

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Now last week I made a particular point, and I prefaced it by saying, “I can do this because Main Street is an educated intelligent congregation.” Now, Monday morning, our secretary, Emmie, said, “Jim, no we’re not!” I think we are.

None of us knows it all, but for a moment I want to redeem my father’s tuition money that he spent on my four years of biology, biochemistry, histology, etc., and indulge me as I try to get a sermon illustration at least out of all that struggle in the sciences. Here’s my statement that, in the beginning, you will say is untrue, but hang with me. Bacteria do not make people sick. Perhaps that should be bacterium. Anyway, bacteria do not make people sick! Yes, I do believe in the germ theory of disease, but bacteria don’t make people sick, not exactly. It’s not the bacteria themselves, what makes us sick is the E&S product. Now, this is wonderful pre-lunch talk. That’s the excretory and secretory poisons that the bacteria secrete. Poisons that they release. They make us sick. They are themselves benign. They are neither good nor bad, but the poisons they release into our bodies cause inflammation and fever and tissue damage and disease. Again, it’s not the mere presence of bacteria, it is what they secrete, their poisons that can cause disease and damage and even death. For example, bacteria are normally in our mouths, and that’s no problem. They have no drills, no chisels to harm our teeth, but if you leave little bits of food in there, they eat them, and they excrete an acid, which forms the cavities in our teeth. We can coexist quite nicely with certain bacteria in a symbiotic way. They help us digest. They’re in yogurt. They live naturally in our colons. It is when their poisons are released that we become ill or damaged or dead. Now what possible connection can all this have with the apostle Paul and whether Christians should eat meat dedicated to idols or not? Hang with me. You look doubtful.

Paul points out that, of course, Christians know that idols are nothing, less than nothing, and there is no harm to your faith and no affront to God by merely buying in the market or even eating some of this meat in the temple, which has been offered to a big zero of an idol.

That reminds me of one of my favorite puns. Did you hear about the archeologist who discovered a primitive tribe in New Guinea, who actually worshipped the number zero? He was heard to exclaim, “Is nothing sacred!” Come on.

Well, anyway, Paul wrote that no one’s faith nor conscience nor relationship with God nor relationship with the church could possibly be damaged by eating meat offered to a big nothing of an idol, but then Paul took a surprising turn in logic. Paul took a turn of love in logic, love of neighbor, in a way that cost him and cost others to limit their freedom for the sake of another, to limit their freedom for the sake of another. He said even though eating that meat does not harm me, I will not eat it because it may damage the conscience of a weaker brother or sister in the faith. They are on the line. They are on the fence. They are emotionally unsure. They are uncertain, and if a more mature Christian ate meat in front of them, it might upset them. It might drive them out of the

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church. It might drive them into despair. It might damage their faith and their growth in God. So even though Paul says it does not harm me, I will stop it out of love for my weaker brethren.

Now, here’s where I hope to tie it together. We can coexist, we must coexist in a world with drugs, with pornography, with alcohol abuse, with gambling, and a myriad other addictive substances and behaviors all around us. It is not until those poisons enter our bodies or our psyches that they make us ill or damaged or even to die. Certain things cannot harm me personally, but would make some of you wish you were never born. I’m going to give you an example. I found accidentally, years ago, as a child that I am not, or at least I was not, allergic to poison ivy at all. I found this out because a whole bunch of us were wearing shorts; we went down the same trail we were hiking in the woods on Saturday on the weekend, a whole bunch of us. The rest of them were miserable for weeks, itching and red all over, spreading that poison from one place to another where they scratched, and the next day, I had to go to church like always. I didn’t have the slightest itch, the slightest urge to scratch, no redness, no nothing to keep me home to watch “Underdog” reruns instead of that man in the black dress in the pulpit. Now, I understand that allergies can come and go so I really haven’t tested my immunity lately, but in my youth, I was simply not allergic. For me, it was not poison. That time that I led my cousins through the poison ivy patch for the meanest of it was just plain wrong! This is a perfect example of the truth that what does not harm me may afflict my brother or my sister horribly. That’s what Paul was talking about.

