

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Introduction: In Genesis 4 we are introduced to the first murder in the Bible when Cain killed his brother Abel (4:8). When confronted by the Lord who asked, "Where is Abel your brother?" Cain lied and said "I do not know." He then infamously said, "am I my brother's keeper?" (4:9). Scripture teaches us from Genesis to Revelation that we are indeed our brother and sister's keeper. Even those who are our enemies Jesus says we are to love them and pray for them (Matt. 5:44).

In 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Paul informs us we are the keeper of our brother and sister in Christ. We are to always seek their good and avoid any action or word that could defile their conscience (v. 7), destroy their faith (v. 11) or be a stumbling block to their walk with the Lord Jesus (v. 13). The spiritual good of others will always be a governor, a check, on what I do. In chapter 8, Paul lays before us the protective check and balance of Christian love (vv. 1-3), Christian worship (vv. 4-6) and Christian deference (vv. 7-13). Three words dominate our text: know(ledge), conscience and stumble.

I. All my actions are regulated by the principle of Christian love 8:1-3

Christians are not always in agreement about the right or wise way to live in a world awash in idolatry. Should we take the path of withdrawal and become evangelical monastics, Baptist monks and nuns?! Or should we take a different path and immerse ourselves in the culture for the purpose of evangelism?

After all, if my heart is in the right place, that is all that matters anyway. Of course, when you bring these two groups together in a local church, conflict, and possibly division, is quite possible. Tim Keller is right in his diagnosis of the 21st century church. “Today, many Christian believers – who often share virtually identical beliefs – are just as divided over how to relate to our increasingly pagan culture even though the issues are often presented as political” (“God, Freedom, and Love”; Q4 2020: Gospel-Changed Minds). Paul has a strategy for avoiding unnecessary conflicts, fights and division. Not surprising, he begins with the ethic of Christian love. Love must always regulate our liberty in all situations.

1) Knowledge alone can make us prideful 8:1-2

The Corinthians have another question for Paul, introduced again by the phrase “Now about” or “Now concerning” (ESV; cf. 7:1, 25). The issue is “food sacrificed to idols” (v. 1). Vaughn and Lea are helpful in setting the table (pun intended!) for what the context was in 1st century Corinth. They write: “It was in sacrifice, which was at the center of the worship of all

ancient religions, that all the important events of domestic and social life culminated. After the legs of the sacrifice (enclosed in fat) and the entrails had been burned on the altar, and after the priest had been given his share, what was left of the victim's flesh was returned to the family that offered the sacrifice. This consecrated meat was then eaten – either as part of a banquet in the pagan temple (or its precincts) or in the worshiper's home – or it was sold at the marketplace.

If the consecrated meat was used for a banquet – whether at the temple or in the worshiper's house – friends and relatives, among whom there might well be Christians, were invited. Christians would then find themselves confronted with the question of whether they should eat the idol meat. So also, when meats previously consecrated to a pagan deity were sold in the market, Christians might find themselves having to decide whether to purchase the meat.” (*1 Cor.* BSC, 86).

So, Christians at Corinth were confronted with several dilemmas: How do I respond rightly to the meat sacrificed to an idol question? Eat? Invite others to eat? Go with my lost, pagan friends and eat (In the temple? In their home?) to maintain a relationship? What about those whose conscience won't allow them to eat? Do I refrain? Do I help them grow up and see that it is ok because idols aren't real gods anyway? Today we do not have the

problem of meat sacrificed to an idol in western culture, but it could certainly have parallels on the mission field. Further, we have our own issues in our culture about what is the right thing to do when confronted with issues where believers disagree about how to act in a world immersed in paganism and idolatry.

Paul will make it clear his concern above of is for the well-being of brothers and sisters in Christ. To do so he addresses the “know-it-all” group at Corinth who were arrogantly spouting, “We know that we all have knowledge” (another Corinthian slogan). This group boasted in their spiritually mature status over those Paul will identify as “weak” in verses 7 and 9. They may have even boasted that they had the spiritual gift of knowledge (cf. 12:8; 13:2). Gardner is helpful here, “Paul has acknowledged that the Corinthians have many grace-gifts including “knowledge” (1:5). The elitists arrogantly insist they all possess this particular gift” (*1 Cor.*, ZECNT, 368). Paul hits back hard telling them the issue is one of love not knowledge. “Knowledge (*ESV*, “This knowledge”) puffs up.” Knowledge alone makes one arrogant and prideful. However, knowledge wedded to love “builds up.” It edifies the body of Christ making it healthier and stronger. In fact, thinking you know everything actually reveals you know nothing at all as verse 2 makes plain. “If anyone thinks

(*ESV*, “imagines”) he knows anything, he does not yet know it as he ought to know it” (v. 2). Something is terribly wrong with alleged spiritual knowledge that tears down rather than builds up. It is broken. Defective. Destructive. It hurts others rather than helping them.

