

Lessons from Corinth

“Stop It! You’ll Make Me Stumble!”

Part 6:1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1

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This passage contains the so called “stumbling block principle” (8:9-13) which is understood to lay out Biblical limitations on individual freedom. What I do affects my brothers and sisters and I must let love be the operating principle in how I relate. Unfortunately, this passage is frequently misapplied. Only a clear understanding of the overall context and argument will clarify Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians and give us a starting point for application.¹

The traditional reading of this passage sees the primary issue to be the eating of meat that was offered to a pagan deity. According to this interpretation Paul is instructing those at Corinth who are eating this meat to stop doing so lest their freedom would encourage their “weaker” brothers to do the same and in doing so, to stumble through violating their conscience.

However, there are difficulties with this approach to the text. While *eating* “idol food” is an issue (10:23-11:1), Paul’s primary concern is the *location* where this eating takes place: within the idol temple.² The Corinthians are demanding the “right” to participate in the temple feasts which involved sacrifice to an idol and a cultic meal. Therefore, the primary issue in this passage is about active involvement and participation in the practices surrounding pagan temple worship (8:10).³ For Paul, this is a denial of loyalty to Jesus (10:1-22), not simply eating idol food. This clarification in Paul’s focus will help us when the time comes to make application.⁴

The concern for idolatry forms the theme throughout. It is likely that Paul has addressed this issue before, either when he was present or through his previous letter. Regardless of his stance, the Corinthians have their own mind on the matter. It is very possible that some have returned to attendance at idol temples in direct opposition to Paul’s instruction.

Idol temples were the places where animal sacrifices were offered to pagan gods. The food so offered would then be eaten by the participants together in the presence of the god. Paul identifies these practices as a participation in the demonic (10:14-22). It might seem obvious to us that this kind of activity should have been out of bounds. However, it is more complicated in that idol temple worship was more than a religious practice. It was where community events of *all* kinds took place, “every kind of occasion was celebrated in this fashion,” including, e.g., birthday parties!⁵ It was the community hall, restaurant and socializing center of the culture. It was the one place where meat was actually available to eat. The Corinthians had grown up attending such events and it was a regular part of their lives.

Attendance at the idol temple is wrong in and of itself, says Paul (10:1-22). His argument in 8:1-13 is to counteract the *reason* the Corinthians have given for demanding this right. They have “knowledge,” they know the truth – idols are nothing; with this Paul can agree. They go to the temple simply to be with family, friends and community and enjoy a good steak!

Based upon their knowledge that idols are nothing (there is only one God, 8:4-6), they have been encouraging other believers to go to the temple with them – “Exercise your freedom in Christ!” Not every believer at Corinth is ready for this step; there are those who are still struggling with the issue of the reality of idol gods. It is for these “weaker” members that Paul is most apprehensive. While the “strong” at Corinth believe that their attendance at temples will “strengthen” the “weak” to overcome their weakness, Paul says the opposite is true – your

attendance will encourage the weak ones to violate their conscience and *return to idolatry*.⁶ And this is the key point.

So then, Paul's overriding concern is that the actions of the "strong" will cause those who are weak *to stumble*; which clearly means in this context to *lose their faith*. Because this is true, any contemporary application of the so called "stumbling block principle" will require that we have true parallels with Corinth: *in your freedom don't do something that will cause your brother to lose his faith*. This is how serious was this issue at Corinth.

Therefore, this passage is not about "offending" another brother with your personal preferences or matters of individual conscience with which he might disagree.⁷ It is not about peripheral matters, "don't smoke, don't drink, don't chew, don't run with those who do." While it is at times applied to alcohol use or dress or dancing or movies, etc., the so called "stumbling block principle" of Paul **here** is not about such extraneous matters. To cause someone to stumble is to do something that threatens the very faith life of another believer - they might be "ruined."⁸ It is about participation in an activity that if another believer were to do it, might well lead them to a denial of their allegiance to Jesus. This alone makes this passage a difficult one to apply today.⁹ So where does that leave us?

We may find some added help in another "stumbling block" passage in Romans.¹⁰ In Rom. 14:1-15:7, he addresses a similar, though not identical, concern. While the issue in Romans is somewhat different, the principle is the same, don't let your freedom become a means by which your brother "stumbles," meaning *loses his faith*. At Rome, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians were learning how to live and walk together in unity. A major concern among the Jewish Christians (the "weak" here) was the keeping of certain Jewish dietary laws and celebrating certain religious days (14:1-6). For these Jewish believers, at this point in their walk with Jesus, these practices could not be abandoned without them violating their conscience and losing faith. On the other side of the issue were the Gentile believers (the "strong"), who had *no* scruples about food and were unconcerned about special "days." These differences had led to conflict and to judgments being made toward one another.

