

MORE THAN MEDIOCRE - MORALITY
A SERMON BASED ON 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
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10:00 a.m.

I prefer the easy answer.

I prefer the clarity of yes, or no.

It is, or it isn't.

You can, or you can't.

As one who provides counsel, I am often asked questions.

Being clergy I am often asked questions.

Looking into the faces across from me,

I know that I am not alone in preferring the easy answer,

the clarity of yes or no,

or the certainty of hearing 'this is absolutely how it is'.

What should I do Reverend? What's the right thing?

What should I have done Pastor?

What is the answer here Doug?

Am I doing the right thing? Yes or no.

Did I do the right thing? Yes or no.

Is this what God wants me to do? Yes or no.

Or, what exactly is the right thing to do here?

Often I find myself saying - well, it depends.

Today's text gives us some perspective

on how to deal with some challenging questions,

and behaviours,

particularly in the area of morality.

The word morality has as its root meaning,

the proper behaviour of a person in society.

How do we behave in relation to others?

What character do we bring to relationship?

What is the nature of our morality as Christians?

The Corinthians had written the apostle Paul with a question.

As a new church, a young church, with many believers new to the faith,

they had a lot of questions about how to conduct themselves.

Including this one.

Paul, is it okay to eat meat that has been sacrificed to an idol?

Yes or no.

Back in this time most of the meat available for purchase at the market,
had some connection to pagan worship.

At a temple devoted to the worship of a god or goddess
an animal sacrifice would be offered at the altar
by the priests and priestesses.

In addition to sacrifices at the temple,
Sacrifices and offerings to various gods would happen at group meetings.
or at public events, even private banquets.

In the way we might say grace,
a sacrifice was made and meat was offered
to the gods or goddesses to honour them.

After these sorts of gatherings,
whether at the temple worship, public events or private parties,
there would be meat left over.

It was taken to the market where it would be sold.

So in the market,

almost all of the meat for sale
was surplus from these types of events
and this is what is being referred to as 'idol meat'.

Thus unless a Christian raised and slaughtered their own meat,
somewhere along the line,
if they were at the market,
they would encounter meat which
had been offered up to some other god in sacrifice.

The church in Corinth had their question of morality in regards to idol meat.
Paul, we are Christians now,
we no longer worship other gods or goddesses.
Is it okay to eat meat that has been sacrificed to an idol,
to eat idol meat?

Yes or no.

Easy question.

It is apparent there was a dispute in the church over the answer.

Some were saying it was okay.

Some were saying it wasn't.

In this letter to the Corinthians,

it looks very much like Paul

is responding to, answering,

a letter he had received prior to writing this.

Whoever wrote that letter to him was in the yes camp,

in the 'it's okay to eat meat sacrificed to an idol' camp.

You can hear their case as Paul quotes from

what we assume was their letter to him.

They had articulated their argument quite well.

They said,

All of us possess knowledge (We are enlightened).

No idol in the world really exists (We know they're not real).

There is only one God.

Food will not bring us close to God.

We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.

(Food is irrelevant to our faith.)

All things are lawful. (We have no dietary restrictions.)

They've built the case for themselves,

using some of Paul's own teaching.

It's obviously okay to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols Paul.

Just tell the others in the church plainly, that yes, it's okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols and this bickering can stop.

Can we eat the meat that has been sacrificed to idols?

Yes or no.

Seems like an easy enough question.

So Paul answers it.

It depends.

Even in this simple question, there is no clear answer.

He says to the Corinthians who wrote to him.

Let me paraphrase him for you.

"You are arrogant.

You are enlightened are you?

Well, knowledge puffs up.

But love builds up.

You know that idols aren't real.

You know there is only one God. That's great.

But not everyone does.

There are those in your midst, in your church,

who still think of the idols as very real beings,

who think that the meat they are eating,

is in fact honouring the goddess or god it was sacrificed to,

that in eating it they are being disloyal to

the one God of the Christian faith

they have just begun to follow.

So, for you who know that we are no better if we do not eat,

and no better if we do,

be careful,

because there are some in your midst,

who have a weak conscience,

who are less able to accept,

that there is only one God.

There are those in your midst that think eating that meat

is the equivalent to declaring loyalty to that idol.

If they see you eating meat,
they may start eating it again,
but without the strength of conscience.
They may be lead away from their faith in Christ,
back into bowing their knee to false gods.”

