***YOU CAN, BUT SHOULD YOU?***

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Texts: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 and Matthew 18:6-7

In law one of the early lessons to be learned is the difference between what is mandatory and what is permissive. It is the difference between the words *shall* and *may*. If a statute or policy says that you *shall* do something, it is mandatory; you must do it in order to be in compliance. There is no discretion. If a statute or policy says that you *may* do something, it is permissive; you are allowed to do it, but not compelled to do so. You can choose. The Ten Commandments are all *shalls* – you *shall* have no other God’s before me, you *shall* not take the Lord’s name in vain, you *shall* not kill, steal, commit adultery, or covet your neighbor’s donkey. We may want to read those commandments as permissive, as things we should do, in order to excuse our failings in following them – especially the one about the Sabbath Day – but the language of the commandments is not so lenient. They tell us what God commands, not what God suggests.

For those trying to follow the commandments, the *shalls* can pose a sinfully difficult challenge; *you shall not covet* offers no exceptions. But permissive language poses its own problems, for just because you *may* do something, does not mean you *should* do it. There can be a difference between what the law requires and what morality demands. You may be free to eat that whole big bag of M&Ms in one sitting, but that doesn’t mean you should. Just because you have the freedom to choose, does not mean that the choices are equally right. The question is not: what may I do? The question is: what is the right thing to do?

The church in Corinth had a problem with permissive language; they were unsure what they *could* do and were even less sure what they *should* do. Recall that this fledgling church had little guidance on what it meant to be Christian. Only twenty years or so after Jesus’ death and resurrection, these believers were still trying to figure out what was expected of them. They had no gospels to read since the earliest of the gospels would not be written down for another twenty years; they had no trained pastors to whom to turn, no firm traditions to draw upon, no readily available theologians to answer their questions. This was new ground they were breaking – a new tradition called *Christian*. They followed Jesus whom most of them had never seen or heard, so they relied upon Paul, the man who had brought the good news of Jesus to them, seeking his guidance on how to faithfully follow the One they called Lord.

The issue before them was what to do about meat offered to idols. In Corinth as in many Greek cities, animals were sacrificed to a variety of gods, and while some of the meat was burned on the altar, much of it was shared in a festive meal or was sold in the public market. The question was this: could a Christian eat meat that had been offered to an idol? It was a question of dietary practice, but Paul expanded his answer to address a broader moral question. From Paul’s perspective the question was not *could* a Christian eat the meat, but *should* a Christian eat the meat offered to idols? For Paul, it was a question of individual freedom versus the public good, a question of knowledge versus love.

Several years ago during a winter storm like the one forecast for this weekend, I happened to answer the phone at the church when a telemarketer called. “*Covenant Presbyterian Church*,” I said. There was a brief pause and then a curt female voice asked: “*Is the owner there?*” “*That would be God*,” I said, “*This is a church*.” “*O crap!*” said the voice, and she hung up. Thus was lost an opportunity for theological dialogue on God as *owner* of the church, but perhaps that wasn’t why she was calling anyway. The reality is: we belong to God and to God alone. We are owned, known, and loved by the God whom we proclaim to be creator of all things. There are no other owners to whom we belong, no other Creators, no other gods that merit our praise or adoration, no other gods who are truly divine.

That does not mean there are no other gods (small g), for there are lots of lesser objects that claim our devotion and praise. The idols of gold, wood, and stone in Corinth were such gods; so are all the lesser gods that command ultimate affection or devotion today – gods of wealth, nationalism, political figures with all the answers, and even football teams (imagine that!). That is not to say that those things have no place in our lives, but they deserve none of our devotion. They are not our ultimate concern. God alone claims that place in our lives, and anything less than whole-hearted love for the Lord is idolatry, for YOU **SHALL** LOVE THE LORD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, SOUL, MIND, AND STRENGTH. There is no wiggle room there. Consider then your loves, those things to which you devote your time, energy, and monies; are you more devoted to any of them than to God? If so, then they are idols for you as much as were those idols of gold, wood, and stone worshiped by the pagans in Corinth. None of those gods (small g) has any power or authority that rivals that of the Lord our God. Why then do you give them so much attention?

