

29JAN12 Text: 1 Corinthians 8:9 ***“Take care, that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”***

Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger is the youngest signal-caller ever to win a Super Bowl. He is a rising superstar in the NFL and has been the recipient of a number of endorsement opportunities. However, as of June 2006, **he also has a new perspective on freedom**. In July of 2005, ESPN reporter Andrea Kremer asked Roethlisberger to explain his decision to ride his motorcycle without a helmet: **[ESPN]: “It’s not the law in Pennsylvania to wear a helmet. *Why don’t you wear a helmet?”*** **[Roethlisberger]: “Because you don’t have to. It’s not the law. If it was the law, I’d definitely have one on every time I rode. But it’s not the law and I know I don’t have to. You’re just *more free* when you’re out there with no helmet on.”**

Unfortunately, Roethlisberger was involved in a serious motorcycle accident in June of 2006, less than one year after this interview. His motorcycle was totaled. Emergency surgeons spent over seven hours repairing a broken jaw, a fractured skull, missing teeth, and several other facial injuries. After being released from the hospital, Roethlisberger apologized to the fans, his family, and his team for **risking his health (and life) unnecessarily**. In another interview, he was no longer focused on taking advantage of his individual freedom: *“In the past few days, I’ve gained a new perspective on life. By the grace of God, I’m fortunate to be alive.”* He also added that, if he ever does ride a motorcycle again, *“it will certainly be with a helmet.”*

**Freedoms used with little thought about possible consequences can be a dangerous thing.** Ben Roethlisberger learned this lesson the hard way. Let’s transfer this thought about freedom to the spiritual realm. *What about the wrong use of our spiritual freedom in Christ? What if our freedom in Christ is used with no thought about possible consequences?* St. Paul’s words in our epistle today are all about **the use and misuse of our freedom in Christ**. His words urged the believers of his own day and urge us today to:

### **EXERCISE CHRISTIAN LIBERTY CAREFULLY!**

This morning we are reminded again that:

- 1. Our life and liberty in Christ Jesus are precious gifts from our Savior.**

We are also reminded that:

- 2. Exercising Christian liberty without love in a proud way often causes offense.**

Finally, we can learn today that:

- 3. Christian love may require a self-imposed restriction of our liberty, the freedom**

**which is ours in Christ.** Yes, Paul’s words are practical and applicable to all of us as we carefully use our freedom in Christ so that it does not become a stumbling block for others.

The life and the freedom we have come to know through Jesus Christ our Savior are indeed precious gifts. **We who were once dead and trespasses and sins have been made ALIVE through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ!!** **We who were once in bondage to sin and Satan have been set FREE!!** Jesus came to bring such **freedom** from the oppression of sin and Satan. Today's Gospel told us about how our Lord brought **freedom** as He healed a demon-possessed man in Capernaum. Yes, the reason that you and I are here this morning in God's house because His grace has called us out of the darkness of our sins and into His own marvelous light! Only the true God, the Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is worthy of our praise and devotion. He has **created** us and **redeemed** us and **sanctifies** us by His grace. All other so-called gods are idols: *false gods who have no power to give life or freedom.*

How well we know that the life and freedom we have in Christ are constantly challenged by the world in which we live! It was the **same** for the Corinthian Christians of St. Paul's day. The city of Corinth was quite a place, a city that was known for its immorality. It was also a city filled with temples to false gods. The temple of Aphrodite had 1,000 temple prostitutes and it sat perched at the top of the highest hill in Corinth. Sexual immorality was not the only problem with which the Corinthian Christians had to contend. There were at least twelve other temples devoted to a variety of gods and **the sacrifices which were offered at these pagan altars led indirectly to a problem for some of the Christians.** Not all of the meat offered in the many, many daily sacrifices in these pagan temples was burned up. One part was offered on the pagan altar, another part was given to the one who offered the sacrifice as part of a temple meal, a third part was given to the pagan priest to eat and the **rest** of the meat from the sacrifice was taken to the **public meat market** and sold to the general public.

This posed the problem which St. Paul is addressing in our text today. Because many of the Corinthian Christians had once been followers of these false, pagan gods before their conversion to Christ, they wondered, ***“Could they, should they continue to purchase meat from the market and eat meat which had most likely been part of some pagan sacrificial rite without compromising their faith?”*** Since the eating of sacrifices was one of the activities that **bonded** the pagan worshiper to the idol, *could they eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols?* Did such an action make them **participants in pagan worship?**

We might be tempted to think that these Corinthian Christians were attaching a little too much significance to the power of food to bond people to an idol, yet even in our day, food plays an important role in bonding people together. *Would we ever think of having a wedding or a Super Bowl party without food?* We serve food, and if our guests do not eat, we are offended. Even Jesus “bonded” Himself to sinners by frequently eating with them in their own homes.

