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“But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ,” I Corinthians 8:12.

I Am My Brother's Keeper

Lesson Aim: To awaken an earnest concern in each believer for his brother in Christ.

L136. Date: April 1975. **Text:** I Corinthians 8:1-13. **Topic:** Love: Of Others

Life's moral choices are made according to one's “moral color chart.” That color chart is made up of black at one end, white at the other end, and a large grey area between. Black represents those things which are evidently evil and must be shunned. White represents those things which are evidently good and should be sought. Grey represents those things which are neither good nor bad of themselves, but may become either good or bad according to one's use of them.

Today's lesson deals with one's choices in that grey area. It deals with a pertinent question, “How should I respond in a situation when something I consider to be 'white' (permissible) is thought to be 'black' (forbidden) by a fellow Christian?” A case-in-point will be reviewed. Some guidelines for Christian conduct will be set forth. A deeper concern for one's brother in Christ will be awakened.

Frankly, the lesson will strike “close to home” for each reader. It will separate the mature Christian from the immature. It will reveal whether one truly lives by the Spirit of Christ. Be open to the Word; God will speak to you during the study.

The lesson is set against the background of a problem faced by early Christians. “Should a Christian eat meat offered in sacrifice to idols?”

Some replied, “There is nothing wrong with it.”

Others judged, “It is a sin and should be avoided at all costs.”

How could such a problem be solved? Thank God, it was solved. It was solved in exactly the same way Christians are to deal with differences of

opinion today.

I. LOVE YOUR BROTHER'S GOD, 8:1-3

In all matters of difference between brethren, lead with your heart and not with your head. That is to say, let love guide you.

Should a Christian eat meat which had been offered in sacrifice to idols? That was a major problem for people who had been newly converted from idolatry. To refuse to eat would cut them off from much of the social life of the community. To eat would seem to place at least tacit approval to idolatry and homage to idol gods. Most Christians had strong opinions upon the subject.

Many insisted that their answer to the perplexing question was based upon their “knowledge.” Paul recognized that not every believer had full knowledge of the subject. While agreeing that “. . . **an idol is nothing in the world, and there is none other God but one,**” he further observed, “. . . **there is not in every man that knowledge.**” To some believers, participation in pagan feasts would mean a compromise of Christian principles. To other believers, participation would have no effect whatever upon their faith. God warns lest one's knowledge of truth make him impatient or aggravated with one of lesser understanding. Take heed. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” (See verse 1).

Even if you have superior knowledge and insight, remember that human knowledge is always incomplete. Do not be proud. What seems to be full knowledge today will be revealed as very partial tomorrow. That is why you should “**Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth,**” II Timothy 2:15. Praise God if you are learned in spiritual things, but in all relations with believers, lead with your heart and not your head.

“**If any man love God, the same is known of him,**” verse 3. That is to say, “**The person who truly loves God is open to God's knowledge.**” God recognizes mature Christians by their love, not by their knowledge. It is not sufficient to say, “I know there is nothing wrong with this, so I will do it regardless of what others think.” “. . . **If thy brother be grieved . . . now walkest thou not charitably . . .**” Romans 14:15.

How would you respond if a weaker Christian challenged as wrong something which you know to be harmless? Would you respond with aggravation or with understanding? Would you respond with disgust or with sympathy? Would you insist upon your “rights” to do as you please in view of your superior knowledge? If you loved God, you would respond with

compassion and love, showing pity and courtesy, and deferring to a brother you would bring him a blessing (I Peter 3:8, 9).

Let love guide you. If a brother is offended by your “harmless” action, show love to him by ceasing that act. **“Destroy not him . . . for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of,”** Romans 14:15, 16. Let love, divine love, guide you.

Remember that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. In all relations with fellow Christians, particularly those who are weaker than you, lead with your heart and not your head.

II. ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR BROTHER'S SCRUPLES, 8:4-7

Many things are in that “grey” area — neither good nor bad except according to one's attitude toward them. Eating meat offered to an idol was nothing. It made no difference in the flesh of an animal, if a portion of it had been offered to a block of wood or stone. **“. . . We know that an idol is nothing in the world . . .”** verse 4. Why not eat meat without consideration of whether it was offered to an idol? One reason prohibited such freedom in eating: **“. . . There is not in every man that knowledge . . .”** verse 7. Such a simple thing as eating certain food may be permissible for one but evil for another, according to his attitude toward it.

Why was that such a problem among early Christians? Jewish Christians had been reared to regard clean and unclean meat, holy days, feast days, and fast days. The Gentile Christians had been taught no such customs. The Gentile Christian thought it no sin to violate a Jewish “holy day.” The Jewish Christians thought an idol nothing and thus no sin to eat meat offered to it. What one condoned, the other condemned. Each took his position upon the basis of his devotion to God. **“He that regardeth a day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks,”** Romans 14:6. It is evident that such a problem should be worked out by mutual love and trust among brethren. How could one condemn a man who is devoted to the Lord in his opinions and practices?

Such differences exist between brethren today. If a brother challenged as wrong your drinking coffee, or using tobacco, or playing dominoes, how would you respond? Would you respond by insisting upon your “rights” since you “know” there is nothing wrong with what you are doing? Would you insist upon continuing your action even if it defiled his conscience? Not at all! If you consider yourself strong, your strength should be lent to help

your brother. **“We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification,”** Romans 15:1-2. Are you mature enough in Christ to deal properly with your brother's scruples?

III. PROTECT A BROTHER'S CONSCIENCE, 8:8-13

God has not left His children without guidance in that area. He set forth five specific principles to help resolve differences between honest brethren.

Acknowledge enlightened truth, even if it is different from what you have been taught (verse 8). Here is a truth as it relates to food, **“But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse,”** verse 8. Both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians should agree that one does not buy acceptance before God through obedience to fleshly regulations. You, too, ought to be open to acknowledge new insights as God reveals divine truth to you. Be open to respond as God leads.

Beware of being a cause of offence to your brother (verse 9). You are free from restrictions which bind others in their limited knowledge. **“But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak,”** verse 9. You could insist upon your own rights, but would that be the course which divine love dictates? Do not misuse your freedom; do not make a brother stumble.

Remember the power of example (verses 10, 11). Suppose someone saw you doing a thing which he thought was wrong but which you considered to be right. Your example might persuade him to do it also, even though he may be convicted of it. That, in turn, may cause him to go into worse sin. The result would be that by your example in a “grey” area, you might injure a brother. You cannot be responsible for what every person thinks, but you can guard our conduct in questionable areas.

Consider the consequences of an action before you take it (verse 12). It is very serious to offend a brother by doing questionable things. **“When ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ,”** verse 12. Many who take care not to sin against the Lord by overt acts, sin against Him by giving offense to a brother. Please, consider the results of your actions before you commit yourself to do them.

Resolve to protect your brother, even at the cost of personal privilege (verse 13). How much are you willing to sacrifice for the sake of a fellow Christian? Consider Paul's example. He knew there was nothing sinful about

eating meat which had been offered to an idol, yet he resolved, **“. . . if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend,”** verse 13. Are you willing to apply such a principle of sacrifice to your use of tobacco, card playing, dress style, or other things which may mislead or offend another? According to your spiritual maturity, be it unto you.

Here is God’s principle given to guide in those “grey” areas of moral choice. **“I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. . . . All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence,”** Romans 14:14, 20. Then what should be our attitude in all questionable areas? **“Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another. . . . Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth,”** Romans 14:19, 22.

Test all activities by the effect it will have upon others. **“For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself.”** Romans 14:7. Let brotherly love guide you.

Questions

1. What is the problem dealt with in this study?
2. In what way might knowledge puff one up?
3. In what way does love build one up?
4. What does Romans 14:6 teach?
5. What does Romans 15:1-2 teach?
6. How can you protect a brother’s weak conscience?