

Sermon - January 28, 2018, Epiphany 4

Can but Won't

1 Corinthians 8:1–13



Dear Friends in Christ

Did you know that sometimes, even though we can do something, but we don't do it so that someone else doesn't get hurt? Yes, that's what the reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 8 teaches us this morning. In fact we can summarize this truth with this statement: "Yes, I can, but, no, I won't."

Although the words from Paul in our text refer to food, it also applies to many areas of our lives.

Take sports for example, I'm referring to little leagues, be it soccer, baseball, or hockey, now, have you seen how parents tend to get angry, or blame the other players in the team, for errors when the team lost the game? Others actually yell at the referees when they don't call mistakes, parents get angry at those games. Now, what if you were that parent, but you are a Christian parent? Well, I was there, attending some of our children's soccer games, and I yes, I did get angry and even maybe yelled at the coaches and players, at some point. I don't remember much, or at least don't want to, because, but looking back now, I realize that those were not the things to do. Yes, I could do them but, no, I shouldn't have done them.

And because of those angry-yelling parents, Mike Matheny, the manager of the St. Louis Cardinals, wrote a book for players, coaches, and parents called the Matheny Manifesto. It came out of his coaching Little League baseball and a letter he wrote to parents. Essentially, it calls for showing integrity while playing hard. It addresses the players and how they ought to behave, but it also details how parents are to act at their kids' games, and the key word in that manifesto is "respect."

The manifesto helps parents to enjoy the game with their children, and the children learning true sportsmanship. It teaches that even though you as a parent or a fan of the team, can yell, blame, complain, and be obnoxious, you don't do these things. As you see the statement comes true: "Yes, I Can, but, No, I Won't."

I. The situation in Paul's day that results in "Yes, I can, but, no, I won't."

And that's what Paul teaches us today. "Now concerning food offered to idols . . ." he says. Mmm... food offered to idols? What does that mean?

Let me explain. Back in Corinth, you would find all sorts of temples and shrines to various idols and gods. And there people would offer animals as sacrifices. But once the animal was sacrificed the meat would be split three ways. Some would be left at the altar for the god they are worshiping. Then, some would be eaten by people who worshiped there, often in special meals or celebrations, like a birthday, anniversary, or family event, which would happen at those shrines where the sacrifices took place. And the

remaining meat would be taken to the marketplace and sold. So, whatever meat you would buy there, would have been sacrificed to an idol before it reached the marketplace.

Now, what were the Christians at Corinth to do? As you know Christians are not to worship other gods, false gods, that is. Well at Corinth some of the congregation members, thought that there was no problem at all, after all prayer sanctifies them. That is true, however they become a bit too puffed up in their own knowledge. They said, "We know those are false gods. We know the idols are just wood or gold or stone. We know there's just one true God. We know this food isn't going to get us any closer to Jesus or push us further away. It's just plain food because those idols don't really exist anyway. We can go ahead and eat at these temple meals." That sounds about right!

However, in the congregation there were also member that before becoming Christians, they had participated and even very involved in those kinds of sacrifices, so they knew what they were all about, but didn't think as the other Christians did, so their conscience was hurt. Their conscience was weak because they thought that to eat this meat would lead them back to the idols and away from Jesus.

So, Paul helps them to understand better. He doesn't talk about the sinful things, like the worship of idols, he doesn't point them out, after it's sinful, just like adultery, stealing, abusive anger, using profanity, or getting drunk for that matter. No, he's talking about this gray area of whether Christians can eat this meat or not and answers their questions: Can we eat it in the privacy of our homes? Can we eat it when other people see us?

Paul says, "Yes, you can eat this meat, at least in the privacy of your home, since you know the idol is fake, and you don't at all mean to worship it." But then he says no, as he does later in chapter 10, "No, you can't be a part of those temple meals, even if it is mostly a social gathering. That meal is participating with the demons that may be present there. And even you are strong in our faith, eating a meal there gives the wrong public witness to those who are struggling to stay faithful to Jesus."

But what about when you're with other people at your home or eating at church as a congregation? Can you eat the meat that had been sacrificed to idols then? Well, the principle of "Yes, I can, but, no, I won't because it might hurt someone I'm with" applies. Because it could be that some might actually think that eating the meat that was sacrificed to idols would means that it's okay to worship the idol too. So, out of love for the brother or sister who could stumble you don't.

