

Study in 1st Corinthians 13 - Part 6

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[0 : 00] Seeking the Lord's blessing, we'll turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 13.

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1 Corinthians chapter 15 and at verse 4. 1 Corinthians chapter 14 and at verse 4. 1 Corinthians chapter 16 and at verse 5.

problem was this, and I think when I describe it, you'll find it quite easy maybe to relate to yourselves in some kind of ways. First of all, there was this. Corinth, of course, was a very pagan city. It was full of immorality. It was notorious throughout the whole world for sexual immorality, and many other kinds of immorality too. And one of the problems that arose was this.

Most of the social events took place in temples that were dedicated to idols. Sometimes those events would contain a worship to those idols. Sometimes it wouldn't. And you can imagine the questions arising, well, should we attend there if we're asked to go there? Should we attend there if there's a worship there? Should we attend there if there's no worship there, even if it's still in the idol's temple? Or should we just refrain from going to the idol's temple full stop? It doesn't matter what happens in it. And then again, there was the question of the meat itself. Because some of the meat or some of the food that was offered to the idols could actually be taken back home.

And so this question arose that if someone invited you to a meal, you couldn't be sure whether this meat had actually been dedicated to the idols or not. In other words, was this meat contaminated in some kind of way? And were you associating yourself with the idol by eating that meat?

[8 : 53] The same question arose in connection with the shops, the shambles or the marketplace, because some of the meat could find itself in the marketplace too. In other words, you could go to the shops and you couldn't be sure whether that meat itself had been dedicated to idols or not. In other words, it wasn't just a matter of going to somebody's house that had recently had a feast, but it was a matter of going to the shops and not being sure even there whether the meat had been sacrificed to the idols or not. So there were questions of giving offense, questions of Christian liberty rising in the church in Corinth. Now, when I describe them, I suppose you'll find it easy to understand the kind of things that I'm speaking about and the kind of questions that can arise in the church all the time. And what Paul does here in these chapters, 8 to 10, and in Romans 14 as well, what he does in these chapters is he gives us clear guidelines to work our way through difficult questions of that kind. Before I come to that, I just want to highlight one thing.

There are two types of Christian conscience. Paul calls them strong and weak. And in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians, you'll find references to strong consciences and to weak consciences. Now, what do they mean? What does that mean? Well, a strong conscience is one that recognizes that the only things which are sinful, are the things which God condemns as being sinful. That every creature of God is good and uses to be made of all God's gifts in this world unless God prohibits it. But when God prohibits a thing, it is truly prohibited. Now, a strong conscience is one that recognizes that.

It recognizes that God, as the Westminster Confession puts it, God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from the commandments of men. But there's also what's called a weak conscience, and Paul refers to it quite often. And the weak conscience is the conscience of a Christian that sees sin where there isn't any. Now, there might be different reasons for that. Maybe it's because he or she misunderstands the word of God. That could be one reason for it, and maybe through time they will come to a better understanding of it. Maybe it's because of certain traditions that have been handed down to them, and which they almost unconsciously put on a par with the word of God.

Of course, the Pharisees were guilty of that. They had a whole host of rules and regulations relating to everyday life, which weren't just as important, but they seemed to be more important to them than the actual law of God itself. And of course, it can make a big difference why a Christian's conscience is weak. Is it because of a pharisaic spirit, or is it just because that person hasn't come to a proper understanding? That could be very important, and I'll come to that a little later on.

Now, Paul calls for great care when it comes to people dealing with each other at the level of conscience. He calls for great care. And in Romans 14, he reminds us of the two possibilities.

[12 : 41] The weak are always prone to judge the strong, and to assume that they're sinning, because they're doing something that they themselves disapprove of. Even if they can't tell how the word of God exactly prohibits it, they believe strongly that it's wrong, and so they immediately judge other Christians if they're doing that thing at all. So the weak are prone to judge the strong.

And then Paul tells us in Romans 14 that the strong are prone to despise the weak. In other words, they can treat them as ignorant people or uncultured people, people whose rights don't deserve to be respected or whose views and opinions can be just discounted. So the weak can judge the strong and the strong can despise the weak. And Paul emphatically says in Romans 14, he tells the weak not to judge the strong. He says, who are you to judge your brother? Who are you to judge another man's conscience? We must all stand before God. But he also tells the strong not to despise the weak and to be careful that they don't cause the weak to offend, to stumble by going against their own conscience.

Now, I think it's quite important at this point too to point out something else. Most of the instructions Paul gives are to those that we would call strong.