2) Love for God is an evidence that God knows us 8:3

Paul does an interesting thing in verse 3. He tells us it is not what we know that is of ultimate importance (though it is important; cf. 5:6; 6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19), but who knows you! The ultimate issue in all of life is this, “does God know you?” Verse 3 ties together loving God and being known by God. “Those who love God give evidence that they are known by God in electing knowledge and grace (Jere. 1:5; Amos 3:2; Rom. 8:28-30). Further, to love God will supernaturally lead us to love others, especially our spiritual family. Schreiner says it perfectly, “True knowledge is adorned with humility and accompanied by love, and if these qualities are lacking, one’s knowledge has not been applied correctly.

Love is the signature and mark of being a Christian (cf. 13:1-13; John 13:34-35), and such love has God supremely as its object, though such love for God is also expressed in love for brothers and sisters. The knowers may have boasted in their knowledge, but what is decisive is whether one is known by God” (*1 Cor.*, TNTC, 169).

If we know God as we ought through faith in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, we cannot help but love our God who has so perfectly loved us and also love those for whom Christ died, our brothers and sisters (8:11). Love regulates our liberty. It always will.

II. All my actions are regulated by the truth of Christian worship 8:4-6

Sometimes theology is given a bad rap. It is said that theology is boring, deep, irrelevant and unnecessary. “Just preach the gospel” some say, failing to realize the gospel itself is quite theological. Paul again addresses the pressing issue of “eating food sacrificed to idols.” (v. 4)

Paul’s argument is both theological and pastoral and carefully presented.

1) Unbelievers worship false gods and false lords 8:4-5

At Corinth the “knowers” flaunted their theology with two confessional affirmations, both of which were true. First, “we know that an idol is nothing in the world” (ESV, “has no real existence”). Second, alluding to the Shema from Deut. 6:4, “there is no God but one” (v. 4). Paul agrees with them, but there needs to be an important qualification theologically and pastorally, especially as it relates to those who have recently been saved out of pagan idolatry. His argument goes something like this. There are so-called gods in heaven and on earth, many “gods” and many “lords.” We know they are not real, but the lost person doesn’t. Further, as Deut. 32:16-

17 and 1 Cor. 10:19-22 clearly teach, while idols are not real demons are!

Lurking and acting behind these idols are demons that utilize these false gods and false lords to lead people into false worship and away from the one true God. Demons are real and they can be worshiped. One of their favorite tools are idols; false gods that humans give their ultimate allegiance.

Deuteronomy 10:17 is a much-needed corrective, “For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords.” There is only one true God, but it is theologically incorrect to deny the many gods and lords falsely worshiped in this world.

2) Christians worship one God and one Lord

8:6

Paul will now reaffirm the monotheism of biblical teaching within the context of the Christian faith. His words read quiet easily as an early confession of faith. “For us,” who know the truth, “there is one God, the Father.” This God is the beginning and the end, the A and Z of all things. “All things are from him, and we exist for him” (cf. Eph. 4:6). Likewise, and in the same way, “there is one Lord, Jesus Christ. All things are through him, and we exist through him” (cf. Col. 1:16-17). With an amazing theological ease, Paul affirms a plurality within the divine simplicity of the one God who exist as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. No commentary is added. No explanation is given. We are simply left, at this point, to reflect

and worship such an amazing God. Helpful, again, are the comments of my friend Tom Schreiner: “Paul reaffirms the Old Testament truth that there is one Creator God and thus all glory and praise belong to him. He is the Father of believers, and the word ‘Father’ also suggests a relationship to Jesus the Son, though the word ‘Son’ is not used here. The identity of God, however, is not exhausted by the Father. The Son is also the Lord and agent of creation, and Paul affirms these astounding truths about the Son without compromising or denying the truth that God is one. No explanation is given as to how there can be one God when the Father and the Son share the same identity. The task of working out the implications of what is said here was left to later interpreters, but I would argue that such a task was faithfully carried out in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan and Chalcedonian Creeds” (172). I agree with Tom.

