

Small Group Summer Series: Maintenance Required - Obedience (1 Cor. 8-10:13)

Over the last couple of weeks we have been doing routine maintenance on our church. All this means is that, together, as the body of Christ, we are examining our hearts to ensure we are on the right path. We have checked our health in a number of areas. We saw how we should not forget the blessings of God, how unity over preference should be a marker of the body of Christ, how we should properly handle sin and church discipline, how to avoid imposters and false teachers in the body, and last week we talked through asceticism, which is simply the false idea that harsh treatment to my body will make me holy. But as we saw, it is only Jesus who makes us holy.

This week, we are going to learn about how disobedience can affect the health of a church. Interestingly, we are primarily concerned today with how our actions can cause disobedience in others. While we will talk about massive sins that can take a church down, we are going to start off with how holding onto our “rights” as a believer can hinder growth in a young Christian, and they can hinder the message of the gospel! It is only then we are going to look at explicit sin in our own lives.

And that is really how we are wired to think now and days isn't it? Many of our books on discipleship primarily focus on your own internal sin, practical holiness, etc., but very rarely talk about how your actions, even if they aren't necessarily sinful, can badly affect others. And what this shows us is that obedience isn't just about “I don't do this sin...”, but out of a heart of charity giving up our rights for the sake of others.

Transition

In other words, we are to be concerned with the obedience of weak believers, concern for unbelievers, and concerned about our own personal obedience.

1.) Concern for the Obedience of Weak Believers

Read Chapter 8 - Paul in this passage is writing to address meat that is offered to idols. Now, if you grew up in conservative, Baptist churches like I did, the way I often heard this applied was in the context of standards. In other words, you would always defer to the person who has the higher standard than you. Illustration - going to movies. But that is not what Paul is talking about. He is not concerned with external standards, but accidentally causing someone (e.g. a new believer) to fall into sin.

The historical context is that pagan temples would take the meat offered to idols and sell it. In fact, many feasts, marriage receptions, and celebrations were held in the temple, eating meat offered to gods. And many Christians were still buying their meat there, maybe even eating in the temple, and this was causing the younger believers to stumble into sin. But how does that work?

Paul in this passage starts off with the general principle that he wants to teach us, that “Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.” When it comes to meat offered to idols, love must lead the way. Why this matters really comes to the fore when you realize what two groups Paul was addressing, strong and weak Christians. Now, lest we think Paul doesn’t care about right doctrine, he agrees with the position of the strong brothers right out of the gate.

Vs 4-6 - They are correct to believe that idols are nothing, because there is only one God the Father, and only one Lord Jesus Christ. Not only is this quite the statement about Jesus, including Him in the Shema, this is also a great theological statement about idols. Idols don’t exist because God exists. And because of that, there wasn’t anything inherently sinful about eating meat offered to idols because they don’t exist. But the problem was not their belief, it was how they were using it. They were holding onto their “rights” at the expense of the obedience of younger believers.

Vs. 7-11 - These weaker brothers were not yet properly disciplined. They, being recently converted from paganism, still believed idols were real. The temple was still “haunted” to them so to speak.. And when they saw more mature believers eating meat in the temple, they misunderstood what was going on. They thought they were honoring idols by eating the meat, and they took it as a green light to continue practicing paganism. It caused them to mix their faith with paganism. They would eat meat offered to idols, and see it as legitimately honoring the gods of the Roman empire. Their underdeveloped conscience would take the “rights” of the mature believers and take it to a bad conclusion. So far from this being two sets of mature Christians arguing over standards, this is mature believers accidentally leading younger believers astray. And it seems they may have known about this, and kept holding onto their practice, because it was their “right”.

Galatians 5:13-14, “13 For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. 14 For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”

Paul wanted to remind them that it wasn't about their rights, but consideration for others. Our liberty is to love our neighbor, not hold onto every "right" I have at the expense of someone's walk with Jesus. Continuing on into chapter nine, Paul used himself as an example to teach them that others matter more than our own personal liberties.

You should beware about causing others to fall into sin. And Paul doesn't just say that, and turn around and eat a steak offered to idols. He lived it! And he uses his own life as an example, which leads us to the second, slightly related, concern for Paul.

2.) Concern for the conversion of unbelievers

Read ch. 9 - Paul, as an apostle, was living and preaching the gospel completely pro-bono. Now, he makes a very clear theological case that he is within his rights to be supported by churches for the work of the ministry. Not only that, he has a right to take a wife, he has a right to eat meat and not practice the Jewish law. He has liberty in Christ. If anyone understood what it means to not be a legalist it was Paul! Remember he also wrote Galatians and Colossians around this time. But he absolutely refused to do that. Why?

