**THE LITMUS TEST OF LOVE**

The early Christian church faced a lot of challenges. New believers came under attack for their faith in Jesus Christ from all corners of their society. The Jewish leaders who hated Jesus, who had been instrumental in having Him crucified, also hated the church. Pagans disliked Christians because they would not participate in their debauchery and idol worship. The Roman government began to distinguish a difference between Christians and Jews and because Christians refused to worship the Roman Emperor they were persecuted terribly as enemies of Rome. And this persecution grew under the Emperor Nero. Despite all of the persecution it faced, the early church grew in strength and numbers and in their faith. This was due in large part to the strong evangelistic missionary effort by Paul and the other Apostles as they were led and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The flame that had begun as a spark at Pentecost spread like wildfire across Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Asia Minor and on into Europe. Christian churches were birthed in places like Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth and Rome.

But not only did the early church face the challenge of persecution from outside, it faced quite a huge challenge from within. You see, the church was made up of people. And these people who had been unified by their faith in Jesus Christ came from a wide variety of backgrounds. And the result was that there was often disharmony in the church. The inevitable result of bringing these different groups together into one church body was that conflicts arose. Another issue was the influence of false teachers. Most believers were new to the faith and as a result were susceptible to wrong doctrines, heresies that would creep into the church. As you study early church history and you see all the challenges that the early believers faced, it’s a miracle of God that the church had the success that it did. Only because of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers was the church able to withstand all of its many challenges and flourish like it did.

Well we are in a study of 1 Corinthians and have been looking at the church in Corinth. The Corinthian church had its share of issues. I’m not going to say they were any worse than the other churches, but they were typical. And Paul in his letter to them, preserved for us today as “First Corinthians,” addresses many of these issues. This morning we’re going to be looking at Chaps 8-9. I entitled this lesson “The Litmus Test of Love” because at the heart of the Corinthians problems, and there were many, was a lack of love. Perhaps as we go thru the text this morning we can note some parallels between the Corinthian church of the 1st Century and the church in America today.

Chapter 8 addresses a major area of contention in the Corinthian church in Paul’s day. The issue was this – Should a Christian eat food that had been previously offered to idols? Those who had come out of a background of pagan idol-worship said, “NO WAY” while those old Greek intellectuals said, “IT’S O.K.” So, who was right? Paul answers this question and, in the process, introduces a good litmus test for us to use to determine if our activities are appropriate. Today the issues might be: Should a Christian gamble? Should a Christian smoke? Should a Christian drink alcohol? Should Christians dance? Should Christians go to R-rated movies? And so on. The principles contained Ch 8-9 find application for us today regarding the activities in which we may choose to participate.

In 1 Corinthians Chapter 8 a specific issue is raised

READ 1 Corinthians 8:1-9

 – let me summarize what was happening

In Corinth, in that culture the people brought sacrifices of animals to offer to their many idols. They would bring the best animals they had. The meat was offered to the idol, but it didn’t stay there long because they believed that the spirit of the idol ate the spirit of the animal and that finished the meal for the idol. Then they took the meat to the stalls around the temple, which was the meat market where the meat was sold. If you wanted to buy the best quality meat in Corinth at the lowest prices, you went to one of these markets. One group of believers had no problem with purchasing and eating this meat because they had the “knowledge” that idols weren’t real and so there was absolutely nothing wrong with eating this meat. The problem was that there was another group of believers who did have a problem eating this meat. These would have been those who had been saved out of an idol worshipping background. These individuals could not eat such meat because of the association it had with their former pagan lifestyle. They could not in good conscience eat such meat.

In v 1 Paul says,”knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” In other words, knowledge that does not regard the feelings of others leads to an air of superiority (arrogance), while love regards others feelings more highly than their own feelings (edifies or builds up). Our knowledge points to us and makes us feel superior. By contrast, LOVE is directed at others, and builds them up.

The freedom we as Christians experience in Christ is not a license to do or act any way that we please. On the issue before us, the knowledge group – by flaunting his or her freedom is insensitive to the feelings of those former idol worshipers. This may cause the weaker Christians (weaker defined as one who struggles in a certain area) to stumble because it offends their consciences. Contrary to what Cain thought, we are our brother’s keepers! We should care about how what we do affects others. We ought to be considerate of the person who does not have the liberty we have and not do anything to hurt their Christian walk.

READ 1 Corinthians 8:10-13

To be a party to offending the weaker Christian – wounding his conscience – is to sin against that individual and to sin against Christ. The result of freedom flaunted is that it causes great spiritual damage. Therefore, Paul says that he would rather not exercise his right to eat meat offered to idols if it will keep his brother from stumbling.

What motivates Paul is not his rights, but his responsibilities, as a Christian. If we truly love our brothers and sisters in Christ, our freedom (our rights) will become less and less important to us and strengthening and encouraging the faith of a brother or sister in Christ will become more and more important. If I love you, then I am willing to give up any activity that I am aware will cause you potentially to stumble, to be hurt spiritually.