Paul says,
Jesus died for them.
And you could damage their faith by eating meat from the temple.
Your superior knowledge,
your mature faith, could ruin them, destroy them.
If you ruin it for them,
you have sinned against the weaker brother or sister,
and you have sinned against Christ who died for them.

So the answer is more than yes or no.

If my freedom to eat meat,
causes harm,
if it becomes a stumbling block to another’s faith,
the I won’t eat meat, so that I don’t harm their faith.

Paul circles back to this in chapter ten.

You are right,

everything is permissible.

You can eat meat.

But not everything is beneficial.

Don't seek your own good.

Seek the good of others.

In a world where individual rights

dominate every conversation,

this is a disruptive thought.

Don't seek your own good.

Seek the good of others.

So go ahead, eat the meat sold in the market.

If an unbeliever invites you for supper,

eat what's in front of you without raising question of conscience.

But if a weaker brother or sister is at the dinner,

and raises the point that the food was offered in sacrifice,

and it's clear you are going to be a stumbling block to them,

then don't eat it.

Help them. Help them. Seek the good of others.

Do not cause anyone to stumble,

whether Jews or Greeks or the church of God.

You want to know whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols?

Be my imitator.

Do what I do.

Seek the good of the other's walk with Christ.

Rather than being worried about getting what you are allowed,

or what you feel you are entitled to,

seek the good of others.

So the answer to your question is yes.

You can eat meat sacrificed to idols.

And the answer to your question is no.

Don't eat meat sacrificed to idols.

It depends. Who are you helping?

Now, if I were to hunt for an issue we could care less about as

Christians in the 21st century,

I think it would be difficult to find something less pressing

than meat offered to idols.

I don't even know where I'd find meat sacrificed to another god.

When we head to the grocery store,

we don't ask whether the hamburger

in the refrigeration unit was offered to the goddess Artemis first.

When we sit down to a meal in a friend's home,

it isn't likely the meat is going to be offered up

to the goddess Isis in front of us.

So these chapters might seem puzzling and irrelevant to the church today.

But it was a hot button issue then.

People were coming to Christ out of pagan practices.

They had been worshipping these false gods.

They had been giving the gods gifts and sacrifices.

They had been identifying with the pagan gods.

It isn't about idol meat for us.

But there are things Christians have argued about.

If you have an uber Christian in your family tree somewhere

you may have heard about the rules for

Alcohol, dancing, for some, cards, movies,

the casino, the track, tobacco.

And you may have been fed the easy answer.

Yes or no.

Is it okay for a Christian to drink alcohol?

In this congregation, many people would say yes.

Many would point to their freedom in Christ.

Would say, I am enlightened, I know,

that a drink has nothing to do with my relationship with God.

I am no better if I do not drink,

And no worse if I do.

We have those who say no.

I have seen the damage it does when it is abused.

I have seen what harm addiction brings.

We have no need to intoxicate our bodies.

Yes or no.

Well which is it?

Depends.

You have freedom in Christ.

But beware that your freedom does not become arrogance.

Knowledge puffs up.

Love builds up.

Beware that your freedom

does not become a stumbling block to another.

In our life before Niagara Falls,

Wendy and I became friends with a great couple,
newly Christian.

They had recently given their lives to Christ.

They wanted to assist us with the youth work we were doing.

They had two young children as we did.

Nice people, good friends.

They had come from a very difficult place.

Both were alcoholics. They had been sober seven years.

Their life was coming together in a beautiful way.

Their marriage was stabilizing after much turbulence.

Their finances were under control again.

They were present for their young children.

Alcohol was poison for them.

They knew it was a powerful lure.

The idol for which they would give up everything.

I know I have freedom in Christ.

I have the freedom to have a beer or a glass of wine.

My relationship with Jesus is not based on what I eat or drink.

As Paul says, if I take part in the meal with thankfulness,

why am I denounced because of something I gave thanks for?

But be careful that your freedom

does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

Our friends went on a weekend away to Quebec City without the kids.

It was romantic, quiet and pleasant.

They were in love and happy.

They decided they were strong enough,
and free enough to have wine with dinner.

It was the wedge in the door.

Their addiction got a renewed grip on their lives,
and wreaked absolute destruction.

Their relationship with God faded into the background.

He lost his license.