Paul ends up with, "Yes, I can because it's not forbidden or commanded one way or the other. I have this freedom in Christ to do it. The food isn't going to make a difference one way or the other in my relationship with Jesus. But sometimes I won't eat it, for the sake of my brother or sister in Christ."

II. Various situations today that call for "Yes, I can, but, no, I won't."

Now, that sounds good but... today we don't eat meat sacrificed to idols any more, do we? Of course not, but the application still stands, for example. Some of us would like a glass of wine with our meals, right? But is it ok? Some Christian denominations actually forbid any alcoholic all together. How about us, and most importantly does the Bible forbid drinking wine? The answer is, no the Scriptures doesn't forbid it, therefore drinking some wine is ok. No, we are not talking about getting drunk. The Bible says that's wrong. But we can have some.

But let's apply Paul's words from our reading today. "It is believed that about four percent of Canadians could be labeled as alcoholics. In 2002, it was found that 600,000 Canadians were physically dependent on alcohol." It is a problem! A problem that extends into families and relationships with friends and co-workers, not to mention de physical damage that it causes.

But, how does this play out for those of us in church? Can you have a drink? Yes. But, if you are with somebody who has troubles with alcohol, it's the time to say: "No, I'm not going to drink alcohol in any kind of drink." You say no because you don't want to hurt someone by somehow encouraging that person to take a drink, which would lead to a fall back into problem drinking.

That's how it works. I know I can, but for the sake of someone else, the love I have for my neighbor, my brother or sister in Christ, this time I won't do it.

Another example is with people who have trouble with spending money. They can't keep their credit cards in line, and they are in debt. If you have an opportunity to go out with that person and know the difficulty they have with finances, then the invitation is not to go shopping but to do something else. Could you go shopping? Yes. But for the sake of someone who could stumble into some sin, you don't.

Or take some of the types of clothing that women use on a hot day, shorts, or short blouses, or whatever, but that if you are with somebody who is struggling with sexuality, you could pose temptations, therefore you say, modesty is necessary. You can use whatever kind of clothing you desire, but for the sake of those struggling with sexuality, you don't.

Those are just examples, and in all, remember that we have the freedom to enjoy certain things, but for the sake of those struggling we don't. So, yes, I can, but for the sake of a brother or sister in Christ, I won't.

III. Jesus' once for all sacrifice gives us freedom, but also leads us to love so that we don't do something that may hurt a brother or sister in Christ.

Now, remember that God has given us freedom in Christ, freedom to enjoy wisely God's provisions. But, let's face it. We all have failed in one way or another. We don't exercise our freedom correctly, most of the time we end up hurting a brother or sister in the process. Sometimes we've done that without knowing it. I'm sure we've hurt someone because we weren't even thinking about what we were doing, let alone taking into account someone who is weak in a certain area of life. Maybe we didn't even care if someone was struggling. "I can do it, so I'm going to do it" was the attitude. Even say, "It's none of your business! So don't judge me!" We have said those words at some point, right? In other words, we have become a stumbling block for the weak ones, and that is sin.

But here is the good news, even for those times, Paul reminds us that: Jesus died for our brother or sister in the Church. He has died for you and me as well. Now Jesus could have opted out. He could have used his freedom to say, "I'll just stay in heaven and not worry about the people in need of forgiveness." He could have done that. But he didn't. He did what we needed so we would become his brothers and sisters in his Church. Could Jesus remain in heaven? Absolutely, we could hear Jesus say: "Yes, I can, but for the sake of my brothers, I won't." And so he came to save us!

He went through the agony, the beatings, the bloodshed to become the once for all, onetime sacrifice for all of us. No sacrifices needed at any shrine. No meat needs to

be offered up to him. No other false gods or idols allowed. We have only one Savior, one Lord, and his name is Jesus. By his sacrifice, he forgives us.

And in that forgiveness and freedom he gives, he enables to be wise when it comes to those things he doesn't forbid, but desires that we serve one another. We are not to emphasize our rights, but in love do what we can to keep our brother or sister in Christ from stumbling into some sin.

As Jesus has sacrificed himself for us, he wants us to sacrifice our rights for others.

Or here is another way of putting this: Because of Jesus, I can do this; but because of Jesus and my love for my brother or sister in Christ, this time I won't.

Just as Paul says: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.³² Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—³³ even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." (1 Cor. 10:31-11:1 NIV)

Amen.