New believers are often very sensitive to what is right or wrong – to what they should so, or to what they should not do. Some actions may be perfectly all right for us to do (Paul says that all things are lawful). But these same actions may harm a Christian brother or sister who is still young and learning what the Christian life is all about. We must be careful not to offend a sensitive or younger Christian.

The principle that we must follow is this – our liberty governed by our LOVE of Christ. Before I exercise my freedom I must first run it through the litmus test of LOVE. What motivates what I am doing? The doctrine or creed of the church I am affiliated with? No. My own knowledge or convictions? No. What should motivate me is my LOVE for Christ! Because I love Jesus, I love you.

Paul follows up this principle of restraining our rights because of our love for Christ from Chapter 8 with an example from his own personal life. Paul doesn’t just say, “this is what you should do.” He says, “See, I’m doing what I told you myself.” We don’t have time to look at all 27 verses of Ch 9 so I’ll summarize…

Paul will show how, in his own life, he has been practicing what he has been preaching – by not exercising his rights as an apostle. He applies the basic principles of Chapter 8 to his own life in Chapter 9.

READ 1 Corinthians 9:1-2

 (1) “Am I not free?” He pretty well established this in the last chapter – absolutely!

(2) “Am I not an apostle?” The next two questions are asked to answer this one and, thereby, defending his apostleship.

(3) “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” One requirement of apostleship was to have seen Jesus and Paul viewed his Damascus road experience as having met this qualification.

(4) “Are you not my workmanship in the Lord?” He answers this question in v 2. Paul saw the Corinthian church as the visible sign or certification of his apostleship. Changed lives were the evidence that God was using Paul. Few believers in Corinth doubted that Paul was truly an apostle.

READ 1 Corinthians 9:3-6

Paul responds to his critics by showing them that giving up his rights for the benefit of others did not mean that he did not have these rights. In these verses Paul lists the liberties and privileges that he, Barnabas and the other apostles had:

(1) They all had the right to hospitality.

(2) They all had the right to be married and travel with their wives as Peter and others were doing.

(3) They all had the right to be financially supported by the church for their missionary work.

Paul had insisted upon none of these rights in Corinth.

In v 7-14 Paul adds that he even has the right as an apostle and minister of the Gospel to be compensated financially by those he ministers to. He had the right to expect material support from these Corinthian believers. But did Paul exercise those rights? No. Paul opted not to exercise his right rather than potentially hinder the gospel of Christ in Corinth. As a general rule, Paul did not accept financial support from the churches because he felt that some of the immature Christians would accuse him of serving only for financial gain. We are aware of only one church that Paul accepted money from – the spiritually mature church at Philippi.

So for the spiritual benefit of the Corinthian believers Paul foregoes his rights.

READ 1 Corinthians 9:15-18

So, what was Paul’s reward? Simply this – that he was able to preach the gospel without charge (not being compensated financially) to the Corinthian believers. He took great delight in knowing that nobody in Corinth could ever claim that the gospel of Christ was not free and that he never received financial gain from preaching the Gospel. Paul had his critics, but none of them could ever accuse Paul of having selfish motives.

Then at the end of Ch 9 Paul comes full circle back to the original principle he had laid out in Ch 8.

READ 1 Corinthians 9:19-22

Paul gave up his own right to personal freedom to become instead a servant of all, and by doing so, became a more effective witness for Christ. From the Living Letters the last part of this v 22 says, “Whatever a person is like, I try to find common ground with him so that he will let me tell him about Christ…” To the spiritually immature (weak), Paul became like them. Remember the example from Chapter 8 where Paul would not eat the meat offered to idols?

The great Apostle Paul gave up his rights in order to be a more effective witness for Christ. It must have given Paul great reward and pleasure to lead someone to the Lord! From these verses we discover several important principles for ministry: (1) Find common ground; (2) Avoid having a know-it-all attitude; (3) Make others feel accepted; (4) Be sensitive to their needs and concerns; (5) Look for opportunities to tell others about Christ.

Application for today’s lesson: Remember the litmus test of LOVE mentioned in Chapter 8? Before I exercise my freedom I must first run my action through the litmus test of LOVE. To do so, answer these three questions:

(1) Will this action glorify God?

(2) Will it hinder the spiritual growth of a brother or sister?

(3) Is what I am doing in the best interest of that other person?

If the answer to any one of these questions is NO, then the litmus test of LOVE concludes that I ought not do whatever it is I had intended to do.

Never lose sight of the big picture when it comes to our dealings with people who do not know Christ as their Savior. And in my dealings with a brother or sister in Christ, the bottom line is that we promote sound doctrine and unity in our faith.

I was thinking about what would be an appropriate hymn for us to sing and I thought about a hymn of unity that we used to sing at the close of our services – sweet sweet spirit.