

## **You Might Be a Weaker Believer if...**

**Series: GRAY AREAS: Following Jesus when Things aren't Black and White #2**

### **1 Corinthians 8:1-13**

**INTRO:** Dr. H.A. Ironside was a Canadian American Bible teacher, preacher, theologian, pastor and author who pastored Moody Church in Chicago from 1929 to 1948, died in 1951. He once talked about an incident at a church picnic. One young man who had been converted to Christ from Islam was approached by a young lady who was passing out sandwiches to people in the group, and she said, "Would you like a ham sandwich?" He asked, 'Do you have any beef sandwiches left?' She replied, 'They are all gone?' So, he declined to take a sandwich.

She said, "I know you couldn't eat pork as a Muslim, but now that you're a Christian, you're free to eat any food you like." He said, 'I know I'm free to eat pork but I'm also free not to eat it. I'm trying to be a witness to my family. They're all Muslims living in the Middle East.

I visit them once a year, and I know that when I arrive, the first question my father will ask is, 'Have those infidels taught you to eat that filthy hog meat yet?' If I say, 'Yes, father,' I'll be banished and no longer able to witness to my family but if I say, 'No pork has passed my lips,' then I will continue to have a relationship with my family, and I can tell them of the joy I've found in Jesus Christ. So, I choose not to eat because of my love for my family and my love for Jesus Christ." (Ray Stedman, pp 130)

He chose his ability to connect with and influence his family for the Gospel over some of the rights he had in Christ because of the Gospel.

In 1 Corinthians, chapter 8, Paul describes of two types of Christians: Stronger Believers and Weaker Believers. Stronger doesn't mean better and weaker doesn't mean inferior. **He's not measuring value, but rather spiritual maturity.**

The stronger believers have a greater grasp of spiritual truth, and because of it are more mature in their faith. The weaker believers have less spiritual knowledge and understanding, and because of it have a weaker faith.

**The command to the stronger believers is to grow in love.**

**The command to the weaker believers is to grow in knowledge.**

**When stronger believers grow in love and weaker believers grow in truth the whole church grows in unity.**

**RECAP:** If you weren't here last week, let me give you a quick recap. The city of Corinth was a religious city filled with temples dedicated to the worship of false gods. And a major part of temple worship was to offer animal sacrifices. People would take their animal to the priest, and he would separate the animal meat into three parts. One part was burnt as an offering to the gods. The second part was given to the priest as his payment. Most often he would sell it in the market to make money. And then the third part of the sacrifice was given back to the family who took it home to eat or sold it at the meat market.

So, if you lived in Corinth and bought ribeye steaks, or lamb chops from the local Food Lion or Harris Teeter, there was a good chance it had been sacrificed in a temple to an idol.

The Corinthian Church was divided as to whether it was ok to eat this meat or not.

**Team Meat** (Paul calls the stronger believers) said, "False gods aren't gods. They are just statues of wood and stone. Based on this spiritual knowledge, our consciences are clear, we have the right/freedom from God to eat it."

On the other side, **Team No Meat** (Paul calls the weaker believers) said, 'No way! It's a horrible sin to eat that meat. That reminds us of our past. God rescued us out of that, and we shouldn't go back. And neither should you. No one who claims Christ as Savior and Lord has the right to eat this meat.'

So, the Corinthians ask Paul for a verdict. Is it okay to eat meat that's been sacrificed to idols or not? Paul takes three chapters (8,9,&10) to answer that question. But Paul answered 'yes AND no.'

Paul says, 'Hey **Team Meat** you're right that idols aren't real. The meat is fine, not tainted. The problem is while you've got the right knowledge in your head; you don't have the right love in your heart.'

If you realize that eating that meat may tempt some lesser mature Christians to abandon Christ and go back to idolatry, then you should love them enough to give up your rights rather than destroy their faith. Love trumps liberty.'

Then Paul says to **Team No Meat**, "You're wrong if you think eating this meat will separate you from God. You're also wrong if you think not eating this meat will make you closer to God. Meat doesn't affect your relationship with God either way. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ can make you right with God. So, you need to learn to trust Jesus and His Gospel more than your rules."

### **Let's Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-13**

***1Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that "We all possess knowledge." But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. 2Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. 3But whoever loves God is known by God.***

***4So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one." 5For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), 6yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.***

***7But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. 8But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.***

***9Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. 10For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? 11So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. 12When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.***

**13** *Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.” (NIV) PRAY*

Every Christian has a rights/freedom/liberty box. Within it are the actions a person believes to be permissible, allowable, and perfectly justified within their Christian freedom and not forbidden in Scripture.

Some things are always wrong for everyone (lie, cheat, steal, murder, gossip). Some things that are always right for everyone (honesty, integrity, faithfulness, loving). But there are also actions/practices that are neither totally condemned nor totally condoned in Scripture.

