

A Dangerous Diet

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 19th of September 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled, A Dangerous Diet, and is from 1 Corinthians, chapter 8, verses 1 to 13.

Please be seated and you may like to turn in the Black Bibles to page 930 again to the first reading that was read for us from 1 Corinthians, chapter 8.

I should also explain that we're beginning today for the next two months a sermon series on this letter, 1 Corinthians, chapters 8 to 14. And you'll find over the weeks to come a whole variety of issues that are dealt with in this letter.

And you may wonder what happened to the first half of the letter. Well, we're looking at that in the evening services starting in a couple of weeks' time, chapters 1 to 7. Fred had been an alcoholic when he became a Christian.

It was with the help of his Christian friends that he'd turned off the drink and he'd become a Christian. And there at his new church he met a number of new friends.

[1 : 24] And after some time, one particular Christian friend invited him and some others around for a meal and encouraged him to have a drink along with the rest of them. He encouraged him by saying, well, being a Christian means that, you know, we can drink in moderation.

There's nothing wrong with that. And so Fred gave in. He drank. He drank too much. He got drunk and ended up back as an alcoholic and eventually no longer a Christian.

Kylie had been involved in the New Age movement. She'd been involved in the occult and reading tarot cards and crystals and all sorts of different types of mysticism.

But in her search for truth and for God, she'd come across a Christian who'd befriended her and led her to become a Christian and to give her life to Jesus Christ.

At her new church, she met various new Christian friends. And one day she was with a Christian friend who was reading her horoscope. And she said, well, there's nothing wrong with it.

[2 : 32] It's just harmless fun. What's your star sign? I'll read what it says. Kylie was a bit rattled by this because that's the sort of thing that she'd left when she became a Christian.

And over time, that temptation grew from that Christian friend. She got a bit puzzled and ended up back in the grip of occult practices in the New Age.

David was a wealthy businessman. The bottom line was what mattered in his life until the property crash. And in the crisis of his wealth and business being in tatters, he became a Christian.

And there his attitude to money changed. No longer was personal wealth the goal of his life. But indeed, he took pleasure in being able to give to the church and to charity and become a generous person.

But over time, he found Christian people in the church to which he'd started coming who were greedy for money, in effect.

[3 : 41] They weren't generous. They described their wealth and prosperity as a blessing from God. Gradually, over time, David found the pressures of work building and the pressures to accumulate wealth beginning to grow as well.

And eventually, money reclaimed top spot in his life. And his enthusiasm for God and Christian things began to wane.

And in the end, it withered and died. What went wrong for Fred, for Kylie and for David? Some would say, well, their Christian faith never took deep enough root to sustain them through their life. That really, they weren't Christians to begin with. It had just been a superficial thing. But in the end, they'd just gone back to where they were in former times.

And some people might say, well, their Christian friends were right in the things that they said. That it was okay for Christians to drink in moderation or to have money or see it as a sign of God's blessing.

[4 : 57] Although it's perhaps harder to sustain the argument that horoscopes are harmless nonsense. And after all these Christians, one might say, these mature Christians are really exercising their Christian right or freedom to do what they did.

Drink in moderation, earn money and so on. That's the issue that St. Paul is dealing with in this chapter of 1 Corinthians. But his society, his environment is very different from ours. And when we read this chapter, we think, well, this has got nothing to say to me. Because I'm not in the situation where I'm tempted to eat meat that has been offered to idols.

But the situation is like those three people I've described. In St. Paul's Day 2,000 years ago in a place called Corinth, which is not far from Athens on the Peloponnese of Greece.

It was a pagan world. There were many temples there, the ruins of many of which are still in existence today. And in that society, the temptation and pressure was for all people from time to time to go up to one of the temples as part not only of a religious feast and eating meat that has been offered to idols in honor of the idol or God of that temple.

[6 : 14] But there was a societal pressure to do it because people would have social functions there where not only would they offer meat and sacrifices to the idols, but it would be part of a social gathering and feast in honor of people as well as the gods.

