

When Two Rights Make a Wrong

In the name of him who teaches with absolute authority, dear friends in Christ: One of these things is not like the others. One of these things doesn't belong. I'm referring to today's Scripture readings. I mean it's easy to see how today's Old Testament and Gospel lessons go together. In the first we've got Moses declaring that the Lord will raise up a mighty prophet like himself who needs to be listened to, and in the latter we've got Jesus showing himself to be the fulfillment of the prophecy. The two readings fit hand and glove. And then we've got the Epistle in which Paul is addressing the topic of food sacrificed to idols. It seems like it's on a different planet. Still, it contains an important authoritative teaching from God's Holy Word to which we will do well to listen and apply to our lives.

You've heard the expression "two wrongs don't make a right". If you're a parent, you've probably used it, as in "Bobbie, why did you hit your brother?" "He hit me first." "Now, Bobbie, you know that two wrongs don't make a right." It's a good Christian principle to employ straight across the board. We are told not repay evil for evil, but to overcome evil with good. But writing to the Christian Church in Corinth, Paul teaches us that under certain circumstances there are times in which two rights can make a wrong. That is to say you could commit sin by doing something that itself is not a sin. How that's possible will require some explanation. So here goes.

Corinth, like most Greek cities, was almost completely pagan. The number of Christians there was probably less than one percent of the population. The majority of the people believed (at least to some degree) in the gods of Greek pantheon: Zeus, Hera, Apollo, Ares, Aphrodite ... a whole host of others. The city was full of temples and altars dedicated to these gods. And the practice of Greek religion was fairly simple. You worshipped the gods to secure their favor. Then they would supposedly smile on you and good things would happen in your life. Conversely, if things were going badly for you, it likely meant that you had offended one or more of the gods (though you might not know whose nose was out of joint), and then you had to do whatever was necessary to get back in favor again.

In general, the way to get the gods to smile on you (or at least get them off your back) was to bring offerings to their temples: usually that meant livestock that would be sacrificed, although grain, vegetables, and wine might be offered too. So let's say you're some Greek pagan and you want the gods on your side. Zeus is the head god, so you start at the top. The priests of Zeus tell you he's partial to beef, so you get your hands on a fine young calf – the best you can buy, and beef was super expensive back then. You bring your animal to Zeus' temple. The priests sacrifice it and lay its carcass on Zeus' altar. The idea is that Zeus, sitting up there on Mt. Olympus, receives the animal on his dinner table in a spiritual sort of way. Hopefully that makes him happy. Now he owes you one. Just the same, the priests need to leave the animal on the altar for several minutes because it might be that Zeus wants to take it for real. According the pagan beliefs there's a chance he'll want it in more than a spiritual way. Funny though, that never seems to actually happen. So, anyway, after waiting for the prescribed period, you can go on your way thinking you'd done your duty by Zeus. Of course, to hedge your bet, you'd probably want to go offer sacrifices at the temples of some of the other gods too. Get'm all on your side.

Meanwhile, back at the temple of Zeus, the priests have a calf's carcass on their hands. They need to move it off to get ready for the next guy's sacrifice. After a while they'll have tons of meat lying around. What are they going to do with all? They're going to sell it at the city market. That's where the vast majority of the funds to support the priests and their temples comes from: the sale of sacrifices at the market. So, the chances are good that when you go to the market to buy your groceries, the stuff you buy was first offered on the altar of a pagan god.

So, here's the question: as a Christian, is it all right for you to buy and consume meat that's been offered to an idol? Or is the meat defiled somehow? Has it been made unholy by its use in a pagan ritual? Are you participating in the pagan worship by eating it? Or is it wrong for you to buy it because your money will end up being used to support a false religion? These are the sorts of questions the people to whom Paul was writing had to deal with every day.

And Paul had already taught them how to view such things. We Christians, he told them, recognize and worship the One True God. There are no other gods. So when a pagan offers a sacrifice to Zeus, there's really nothing going on except in the minds of people who are deceived. Their mistaken understanding doesn't do anything to the meat itself. It's still just meat. And we who know the truth are not defiled by the wrong beliefs of others. So, by all means, buy the meat and enjoy it, giving thanks to the true God who has provided it to you through these means.

But, says Paul, there's a catch. You see, most of the members of the Corinthian congregation had been pagans prior to their conversion to the true faith. They grew up believing in the Greek gods and had sincerely participated in all the pagan rites and sacrifices. They now realize how foolish, lost, and wrong they'd been. They were ashamed of the things they had done and believed. And for many of them, now as relative infants in the true faith, they had a hard time separating their former idolatrous practices with the meat being sold as a result of those practices. They had not yet grasped the full extent of their freedom in the Gospel. They thought of the meat as being defiled. They felt that it was something they should avoid.

And here's the thing: if you do something that you think is wrong, even if it's not wrong in an absolute sense, then you are committing a sin. If you believe that you are defying God by your action, even if the Lord is not opposed to it, the attitude of your heart is one of rebellion and sin just the same as if you were doing something that God had prohibited. That's what makes it sin: the belief that you are doing something you ought not be doing. You're going against what your conscience tells you is right.