We called these 'gray areas'. In fact, that is the title of this series: **Gray Areas: Following Jesus When Things Aren't Black and White.**

*In our world today, there are lots of issues on which equally committed Christians disagree: For example...*

**Drinking:** some Christians point to a verse in the Bible that says, “Do not get drunk,” and they say Christians should abstain from alcohol.

—other Christians say, "Didn't Jesus turn water into wine? Wasn't that His first miracle?" "It says don't get drunk, not that you can't drink at all.

Some people have said, "Well, if social drinking is okay, what about smoking pot? The Bible doesn't say anything about it, and if God created it, it must be ok to smoke it. There's no verse that says, 'Thou shalt not smoke pot.'

**Dancing:** Some Christians say, “Look, there’s dancing in the Bible—King David danced for joy!”

—other Christians say, “Yeah, but his dancing wasn’t like sensual dancing today.”

**War:** some Christians point to the verse that says, “Thou shalt not kill,” and they say war is never justified

—other Christians point to the wars fought by God’s people in the Old Testament and say that sometimes, war cannot be avoided

**Worship Styles:** some Christians point to verses that say, “Make a joyful noise to the Lord!” and they say, “We ought to’ have worship that’s loud.”

—other Christians point to verses that say, “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him” and they say our worship services should be quiet and reverent.

Dating, kissing, gambling, lottery tickets, clothing, music, movies, television, taking out a loan, being in debt, etc.

In Romans 14, Paul is addressing the same issue with the Roman Christians. Romans 14:1-2 he says, '**Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.**'

Eating meat sacrificed to an idol was neither condemned nor condoned in Scripture. It was a disputable matter. Disputable matters are the gray matters. These are things that aren't directly called sin in the bible, yet some have the conviction it's wrong, while others do not.

Paul didn't say **don't discuss** them. He said **don't become divided** over them.

But how do we do that? We focus on our **faith**, not on our **freedoms**. We express **love** over **liberty**.

The stronger faith you have the greater clarity you have on what's important. And what strengthens our faith? "**Faith comes by hearing, hearing by the Word of God.**"

So, the more we know and obey God's Word, the stronger and wiser our faith becomes. The strongest churches are full of people who refuse to divide over disputable freedoms, but rather unite on undeniable truth.

I want you to write down something I think is important for us to understand...

**Weaker Believers elevate RULES over RELATIONSHIPS. In fact, weaker believers tend to have lots of rules.**

How often do we think the people with the most rules...the people who see sin in every little thing... and think they're the most spiritual.

Paul says, 'Their faith is so weak that things that aren't sinful become sinful for them.'

Here's what we must understand: If we're not careful, we could teach people to aspire toward the very behavior that Paul calls us to grow out of. Because of that we can inherit a lot of rules and a lot of traditions that call things sin that the Bible doesn't call sin. [Jesus vs. Religious Leaders]

**Example:** Jesus was always going against the rules of the religious leaders. Their rules caused them to miss out on a relationship with the savior, and they eventually had Him crucified.

How do you know if you have the weaker believer syndrome? How can we tell the difference between being disciplined, holy, and strong versus being immature, legalistic and weak concerning the gospel? **Four Warning Signs:**

**#1: You Might Be a Weaker Believer if...OTHER CHRISTIAN'S 'RIGHTS' EASILY OFFEND YOU.**

A weaker believer is someone who sees another believer engaging in a disputable matter they have deemed wrong for themselves, and they are offended. They allow it to affect them. [Colorado Pastor at minister's retreat] [Ernest Saves Christmas]

V9 says, '***Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.***'

Explicit (Obvious) Command: The stronger believer is to be careful not to use their rights in a way that causes weaker believers to stumble.

Implicit (Implied) Command: The weaker believer is to be careful not to let the freedoms of others cause them to stumble.

Both sides need to take responsibility. It's interesting every time the New Testament talks about a believer being offended by a non-sinful action of another believer...it's the weaker believer who is offended.

But what's ironic is sometimes their response to things that aren't sinful is often very sinful. Have you ever seen that? [rude, hateful, divisive, unloving, temper] Some of the most ungodly behavior has been from professed Christians who DIDN'T LIKE YOUR FREEDOM.

1 Peter 4:8: ***'Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.'***

When we really love people, we will forgive them, help them, and be patient with them. Why? Because that's exactly what God has done for us.

The first warning sign is you might be a weaker brother if you're easily offended by the actions of other believers. **2nd Sign...**

## **2. You Might Be a Weaker Believer if...EVERY ISSUE IS EQUAL.**

For weaker believers, everything is of equal importance. These gray areas become as important as the Gospel itself. In some places, they become even more important than the Gospel. Paul says that's wrong.