They lost their children for a while.

They lost their marriage.

He literally lost his life. Dead from alcohol poisoning.

His children lost their father.

It still saddens me to think of it.

The friend had said to me at one time,
a thimbleful of wine, the smell of wine,
set her addiction revving.

I have freedom in Christ.

Freedom to have a glass of wine.

But I also have the freedom not to.

Paul says, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin,
then I'll never eat meat again.

You have freedom.

Knowledge puffs up. But love builds up.

I'm not a legalist.

My relationship with Christ is beyond do's and don'ts.

Love builds up.

The real question is not am I allowed to or not?

The real question is

do my choices lead a person closer to Christ,

or drive them further away?

I would not have a beer with the friends I just told you about.

I didn't even offer it.

It would have been a stumbling block to them.

Indeed it was just that and it literally stole their lives from them.

But I would absolutely have a beer with my Dad when he was with us

or my brother,

because, for some reason that makes the
‘jeez, how did we end up with clergy in the family’ guy,
a little more accessible and a little less other
It gave me greater opportunity to talk about my life in the church,
and life in Christ.

Is it okay for the Christian to drink alcohol?

Yes or no?

It depends.

I have freedom.

And love builds up.

So my freedom, in imitation of Paul,
should be used to bring others closer to Christ.

The Corinthians wanted to know if they were allowed to eat idol meat.

Paul basically answered their question with a question.

Are you using your freedom,
to help others grow closer to Christ?

Or are you using your freedom,
to serve yourself?

I leave you with one example you probably never would have considered.

The morality of baseball.

Is it okay for a Christian to go to baseball games?

Yes or no?

Paul Little in his book *How To Give Away Your Faith* tells of his experience.

He says, I was at a student conference in New Jersey.

There I met a fellow, a salesman,

who literally worshipped baseball before he became a Christian.

He would slave away all winter long, saving his money

so that he could be completely free for his nine inning 'god'

in the summer months.

For something like twelve years

he hadn't missed a single game in Philadelphia.

He knew every batting average since 1910.

He slept, ate, drank, and breathed baseball.

Then he met the Saviour and gave up his idol,

leaving it at Jesus' feet.

Toward the end of a rugged and somewhat exhausting conference,

this fellow overheard me suggest to another staff member,

'Say, after the conference let's go to the Stadium

and see the Phillies.

They're playing the St. Louis Cardinals.'

The salesman was staggered.

Incredulous, he stared at me and demanded,

'How can you as a Christian go to a baseball game?'

Little shares,

'Now, I've heard a lot of taboos in Christian circles,

but this was the first time I'd heard baseball banned! '

I was flabbergasted and didn't know what to say.

When he asked a second time,

'How can you and Fred claim to be Christians

and then go out to a ball game?'

Fred and I starting thinking and discussing the situation.

As we talked to the salesman we uncovered his problem.

Here was a man like the Christians in Corinth, a former idol worshipper.

Baseball had been a big thing to him;

now he assumed that anybody who saw a game,

however removed from idolatrous intents,

was worshipping baseball as an idol,

the way he had.

Fred and I cancelled our baseball date

since our going would have needlessly disturbed our friend

at a sensitive stage in his Christian life.

But we also talked and counselled with him,

and he gradually realized

that not all Christians find baseball a problem.

With his background,

baseball will probably be a dangerous temptation to him

for the rest of his life; this he knows.

But later he also saw

that he couldn't legislate for Christians

who have no problem with the sport.

It heartened us to see him begin to mature in his attitudes."

Your faith is not a bunch of do's and don'ts.

It is not a bunch of easy answers.

Your faith requires great care and discernment and love for those newer in the faith, or not part of the faith.

You have great freedom in Christ.

The most important question is how are you using your freedom?

Are the choices you are making
helping others in their walk of faith,
or hindering them?

Your answer could be different for different people.

The criteria is love.

Knowledge puffs up. Love builds up

It is not about getting what you want

and what you believe you should be allowed.

That is a mediocre self-centred morality.

A morality that is more than mediocre builds others up.

Love builds up.

Your freedom is to strengthen those new and weaker in the faith.

Consider your choices.

Consider those around you.

Paul says,

I am not seeking my own good but the good of many,

so that they may know Christ and be saved.

That is the purpose of your freedom.

That is a morality that is more than mediocre.

Amen.