

THE PROGRAM: FLEXIBILITY I Corinthians 8, 9, 10

INTRODUCTION:

Have you ever seen a picture of a muscle-bound body builder? Most people do not find these physiques to be very attractive. Most people find these bodies to be a bit grotesque and misshapen.

But, you know what? Not only can these bodies be unattractive, they can be ineffective. The power of the muscle-bound body builder is restricted because, while he may have strength, he does not have strength with flexibility.

I'll bet you've known Christians who were muscle-bound: they knew a lot about the Bible, even minute details and obscure particulars, but they became proud, rigid and unyielding because of what they knew. I once knew a man who prided himself on having memorized the entire Bible. (At least he claimed to have memorized the entire Bible. I never heard him quote much of it and when I heard him read scripture in public, it sounded like he might have been looking at it for the very first time.) But he prided himself on having memorized the Bible...and that is the point I am making: he PRIDED HIMSELF on having memorized the Bible.

Proverbs 16:18 teaches us that pride leads to destruction. That kind of pride, vanity or arrogance is a prelude to disaster. And in the case of this man, there were plenty of moral failures in his life that would support what Proverbs 16:18 says. Instead of getting all of the Bible in his memory, he should have got some of it in his heart.

I've also known others who have been church members for a long time and who are cantankerous, difficult, unyielding and rigid. I suspect you know what I mean: they insist on their own way, throw their weight around if they don't get it and bully their brothers and sisters into submission. They may be quite knowledgeable in the Bible and quite experienced in the church but they are not very Christlike.

Let me tell you a little secret: inflexibility on the part of a Christian is often a symptom of spiritual weakness blustering as strength. Now, let me tell you another secret: this is nothing new. In three chapters in the middle of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he urges flexibility.

But please do not miss this important truth: Paul urges flexibility that derives from strength. Some people think they are flexible when, in fact, they are spineless. That is decidedly NOT what Paul is advocating. Paul is promoting the kind of flexibility that arises from knowing what is most

important, concentrating on that and remaining accommodating on the less important issues.

From these three chapters, I derive three facts about flexibility that ought to characterize the mature Christian.

I. **KNOWLEDGE SHOULD YIELD TO LOVE (8:1-7)**

In I Corinthians 8:1, Paul wrote, “knowledge puffs up but love builds up.” Let me give you the context for that phrase:

¹ *Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ² The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But the man who loves God is known by God.*

⁴ *So 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. ⁵ For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), ⁶ yet 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.*

⁷ *But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.*

“Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.” My, I wish I had said that! Isn’t that a great turn of phrase? Isn’t that a clever expression? Isn’t that the truth!?! Remember the saying, “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing”? Some people have just enough knowledge to be dangerous. “Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.”

Perhaps the best illustration of this truth is found in Luke 18:9-14. Please listen carefully to every word of this text..

⁹ *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’*

¹³ *“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’*

¹⁴ *“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

Isn't that revealing? Luke wants us to know what prompted Jesus to tell this story: "some were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else." Then he spoke of a Pharisee whom, Jesus said, "prayed about himself."

Ever know anybody like that? I have. I have known people whose prayer requests are really thinly veiled excuses for telling the congregation about all the wonderful things they think they've done lately. "I've been witnessing to a co-worker and she says that no one else has ever taken the time to tell her about Jesus and she says that I am the most Godly person she has ever met and she admires me and hopes to be like me and thinks that my church ought to be very thankful that I am a member. And even though I am entitled to a coffee break every morning and every afternoon, I skip my morning coffee break just so I can talk to her about the church so I'd like for you to pray for me because I get sleepy about 11 o'clock." They pray "about themselves".

Now, in Jesus' day, the Pharisees were well known as the most devoutly religious people among the Jews. But they were also well known for being harsh, judgmental, condescending and cold. Their knowledge was not tempered by love.

In I Corinthians 8:1, Paul warns us about the danger that knowledge puffs up but love builds up. The setting for that little gem is a controversy in Corinth. Some of the Christians in Corinth had found a cheap source of good meat: the temples to the false gods. Worshippers would bring the best of their livestock to offer as sacrifices to their idols and the pagan priests would butcher the beasts and burn some of the meat on the altar. But they would sell some of the meat. It was good meat: some of the best available. And the price was right. But some Christians said, "that has been offered to idols. You might get contaminated by that meat because it belongs to a false god."

Paul says that you know that the false god isn't real so it can't hurt you but not everyone knows this. You might hurt your fellow-Christian if what you act on what you know instead of acting on whom you love. Out of love for your brothers and sisters in Christ, be flexible and pay a little more for your meat somewhere else so you don't create an issue for someone else. Don't be so proud of what you know that you fail to be loving toward others.

II. **RIGHTS SHOULD YIELD TO RESPONSIBILITY (8:8-9:18)**

Paul also teaches that our rights must yield to our responsibilities. In I Corinthians 8:9, Paul wrote: "*Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.*" Again, how can you

improve on Paul's phrase, "Be careful...that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak"? You may believe that you are free to do some things but you know in your heart that if you do, you may create a barrier to the gospel or a hazard to another. Your freedom is not so much a right as it is a responsibility.