He tells them especially to be very, very careful how they deal with those who have a weak conscience. And the strong must be careful, first of all, that they understand that what they do is right, that it is not a sin. And also, even if it is a good thing, that they do it lovingly and do it carefully, do it charitably. Because as you all know, you can do a right thing in a wrong way.

You can do a right thing in a wrong spirit. And I suppose you could be liable sometimes to say, well, if what I'm doing is right, it doesn't really matter how I do it. Not so according to the Bible, how you do a thing matters a great deal. And you can do a right thing in a wrong way.

[15:03] You can do a right thing with a view actually to offend somebody else, with a view to annoy somebody else. Even if what you're doing in itself is quite harmless. You're doing it for a wrong reason, for a wrong purpose.

Paul says, for example, he says this, in 1 Corinthians 8 and verse 10, verse 11, he says this, 1 Corinthians 8, 11, through your knowledge, that's your knowledge that this thing is legitimate, through your knowledge, shall the weak brother perish for whom Christ died. But when you sin so against the brethren by carelessly, as it were, riding roughshod over what they think and wound their weak conscience, you are sinning against Christ. Sinning against Christ. Wherefore, if food or if meat makes my brother to offend, if it makes him to stumble in his own Christian life, I will eat no flesh while the world stands, lest I make my brother stumble, lest I make him fall. In other words, we have to walk in love always towards those who may be weak. And that helps us to understand what Paul says when he says this, that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. That's a good kind of motto for you to stick in your head and to remember, that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. And you find that in chapter 8, verse 1, we know that we all have knowledge, but he says knowledge puffs up, but charity edifies, or love builds up. Knowledge on its own, without love, is liable to go around behaving in an unconcerned way, wanting your freedom, wanting your liberty, no matter what the cost, no matter what the fallout.

But Paul says love is more concerned to build up, to lead others, to take them along with you. And that love should always regulate our actions. It is Christian love, and it should always regulate our actions. Now, here again, you have another problem. You could easily say, well, does that mean that you always have to give way to the conscience of your weaker brethren? Well, you have to be very, very careful here. Because a weak conscience, Paul says, is a burden to the person who has it.

And I think you should remember that too. The person with a weak conscience is scarcely a happy person. A weak conscience is a burden to the person who has it. And it can also be a tremendous burden to the rest of the church.

And if the spirit of the weak conscience is allowed to grow throughout the church, it becomes legalism. What happens is that a whole host of man-made rules begin to quench the liberty and to quench the spirit of God's people.

[18:16] For example, you've only got to step back and look at it this way. Everyone is liable to think something is wrong. That is not in God's word. Nobody offends. For example, you like to paint, but somebody says, well, I don't think painting is something that you should be doing as a Christian. I think it is a total waste of time.

So you have to put down your paintbrush. And then again, someone says, well, I don't think you should wear red or yellow or green. I don't think colors like that are suitable for a Christian.

So then you immediately have to dress all the time in very dark clothing. And then again, someone could say to you, well, I don't think you should be playing sport like that, whether it's tennis or badminton or whatever.

I don't think it is appropriate for you to be playing sport. So there again, you would have to put away all these things. Now, when you would gather into a collective bunch all the things that people would find offensive, what follows from that is that all these things would never be done by any Christian or any man anywhere.

Because, of course, what you think is good and right for yourself, you think is good and right for all. So all these things would disappear out of the world. And the problem with that is that you can't account for some people's scruples.

[19 : 37] I mean, some people are very strange scruples. I remember once a man who was admirable in many ways saying that it was quite wrong, really, either to play or to watch football.

But he himself had no difficulty with spending two or three hours watching a boxing match and never once saw the inconsistency in all that. Of course, it is inconsistent, but it never seemed to dawn on that person.

But the point is that if you were going to give way to all these scruples, you would never do anything of that kind at all. And what is the result? You yourself would lose your Christian joy.

You would lose your sense of delight and liberty in the world that God has given you to enjoy. And the legalism of the Pharisee would rule in the Church of Christ.

Man-made scruples would become the binding norm across the whole of Christ's Church. And of course, that isn't right. And we must never pander to the Pharisaic spirit.

[20 : 38] And it's there in his all. I'm not here trying to identify a spirit that's in you and not in me. It's there in his all. And at certain times, perhaps it's liable to come to the fore.

But we must never pander to it. For example, let me take the Lord himself as an example. You'll know that the Lord was accused by the Pharisees of being a drunkard.

A drunkard. And that stemmed from the fact that he drank wine. And they had a certain kind of admiration for John the Baptist because he didn't drink wine.

But they frowned upon the Lord for drinking wine and the Lord's disciples too. And they thought that they didn't fast too as much as they should. They didn't fast as much as John the Baptist and his disciples fasted.

