



4. A Passion for Respect (1 Cor 8:1-13, 10:18-24)

This is the fourth item in our series on fellowship. We started by affirming the fact that as believers we have fellowship with God and therefore fellowship with one another. This led us to consider that as the children of God, we have been called into unity and have been called to build together. In our look at the early chapters of 1 Corinthians, we considered that we are called to be part of one building, one body. The Corinthians had made divisions between themselves - divisions based on man which had a bad effect on the church.

But we also learned that God called us to unity, not uniformity. It is accepted that there are differences between us. We'll learn next week that we are supposed to be different.

This week we are going to explore the fact that we do have differences of opinion about things. Yet we are called into relationship with one another. Perhaps the easiest way I could sum this up is in the working title I have given today's sermon - A Passion for Respect.

I occasionally look at a Christian website called Ship of Fools which is a kind of Christian satirical website that exposes the strange and bizarre aspects of what we try to pass off as Christianity. For example, they have the mystery worshipper who visits a church and gives a report on particular churches - usually famous ones - according to the welcome they received and how uplifting the service was to them and the others that were there. Another section is Gadgets for God - religious kitsch that purports to be Christian.

Sometimes we look at things like this and say to ourselves; "why on earth do these Christians do things like this? Surely that doesn't honour God." Or worse, we have been the victim of someone who has criticised us for the way we dress, or the way we pray, or the version of the Bible we read, or some of the attitudes we have as a Christian. I know that there are quite a few people in this church that have been hurt and maybe even forced to leave another church due to the hostile attitudes of others to who they are or what they are like.

Yet we are called into fellowship for one another. We are called to love one another and one product of agape love is a care and mutual respect, putting the needs of one another first.

In the church I was brought up in, church meetings were an opportunity for people to exercise their grievances and they always proceeded their public criticism of another believer with the words "I say this in love": No you don't or you wouldn't have aired the issue in public! Isn't it funny that Christians always say nasty things "in love".

That was the problem at Corinth. There were some people who thought that they were "super-Christians". They thought that because of their knowledge and supposed maturity in Christ, they were allowed to behave in any way they liked towards their fellow believers - because they were right as far as they were concerned.

The "super- Christians" had a phrase which Paul quotes back at them on several occasions:- "all things are permissible" because they were not under the Jewish law - they were Christians.

It was all to do with food! It was difficult for ordinary people to buy meat as they didn't have the means to buy what was an expensive commodity. However, meat that had been sacrificed to idols often sold cheap in the markets. Many of the Christians at Corinth bought this meat even though it had been associated with idolatry. Some commentators have suggested that some of the richer Corinthians were actually even going to dinner parties at the pagan temples, which would have been expected if they were senior members of society. Chapters 6 and 10 both suggest that they were into the immorality of the local society as well as the parties and social circles associated with the temples. They may not have worshipped there, but they certainly felt it was OK to be there.

In verse 4 and Paul is almost certainly quoting them

We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), 6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

In other words; idols are just lumps of wood or stone, so it doesn't matter if you eat meat offered to them because quite frankly, there is only one true God. There is only one God, so it doesn't matter at all what we eat or where we go. We have the freedom to do that as Christians. That was their attitude. On the face of it, it seems OK here but by chapter 10 Paul is going to show them up for the idiots they were:

The problem was as we scan down to verse 7 that there were some Christians in Corinth that just found it unacceptable.

7 But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.

Perhaps these folk were people that had been idol worshippers all their lives and in becoming Christians had departed from the falseness and the sexual sin that was associated with it. Probably they would have identified idolatry as demonic. It was a matter of conscience and in all conscience they could not have anything to do with it.

he problem was that they weren't getting much sympathy from those that were "exercising their freedom". As they saw the other Christians buying and eating food offered for idols, they were discouraged and stumbled.

So what's that got to do with us? After all, idolatry is long since gone. Arguably you could get the same in some places in Britain. I remember once that a person in my last church was concerned that her daughter was being made to eat food prepared with Halal meat - meat prepared for Muslims - because of the high number of Pakistani children in the school.

But this is really about relationships and more specifically it leads us to the question we must ask ourselves:

"Is what I am doing encouraging and edifying to my fellow believers, or am I a stumbling block?"