Paul uses his own life as an illustration of his point. In chapter 9, he lists some of his rights as an apostle.

- He has the right to receive hospitality when he is preaching among the churches...but instead he pays for his food and lodging so no one will say he's only in this for the money.
- He has the right to marry a Christian wife like the other apostles have...but he doesn't so that he won't be tied down with domestic responsibilities and he can devote himself totally to the gospel.
- He has a right to be paid for his services to the church...but he won't accept any money for his ministry so he won't be a burden on the church.

Paul's take on all his rights is that if he is free to receive these benefits from the ministry of the gospel, he is also free to refuse them and he believed that it was better for him to yield his rights as an apostle as an exercise of his responsibility to the church.

In I Corinthians 9:19, Paul made another application of this truth. He had been writing about his rights as an apostle but now he begins writing about his rights as a Christian. As a young man, Paul was a Jew and was obligated to keep the Law of Moses in its most minute and intricate detail. When he became a Christian, he was freed from the Law. But Paul did not want his freedom from the Law to prevent him from reaching other Jews for Jesus. When he was preaching in Jewish communities, he went back to observing the Jewish Law. When he was among Gentiles, he lived as a Gentile and did not keep all of requirements of the Law.

Some might say that this made Paul a hypocrite. Paul says, "Not at all!" He was not living one way in front of some people and another way in front of others to try to mislead them or deceive them. No, his purpose was clear. As he said, "*I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.*"

Paul had a right to live freed from the Law but he had a responsibility to live in such a way that he could win a hearing from the Jews. You probably know of some rights you have that you choose not to exercise so that you will not cause a problem for others and so you can create opportunities to share the gospel. For all of us, as for Paul, our rights should yield to our responsibilities.

III. **STRENGTH SHOULD YIELD TO VULNERABILITY (9:22)**

Another principle that Paul taught is that our strength should yield to vulnerability: the vulnerability of others. Specifically, in I Corinthians 9:22, Paul said, "To the weak, I became weak to win the weak."

Paul knew that he was spiritually mature enough and that his faith was strong enough that he would not be tripped up by eating meat that had been offered to idols. He was not going to go into the temple of a pagan god for the purpose of buying food and come out having bought their false teaching.

But Paul also knew that there were some Christians who were not strong enough for that and he did not want his example to lead them astray. They might see Paul coming out of the temple of some idol with a grocery bag of meat in his hands and figure that if Paul could do it, they could do it; go in to buy meat and then be seduced by the teachings of the pagans. So Paul deferred to the vulnerabilities of his weaker brothers and sisters.

There might have been some things that Paul could have done that were not wrong in themselves but that were considered questionable by others. Paul's principle was that although these things were not objectionable to him, personally, he would avoid them for the sake of the one who was not mature enough to deal with them.

May I give you a personal example? As you may know, Sandy and I live in Scotland for a number of years and we preached among the Scottish equivalent of our Christian Churches. The State Church of Scotland is the Presbyterian Church and it pretty much ruled the religious roost at that time. Every person born in Scotland was, at the time of his birth, enrolled in the parish of the Church of Scotland that served the community where he would live. The Church of Scotland was such a part of the landscape and the mindset that their practices affected all the rest of us in many ways.

The Scots had only limited experience with American ministers coming to their land. Most Americans who did church work in Scotland were Mormons and, quite frankly, they were viewed with a certain amount of suspicion.

In one of our first elders' meetings after we moved to Scotland, the leadership of our churches asked me if I would be willing to wear a clerical collar when I was doing church work. They said that it would open a lot of doors to me. They told me it would make it possible for me to do hospital calls without objection by the nurses and that it would open many doors for me to be accepted and effective in the community. They also told me

that it would assure people immediately that I was a real minister and that I was not a Mormon.

As you might imagine, I had to do some thinking and praying about that one. Eventually, I decided that if it would open doors for the gospel if I wore a black shirt with a white plastic dog collar, I'd wear the shirt. That clerical shirt meant nothing to me but for those who were not so well informed, it would remove barriers. Now maybe it was because of their spiritual weakness that they needed a uniform for their minister to make him seem legit. I didn't need the uniform but if they did, I believed that I should defer to them...for the sake of the gospel. I was strong enough to serve in any clothing but they were not mature enough to accept me without the clerical garb. My strength should yield to their weakness.

There may be some choices you have to make where what informs your decision is not what you are strong enough to withstand but rather what others are too weak to endure. A sign of your spiritual maturity and your strength of faith is your ability to yield for the sake of those who are weaker.

CONCLUSION:

In Jesus' day, the Pharisees were very strict about their religious observance so that people would be impressed with them. They still are. Paul, who had once been a Pharisee, left that kind of rigid religion behind because he had stopped wanting people to be impressed about him: he wanted them to be impressed with Jesus. No wonder he could honestly say, "*I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.*" That, my friends, is flexibility! Do you have the strength to be flexible enough to ask God to empower you to be a blessing to others?

INVITATION: #670 – "*Make Me A Blessing*"