Now, the Lord didn't stop drinking wine as a result of that at all. He made 120 gallons of wine at a wedding in Cana.

[21 : 39] And he drank wine himself with the disciples. And refused to be bound by the man-made expectation of the Pharisee. That he ought not to have drunk wine.

In other words, it didn't stop him. He didn't conform to their expectations. In fact, quite the contrary. It was at that point that he gave a sermon to them about their insistence on his conforming.

He says, you remind me of children playing weddings and funerals. You expect that when you pipe, I should dance. And that when you mourn, I should conform to that too. But the Lord, of course, recognizes that the Lord gave wine to gladden the heart of man.

That it is a blessing which the Lord gave and he took it. And he didn't allow himself to be bound by the scruple of a Pharisee. Now, here is the difficulty.

How do you respect a weak conscience and at the same time protect and guard Christian liberty? I think that it's very useful for us just to look at what Paul says about that here.

[22 : 48] He has some very important controls. And I'm going to raise these five controls on our Christian liberty. Now, I know five sounds a lot, but I'm not going to spend all that long on each one of them.

I'm going to give them to you and you can go away and relate them to your own life and me, to my own. And just before I mention the first one, let me say this. Remember that the Christian is free from the doctrines and commandments of men.

As the confession put it, Christ alone or God alone is Lord of the conscience. And anything that is not sinful is good. Some people say that there are indifferent things. But there aren't really indifferent things.

Things that are neither good nor bad. For example, people will say, well, is painting a picture, say? The thing I raised earlier. They'll say that is neither good nor bad. Now, I don't think it's ever right to say that something is neither good nor bad.

I don't think that there is such a thing as an indifferent thing. I would say that that was a good thing. Any action that is not sinful is in and of itself good before God. Good.

[23 : 55] And I think it's worthwhile listening to what Calvin says. Calvin says this, certainly, and this is in his famous Christian Institutes.

Now, listen to what Calvin says. Certainly, ivory, gold, and riches are good creations of God for the use of man. Never was it forbidden to us to laugh or to be fooled or to add new possessions to old or to be delighted with music or to drink wine.

Now, that is the Calvin that people will present as very gloomy and austere and harsh. But he says neither is it forbidden to be delighted with music or to drink wine.

Now, of course, there's a great danger here, too, because if you go down the road that by piling on these commandments in your own life you're going to make yourself better, And if you try and force these things on your children, too, if you try and forbid your children's music, or if you try and forbid them legitimate God-given talents, the use of these talents, you'll find that you'll stifle your children.

And you'll find that your children will break loose, perhaps in a way, perhaps in a way that you absolutely wanted to avoid. That's the very thing you'll drive them into by putting a straitjacket on them which God never put on them.

[25 : 22] It's one thing to raise them in a covenant way, to teach them how to use music, to channel music to the glory of God, only to sing what is good, only to sing what is clean, only to play in a way that honors and glorifies God.

That's one thing. It's another thing to say some people play music badly. They use it in a moral way, therefore stay away from a piano, or stay away from a harp or whatever.

You'll find that that will stifle your child, because God gave your children and mine talents, and gave you and me them, too. And if you try and choke them with a kind of hair-shirt mentality, you'll find that you'll make difficulties in your own spiritual life, and difficulties in other people's spiritual lives, too.

Now, we have to be careful. Paul says, yes, you're free, but you've got to be careful about how you use that freedom. And there are five controls.

Now, let's take them in turn. The first question you must ask yourself always about anything is this, is it safe? Is it safe? As Paul puts it in chapter 10 and verse 12, he says this.

[26 : 37] This is a personal warning. Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall.

Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall. And again, in chapter 6 and verse 12, he says this. Chapter 6, verse 12.

All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.

Now, for the moment, it's especially that last part I want to look at. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.

Now, what that's reminding us of is this. The subtlety and the power of sin. And sometimes we can unfortunately be too blind to that.

[27 : 38] Just how subtle and how powerful sin is. And that's why you've always got to search the scriptures. First of all, to examine whether God is forbidding the thing that you are doing or not.

Some people can quite boldly do a thing, and they think they have a liberty to do it, when God is actually prohibiting it. And a careful study and a careful attention to scripture would show that.

But more than that, there's this. I will not, he says, be brought under the power of something, even if it's lawful. You have to ask yourself that too.

Yes, this thing in itself might be lawful. But what is it doing in my life? Is this lawful thing getting a hold of me? Is it coming in between myself and God?

Is it coming in between me and my duties to God? Is it coming in between me and the fellowship of God's people? Is it stopping me, for example, going to the prayer meeting?