Paul gives them a framework, principles, so that they might walk together in unity. They must stop judging the servant of another – for they are *all* servants of one Lord, Jesus; they belong to Him. He will call all to account for their lives in this world (14:7-12).¹¹ This applied to both the "weak" and the "strong." With this in view one should determine not to put a "stumbling block" in the way of fellow believer. They are to live in peace and pursue mutual edification (14:19).

Because the Gentile believers are "strong" (have no scruples about food, etc.), Paul addresses them primarily. Don't let what is a good thing, something which you can enjoy with a clear conscience, become something that "destroys" your brother. Rather, bear with your brother's "weaknesses" on these matters, following Christ's own example, and live in harmony (15:1-7). Such is to be the principle of love in practice at Rome.

What does Paul mean by "stumbling block" here? Like our Corinthian passage, Paul sees the possibility that a weak brother could be led to ruin by the insistence of the strong brother to exercise their freedom in regard to food.

In this passage, it is Rom. 14:21-23 that gives us the most trouble. Is Paul saying that the "strong" ought *never*, under any circumstances, eat meat or drink wine if other Christians are "offended" by it? After all, the "strong" have faith to do so and are clear in their consciences (14:22-23).¹² To understand we need to think practically and concretely. Remember that the issue was primarily about food. So, when and under what circumstances would there be an issue

between these “weak” and “strong” believers? It would be when they are gathered for *common* meals. Here, then, is how Paul’s injunction works. *When you are together*, do not eat or drink in such a way as to cause a problem for your brother or sister. Notice what he is *not* saying. He is not saying, “you are *never* to eat or drink just in case you might cause a problem.” He is not saying, “Don’t ever eat or drink just in the case that someone might *hear* about it and be offended,” rather “when the circumstances dictate, don’t cause a problem for your ‘weaker’ brother.”

Back to Corinth. In 1 Cor. 10:23-11:1 Paul addresses the question of eating the food that was offered to an idol and then put up for sale in the marketplace (10:23-11:1).¹³ Remember that meat was not readily available and this kind of sale made it available to the general public. In this particular matter, he calls for a respecting of the each other’s conscience. It is fine to eat whatever you like (assuming your conscience allows it) unless it becomes an issue for someone else who is *present and in the moment*. There does not seem to be a general principle which says, “you can *never* do this because someone else *might* stumble.” Rather, the believer is free to eat with the caveat that the eating does not create a problem for someone *present* who raises the concern.

Paul’s instruction on the legitimacy of eating marketplace idol food in Corinthians nicely parallels his concerns in Romans. Take care for your brothers and sisters *when you are together or in that situation*.

Implications and Application

To what kinds of things might our conclusions apply? Clearly, we are *not* dealing with obvious sin – e.g., Paul explicitly forbids visiting idol feasts as sin, in and of itself.¹⁴ We are *not* dealing with matters of personal “offense,” using that the term “offense” the way we commonly use it today. I might disagree (be offended?) with your actions, but if it is not sin, then I must leave it with God, you and your conscience.

I will risk some application, but only tentatively. As great as is the danger of license among believers today, nearly equally as dangerous is legalism.¹⁵ Also, God’s gravest concern is not with external particulars, but with the heart that issues forth in our external behaviors (Mark 7:20-23). When God captures our hearts fully, He is able to resolve all else. When he rules over me because of His love, then I am resolved to make love the reason why I do all else.

We must begin with this, “If a believer does this, does he have a conviction about it? Is it okay for her? If she does this, is she any way violating her own conscience? Does this behavior put him or her in danger of falling into a past pattern that will affect his relationship with God and his pursuit of and usefulness to, His kingdom?” If a believer cannot act with clarity and conviction, then they must not do this thing (Rom. 14:22-23).

If a believer is of clear conscience, then he must ask, “How does this thing impact my brothers and sisters? Is it the kind of thing that might cause a brother or sister to fail in their relationship with God because they followed me in this thing and in doing so, violated their own conscience?”

To make application, one needs to think about the circumstances in which this takes place. Is what you are doing in public or in private? It seems from these passages that public, corporate settings are the primary issue. So, to whom might this apply and under what circumstances? Because we cannot under every circumstance know about people’s objections or concerns, unless they voice them, I think Paul grants freedom unless there is an objection actually made (1 Cor. 10:25-29).