V8, ***"But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do."***

You see, for the weaker believers they knew eating this meat would tempt them to leave Christ and return to idolatry. So, because it was a gospel issue for them, they made it a gospel issue for everybody. They assumed nobody could eat meat without abandoning the gospel.

Some people can't have a drink alcohol without feeling the pull back to an old life of drunkenness. Some can't talk about Santa Claus without feeling they're trampling on the real meaning of Christmas, so they don't think anyone can.

**STORY:** Arnold Dallimore wrote a biography of CH Spurgeon. The picture of Spurgeon as a man of unusual holiness is entirely true. Nevertheless, it also is true, that Spurgeon both smoked cigars and drank alcoholic beverages.

When his smoking began is not known, but in Spurgeon's time the practice was believed to be beneficial to one's health. Robert Hall, the famous preacher of the St. Andrew's Street Baptist Church, Cambridge, had been ordered by his physician to become a smoker, and since Spurgeon lived at Cambridge and attended that church in his teens, he was undoubtedly familiar with this. Moreover, there were no qualms whatsoever about the practice in the minds of many ministers in the Church of England and the Church of Scotland and in the churches of France and Holland during that time.

While out on a trip with his students one morning, when several of them had lighted pipes or cigars Spurgeon said, 'Aren't you ashamed to be smoking so early!' And they immediately put out their fire. Then he produced a cigar and lit it, and both he and they laughed at his little joke, but his point was that he was in no way ashamed of the practice. He saw nothing wrong with his smoking and that he did it openly.

In 1874, Dr. George F. Pentecost, a Baptist pastor from America, visited the Tabernacle and Spurgeon had him sit on the platform for the evening service. Spurgeon preached strongly and plainly upon the necessity of giving up sin, to have success in prayer.

After concluding his sermon, he asked Dr. Pentecost to speak, suggesting especially that he apply the principle he himself had declared.

It is probable Dr. Pentecost did not know that Spurgeon smoked. At any rate, he applied Spurgeon's principle by telling of his own experience in giving up cigars. He said, 'One thing I liked exceedingly – the best cigar that could be bought,' yet he felt the habit was wrong in the life of a Christian and he strove to overcome it. The habit, however, proved so strong that he found himself enslaved, till after much struggling, he took his cigar box before the Lord, cried desperately for help, and was given a complete victory. He told, with much praise to God, how he had



been enabled to defeat the habit. His point was not only was smoking an enslaving habit, but that the Christian must see it as sin.

Spurgeon arose and stated: ‘Well, dear friends, you know that some men can do to the glory of God what to other men would be a sin. And, notwithstanding what brother Pentecost has said, I intend to smoke a good cigar to the glory of God before I go to bed tonight.

‘If anybody can show me in the Bible the command, “Thou shalt not smoke,” I am ready to keep it, but I haven’t found it yet. I find Ten Commandments, and it is as much as I can do to keep them; and I have no desire to make them eleven or twelve. The fact is, I have been speaking to you about real sin, and not about listening to mere quibbles and scruples...’ Whatsoever is not of faith

In his day pure drinking water was difficult to obtain, and to avoid contamination most people used beer and ale in their meals. In turn, he had not long been in London when we find him using such drinks as beer, wine, and brandy, though in very moderate amounts. And this practice, like that of smoking, he did not in any way attempt to deny or hide.

In these two practices we see that Spurgeon was very human – a man of his times. Moreover, he was not alone in the indulgence. For instance, though John Wesley totally opposed the drinking of tea, hence the term ‘tee-totaler,’ he was something of an authority on the taste of ale.

Charles Wesley also indulged, and Whitefield’s practice was similar; we find him writing, ‘Give thanks to that friendly brewer for the keg of rum he sent us.’

Concerning this, Kenneth L. Chafin states, **“Often the gray areas reflect the area or of the times and have little to do with the biblical faith.”**

**For the weaker brother, everything is a big deal. They make every gray issue a Gospel issue.** If a weaker believer disagrees with anything, it's a matter of spiritual life and death to them.

As you can imagine, it's hard for weaker believers to be happy in any church. Being in church is stressful for them... because every little thing they disagree with conflicts with what they think is acceptable.

When everything is a matter of right and wrong, and everything is as important as the gospel, you might never find the perfect church. It doesn't exist.

**If everything becomes the GOSPEL FOR YOU, you are close to having NO GOSPEL AT ALL.**

The gospel is God's grace alone through faith alone in Jesus alone. And if you're attaching all this other stuff to the gospel, that's not grace alone, that's not faith alone, and that's not Jesus alone. And that's not the gospel!

In other words, if everything is as big a deal as the gospel, then the gospel isn't really a big deal. If you emphasize everything, then you emphasize nothing. Refuse to make every issue, every right, every freedom a Gospel size issue.