In every church, I have had at least a member or two who were prescribed powerful pain killers after surgery, and some of them liked it way too much, and went from doctor to doctor, getting more and more. Every church I’ve been in! Indifferent things or even good things such as painkillers can become poison. Some of you can have a glass of wine with dinner once or twice a year and think nothing about it. Others are more like the author Edgar Alan Poe, of whom it is written, with a single glass of wine his whole nature was reversed. The demon became uppermost, and though none of the usual signs of intoxication were visible, his will was palpably insane. Some of you remember the show, “Miami Vice.” The vice squad dealt mostly with illicit drugs and gambling and prostitution and illegal alcohol sales. You know, vice implies a compulsion that goes way past enjoyment. Vice is a life turned in upon a destructive habit, a life focused on self and cut off from others. Vice is the opposite of virtue. Virtue seeks to conform to a standard of moral excellence. Standards limit freedom. Standards limit our choices. Paul was saying Corinthians today that as Christians, we must never do anything, which causes or gives permission or opportunity for the stumbling or the fall of our brothers or sisters in Christ. In other words, when we make decisions we must consider more than just “me.” How will this affect others? We are not little gods living in isolation. We are connected, like it or not, we are all connected, and it matters what we do and with whom we do it.

John Wesley, early in his ministry, used to be indifferent about drinking wine or ale. He even recommended in the beginning that, if you were an outdoor preacher where you had

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to yell and yell and yell, you should have a pint of ale after the sermon because it would soothe your throat. Now, that was early on, but then he began to work in the inner city and around the gin factory neighborhood. The distilled spirits were part of the industrial revolution. He saw the condition of those who were paid part in wages and part in gin. He saw the functional alcoholics barely living to work to get the money to go home to drink to the next day, and it sickened him. Soon after, he and the entire Methodist movement began to counter their own national culture, and they abstained completely from alcohol, not because they could not drink, but because of the harm that it caused their brothers and sisters. As Paul said before about meat dedicated to idols, if this weakens the faith of any or harms them and causes them to stumble, then I will not eat it at all. Wesley said then I will not drink it at all.

This is strange thinking in our world. In our world, we usually think every man or every woman for themselves. The flip side is, I am my brother’s keeper. I will allow my behavior and decisions to be limited by how I affect others. Alcohol is just one example, just one. It’s extremely dangerous stuff. It causes the fall of many. Whether you can handle it or not, your brother’s weakness should inform and limit your behavior, or at the very least, give you pause to think, “Am I giving permission to someone who will be harmed?” If I do not know, should I take the risk in serving it? Are you free as a Christian to drink alcohol? Yes! Yes, you are. In 1 Corinthians 10, it does say, all things are lawful to me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up. All things are lawful, but I will not be enslaved by anything. In verse 24, “Let no one seek just his own good, but also the good of his neighbor.” If you know something harms your brother, what should you do? Is your freedom so important that it is worth your brother’s fall? It could be lawful, but it is not helpful. Paul anticipates our question. He says in Romans, “Each of us will give an account of himself or herself to God.” Then Paul takes it again in an unexpected direction. Instead of letting us off the hook for our brother, and giving account only of ourselves, he goes on to say, “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another, instead make up your mind not to put any stumbling or obstacle in your brother’s way.”

I had a friend; I have to confess, back in college, when I was young and foolish, not so much a friend, but really a roommate, who was just assigned to me for a summer session. In a casual way, I was acquainted with alcohol, and for me, it was take it or leave it. It was benign, neither good nor bad, not a compulsion, not a habit. I confess that I didn’t see the big picture. You see, my roommate, whom I didn’t know very well, had no experience and no knowledge of alcohol, and he was legal. I didn’t see a problem. He asked, “Can I have some of that?” I said, “Go ahead.” At the ripe old age of 19, which was legal at the time, I did not see any problem. Later, about a year later, late at night, in the science building, I saw him looking in on one of his experiments, and he looked bad. He obviously had a problem. What was benign to me was poison in his life. Some of you, in your mind, may be saying, ah, Jim, you know, you can make excuses for me, I couldn’t have known, or you can’t feel responsibility because everybody is responsible for their own behavior. What are you saying, are you his keeper? Yes. Is it my problem if another person can’t handle his booze? Yes. Even if the law thinks it’s okay, faith

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holds us to a higher standard than law. I introduced my summer school roommate to a stumbling block, a poison, an obstacle to growth and faith and to his future, and I regret this. I regret this greatly.