Often the use of alcohol is brought into this discussion; how might these principles apply? While some might disagree, the use of alcohol in and of itself is not sin in the Bible (though excessive use, drunkenness, is: Eph. 5:18). We might garner arguments and reasons for why drinking is not wise or even proper, but one cannot say that alcohol use in and of itself is sin.¹⁶

So, first, is this a freedom for a believer? They must be asked, “Can I do this with a clear conscience?” If not, and they do so, then they sin (Rom. 14:22-23).

Second, again, and importantly, this goes beyond *another* brother’s *personal* objection to alcohol use in general. If the other brother’s preference is not to drink (and that is what his conscience allows), then, he should not. However, Rom. 14 would also disallow his judging his brother who *does* drink.

Thirdly, under what circumstances might a believer use alcohol? Private use seems to fit Paul’s liberty about eating idol meat in one’s own home or the home of a friend (1 Cor. 10:23-33). The restriction comes if and when it violates the conscience of someone *present, in the moment*, who makes it an issue. Not hypothetically, but practically.

Fourthly, the one who has the freedom to drink must ask, “Will my actions *endanger* my brother, who *struggles* with alcohol?” This, also, is not a hypothetical, but a practical matter. It must be a concern in the present circumstance and moment.

Does this include situations where your weaker brother *knows* you have this freedom? In other words, should you not drink at all on the *possibility* that a weaker brother might be encouraged to drink because he knows that you do? While this is a matter of prayer, it does go beyond what Paul seems to address here.¹⁷

The alcoholic brother *might* come close to an equivalent to what Paul actually deals with in 1 Cor. 8 and Rom. 14: a situation whereby a weak brother might stumble and “lose his salvation.” If one’s use of alcohol encourages a weaker brother (an alcoholic) to drink, when his conscience says no, then it might endanger him or her. Regardless, it is certainly true that deferring to them in the moment is the loving thing to do (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

As an illustration, you may feel free in your conscience to have a drink with your meal in a restaurant (public setting). Should you do so or not do so? It may depend upon who is present and your knowledge of their “weakness” in this area. Again, it may be okay for you to have a drink, but if your actions in reference to your brother in the moment will create a problem for them as defined above (not simply “bother them”), you should defer.

Let’s take one further step. Would it be wrong, based upon Paul’s injunctions, to go to a bar? Maybe so, dependent on the situation and atmosphere/circumstance; obviously, a bar that is a strip club is off limits.☺ What is the *reason* to go there? I know of many places where alcohol is served that are excellent restaurants and have family atmospheres. Also, in some cultures of the world, “pubs” are the socializing centers of the community. Unless, they are worshipping false gods, it’s probably legitimate.¹⁸ Again, what is the purpose?

A Principled Loving Approach

But can we draw out other principles from the Corinthian passage? In contrast to their insistence on their “rights,” Paul holds up his own life (9:19-23).¹⁹ His primary priority is with the forward movement of the gospel and how his life contributes to this through all his actions. He does so b/c his goal is to win the prize and not be disqualified (9:24-27). It is this *discipline*, like that of

an athlete, which insures his success. He brings his life under control for the sake of the gospel (9:23) and so that he may at the end of the race obtain the “imperishable wreath.”

This bigger picture of life purpose should determine what we do and don't do, not our personal preferences, whether we are “weak” or “strong.” Our goal must be to see the “profit” or gain of His kingdom (10:23-24, 31-33) and **we must be ready to set aside our personal agendas for God's glorification in the world through our lives** (10:31). In this way, it is not my personal preference to do a thing, or my brother's personal offense with what I do that matters, rather it is our cooperation together to see God's purposes achieved.

Several final thoughts emerge. In contrast to their demand to have their “rights” in these matters (8:10, 10:23), Paul lays out the overarching principle of love and deference (8:1-13, 10:23-24) with the ultimate principle being a life lived for the glory of God and the furthering of His gospel in the world (10:31-11:1). In doing so, he balances the believer's freedom with the need to put “first things first.” In response to the Corinthian slogan “All things are lawful” Paul corrects: not all things are profitable or edifying (1 Cor. 10:23-24).²⁰

As is true throughout the Bible, we are confronted with our radical individualism as Americans. My life affects others around me; there is no such thing as a “private sin” or a truly private action. There is no “victimless” sin! God sees and is affected *directly* by my life, my choices, my thoughts! And as a believer I have no right to my life, so I cannot claim to do be able to do “whatever I want as long as it only affects me.”²¹

Bottom line? Stop judging, yield your “rights,” honor one another's liberty and conscience, be sensitive to moment and circumstance so as to not create problems for one another - because what matters is the forward movement of the gospel and the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

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¹ I would recommend you read these chapters and become familiar with the contents. Note that Paul begins this section with “now concerning,” a key indicator that he is addressing another issue the Corinthians raised in their letter to him (7:1).