What should a Christian do in that situation is the issue that Paul is dealing with here. And as we'll see in two weeks time in chapter 10 as well. Now in the letter of 1 Corinthians, Paul, it seems, is responding to various issues that the Corinthians had written to him about.

They'd written to him a letter and said, we'd like your advice or we'd like you to back us up on this point. Or we'd like you to say whether we're right or wrong on this issue or we have a problem with this thing.

So chapter 8 begins, now concerning food offered to idols. It's just like when you or I write a letter and you're responding to various questions that your friend has written to you.

That happens to me. If I write to somebody, I usually get their letter out and I skim through it again and I might respond to some of the points. You commented about this, well, such and such and so on.

[7 : 22] That's what Paul's doing here. And this chapter is devoted to their question about food or meat sacrificed to idols. He'd been written to by the Corinthians leaders of the church, what we might call strong or mature Christians.

Clearly there's a debate within their church about what is right, about whether to go up to the temples to be part of these idolatrous feasts or not. And the strong Christians who've written to Paul are arguing that we can go up and exercise our freedom to be part of this temple feast because there's no such thing as an idol or another god.

There's only one god. It's the god of the Bible. So these Greek and Roman gods for whom these temples are built, they don't really exist. They're just figments of people's imagination and creation. So there's no harm in going up there to eat at their temple feasts and so on. And therefore we strong Christians ought to be encouraging weaker Christians to join in with us, to have a more robust view of God and the weakness of idols and other gods.

That's the view of the Corinthian church's leadership, it seems, in writing to St. Paul. Now Paul doesn't give them a straightforward answer. He doesn't just simply say what you're doing is right or what you're doing is wrong.

[8 : 43] But he actually gets underneath the issue to the attitudes that are prevailing about the issue. He addresses in the end their basis for Christian behavior.

And it's at that point of basic principle that we can learn the most and apply it to our own situations today. The point Paul makes in his introductory paragraph in this chapter is that the basis for Christian behavior is not a lot of knowledge.

It's not superior knowledge. It is love. That's the first and starting point for all Christian behavior. Love.

And the point that he'll make, as we'll see in a few minutes, is that an action in itself may be okay or right, but if done without love, it is wrong.

So in a sense, the Corinthian Christians are saying to him what Nike tells us to do, just do it. And Paul is saying that is not the case.

[9 : 53] The action may be in itself okay, but if it's done without love, it is wrong. That's the principle that he's expounding in the first two or three verses.

And we'll see how he applies it to this particular situation. Firstly, he contrasts knowledge and love. For it's knowledge that the Corinthians are boasting about. They think they know it all.

They think they have even maybe some superior knowledge to other Christians. And therefore, they're free to go and eat and do whatever they like in effect. But Paul says at the end of verse 1, knowledge puffs up.

Love builds up. You Corinthians, he's saying, you are in effect proud about your knowledge. But all it's doing is puffing you up like a balloon. But love is what builds up solid Christian people.

You may be knowledgeable. But you are not loving. He develops the contrast in verses 2 or 3.

Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge.

[11 : 03] The necessary knowledge he makes clear in the next verse is to be known by God. Not our knowledge of God that matters. But rather that God knows us.

And what is required for God to know us is, as verse 3 says, loving God. Not an intellectual knowledge of God, although that's part of it.

But fundamentally love of God. Knowledge without love is inadequate and deficient. The mark of spiritual maturity, Paul says, is not a lot of knowledge, but love.

There are lots of Christians in every age who are full of biblical and theological knowledge that is right, but are deficient in the practice of love.

Their knowledge counts for little in such cases. So that's the basic principle. And Paul now applies it to the situation of the meat and food that is sacrificed to idols.

[12 : 11] He goes on in verse 4 to continue to agree with them about the issue of idols. You see, these Corinthians basically thought idols were nothing. Creation of human imagination.

Which is true. Paul says, yes, that's true. The idols are nothing. They don't have an objective existence or power or reality. There is, after all, only one God.

So therefore a temple that's built to Aphrodite or to Jupiter, it's empty. Because those gods don't really in the end exist.