In fact it is a passage that hits us each personally. It's not about what someone else believes, it is about what I, or YOU, or WE do that upset and discourage others in the faith.

And it invariably involves something our background or our culture that to someone else is an issue of conscience. What sorts of things may we be talking about.

- ⇒ drinking alcohol.
- ⇒ Lord's Day sabbatarianism
- ⇒ the exercise of certain spiritual gifts
- ⇒ worship styles
- ⇒ the colour of the church ceiling.

Riveting stuff eh? But you'd be surprised how much of an issue of conscience these can be. The same was true of the Corinthians. The fact is that the "super-Christians" ate meat offered to idols was a real problem to other Christians. Who was right? What was permitted? It wasn't a question of law, it was a question of love and respect. Look at verse 8:

8 But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. 9 Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

In other words, whether it was right that the super-Christians could do what they did wasn't the point. They had discouraged another believer and that wasn't acceptable.

Paul is really tough on the "super-Christians":

¹⁰ You see, this is what can happen: Weak Christians who think it is wrong to eat this food will see you eating in the temple of an idol. You know there's nothing wrong with it, but they will be encouraged to violate their conscience by eating food that has been dedicated to the idol. ¹¹ So because of your superior knowledge, a weak Christian, for whom Christ died, will be destroyed. ¹² And you are sinning against Christ when you sin against other Christians by encouraging them to do something they believe is wrong.

We live in a world of rights; individual rights. I'll do this because I'm allowed. That's law and it can be immensely destructive and people's spiritual lives have been destroyed by others who have exercised their freedom to do something without respect for their fellow Christians, weak or otherwise.

Let me illustrate this. It's lawful to drive at 40 miles an hour past Hamond's High school. As you may know, the head teachers are trying to get it reduced to 30. But each day at 3-15pm, I can legally drive at 40mph whilst the children are pouring out of the School. It's perfectly legal, but it's not expedient as it's too fast and my lack of care may cause a child to end up in hospital or worse.

Just to clarify the point: if I do something that discourages or stumbles another Christian, then it's wrong, however morally upright my action may be otherwise.

The challenge to each of us this morning, have I done or am I doing anything that will stumble and discourage another believer. What can we learn from the "super-Christians" who seemed so adept at being able to offend their brothers and sisters in Christ:

🟡 Lack of Love

They showed all the hallmarks of people who did not love and respect their brothers and sisters in Christ. I believe that as I said in the first of the series; the hallmark of

true fellowship is to love one another as Jesus loved us and these folks just weren't doing it.

🟡 Freedom from the law did not make them lawless

In 1 Cor 10:23 Paul says *23 "Everything is permissible"--but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible"--but not everything is constructive. 24 Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.*

They had this phrase *"Everything is permissible"*. They thought that being a Christian allowed them to do whatever they wanted. If they wanted to eat meat sacrificed to idols (something that would have horrified the Jews) then that was just fine. They weren't under law - well, that wasn't quite so.

Paul's actions were determined by people - as he says, seeking the good of others:

1 Cor 9:19 Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

Paul changed his actions to win people. He didn't do what he liked to please himself but he did change how he behaved towards people. But he was never without law - Christ's law. What is it? I'll give you two suggestions. The first is from the gospels because one of the most often quoted scriptures by Jesus is the "two words" - Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and your neighbour as yourself. It's a law of love. And it sums up the whole of God's moral law. Your actions are controlled by the will of God and the needs of others. This is exactly what is being said in 10:24 *Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.* That is the agape principle and Paul exercised it well.

Therefore his actions were dictated by the needs of others and he makes the statement in 8:13 *Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.*

It's a challenge. Is what we are doing causing someone to be discouraged and stumbled?

🟡 The super-Christians were not in possession of the facts

Paul agrees with some of the things they said in chapter 8. Idols are just lumps of wood or stone but as we read down into chapter 10, we find that *10:19 Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20 No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.*

Rather than the people with a conscience being weak, the "super-Christians" were being foolish because they opened themselves to something demonic and they weren't even thinking about that - which is the way Satan likes fools because they were not on their guard. In believing that they could just live their lives like pagans opened them to being attacked.

