

## **1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Exercise Your Freedom Carefully! Epiphany 4 February 1, 2015**

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God's grace and peace are yours in abundance through your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.

In 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Paul describes what it means to have a strong faith and how we can use it for good.

These are Your Words heavenly Father, to help us as Your people to live in love. Your Word is truth.

Dear Christians,

I once heard a chaplain speak about a woman he met at a hospital. She was dying of cancer and was very bitter against God. She had grown up in a church. But she had been a rebellious teen and had stopped attending and had gotten into trouble with her family and eventually with the law. She had an older brother who was a faithful Christian. He was always at church and was willing to help any members with any need. But, he got into a car accident and died. His sister came to the church for the funeral and was moved to tears. After the funeral a couple of women came up to her and said, "We're sorry for the loss of your brother. We wish you had died instead of him." Needless to say, the girl left the church and never returned. From a human point of view, the women spoke the truth. They would miss the young man who had done so much for them and she had brought pain and trouble to many in the community. They had freedom to speak their minds, but at what cost? So Paul tells us to:

### **Exercise our freedom carefully!**

**First, our freedom can lead us into trouble.** Paul warned, "*Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.*" (v.1-2) The Corinthians had been well instructed by Paul. They knew that idols were only statues and that there was no real god connected to them. Paul had taught them that there was only one God, the Father, and only one Lord, Jesus Christ. They also knew that once Christ fulfilled the Law as the Savior, the Old Testament regulations about foods and ceremonies weren't needed. But, even though they had known the truth in their head, some of them who were converted had not been able to fully get over their past connection to idols. They wanted nothing to do with them, including the meat of sacrifices that was at the market. Other Christians took the meat and ate it in freedom. They thought by eating they were helping the weak one. Just the opposite happened. Their weak consciences were troubled. It was a sin to go against their consciences. Those with knowledge, rather than helping them gain freedom from sin, put them in worse bondage!

We've had the same thing in the jungles of Peru. When some natives are converted and understand that Jesus is their Savior and Lord, it takes them a long time to stop fearing the power of the witch doctors. They have the knowledge of Christ as Lord, but also have years of superstition and fear. In Corinth, those with strong faith needed godly wisdom to go with their knowledge to help those who were weak.

I would equate the Corinthians to a person today taking CPR and safety courses. He takes the courses only so that he can boast about his great knowledge. But, he has no plans to use the CPR or safety instruction to help people. He does not want to apply what he has learned to make a positive difference. This was the thinking of the Corinthians as they used their freedom carelessly. We also must be careful that we do not harm Christians with weak consciences like those two women who spoke to the teen. We do not want to wound the hearts of Christians. Some people need to avoid alcohol. We should not drink around them. Others need careful guidance through tough situations in life. We don't want to be too hasty to turn them from Christ.

Paul wrote, *“Be careful that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.”* (v. 9-12) Jesus valued all people so much He sacrificed His life to save them. If we use our freedom to harm people's faith we are not just hurting them, we sinning against Christ. Remember when Paul was still Saul who persecuted believers? Christ appeared to him and said, *“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?”* (Acts 9:4) We need to keep that in mind so that we who have a strong faith should not offend the weak. Paul warned that some had lost their faith because of such misuse of Christian freedom. Along with our knowledge and freedom we need a heart of compassion for people. Luther wrote: *“On earth there is nothing more tender than the conscience, and nothing less able to tolerate abuse. It is said that the eye is tender, but the conscience is much more tender and soft. That is why we note in the apostles again and again how gently they dealt with the conscience.”* (People's Bible)

**Second, how should we use our freedom in Christ?** Paul wrote, *“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up... The man who loves God is known of God.”* (v.1, 3) We who are strong and certain in our freedom in Christ are to be equally strong in love. Today people think that love sets aside God's truth and accepts every lifestyle and sinful action of people. That is not Christian love. God tells us in His Word what we as Christians are to avoid so we are not condemned and that we believe in Christ to be saved. In love we use the truth to warn those who are sinning so they repent and we comfort and strengthen those with fear with the news of Christ. True Christian knowledge is blessed by the Holy Spirit to produce the fruit of love. It should be our goal to help all Christians become stronger in Christ's forgiveness even as we grow in it.

Paul told the strong believers to protect the weak and be patient with them. He would do anything to keep people from falling from the faith. He wrote, *“If what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again.”* (v.13) Jesus always helped the weak. He had to rebuke His own weak disciples and then encouraged them. He challenged a man for his lack of faith and then He healed his demon- possessed son to strengthen him. He told a woman at a well that she was sinning and then assured her that God had sent Him to save her from her sins. He had a love for all people, even for us while we were still apart from God. Should we do any less for others, especially for Christians? Christ told us, *“Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”* (Matthew 25:40)

Life will never be perfect in this world. That's why Jesus died and rose to open the doors of heaven to us and to all believers. By God's grace, someday we'll have perfect love in heaven. I mentioned earlier about the two women who offended the girl. Let's assume that the two women repented of their offense against Christ (He is the one they truly offended) and by God's grace through faith in Him they entered heaven when they died. What a surprise they would have when one day that woman who had been the rebellious teen also entered heaven! As she was fighting cancer in her last days at the hospital that chaplain had talked with her. She confessed her sins, trusted in Christ forgiveness, and died as a child of God. Would things be uncomfortable as the three met in heaven? No! There is no sin or grudges in heaven, but only a perfect love and understanding. When we get to heaven, we too have many joyful reunions with parents and others who helped us along the way. And we will later meet Christians who we helped through times of weakness. For now, we are to receive Christ's love in the Gospel so we can grow in wisdom, knowledge and love. We live in the freedom of Christ's forgiveness and we will help others know that same love. Amen.