So, now in the Corinthian congregation you've got some folks who have a pretty good handle on things. They understand their Christian freedom to buy and consume meat sacrificed to idols. To them it's just meat. At the same time, there are others who aren't that far along in the faith. To them use of the meat is participation in idolatry – and because they believe that, it is wrong for them to use it.

It's in this context that Paul addresses the more mature members. He tells them that you must be careful not to lead your fellow Christians into sin. You can, by your actions and example in doing something that's perfectly right and proper, and which you have the Christians freedom to do (the right, so to speak), influence and lead astray someone else for whom it's not right to do. He might see you doing it and think, "Well, *maybe* it's all right ... but I'm not so sure ...oh, I'll just go ahead and do it because he thinks it's okay." And if that happens, your two rights just became a wrong. Your right becomes a serious offense that places the soul of a weaker brother or sister in Christ in jeopardy of being lost. You've sinned by insisting upon your

rights without regard to the damage you may do to someone else. Christianity is not about rights. It's about love. It's about God's great love for us in Jesus Christ and the love that we share for one another in him. And it's not a loving thing to do to hurt people who are spiritually weak. True Christian maturity, then, is not just doing what's right, but it also includes being conscious of your influence on others and protective of their spiritual wellbeing.

And this is the application to us. We don't have to worry about the meat we buy at the market. To the best of my knowledge, none of it is offered to idols; and even if it was, it's nothing to be concerned about. But the overall principle of showing Christian love remains the same: you must be careful that through the exercise of your freedoms you don't lead your fellow Christians into sin.

Let me give you a few examples. Since we've been talking about meat, you probably know that many Christians observe certain ceremonial dietary restrictions. Converts from Islam or Judaism can find it very hard to get used to the idea of eating pork. From childhood it was pounded into their heads that it's unclean and forbidden to consume. Even today some Christian churches forbid its use. Were you to dine with such a person or have them over for supper, it would be wrong for you to offer them a tenderloin sandwich or eat one in front of them. You might lead them into what is for them a sin.

Or again, a recovering alcoholic would likely associate drinking with all sorts of troubles and sins now past. Someone who grew up with an alcoholic parent might feel the same way. To such a person, the use of alcohol in any form might be thought of as wrong. Also, some Christian churches teach that it's a sin to use alcohol. Your responsibility, as one who doesn't have a problem with it, is not to put such people in a situation in which they might be tempted to fall by violating their conscience.

A third somewhat related example is part of why our church practices closed Communion. We have an obligation, borne of Christian love, to keep those who do not recognize the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament from sinning against the Lord by partaking in unbelief. Though our motives are often misunderstood, we say "no" to protect them and keep them from sinning.

Okay then, hopefully we've made some sense of this spiritual problem: how two rights can make a wrong. But I need to issue a corrective. This is a road with ditches on two sides into which one might fall. While we recognize that we must sometimes forfeit our rights and freedoms for the sake of others with less understanding and spiritual maturity, we must also not adopt their misunderstanding as the truth. It's one thing to protect the weak Christian; it's another matter entirely to accept or submit to the false teachings of the erring.

Some time back I listened to a radio preacher going on and on about what he called the sin of drinking alcohol. He readily admitted the Scripture did not prohibit it or say that it was a sin. But he went on to say that it's a choice God gives you to see whether you will be obedient. Obedient to *what*, I don't know since he already said it was not prohibited. Anyway, he said that if you choose not to drink alcohol, God will honor and reward you for your decision, and that when you stand in the judgment, you can be proud that you made the right choice. But do you see what he's done here? He's set up a way for you to earn some extra points with God for something you do or don't do – a way to be righteous before God beyond what Jesus Christ has done for you by his atoning death on the cross. And to the extent that he has done that, he has denied the saving faith.

In a case like this, we are not dealing with a weak brother or sister who is in danger of temptation and falling into sin. We've got a legalistic and self-righteous heretic who is trying to impose his man-made laws on others. Were I to spend an evening with such a fellow, the loving thing to do would be to show him with my personal example how it is possible for a Christian person to responsibly drink and enjoy alcohol without sin. I would feel it my Christian duty to have a drink (maybe two).

So, while we must be careful not to cause the weak in faith to stumble into sin because of their misunderstanding, we must be equally careful not to reinforce the errors of those who would misapply God's Word or create laws on their own. And because we will always have in the church those who are just learning and those who are deceived, we'll have to keep to the straight and narrow path, avoiding the ditches on both sides. The goal, of course, is for all of us to move forward in the faith by growing rich in the truth and the love of Christ Jesus our Lord. We want the immature to grow up, the erring to be corrected, and for all God's people to become more fully grounded and informed by the authoritative teaching of Jesus. His alone are the words of grace, forgiveness, and eternal life for all who believe. So may he continue to send us his Word and Holy Spirit to lead and guide each of us into his whole truth. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!