

1 Corinthians 8:9-13 Use Your Freedom in Love! Epiphany 4 January 28, 2018

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God's grace and peace have been won by Christ so that you and all believers may rejoice. Amen. God's Word of freedom in Christ and the obligation that it brings to us is written in 1 Corinthians 8:9-13 These are Your Words of love, heavenly Father. Keep us loving as You love us in Christ. Your Word is...

Dear Christian Brothers and Sisters,

The word "freedom" may bring different things to mind for people. For children, a day off school gives freedom to stay up later at night. For workers, freedom may mean a vacation or changing from one job to another they like better or retirement. Our country offers us many great freedoms as well. Today, let's think about Christian freedom. Christians have many freedoms in Christ: we have freedom from fear of God's anger, freedom from the obligation of keeping God's law to be saved, freedom to know that false gods are nothing. Even demons have no control over us who are in Christ. Yet, there is a balance in having God's freedom. God expects us to use our freedom not selfishly but for the good of others. Martin Luther described this balance of freedom: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." (LW 31, page 344) How can these two statements stand together? We can answer with one word: Love! Paul urges:

Use Your Freedom in Love!

First, treasure the freedom God gives you in Christ! The Corinthians must have been amazed when missionary Paul first came to them with the message of the Gospel. He told them that they didn't need to do anything to be saved. Many of the Corinthians earlier had grown up with sinful philosophies that made knowledge like a god, which they found to be useless to help them. They had known many false gods which they later realized offered them no peace. These false beliefs made them wonder if God was always angry with them or if He cared for them at all. Paul preached about Jesus came to live and die so that they would know the love of God. He had suffered and died on a cross to take the full punishment for all sins so that they might be set free from sins, guilt, and eternal condemnation. God gave them His Word so they could know this truth and be free.

Hearing this good news their doubts and fears disappeared in the complete freedom in Christ as their Savior. They were certain of God's eternal love for them. He proved it by giving His Son to be their Savior. He proved it by raising Him from death and promising that because He lives, they who believe in Him *will live also*. (*John 14:19*) We do not have to fear death, because we know Jesus made death only a temporary sleep. We have no fear of evil in the world, because God promised that nothing will separate us from His love through Jesus. He will ultimately lead us to heaven. We have the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Thanks to God for such freedom!

Earlier in 1 Corinthians 8 Paul described Christian freedom extending in types of food people ate. He wrote, "*About eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.... Food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.*" (v. 4, 8) He was saying that they had freedom to eat whatever kinds of food they wanted. There were no restrictions from God like in the Old Testament.

But, not all the believers at Corinth were ready to accept this truth. The people of the church were not on the same level of sanctification. They had different backgrounds. Some were Jews with a strict background about ceremonial foods. These restrictions were not necessary once Christ came, But some had a difficult time changing their diets. Other Christians in the church came from families that worshipped idols. They were offended by Christians eating meat at a temple, since part of the meat had been offered to an idol. A third group of believers had neither of these customs, so they freely ate any meat.

To prove a point, these believers accepted invitations to eat at a temple restaurant and to show the other Christians their freedom. These people thought that they were leading the doubting people to more freedom. Instead they were harming the faith of the other Christians. By their actions, they encouraged them to go against their consciences. They offended the “weaker” brother or sister. In life to offend someone means to insult them. The Bible word “offend” means “to cause a person to sin or to harm a person’s faith.” Paul made clear that their actions were wrong! Although they treasured their freedom in Christ, they missed something else.

Second, treasure the believers God gave you in Christ! Paul commended the Corinthian believers for knowing the truth that gave them freedom. But he rebuked them for using their freedom without love. He wrote, *“So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.”* (v.11) We need to consider the faith of others before we act. Jesus valued each person enough to sacrifice His life for them. He gave up His freedom on earth to live in humility, suffering, shame, and death because of His love for all people. Picture an artist spending weeks planning a portrait and then spending many weeks painting it. Then someone comes along and dumps a bucket of paint on it. What a waste we say! How much more if we harm the faith someone for whom Christ lived and died for to save! Can we treat those people as if they have no value? No! We want to instruct them in love just as Paul did. We don’t want anyone of any age to lose their faith over something where the Bible gives us freedom.

Another reason for showing concern for other Christians is the connection that they have to Christ. Paul wrote, *“When you sin against your brothers ... and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.”* (v.12) When Paul was converted; Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and told him, *“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?”* (Acts 9: 4) Now Saul had not directly persecuted Jesus, but because Jesus was intimately connected to believers as members of His body, Jesus felt every hurt that Paul inflicted on them. Also, Jesus earlier commended disciples: *“Whatever you did for one ... of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”* (Matthew 25:40) He was speaking about how believers showed kindness and great care to help other believers and Jesus received it as if it was done for Him. So, when we show spiritual concern for our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are showing love for Christ reflecting His love for us!

When it comes to Christian freedom, we need to ask ourselves two questions. First, is what we are doing helping Christians? Second, is what we are doing helping the cause of Christ? Paul was so strong in his concern for other believers and for the work of Christ that he wrote, *“If what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again.”* (v.13) How could Paul be willing to give up all his freedom? He remembered how patient God had been with him that when he was an unbeliever. He had harmed and murdered Christian men and women. Despite his sinful past, God assured him that there was no condemnation for him in Christ. In that forgiveness, Paul did all that he could to share the joy that comes with Christ’s forgiveness. He wanted nothing to stand in the way of their true freedom.

We want everyone to have that same joy in Christ. Yet, None of us will get this totally right as long as we live in this world. But, like Paul we will keep working, knowing that Christ by His grace will call us to heaven where we will live in perfect freedom and harmony with no sin. For now, we continue to receive Christ’s love in His freedom, we sets us free to serve others so that God’s kingdom will continue to grow.