Jesus' enemies criticized Him when He ate with men like the tax collector, Zacchaeus. **Most significantly of all, Jesus took the Passover meal and instituted a new Supper for the whole Church to celebrate as they share in eating and drinking His body and blood to receive forgiveness!** The meal we are about to receive here again today brings us **freedom** and renews our **life** in Christ! It unites us to Christ even as we are united to one another! So the Corinthian's question of eating meat offered to idols was no small matter. Were they **free** to eat such meat? Was it **OK** for them to do this? What if their **freedom in Christ** to eat such meat offered to idols **caused offense** and led other Christians to **stumble** in their faith?

Paul addressed these practical questions and begin by reminding the Corinthians that idols were not real gods in the first place. There was only **one** true God, the God who has made all things, the God who had given them life eternal in Jesus Christ. Because this was the common understanding held by all Christians, there were those in the Corinthian parish who had no qualms at all about eating meat that had been offered to idols...*they knew that idols didn't exist...what **difference** did it make if the meat had been sacrificed to something that didn't exist anyway???* **The spiritually damaging effect of those Christians who exercised their freedom in Christ to eat meat sacrificed to idols was that it was done in a proud and loveless way, with no thought for the weaker brother or sister in Christ.** They were not EXERCISING CHRISTIAN LIBERTY CAREFULLY. Freedom in Christ used **without love** can indeed cause offense.

Such careless use of Christian liberty in Paul's day could have two results. On the one hand, those who still believed in idols and who offered the food and ate the meat as a way of uniting themselves to the idol might indeed think that those who ate such meat were one *with them*. Certainly none of the Christians would want to give that impression! More importantly, new Christians who had only recently become Christians and renounced their former pagan lifestyle, were often struggling to live for Christ. For them it was extremely important **not** to eat meat offered to idols, which would make them feel as if they were once again involved in pagan worship and thus *sinning* against the Lord. While Paul himself and other Corinthian Christians could eat such meat without any spiritual harm, such newer Christians who watched them do so might have their faith damaged. **This weaker brother, for whom Christ died, would then be wounded by another Christian's careless use of his or her freedom in Christ.** For this reason Paul says that Christian love may require the **restriction** of Christian liberty. Paul uses himself as an example and says that *"if food makes by brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble."* (v.13) If eating meat was going to be the cause of a Christian brother or sister to stumble in his or her faith, Paul would become a vegetarian!! He underscores this same thought in the 14th chapter of Romans where we read, *"If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, **you are no longer acting in love.** Do not by your eating*

*destroy your brother for whom Christ died...Do not destroy the work of God for food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall...each of us should **please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.**" (14:15,20,21; 15:2)*

Now fast forward 2,000 years. As 21<sup>st</sup>-century Christians, you and I must also EXERCISE OUR CHRISTIAN LIBERTY CAREFULLY. **Love is to be our guiding principle.** What actions are **we** willing to take because of love for our fellow Christian so that another believer does not stumble in his or her faith? Do we lovingly think about what **impact our actions may be having on the life of another Christian?** While we do not have to struggle with the issue of eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols in a pagan temple, we are confronted by many situations where we need to apply this same principle as we carefully use our freedom in Christ. **LOVE MAY REQUIRE THE RESTRICTION OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY!**

Drinking alcohol in moderation is not forbidden in Scripture; it is drunkenness which is condemned. Question. Should the pastor ever drink an alcoholic beverage in public when with parishioners? What if, unbeknownst to the pastor, such an action offends a believer or encourages an alcoholic? Is it better to refrain from having a beer not fully knowing if someone else is having a problem with alcohol? LOVE MAY REQUIRE THE RESTRICTION OF ONE'S FREEDOM IN CHRIST. There may be an activity which one spouse wishes to do but the other spouse opposes. There may be absolutely nothing wrong with the activity in the eyes of the one spouse, yet the other spouse will be offended...LOVE MAY REQUIRE THE RESTRICTION OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY. Whatever example we might use, no matter how pleasant or innocent it may be, **if it is seen by those who are new in the faith or weak in the faith as an offense against God or an occasion to stumble in their faith**, then for the sake of that Christian brother or sister, LOVE RESTRICTS CHRISTIAN LIBERTY. Forms of music, types of jokes, length of hair, styles of clothing, forms of art, certain public events, some types of recreation and all other areas of Christian liberty must be exercised carefully and sorted out with **love as the guiding principle.** **The last thing we want to do is lead another person into sin by our own thoughtless actions.**

Let us then EXERCISE CHRISTIAN LIBERTY CAREFULLY, cherishing the freedom that is ours in Christ. However, let us not use that freedom in Christ in a proud or loveless manner which may cause offense to a brother or sister in Christ. Rather **let us be ready to restrict our freedom in Christ when love requires us to do so**, for Jesus' sake. AMEN

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