So that's what he's saying in verse 4. As to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that no idol in the world really exists. He's quoting their letter, it seems. And that there is no God but one.

And he's agreeing with their letter as well. And then he goes on in verse 6 to say, for us, strong Christians that is, there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist.

[13 : 12] And there's one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. He's saying there is only one God, not many. And the God that exists is known through Jesus Christ.

That's the only way to know God. Now that's something that's quite startling in our day and age.

Where so often we hear it said there are many gods and they're all really the same God.

Whether it's the God of the Buddhists or Islam or Judaism or Christianity or New Age mysticism, it's all the same God. So we are all united. Paul's not saying that. He's saying the only God that exists is the one known through Jesus Christ.

The God revealed in the Bible. And any other claim to God of any other religion or practice is really no God at all. He doesn't exist.

He's nothing. There's no objective reality to that God. Now to this point, the Corinthians who've written to him would agree. Their conclusion will be, well, there's no harm then in going up to the temple to eat meat offered to idols.

[14 : 21] Because if the idols don't exist, then there's no spiritual harm in going to eat their meat and being part of their feasts. Food is a matter of indifference with God. Paul agrees with them again in verse 8.

Food will not bring us close to God. We're no worse off if we do not eat and no better off if we do.

True enough. But the problem with their thinking is that not every Christian has that knowledge.

And that's what he says in the beginning of verse 7. It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. You see, there are some Christians who wouldn't accept easily the view that idols are nothing.

They may well believe that there is only one God known through Jesus Christ. I'm not saying that they're not Christians. But for them there is a certain reality about the idols and other gods that means they don't want to have any part in their feasts.

That, I think, is also the implication of the end of verse 5. After the dash in the verse, Paul says, As in fact there are many gods and many lords, yet for us, strong Christians, there is one God.

[15:37] That is, for some people, the pagans and the weak Christians, there may not be quite the same knowledge about the one God of the Bible. Now what's the point of all this?

Verse 7 goes on to say, Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol.

And their conscience being weak is defiled. That is, there are people who have been converted from idolatry to Christianity in Corinth. But for them their idolatrous past was so woven into their life that having become a Christian, they cannot just with a free conscience go up to the temple and take part in the feast.

Because for them it is burdened with all the idolatry and the power of those idols and their immorality and wrongness. That's their past. It casts a shadow over them.

Something not to be unexpected, I guess, when people are converted from such backgrounds. Now if you were writing this letter to this church, what would you do?

[16:54] What would you advise? Advise. Many of us would advise a course of education. Would say to the Corinthian leadership, What you need to do is run an advanced course.

So that these Christians who have been converted from idolatry can come to understand that idols have nothing, no power, and therefore it doesn't matter whether you eat or not. But Paul doesn't give that advice.

Paul gives advice to the strong Christians about how they are to behave. And his advice to them? Love the weaker Christian.

That's what he says in verse 9. Take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

These strong Christians had the liberty or freedom to go up to the temple and eat because they didn't believe that idols really existed at all.

[17:55] The word for liberty is the word that we, in our day and age, might translate as rights. They claim their right to go up to the temple. But Paul is saying here, Don't claim your right to a particular action if it leads to a weaker Christian stumbling or falling.

If the mark of mature Christian behavior is not knowledge but love, as he said in his opening paragraph, then what you stronger Christians need to do is not exercise your freedom but love your weaker Christian brothers and sisters.

Now Paul goes on to make the point with some biting irony in the next verse. Verse 10. For if others see you who possess knowledge eating in the temple of an idol, might they, the weaker Christian that is, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols?

Now we might think that Paul's giving them advice, Go and eat. And that'll encourage the weaker people to see that it's okay to go and eat and encourage them to do the same. But that's actually not what Paul is saying here because he says in verse 11 that they would be destroyed by that behavior.

He's using the word encourage ironically. It's the same word as was in verse 1 to build up. There he said love builds up, not knowledge.

[19:32] And here ironically he's saying if you exercise your freedom because of your knowledge to go and eat, the only building up you will do is build up the weaker Christian to destruction.