The Corinthian Christians who were mature in their faith *knew* that the Lord alone was God, so there was no concern about eating the meat offered to idols. Idols had no divine power, so the offering was a meaningless gesture; the meat *could* be safely eaten. The problem was that mature Christians possessed that knowledge, while those who were new to the faith or curious about the faith – those we might call seekers today – had no such knowledge. They looked to mature Christians for guidance on what to do in order to be faithful, and when they saw their brothers and sisters eat the meat offered to idols, they concluded that idols could be set alongside the Lord in a pantheon of gods. Seeing their brothers and sisters eat meat offered to idols thus weakened their faith; it became a stumbling block, for they didn’t *know about God* in the same way that mature Christians *knew about God*.

“*Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up*,” writes Paul. “*Anyone who loves God is known by God*.” Paul flips on its head the knowledge that some Christians in Corinth exalted so highly. More important than *knowing about God* was *being known* *by God*. Such knowledge is rooted in love – God’s love for us and our love for God. For Paul, discerning the right thing to do meant asking, “What is the loving thing to do?” The loving thing in this instance was to forego eating meat, for the act of eating that meat offered to idols weakened the faith of new Christians. The meat was no better or worse for being a pagan offering; Christians *could* eat it, but because new Christians didn’t understand that, something more was required of those mature Christians. As long as eating that meat weakened the faith of fledgling Christians and served as a stumbling block to them, Paul would forego it. Perhaps he recalled the words of Jesus: “Woe to you who put stumbling blocks in front of these little ones who believe in me.” Or perhaps Paul just recognized what love required of him in this instance. In any event he willingly sacrificed his individual freedom for the sake of the larger community’s good, and he urged the Corinthians to do the same – out of love.

“*Freedom is not the right to choose to do as one wishes*,” writes Bruce Rigdon. “*It is not simply a lack of restrictions….Christian freedom is grounded in love*.”[[1]](#endnote-1) That love should be the rubric by which we make moral decisions should come as no surprise to us. Again and again we are told about God’s love for us. Again and again we are called to love God and one another. All the law, prophets, and commandments hinge on two commands, says Jesus:

*Love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself.*

Sometimes love requires that we forego individual freedoms for the public good, that we make sacrifices for others, that we consider how our actions impact our neighbors before we act. This is not just choosing the good thing over the evil thing; it is harder than that. It is choosing the loving action over the free action we have every right to choose. It is choosing to act out of love for our neighbor.

These distinctions – among what we can do, what we may do, and what we should do – are the source of a lot of conflict in our world these days. The pandemic has tested our willingness make sacrifices and do the right thing out of love. In America, our rampant individualism rebels against personal sacrifice for the public good. We don’t want to be told what we can or can’t do; when we have a choice to make, we don’t want to sacrifice our own freedom or convenience for the sake of others. So, people refuse to wear masks even though that is the right thing to do to protect themselves and others from the virus. They risk spreading the virus because they are tired of staying at home and want to travel. 25% of respondents in a Seton Hall Sports Poll indicated that they plan to gather with people outside their households to watch the Super Bowl next weekend, despite the pandemic.[[2]](#endnote-2) As Walter Brueggemann suggests, “*The great crisis among us is the crisis of ‘the common good,’ the sense of community solidarity that binds all in a common destiny – haves and have-nots, the rich and the poor.”*[[3]](#endnote-3) In making our choices we choose what we want, not what is right for the public good. The haves, individuals and nations, contend they should get the COVID vaccine ahead of the have-nots. Because they CAN pay for it, they believe they SHOULD get it.

How then do we decide what we ***should*** do day to day, week to week? We follow Paul’s example and choose what Paul urges us to choose – the loving thing, the thing that builds up, the thing that shows love for our neighbor. That is what we are called to do, that is the choice we are called to make as disciples of Jesus and children of God. When next you choose whatever you must choose – to take some action or to press send on some angry tweet or text or email, ask yourself: Is this the loving thing to do? Then choose well, my friends. Choose well! Choose love. Amen

1. V. Bruce Rigdon in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, Westminster John Knox Press: 2008, p.304 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cindy Boren, *The Washington Post*, January 29, 2021, p.D2 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2010, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)