And, what does this task faithfully carried out look like in later church history:

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (A.D. 381)

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten, Begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light, Very God of Very God,

Begotten, not made; of one essence with the Father; by whom all things were made;

Who was for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man;

And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried;

And the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures;

And ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father;

And He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spoke by the Prophets;

And we believe in one, holy, catholic [universal], and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.

We look for the Resurrection of the dead,

And the Life of the age to come. Amen.

Yes, the principle of Christian worship, also will be a helpful guide as we consider the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

III. All my actions are regulated by the guideline of Christian deference 8:7-13

In Phil. 2:3-4 Paul explains to us what it means to have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5). There he writes, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others.” Paul will apply this principle to the controversy that was raging in Corinth.

1) I will not defile my brother’s conscience 8:7-10

The Corinthian “know-it-alls” claimed we all have knowledge about idols being nothing. Paul says that’s not true. “Not everyone has this knowledge” that idols are nothing and that “there is one God” (v. 7). Some newer believers are still “weak” and growing in their faith. Worshiping idols had done a number on them. Eating food sacrificed to an idol would seriously harm them, defiling their conscience, causing them to question their status before God. Here both the “know-it-alls” and the “weak” need instruction which he provides in verse 8, “Food will not bring us close (*ESV*, “commend”) to God. We are not worse off if we don’t eat, and we are not better if we do eat.” The fact is your arguing about this issue misses the key point all together, which is what is the loving thing to do for my brother or sister in Christ that will build them up in the faith? “Be careful [a word to the “know-it-alls”] that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak.” Later Paul will bluntly say, “Flee from idolatry”

(10:14). All believers, strong and weak, must recognize the seduction of idolatry and our susceptibility to it. In this context, I believe Paul would forbid eating with friends and associates in an idol's temple, even as he might allow it, in certain situations, in a home. Verse 10 seems to bear this out, "For if someone sees you, the one who has knowledge, dining in an idols temple, won't his weak conscience be encouraged ("built up") to eat food offered to idols?" What the "know-it-alls" call a "right" Paul calls a "stumbling block." The issue was no doubt significant and potentially costly to the fledgling Christian community. Do I avoid the pagan temples where sharing a meal is where business is transacted, and people expect to see you as a matter of social convention? Or do I refrain and stay away and pay the cost because the spiritual well-being of my brother or sister is more important? What would Christ do? The next three verses touch on that very question.

2) I will not sin against my Christ

8:11-13

Paul has warned the church about sinning against a brother or sister. Now he warns them about sinning against their Lord. He drives his plea to the cross and the atoning work of Christ. Your so-called knowledge, which is flawed and misguided, has defiled your brother's conscience (v. 7). But the situation is worse than that, as verse 11-12 make abundantly clear. "The

weak person, the brother or sister for whom Christ died, is ruined (*ESV*, “destroyed”) by your knowledge. Now when you sin like this against your brothers and sisters and wound their weak conscience, you are sinning against Christ.” The word translated “ruined” or “destroyed” is very strong, causing some students of Scripture to conclude their eternal destruction is in view. I think, however, Paul employs such a strong word to communicate the severity of arrogantly putting my supposed rights ahead or above the well-being of a brother or sister in Christ and seriously damaging their faith. You ruin their faith. And, you ultimately and more seriously sin against Christ who died for them just like He died for you. Is getting your way and flaunting your rights worth the lose of all this?

Paul provides the answer to our question. It is not. Verse 13 brings our chapter to a close with an appropriate summation, “Therefore, if food causes my brother or sister to fall (*ESV*, “stumble”), I will never again eat meat, so that I won’t cause my brother or sister to fall (*ESV*, “stumble”). We could easily substitute for the word “food” any number of things in terms of application. Paul’s words are emphatic and pointed. Love trumps knowledge. Love trumps rights. Love trumps all (see ch 13).

Conclusion: In reflecting on how to bring this important study to a close, I felt I could not improve on the words I came across by Paul Gardner, a minister in the

UK. I have been greatly blessed by his insights, as I am once again in these words: “Those who think they are “something” need to realize they can end up leading others into sin. When they no longer see love for God and love for neighbor as the true markers of community standing, then they will behave arrogantly toward others and will replace what is good and of the Lord with what is at best inadequate. This arises from people’s desire to place themselves and their actions at the center of their spiritual lives. The ability of Christians to give up what they see as their community rights and privileges – even things they enjoy – for the sake of a Christian brother or sister is ultimately the test of the presence of love. Assurance for those who lack it is found first in looking again to the love of Christ who was crucified for them, but it is then reinforced by a people who build each other up in the faith through their love for one another.” (pgs. 382-83).