

19. Avoiding Hindering the Growth of Others

In our last topic, we saw that many weak Christians still have a fear of evil spirits. We saw that we want to help our children learn to explain to such individuals that the Holy Spirit living in our lives has all power and has already overcome all evil spirits. As a result, any person that has become a Christian does not have to fear demonic spirits any longer. It is important to help our children understand that fact. At the same time, we are to avoid hindering the spiritual growth of others that have not yet understood that fact.

We saw in our last topic that some of the stronger Christians in Corinth understood that idols and the demons behind those idols have no power over Christians. As a result, those Christians felt free to eat meat that had been offered to idols. However, 1 Corinthians 8:9 says, “But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak.” It is true that as Christians we have liberty because we have been set free. However, Galatians 5:13 says, “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” We want to help our physical and spiritual children understand that liberty does not mean that they are now free to sin. Instead, liberty sets us free to serve one another in love. Paul warned the stronger Christians in Corinth not to let their liberty cause them to become a stumbling block to those Christians who were weaker.

We want to help our children learn a very important principle for today from what Paul wrote to the Corinthians. Romans 14:13 says, “Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in *our* brother's way.” We want to help our children learn to make the choice to avoid things that would be a stumbling block to weak Christians. In different parts of the world, it will not be the same things that could be a stumbling block to weaker Christians. That is why we want to help our children understand the principle so that wherever they go they will not make choices that would cause a weaker Christian to stumble or fall.

Paul explained how to help our physical and spiritual children learn to make choices that will not cause a weaker Christian to stumble or fall. Romans 14:19-21 says, “Therefore let us pursue the things *which make* for peace and the things by which one may edify another. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed *are* pure, but *it is* evil for the man who eats with offense. *It is* good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor *do anything* by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.” We want to help our children learn to pursue the things that will help other Christians to experience peace and build up other Christians. We want to help them understand that we do not want to destroy the work of God for anything that will be just to please ourselves. To avoid causing the weaker Christian to fall, we choose to avoid those things that would cause others to stumble even though they are not sin.

In 1 Corinthians 8:10-11, Paul wrote, “For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?” It was not wrong for the Christians in Corinth to eat food that had been offered to idols.

However, Paul told the strong Christians not to think just about their own desires. Instead, he encouraged them to think about the conscience of those Christians that were weak. The conscience of weak Christians causes them to be afraid to do something that they think might be sin. That is why Romans 14:23 says, “But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because *he does not eat* from faith; for whatever *is* not from faith is sin.” The weak Christian that has doubts will feel condemned if he thinks he is doing something that he thinks might be sin.

We may know that certain things are not sin. However, if those same things cause the conscience of a weak Christian to feel condemned, then by our example we are causing the weak Christian to do things that cause him to have great guilt. He may follow our example and do those things but all the time that he is doing those things his conscience is bothering him. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:19, “For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more.” Paul gives us an example for our own lives and for our children. He chose to avoid those things that would either hinder a person from coming to Christ or would hinder a weak Christian from growing in Christ. In the same way, we want to provide such an example by our own lives and help our children learn to provide a similar example.

The word that is translated “perish” usually means *to be destroyed*. That is the way the word is used in 1 Corinthians 10:9-10 where it talks about physical destruction. Those verses say, “Nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer.” In other passages, it speaks about eternal destruction. 2 Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord is not slack concerning *His* promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” In this verse, we see that it is not the desire of the Lord for anyone to experience eternal destruction.

However, there is also a third way that the word “perish” can be used and that is the way the word is used in this verse. Here, it says that your knowledge can cause the weak brother to perish. The word “weak” speaks of those who are without either spiritual or physical strength. The word “weak” is used in Romans 14:1-2 to speak of those lacking spiritual strength. Those verses say “Receive one who is weak in the faith, *but* not to disputes over doubtful things. For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats *only* vegetables.” In this verse, we see that there were Christians who were spiritually weak that were afraid to eat meat because the meat might have been offered to idols. As a result, those individuals only ate vegetables.

As a result, we see that the word “perish” can also mean “*to render useless*.” A weak Christian or a Christian that is depending on his or her own strength can begin to feel like their life is useless if they are doing things that they feel are wrong. This is illustrated in Romans 7:14-25. Romans 7:18-19 says, “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but *how* to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will *to do*, I do not do; but the evil I will not *to do*, that I practice.” Here, we see a Christian without strength that feels like he or she cannot do what is right. Such a person will reach the conclusion stated in Romans 7:24. That verse says, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” In their mind, such a person can feel that their spiritual life is useless. Weak

Christians that are doing things they think might be sin will often feel that their lives are useless.

That is why 1 Corinthians 8:12-13 goes on to say, “But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”

Here, we see that even something that is not sin in itself can become sin if by doing that thing we cause a weaker brother or sister to sin. The reason why that thing becomes a sin is due to the fact that we are not showing Christian love to the weaker brother. Galatians 5:13 says, “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” We have been given the liberty to serve the weaker Christian. When we cause that weaker Christian to stumble, we are not acting in love because we are living to please ourselves.

Here, we see that our actions wound their weak conscience. The word that is translated “wound” is normally translated “*smite or beat.*” It is used in Matthew, Mark and Luke to talk about the way that men hit Christ on the head as they prepared to put him to death. Matthew 27:30 says, “Then they spat on Him, and took the reed and struck Him on the head.” Just as the people who condemned Christ hit him on the head, this verse says that we strike the conscience of a weaker brother when we please ourselves even though we know that our Christian brother is struggling in his mind about whether doing what we are doing is right or not for him to do. Since our weaker brother is a part of the body of Christ, we see that we are actually sinning against Christ.

Paul gave us an example to share with our physical and spiritual children when he said in verse 13, “Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” Paul said that he chose not to do anything that would cause a weaker brother to stumble. In 1 Corinthians 9:20, Paul says, “And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those *who are* under the law, as under the law, that I might win those *who are* under the law.” Paul knew that he was no longer under the law but he chose to obey the law because of his love for the Jews. This is illustrated in Acts 21:23-24 where the leaders of the church at Jerusalem encouraged Paul, “Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave *their* heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but *that* you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.” Here, we see that Paul walked orderly and kept the Jewish law so that he would not offend the Jewish Christians.

We want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to follow the example of Paul in order to avoid hindering the growth of other Christians. It may mean that they choose to avoid doing certain things that are not sin in order to encourage weaker Christians. However, they will experience the joy of the Lord as they see the weak Christians grow. May the Lord richly bless you as you show your children how to help weaker Christians in their spiritual growth.