Vs. 15-22 - Paul gave up his rights so that he could win others to the gospel of Christ. He would live as a Jew so he could win the Jews. When he was a gentile, he lived as a gentile. This obviously does not mean that he believed you needed to keep the law to be saved, you only need to see his interaction with Peter to do so. But he was accommodating to Jewish cultures to win others to Christ. You can see this in Acts by watching him practice Jewish holy days and then preaching the gospel. This also does not mean he would partake in sin, remember he said he would not eat meat offered in the temple to idols. In fact, the reason he would refuse to eat meat from the pagans was so they would not be confused about his full allegiance to Jesus by thinking he thought idols were real! Because if believers thought this, you better believed lost gentiles would be confused! While Paul believed in liberty, salvation by grace alone through faith alone, he did not use his liberty to cause others to stumble or stop short of believing in Jesus. Calling people to believe in Jesus alone is offensive enough to some, why would we muddy it by offending others with our lifestyle?

Application

Now, this passage is hard to apply, because no one buys meat offered to idols in Beavercreek, OH. But, a good question to ask ourselves is this: is there anything in my life that would confuse young Christians or hinder someone from believing the gospel?

In fact, I think that this passage is a direct application of Jesus saying in the Sermon on the Mount, “16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” Our faith and religion is so privatized now and days we rarely think about how our obedience, let alone any part of our life, would affect others. Especially when it comes to areas that we as modern believers see as aspects of our “Christian liberty”, we rarely think about how others perceive us. Now, this does not mean we fall into legalism or into the fear of man. Paul commands us also to stand fast in our liberty. But if there is any action that would cause us to make anyone fall away from Jesus, whether believers or not, that should be stopped.

First, just as a way to apply this, this takes having younger Christians around. Do you even have a person you are discipling that you have to consider with your liberty?

Second, this can be seen in our work environments. Being around unbelievers, it is very tempting to be so focused on being cool and relevant that we never practice righteousness in the workplace. Would people be shocked that you are a Christian? Or do you participate when the office goes out to the bar? When they joke about something they shouldn’t? Throw in a cuss word or two when it’s appropriate? Think about if you ever got serious enough to win someone to Jesus, then as a younger believer they are watching you in your liberty and think “Man, I think being a Christian just about personal beliefs, not public holiness.” Or they would fall into even graver sin than you because you inadvertently gave them the green light.

Obedience is not just about my personal holiness, but considering whether my actions would cause someone to not become a Christian, or cause a weaker Christian to disobey. But, as we will notice, it is not less than that either.

3.) Concern for personal holiness.

Read 9:24-10:14 - Paul starts by using the image of an athlete. We do not run with uncertainty, or box like someone beating the air, but we have absolute self-control in every area of our lives. We do so to win an incorruptible crown in heaven, not a corruptible crown on earth. He then uses an example from the Old Testament to help us understand what it would mean to not be self-controlled.

Read 10:1-6 - Because Jesus has always been God, the blessings the people of Israel were from Christ. Now we, who have received every spiritual blessing in Christ, must learn from their example. And it is very clear that they did not please the Lord.

Read vs. 7-11 - They worshipped idols, committed sexual sin, tempted the Lord by disobeying with impunity, and just complained like a bunch of toddlers. And if you ask me, that sounds a lot like the 21st century American church! We worship the idol of the American dream. The vast majority of men are addicted to porn. We disobey God with arrogance by abandoning the church for lesser things like kid's sports. We complain all the time about all the problems we have like gas prices when people around the world are starving.

Read 12-14 - And if you think that you are actually standing in any area, you need to beware. It doesn't matter how old you are, it doesn't matter how young, any one of us could fall into massive, grave sin. We could fall into lust, complacency, idolatry, complaining, unthankfulness, and it is right when we think we have arrived that Satan works his dark magic to pull us slowly away from Christ. That is why we are told to flee idolatry! Sin is always pursuing us whether we like it or not. That is why, as those who have received every blessing in Christ we are to always run from sin. And Paul gives a very practical way to do that, look for a way of escape.

Application

None of the temptations listed here are too big to bear. In fact, every time there is a temptation to sin there is a way to escape it. Look for that! If you are struggling with lust, tell someone about it! If you are struggling with complaining, obey and give thanks! If you are struggling with idolizing your comfort over the church, ask a pastor to keep you accountable.

Daily, this means you look at your life, recognize sin, and run away.

This means you run away from sin with your church! Again, holiness is a public issue not a private issue.

Ultimately, this reinforces what we started with, encouraging younger believers in the faith and winning the lost. Maybe if we led with holiness rather than liberty we would actually see younger Christians take better steps for Jesus. Maybe if we led with holiness in the work place Jesus would actually seem to matter to us, and therefore attract others to the gospel.

Illustration - my father in law in the workplace. He pastored his work. God has called you to be a light for Him. So put holiness first, consider your liberty. It doesn't mean you don't practice, but think through whether it will lead someone astray. And be concerned about personal holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.