But it wasn't the food that opened them to demons, it was their actions in living like pagans. To those people that did have a conscience about where food came from, Paul

just says, “the Earth is the Lord’s and anything in it”. Food is food - enjoy and don’t ask too many questions. They weren’t in possession of the facts either. Just because the food came from a temple did not mean they were going to be demonised. It was only meat and it was better not to explore its origins and get conscience-stricken.

When we look down on other Christians for not believing the same as us - and we are all prone to do it: think! Am I in possession of the facts? Is this really in the Word of God?

My experience of Christians who think they are right and cause offence in the process is that they have not really thought through the truth of what they believe. And worse, they have not thought through whether they stumble others?

But if you have a conscience about something, I’d also ask you to examine yourself too? Am I in full possession of the facts? Is this really a principle of the Word of God - or just part of my upbringing which I need to grow out of. I’ve said before, it took many years to unwind from my Brethren background, particularly with regard to fellowship with other believers. My heart had to catch up with my understanding of God’s Word

Let me qualify all that I have said this morning. What we are talking about here are what our forefathers called “matters indifferent”. Things on which we may disagree but are not matters of eternal weight. When I talk about not doing something not to stumble another believer, this is what I’m talking about and nothing else.

There are other things we should not compromise on and Paul deals with them in other places in 1 Corinthians and elsewhere, and I shall deal with these another time, but not this series. “Matters essential” as they are called are invariably those things associated with the gospel. They are things we would die for. But they would not likely be things we would stumble another believer with, because if someone does not accept the gospel and it causes offence, then they are not a believer and our job is then to do what’s necessary to win them.

There are also a whole range of things associated with God’s holy standards - the law of Christ as we mentioned earlier. They are essential things. God wants us to live in a way that is Christ-like and honours Him. It’s non-negotiable and in chapter 6 Paul has to condemn their immorality because it was ungodly. Christians are never stumbled by godly Christians, just “super-Christians” who think they are godly but whose “morality” falls short of what God wants - they are not in possession of the facts. You won’t stumble anybody if you live in obedience to Christ and walk in the Spirit.

The people that built this church understood what this was all about:

In all things indifferent - Liberty
In all things essential - Unity
In all things - Charity (Love)

Which brings us right back to the question.

“Is what I am doing encouraging and edifying to my fellow believers, or am I a stumbling block?”

We have liberty to believe and do a whole lot of things in a whole lot of ways as God’s people. But even though we have liberty to, it may neither be beneficial or constructive to do so and may lead another into sin. I found the following checklist of our motives and I’ll read them to you:

"Formula: How to Know Right from Wrong."

1. "' Everything is permissible for me' - but not everything is beneficial."
Question #1: Is it helpful - physically, spiritually, and mentally?
2. "' Everything is permissible for me' - but I will not be mastered by anything" (1 Cor 6:12)
Question #2: Does it bring me under its power?
3. "Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall" (1 Cor 8:13)
Question #3: Does it hurt others?
4. "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31)
Question #4: Does it glorify God?

Or perhaps: If it isn't worth dying for, it probably isn't worth offending for!

Perhaps as we have explored this passage this morning, you've realised that you have acted in a way that has stumbled another Christian when you should have pulled back and respected them. If it is somebody here, you need to seek their forgiveness. If it is someone elsewhere, maybe you should put that right.

I've met too many people in this Church who have been hurt and discouraged, usually I may say, somewhere else. I believe you need to receive God's healing this morning.

Let's listen to God's Word this morning and ask God to give us that passion for respect and love for one another that encourages us and builds us up to give Him all the glory.

Dear Father

*Thank You that you have given us one another,
so that we can grow in You together,
and serve with one another in this place.*

*Forgive us when we have acted in a foolish way
that discouraged someone else.*

*Help us by Your Spirit,
to build bridges and to
forgive and be forgiven.*

*Lord we pray that you would help us to forgive
when we have been discouraged and hurt.*

*We pray that you will save us from the ignorance that causes offence
And from the ignorance that makes us easily offended*

*Help us to love one another as You have loved us
So that we will be built up and give You the glory.*

In Jesus' name

Amen