It's a sarcastic way of making his point. Verse 11 then says in full, So by your knowledge, those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed.

That is the implication is they'll be back into the grip of idolatry. The thing that held such control over them before they became Christians still for them is something that exercises power.

If you lead them back into the temple as weak Christians, that grip will come back firm on them again. But notice also the added thing about the argument Paul has in this verse 11.

He describes these weak believers as those for whom Christ died. Why does he use such a description here?

[20 : 43] Because I think he's appealing to the model of Jesus for these strong Christians. Jesus gave up all his liberty, all his freedom, all his rights of living in heaven and its glory in order to come to earth and be hanged on a cross to die.

He gave it all up for these weaker Christians. So Paul is appealing to the model of Jesus as the basis for how Christians are to love each other.

If Jesus could give up all his rights to die for you and for the weaker Christian, ought you not give up your right to eat at the temple out of love for those same Christians?

Jesus' act of dying was an act of love par excellence. If you are to love the weaker Christian, give up anything that will make them stumble or fall in their faith.

And notice how strongly Paul describes unloving behavior in verse 12. When you thus sin against members of your family, literally against your brethren, that is your fellow Christians, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

[22 : 08] You see, there are some actions that are right in themselves or okay to do. But when they are done without love, that is sin.

You see, sin is not just a matter of what is the right action or not. Sin is a matter of action plus motivation. Here are Christians doing what is probably in itself okay, but without love, it is sin. And it's not only sin against other Christians, it's sin against Jesus himself as well. The basic motivation for all Christian behavior is love.

Jesus taught us the two great commandments, love God and love your fellow neighbor. And that's Paul's basis here as well. So the Christian who has a drink, but in drinking leads a weaker Christian back into alcoholism.

Such unloving action is sin. Or the Christian who passes off horoscopes as being just harmless nonsense, but so leads a weaker Christian back into the grip of the occult, has sinned.

[23 : 31] Or the Christian whose pursuit of money confuses a weaker Christian and leads that weaker Christian back into the idolatry of greed, has sinned.

Idolatry in our society takes many forms. Most of us are not tempted to go up to some pagan temple and stand before a statue and offer some meat.

But in our day and age, as in Paul's, idolatry took the forms of greed, occult practices, addictions, and so on.

So for you stronger Christians, don't be deceived or pressured into claiming your rights to do whatever you want to do that you know is right.

Because if you act without love, you sin and cause weaker Christians to stumble. Whenever we claim our rights to act, we are acting selfishly anyway.

[24 : 32] This passage then has three groups of Christians in mind. The weak Christian, whose lack of knowledge certainly is hampering their growth of spiritual maturity.

The so-called strong Christian, whose knowledge makes him or her know that it's okay to do this, that, or the other, but yet whose lack of love hampers their growth to spiritual maturity.

But implicit is a third group. What Paul commends for both weak and strong. Knowledge and love together, hand in hand.

The one whose knowledge gives them freedom, but a freedom that is exercised or tempered by the practice of love for the weaker brethren. St. Paul himself commends his own example in that third category and in the last verse.

He says, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat so that I may not cause one of them to fall. He's pushing the point beyond meat offered to idols, I think.

[25 : 44] He's saying, if me eating any sort of meat causes a Christian to fall, I won't eat meat at all. There's nothing wrong, of course, in eating meat, he's saying. But I will stop doing something that is in itself okay and right for the sake of a weaker Christian person.

Would you be prepared to give up things that you like doing that are okay to do for the sake of weaker Christians? That's Paul's commendation in the last verse. That's how far Christian love is to go, if not further, as Jesus' death has demonstrated, giving up his whole life in love for others.

The preeminence of love is what the Corinthians lacked. They boasted in their knowledge, but they practiced it without love.

And that is why in words that are very famous even today from chapter 13, Paul rebukes them for their boastful knowledge, but exhorts them to practice love.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

[27 : 07] And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may be burned but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part, then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three. And the greatest of these is love.