**3rd Sign...**

### **3. You Might Be a Weaker Believer If...It's Your Way or the Highway.**

The weaker believers weren't content to simply follow their convictions and not eat meat. No, they wanted to force their convictions and their conscience on everyone else and tell them not to eat meat either. If I can't, you can't. If it's wrong for me, it's wrong for thee. Weaker believers only feel comfortable around people who have similar contents in their rights box.

Again, let's go back to Romans 14. ***"Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand."***

The stronger believers who feel God's freedom in some areas aren't to look down with contempt on weaker believers. The weaker believers aren't to look down on others by being judgmental. Instead, **what are we supposed to do with one another when we disagree on the contents of our rights box?**

### **Accept one another.**

Don't 'separate from one another' and find others like you.

Don't 'convert one another' to your superior view.

Don't 'avoid one another' till someone relents.

**Accept one another** like God has accepted you: lovingly, graciously, and unconditionally.

**Lastly, here's the 4th sign...**

### **4. You Might Be a Weaker Believer If...YOUR FOCUS IS ON EXTERNAL MATTERS.**

The weaker Corinthian believers thought what mattered was whether they ate the meat or not. It was about the action. Paul says what really matters is why they ate the meat or not. It's about the motive. If the reason they didn't eat was out of love for other believers who were struggling, that's good.

If the reason they ate is because they were selfish and didn't care about anyone else, that's bad. If the reason they ate is because they were learning to trust the gospel more, that's a good thing.

Why they did what they did mattered even more than what they did. We can do the right thing with the wrong motive...guess what? We're still wrong.

Now, Paul made one thing very clear...if you believe something to be sin for you, then it is sin for you. If believe something is a sin and you do it anyway, you've sinned against your conscience, and against your God.

What should we do? Well, the weaker are to grow in truth, the stronger are to grow in love so that the whole church grows in unity.

**Unity doesn't just happen in the church. It requires all of us to work at it because the strongest unity is where there is the greatest maturity.**

***1 Cor. 8:1, 13: '...But knowledge puffs up while love builds up...Therefore, if what causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.'***

**The key idea of the whole chapter: Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.**

**STORY:** There was a traveler, between flights at an airport, who went to a lounge and bought a small package of cookies. Then she sat down and began reading a newspaper. Gradually, she became aware of a rustling noise. From behind her paper, she was flabbergasted to see a neatly dressed man helping himself to her cookies. Not wanting to make a scene, she leaned over and took a cookie herself.

A minute or two passed, and then came more rustling. He was helping himself to another cookie! By this time, they had come to the end of the package, but she was so angry she didn't dare allow herself to say anything. Then, as if to add insult to injury, the man broke the remaining cookie in two, pushed half across to her, and ate the other half and left. Still fuming sometime later when her flight was announced, the woman opened her handbag to get her ticket. To her shock and embarrassment, there she found her pack of unopened cookies! (John Ross Cranleigh, Surrey, England, Leadership, Vol. 12, no. 2)

Sometimes we think we know when we really don't. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

You see, it's not just figuring out for myself if I can participate in these neutral matters. I also must be cognizant of how those actions might affect the believers around me. My freedom isn't more important than your faith. Love trumps my rights. Love is better than liberty. So, if I know some of my rights damage your faith, I should willingly sacrifice my freedom for the benefit of your faith. Why? Because of a thing called LOVE.

**APPLICATION:** Spend some time thinking about what is and what is not in your rights box. You know whether you do these things...but do you know why? ***'That's just how I was raised.'***

Listen, that's not good enough. You'll never be spiritually healthy living on mom and dad's faith. You need your own.

Don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying that when you have mature faith, you can drink and smoke and walk the fence with the world. **[explain]**

Do you know the only cure for the weaker believer syndrome? V8 again, ***"But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do."***

Jesus Christ and His gospel is the only way for you to be right with God.

The cure for the 'weaker believer syndrome' is Jesus.

Jesus can make you right with God. Nothing that you do... nothing that you don't do... will make you right with God.

Coming to church will not make you right with God.

Serving in church will not make you right with God.

Reading your Bible and praying will not make you right with God.

Not drinking alcohol or smoking pot will not make you right with God.

Not having sex outside marriage will not make you right with God.

In fact, if you trust anything to make you right with God, you won't be right with God. Because only Jesus will make you right with God.

It's not wrong to be a weaker believer. It's just wrong if you're content to stay one. Have you believed with your whole heart in Jesus, and fully surrendered to Him? Have you personally repented of your sins, and believe your only hope of heaven is in His life, death, and resurrection? Are you growing in the truth? Are you growing out of a life of rules, and into a life of faith, hope and love? **Let's surrender all we are to Jesus.**