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## **SELF-DENIAL IN THE INTEREST OF OTHERS**

*– AUGUST 15. – 1 COR. 8:1-13. –*

GOD'S Word, both of the Old and New Testaments, has been, and yet is, the very cornerstone of human liberty and independence. Every other system of religion has tended more or less to fetter the mind and the conscience with priestcraft and superstition. And the various so-called Christian religions, from Roman and Greek Catholicisms down, have likewise tended toward priestcraft, superstition and conscience-bondage, in proportion as they have ignored the teachings of God's Word, substituting therefor the "traditions of the elders," Decrees of Councils, theological dogmas, etc. As we look over the world to-day, [R2198 : page 234] it is an unquestionable fact that the largest liberty, social, political and mental is possessed by the peoples who have the Bible, and who read it freely. And the largest Christian liberty amongst these is enjoyed by those who study it with the greatest candor and simplicity.

But if this knowledge and liberty be not accompanied by a full self-surrender to God, a complete consecration of one's self to him who is the Author of our liberties and privileges, we stand in great danger; for, as the apostle here declares, knowledge alone without self-submission to God would incline to puff us up, to make us heady, arrogant, self-sufficient. But if the knowledge be accompanied by a love to God, which leads to self-consecration in his service, in harmony with his instructions, the knowledge will work good for us, by thus introducing the spirit of love as the controlling factor in our lives, because the effect of love is to "build up" instead of to "puff up." Love is constructive, and tends not only to build up our own characters after the Divine pattern, but by so doing it makes us co-workers together with God, in our sympathies for and interest in others – in their upbuilding and general welfare.

After making this point clear, the apostle proceeds to apply it to the Christians at Corinth. As in all other cities of the Gentiles at that time, there were plenty of idols, plenty of gods, and plenty of temples; and it was the custom to eat consecrated food – meat that had been offered before an idol. The Apostle assures his readers that he fully agrees with their knowledge and logic upon this subject; to the effect that since the idol is not a god, therefore the offering of meat to it could not in any manner injure the meat to those who really understood the matter. Their increase of knowledge had given them a liberty which they could not have appreciated at first; but he urges that as Christians it is our duty to consider not merely our own liberties, but in such cases to waive our liberties in the interest of others, upon whom the influence might be injurious. We should, therefore, be very careful in the use of our knowledge and liberties, to see that it worked no injury to others – or otherwise to abstain from such liberties as might be injurious to others.

Every one knows how easy it is to meddle with the delicate machinery of a watch, and thus to render it absolutely useless. So the conscience is a delicate mechanism, and we should be on guard against any and every influence which might injure either our own conscience or the consciences of others. The Corinthian brethren who fully understood that an idol was nothing, and that an idol temple was therefore nothing, might be fully at ease in their own consciences, if as guests they attended a municipal feast or banquet in such an idol temple; they might be able even there to recognize the true God and to eat and drink with thankfulness to him; but there might be onlookers, or amongst them, other brethren with knowledge less clear upon these subjects, who, nevertheless, would want to follow their example, and who in so doing would be violating and injuring their consciences. And no one could know what serious results might come from such a violation of conscience; the conscience which submitted to violation reluctantly at first, would incline to become hardened, and finally would cease to speak at all. And the owner of that conscience would be likely to drift according to the inclinations of his fallen nature into

the very worst extremes of depravity. For this reason those who have knowledge of the Divine Word and the liberties wherewith Christ makes free, need more than ever an increase of the Divine spirit – charity, love – which would make them careful that their every act would not only be in harmony with their own consciences, but such, also, as would not prove stumbling blocks to the consciences of others, [R2199 : page 234] whose knowledge or logic could grasp the situation less clearly.

To fail to have this love and this active, self-sacrificing consideration for the welfare and conscience of a weaker brother, the Apostle declares would not only be a sin against the brethren and wound their consciences, but a sin also against Christ – against the very spirit of his law of love one for the other. How nobly the Apostle sums this matter up when he declares that as for himself, if he found it necessary, in order that he might be a help to the brethren, and not a stumbling block to any, he would take pleasure in denying himself, not only the meat offered to idols, but all meat of every kind, as long as he lived. Paul thus manifested the true spirit of brotherly love; and every follower of the Lord Jesus Christ should seek to have this same spirit and sentiment active in all their intercourse with each other.

While there is nothing in this lesson directly bearing upon intoxicating liquors, the principle inculcated can be very properly applied to the great evil of intemperance which is doing so much injury to the whole world, and in some cases even to those who have named the name of Christ. We do not dispute the principle of liberty, that each Christian has a right to decide the right and wrong of such matters according to his own conscience, but we do offset this knowledge and liberty with the doctrine of love, as the Apostle does in this lesson. Whoever is a child of the King, not only has liberty, but must also have the spirit of love; and he who boasts the liberty and manifests nothing of the spirit of love and consideration for others, raises the question whether he is a bastard or a son; for if any [R2199 : page 235] man have not the spirit of Christ (love), he is none of his.

The Christian whose heart is full of the Lord's spirit of love will not only be careful that he may set a good example before the brethren, lest they should be stumbled, but he will also be careful of the example which he sets to his own sons and household, and to all "them who are without" – those who have not yet accepted the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, but who are reading the lives and characters of his disciples, as living epistles of his doctrines.

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Incidentally our lesson brings before us a very clear and positive statement respecting God. While the world has many that it calls gods and lords and masters, to the Christian, as the Apostle expresses it, "There is but one God, the Father." The Apostle evidently knew nothing of the doctrine, started in the second century, and patterned after the heathen ideas, to the effect that there are three gods, of whom the catechisms declare that they are "equal in power and in glory." The Apostle knew of only one God who was supreme, "the Father." And he declares that of him (proceeding from him, directly or indirectly) are all things, including ourselves, who are his children.

But, the Apostle by no means ignored our Lord Jesus Christ, who claimed to be not "the Father," but "the Son of God." Of him the Apostle has elsewhere said after telling us how he humbled himself for our sakes, leaving the glory of the Father's presence in obedience to the Father's will and plan, and how he suffered for us, the just for the unjust, death itself, even the death of the cross," then adds, "Him hath God highly exalted, and given him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, both of things in heaven and things on earth, to the glory of God, the Father" – and that all men "should honor the Son, even as they honor the Father." Nor does the Apostle here omit to mention Jesus, but says, that to us there is "one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him."

How clearly and how simply the Apostle states the relationship existing between the glorified Father, the glorified Son, and all the creation of God, which is or will be blessed through the Son. Although, all things are of the Father, in the sense that the original power, life, etc., proceeded from the Father, nevertheless all things are by the Son, in the sense that he from the very beginning has been the Father's active and honored agent in every feature of the Divine plan. Himself declared to be "the beginning of the creation of God," it is also declared that "all things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (though of the Father, by the Father's power, etc.). See Rev. 3:14; Jno. 1:2,3; also our issue for June '92 and April 15, '93.

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