[28 : 41] Does it mean that my place in Christian circles is usually empty because I'm so attached to this thing? In other words, although it's okay in and of itself, it has assumed a place and a proportion in my life that means that it's coming in between myself and God.

Now, for some time you could say, well, I don't think it is. And everyone else can read your backsliddeness on your face. But you yourself feel that you are not. It's so important to prayerfully and scripturally ask God, is this lawful thing having power over me?

Paul says, yes, these things are lawful, but I will never be brought under the power of anything. So ask yourself today, is what you are doing, is it lawful in itself?

And is it somehow coming in between yourself and God? So is it safe? Ask that first. And then ask secondly, is it beneficial?

And that's what Paul means when he says this. In chapter 10, verse 23, All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient.

[29 : 59] And he uses that expression a couple of times in these chapters. All things are lawful, but all things are not expedient. Now, what expedient means is just useful or beneficial.

And what it leads you to ask is this. Well, doing this thing, it may be lawful, and I can't see it coming in between myself and God, but is it actually developing me as a person?

Is it developing somehow, in some way, my life of service to God? Is it relaxing my body? Is it renewing my energy? Is it making me a more fit and able person to do the work of God in this world, which is what I am called to do?

Does it build me up in that kind of way? Is it useful? Or is it just altogether something that's totally trivial and a total waste of time?

Is it beneficial? Is it expedient? And I should ask the same, too, for my brothers. Is it useful for them? Does it help them? Is it a good way for them to pass the time and so on?

[31 : 13] So is it safe and is it beneficial? And then, I think very importantly, there's this one. Is it instructive to others?

Paul uses this expression in 1 Corinthians 10, All things are lawful, but all things edify not. Now, have you ever thought about what that means?

To edify means to build something up. To build something up in a good way. And Paul says that some things maybe don't build up people in a good way at all.

And that's especially important to remember when it comes to giving and taking offense. Let me put it this way. When you do something in a community, when you do something in a congregation, or even in your family, you've got to ask this.

Is the Christian community just offended or instructed by what I'm doing? Am I conducting myself in such a way that the church is actually taught?

[32 : 24] Or is the church actually just offended? You must never outrun the state of knowledge of other people. You mustn't trample carelessly at the state of understanding at which people are at.

Now, this may be difficult to explain, and it might be difficult to understand. I certainly find it difficult to explain, so I'm sure you're finding it difficult to understand. But I think the kind of thing I mean is this.

There's all the world of a difference between somebody with a pharisaic disposition coming to you and saying, you shouldn't do that. I don't approve of what you're doing there. Stop it for my sake.

There's all the world of difference between that. And on the other hand, a sensitive, perhaps young, Christian, who has not come to a full understanding of what it really means to have a strong conscience.

That person who has real difficulties, genuine difficulties with what you are doing. Not the kind of difficulties, I just don't approve and that's that, but a kind of difficulty that actually causes that person grief.

[33 : 36] And actually causes that person to have real deep questions about his own standing before God and so on. In other words, you're just hurting these people. It's not a matter of refusing to be bound by these people.

It's a matter of actually hurting them at the state of Christian knowledge and Christian understanding at which they're at. Now I hope you understand the difference because the difference is very important.

It's very, very important. I can understand a man who insists on wearing brown shoes if someone there insists that he should never wear brown shoes but only black.

I can understand that person. But I find it very difficult to understand the person who can trample over a weak, consistent Christian, a loving Christian who has genuine difficulties with what you're doing.

Is what you are doing instructing the person or is it just offending him? That's why Paul says be very, very careful against sinning against their brethren and wounding their weak conscience because that is sinning against Christ.

[34 : 43] That is sinning against Christ. And this question, I think, of teaching becomes very, very important there. if you have that kind of person and you're dealing with that kind of person or even with that kind of community or that kind of congregation, refrain from the thing.

Even if it is lawful, find a place or a way in which you can do it that doesn't hurt and that doesn't give offense to those weaker brethren in the way that Paul says here.

And I think if we prayerfully go over that, every one of us in our own minds will find situations where that kind of rule implies. All things, he says, do not necessarily edify even if they're lawful.

And I'm sure if you examine yourself and me with you, we might come across some things that perhaps we should be better refraining from even if we're convinced in our minds that they are lawful.

There's all the world of a difference between being bound by a Pharisee and being respectful to a weak brother. And then again, the fourth control is this, and I suppose it's related, but is what you're doing helpful for the peace of the church?

[36 : 01] In Romans 14, that other great passage that deals with this, Paul says this, Let us follow after the things which make for peace and things wherewith one may edify another.