The way your faith affects how you treat other people is the point of all this talk. If your faith swims only from neuron to neuron in your brain, and it never really matters in your relationships, then your faith is nothing more than a daydream, a passing fancy, a figment, an idea. Faith must inform your decisions, the way you live as an example before others. All I have said this morning is to illustrate this point. It’s not about alcohol. Again, would you offer a Twinkie to someone on doctor’s order to lose weight, who had high blood sugar? No! That is not loving. Would you also legalize gambling knowing, as I have seen, that some will surely become addicted and lose all they have? Would you legalize drugs just because it’s too hard to stop them? Or knowing full well how hard and fast the fall of drugs is, would you look the other way? You wouldn’t smoke in front of somebody who had emphysema. You wouldn’t send a “Penthouse” subscription to someone addicted to pornography. There are so many things of which we must be aware, and the way we live our lives does affect other people.

I know of a former pastor, who left magazines such as Playboy around his cabin for youth from his own church just to look at if they wanted to. I say former pastor; he was removed from the Conference. I spoke to a grown one of those youths, who actually spent a week at the cabin. He said he didn’t know what to make of it. I don’t know what the man thought he was doing, but I do know that later he lost his ministry, he lost his marriage, and he did die of A.I.D.S. Somewhere along the line, poison had entered his life.

Gambling. I met a woman who had the doublewide trailer almost paid off, and then she won \$1,500 in a poker machine, back when those things were semi-legal. She didn’t understand they changed the odds on them daily, and just pay off every now and then. She thought she could win again. She took out a second mortgage, lost the double-wide, which her husband thought was paid for, then lost her marriage, and pretty much lost her future. Lest you think only uneducated people do such things, I counseled another man who owned a thriving business outside of Charlotte, who lost everything putting \$20 at a time into those same machines. This is why I’ve never supported our lottery nor played it. Part of the lottery money was set-aside for gambling addicts, which they knew would be created.

The more available a vice becomes, the more people will be harmed. That’s not an opinion, that’s just the numbers and human behavior and how they add together. Some people can walk away, and some will be poisoned. So many other things I wish I had time to speak about, and I don’t. Parents, consider how much unsupervised time, how much transportation, and how much money you give your children. If you add time and money and opportunity to inexperience in the world in which we live, who knows what poisons they will come into. I read last week that in 30 minutes on a computer, it is possible to download 300 pornographic images – in 30 unsupervised minutes! Burning

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images and actions into young brains that can never be erased. It coarsens something beautiful into something animal. Imagine a world where everyone actually did think, on the other hand though, how are my actions affecting me or influencing others? What potentially dangerous habits of mine might give permission to begin down the same path to others who watch me? It can be drugs. It can be indulgent food. It can be needless spending obsessions or any such thing. Choose your poison to coin a phrase. It may be legal. It may be even a matter of indifference for you, but certain things for certain people are poison. Should their problem limit your freedom? The apostle Paul says yes, as a Christian, yes. Would you be willing to limit your freedom for the sake of another? Paul said yes. Was it fair? No. Neither was it fair that Jesus died for sins not his own, but following Jesus’ example, we can live with freedom limited by love for others. Just consider that thought this morning, that we can limit our freedom because we love other people. We are family in Christ, and we must care for one another. In our strengths and in our weaknesses, we are examples for one another. Just because you are not affected is not high enough a standard. Are you your brother’s keeper, your sister’s keeper, your husband’s keeper, your wife’s keeper, your children’s keeper, the keeper of the voiceless and the poor around you? What about your fellow church members, your work mates? You have an obligation to each and every one with whom you come in contact. We are their keepers. Does God really expect me to modify my behavior for the sake of others? Yes, I think so. God has a passion for us, and Jesus proved that passion through his birth and cross and resurrection. We are called to passionately care for each other. Amen.