² I am following Gordon Fee's reconstruction and interpretation, see *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, 357 f. My thoughts on application are my own.

³ This is clearer if we read 8:1-13 and 10:14-22 as addressing the same thing. On the surface, it may seem that there is not a cohesive argument from 8:1-11:1; but in fact it flows along quite nicely, especially if we hold that the primary issue for Paul is idolatry, meaning participation in the idol temple feasts.

⁴ Application, at least in part, involves looking for similar or analogous situations and then applying the principles from the text to the modern situation. This becomes important here because of the nature of what is being debated, as we will see.

⁵ Fee gives an example of an invitation to the temple of Sarapeum to celebrate the first birthday of a daughter. See Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, 361.

⁶ The issue is well put in Fee (quoting Murphy-O'Conner), “The weakness involved is that their ‘intellectual conviction that there was only one God had not been fully assimilated emotionally.’” In other words, these new believers knew in their heads that idol worship was ‘nothing,’ but they were fragile in their emotions and character in regard to this issue and could quickly fall back into idolatry.

⁷ In commenting on Rom. 14:15, Douglas Moo notes, that the impact on the weak brother is “more than the annoyance or irritation that the weak brother might feel toward those who act in ways they do not approve.” Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, 854. See more on Rom. 14 below.

⁸ By which Paul means eternally lost.

⁹ “Despite the fact that Western Christianity for over a millennium has had nothing comparable to this issue, this text has had a long history of use in the church in the form of the ‘stumbling block principle.’” Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, 391. We might find circumstances in other cultural settings in the world where something analogous exists, but probably not America.

¹⁰ Paul likely wrote his letter to the Roman church from Corinth.

¹¹ This is a disconcerting passage for those who might think that how we live matters not in the final analysis. In both the Romans passage and here in Corinthians Paul seems to think that someone could stumble so as to fall to their “destruction.”

¹² Here is the principle in reference to any peripheral behavior that is not sin: can you do this without creating an issue for your own faith?

¹³ Therefore, in 1 Cor. 8:1-11:1, Paul is dealing with *two* different, but related, types of behaviors. Eating in the idol temple *is* sin – because of the very nature of what goes on there (8:10, 10:1-22). Eating the meat that comes from the idol temple in one’s own home or with others outside of the idol temple *is not* sin and is a matter of individual conscience. The issue is not in the eating itself.

¹⁴ Of course, we might not agree on what constitutes sin; but the Bible and Paul are clear enough.

¹⁵ The problem with legalism is that those who impose their standards often do not understand this passage. Paul is not advocating people going “house to house” to find out who is eating idol meat to impose their own standards of conscience on those who eat. Paul himself apparently ate; it maybe that this was part of the Corinthian argument, “Look! You do it!” But Paul was principled about his eating, as the passage shows. He did not hold it as a “right” under any and all circumstances, but sought the good of all and especially the gospel.

¹⁶ Generally, American church culture looks at the issue of alcohol quite different from Christians in some other cultures around the world. The American Temperance Movement in the 19th century was by and large an Evangelical concern and has significantly shaped the way Evangelicals now see alcohol use. E.g., Germans, including German Christians, grow up from childhood on beer and consequently they tend to see the issue differently. Whether this is a healthy approach is an important, but separate concern. Some Christians in previous centuries smoked without any sense of it being sin, e.g., C. S. Lewis, Charles Spurgeon, etc. Today the health risks would preclude it as a legitimate practice for Christians. However, I also realize the extreme difficulty for many of breaking the addiction.

¹⁷ One might infer that their knowledge is not a restriction: it seems that the Roman Gentile Christians (the “strong”) were enjoined not to drink/eat in the *presence* of their weaker brothers. However, there might be a circumstance where abstinence under any and all circumstances is appropriate.

¹⁸ We may laugh, but this is where Masonic membership and equivalents come into play. Is this a parallel to attending an idol temple? Because of the possible element of outright false worship (oaths that are taken?), one might include secret societies, e.g., the Masons? However, I am not a Mason and must confess my ignorance. It is interesting that at other times in American history, e.g., the 19th c., this was a live and debated issue.

¹⁹ Note weak in 9:22 in conjunction with 8:9-13. He does so as one who follows Jesus. So it is true of Jesus. He “postured” or put Himself in the place of a slave to us, that He might be able to reach us and save us. Phil. 2:5-8. Matt. 20:28.

²⁰ While the context is corporate (our lives affect others), it certainly true about me personally. I need to think carefully about the impact of what I do on God, others *and* myself.

²¹ Remember 1 Cor. 6:20, we have been bought with a price!