In other words, we are always looking to build each other up. And a lack of peace is a very destructive thing in Christ's church. I don't think I need to elaborate on that.

But a lack of peace is a very, very destructive thing. Very destructive. And all of us should be willing to forego in order to help building up the peace of Christ's church.

And I think the peace of Christ's church is something that we should increasingly value. We should increasingly value. And sometimes, maybe, you might feel, well, I have a freedom to do such and such a thing.

And maybe you've got to sit and ask yourself, is it really worth all the discord maybe that it may bring? In the life of someone else. It's just some, perhaps, entertainment that you have or something of that kind.

[37 : 16] And you must really ask, is it worth that it is peace? let us strive towards peace. And the last control that I want to mention is this, the control of love.

The control of love. And again, Paul mentions it in Romans. And he tells us there that we're to always deal with our weaker brethren with charity.

If your brother is grieved with you, know you are walking not charitably. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.

And let not your good be evil spoken of. What you're doing is good, but let it not be evil spoken of. Don't destroy with your insistence on a thing someone for whom Christ died.

Walk lovingly. And what I want to say about love is this, and I think that it's extremely important. You know yourself, as well as I do, that it's easier to give way to those whom you love.

[38 : 27] Is that not right? For example, if someone's putting a burden on your back and you don't particularly love that person, you're going to find it very difficult to carry that burden.

But if someone puts, maybe unconsciously, a burden on your back, if you love that person, you're going to find it easier to carry that burden. I think parents know that, that the more love they have from their own children, the easier they'll find it to get their children, as it were, to accept what they say.

That's usually the case anyway. I know these things are general rules, but you know what I mean. The same is true here. The more you love weaker brethren, the more easy you'll find it to bear with them.

The less you love them, the less willing you'll be to bear with their scruple, whatever it be. And that's why love is so, so important.

And the same is true for a weak brother. Let's say you're here and you fall into that category, and there are certain things that you've laid down that you think, God not to be done.

[39 : 41] And here is someone else, maybe in your own congregation, and is doing these things. Well, first of all, love that person. Pray for that person.

Bring that person before God, as I hope that person is bringing you before God. Always pray for light for yourself, and pray for light for that other person too. And you be sure that you are not judging that person uncharitably yourself.

After all, let's say what that person is doing is wrong. Is it not right for you to pity that person? Is it not right for you to speak lovingly with that person, and to try and show another way and a better way to that person?

I will tell you that 99 times out of 100, that will be far more fruitful than a simple those thought not? It will be far more fruitful. It is walking charitably.

In other words, mutual love between strong and weak will mean that the strong will be much more careful in how they walk in front of the weak. It will also make the weak more careful that they don't go say, you're doing wrong there, you're doing wrong there, and blaze in that abroad all the time.

[40 : 58] There will be a mutual restraint, which will always be healthy in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. So these are the controls. Now I haven't maybe brought them out in detail, I'm trying to here compress quite a lot of teaching on liberty into one sermon, and I hope you understand that, but try to remember these controls.

One, is it safe? Two, is it beneficial for myself and is it beneficial to others? Three, does it instruct my brethren or is it just offending them?

Four, is it helpful for the peace of the church? Five, do I love my brethren? Is it consistent with Christian love?

And so these are what Paul is referring to when he says love seeks not its own things. And we often speak about love, I've often heard the criticism that love is preached too much and holiness is not preached enough.

well, for my own part, for my own part, I think that when we understand what love means, you can never preach it enough. You can never preach it enough.

[42 : 16] Because love isn't what people understand love to be. Love is actually a difficult thing. It's a difficult thing. That's why we're told often to love.

And we're told what love is like. it's something you must pray for. It's something you must work at. And it's something you must develop in your Christian life. Because without it, whatever noise we can make, we are sounding brass and we are tinkling cymbal.

And may the Lord help us to look at it in that light. Let us pray. O gracious God, help us to recognize that there is no conflict between holiness and love.

And that to walk in love is to walk in holiness. And to walk in holiness is to walk in love. And help us to seek to walk even as Christ himself walked.

give us a sensitivity to the feelings and thoughts of others. And help us to love the brethren. For others love us when it is difficult for them to do so.

[43 : 31] And we pray that we would all be taught with respect to our own Christian walk. For we sometimes find it difficult to know what we should do and what we should not do.

Grant us above everything that we would learn to pray more and to study the scriptures more. For from these things come life and understanding.

And unless we grow in love to thee and unless we grow in knowledge of thee we can never truly love our brethren as ourselves. And we pray that thou would give us grace to forgive one another even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven us.

In his name we pray. Amen.