

You Could... But Should You?

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In this morning's sermon I intend to answer, clearly, unambiguously, and once and for all the pressing moral question of our day.

Whether or not it is acceptable to eat meat that has been sacrificed to pagan God's in Roman temples.

Alright, so maybe that is not the question on the top of your mind this morning. But if you were one of the earliest Christians, it would be a huge concern. It was so important to the church in Corinth wrote to Paul asking him to weigh in.

So after six chapters of theological discourse, Paul turns in this letter and says "Now, to the matter that you wrote me about. Concerning food sacrificed to idols."

What was that all about?

Here is the problem the people had. Living in Roman cities, there were temples erected to various God's all over the place. One for Apollo over here, one for Dionysius over there. And at these temples, animals were sacrificed to these Gods.

Typically only a small part of the animal burned as an offering to the God. The rest was butchered, and sold.

And if you lived in a city, as most early Christians did, and you were poor enough that you did not have your own flocks, which most early Christians were, then these temples were about the only place where you could get meat to eat.

There are two opinions in the community. Some people believe that eating the meat of animals that have been used in pagan rituals is wrong. It feels to them like they are taking part in a ritual to honor an idol.

Others think that since the statues in the temples are really just rocks and stones and the God's they depict are not actually real, it doesn't really matter.

This problem is discussed at length in the Letters to the Corinthians, so it seems pretty clear that this was one of the biggest fights in that church. They simply could not agree.

Here is what Paul says to them:

“ ‘All things are lawful’, but not all things are beneficial. So eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience.

If an someone invites you to a meal go and eat whatever is set before you without raising any question. But if someone says to you, ‘This has been offered in sacrifice’, then do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who informed you.”

What Paul is saying is this. It doesn't really matter. Don't let it weigh on your conscience. Eat the meat, don't eat the meat, its all the same to me, it's all the same to God, and it is perfectly lawful.

But! Not everything that is lawful is beneficial. If someone *tells you* that the food was sacrificed to an idol, you should refuse it. Not for your sake. But for theirs. Lest they misunderstand. Lest they think you believe in the God's of Rome.

It may make no difference to you. But it might make a difference for someone else, who might see you eating the meat and think that idolatry is ok.

Basically, the answer is: you could... but should you?

And then always the one for a little boasting, Paul adds. "By the way, I will never eat meat, just to make sure I do not cause anyone to stumble."

Did you know Paul was a vegetarian?

Anyway, so there it is. A clear answer, even if its a little complicated, to a question that none of you had. Is it acceptable to eat meat that has been sacrificed to pagan God's in Roman temples?

So its obvious from this reading that not every page of a 2,000 year old letter ages well. That shouldn't surprise us.

And yet... the heart of what Paul is saying here speaks to us across the ages.

Because even if the content of this decision does not seem relevant to us, Paul teaches a way of making difficult ethical decisions that is just as important today as it was then.

“Not everything that is lawful is beneficial.”

Not everything that you *can* do is something that you *should* do.

As Christians we hold ourselves to a standard of right and wrong that is not fully encapsulated by what is lawful and what is unlawful.

And that standard is whether our actions are beneficial, or harmful, to others.

It is not enough for us to make decisions based just on whether something is allowed or not. We also need to consider the *impact* of our actions.

As Christians, it is not enough to simply avoid doing what is wrong. We must actively do what is right.

Just outside St. Louis there is a manufacturing company named Barry-Wehmiller, which during the recession in 2008 faced, overnight, a 30% drop in orders. It became clear immediately that they could not continue with business as usual and survive. The obvious option was layoffs.

But CEO Bob Chapman thought there would be a better way. And so, despite the conventional wisdom about how fix his bottom line, Champan announced that all of the company's 11,000 employees, including him, would be required to take a 4 week unpaid furlough every year until the company regained profitability.

In announcing this decision he said, "It is better that we all suffer a little, than anyone suffer a lot." Now nobody in the world would have held it against Chapman if he laid people off. His board would have approved the plan. It would be unfortunate but it was happening everywhere. But he made a choice, not just based on what he was allowed to do, but based on what would be best for everyone involved.

And as if that was not amazing enough. Something even more amazing started happening. Some employees, who had better financial security, or other sources of income in their home, offered to take even *more* unpaid time themselves, so that single-parents, or

folks who were barely scraping by could avoid the furlough all together.

So, *they*, also responded not by thinking only about the best they could do for themselves, but the what would be best for the whole.

The attitude was contagious.

Which brings me all the way back around to Paul, and the case of the potentially idolatrous leg of lamb.

At the end of the day, it's clear that the specifics of the question didn't matter that much to him. But Paul was a big picture thinker, and he wasn't going to miss a chance to teach a lesson.

So he planted the seed of this way of thinking in that small church, so that maybe it would become contagious in their community, int heir families, in their city, even in the world beyond.

And little by little that generous sprout would grow and flourish and the world filled with people who knew that everyone around them would think not only of themselves, but thinking of others too, and weigh the effects of their actions on the world around them.

It's a pretty grand vision. So if it feels too overwhelming. Don't worry, you can just start with one, small, simple decision, even about something as trivial as a slice of meat

And just let it grow and grow from there.

