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| **Abuse of Freedom** |
| **(1 Corinthians 8)** |

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| Brandon Lenhart  7-12-2020 |

**Abuse of Freedom**

**(1 Corinthians 8)**

**Yearly Theme: *“Joy is…”***

**Series Title: *“Joy through Loss”***

**July 12th, 2020**

***Introduction:***

Have you ever had those times where you just wrestle with the Holy Spirit, and you're fighting "No, I don't wanna! I don't wanna!" then He says, "No, you need to"? I don't know if this is one of those times but I need to confess, I've had a horrible sense of pride. I've struggled with it my whole life growing up. Being told that you don't do things right a lot, it's hard, but you don't realize that that's abnormal until you see other families outside of your own.

There's nothing you can do to live up to the expectation of people you love the most in your life. With my stepfather, as a point of confession, I could never do any right. I'm now realizing as a forty-five-year-old adult, that I have thought and struggled the biggest majority of my life, with trying to be right. To the point where it's unhealthy. Have you ever done that? You fight to win an argument. You fight to be right because maybe you were told you were wrong your whole life, and so you believe the lie of the enemy who plants this seed of doubt in your mind and your own heart. Which leads you to this place to where you begin to cultivate the lie in your life. You don't mean to, but you cultivate this lie of the enemy that you are no good, that you're not going to amount to anything, that you're worthless to the point that you begin to believe it, but externally you're fighting so hard to be right.

I want to be right. I want to do the right things. I want to be the right person. It's hard when you feel a calling into ministry like I have. You are working for God himself! You know His word is truth and you fight tooth and nail to keep the truth in front of God's people and in front of those who don't know the truth. Some reactions come back against you because when you confront somebody with the truth, and the truth doesn't measure up to their lifestyle, they think you're judgmental. Growing up with an unsaved father until two years before he died, the accusations were always hurled “You’re just being judgmental. Why don’t you just go live at the church.”, then when I decided to go into ministry and decided to go to school to learn about being a pastor he couldn't understand that.

Why am I telling you all this? Because this deep-rooted issue of pride and always wanting to be right (sometimes even when you are right and you know the other person's wrong) and fighting for my choice to be right, in spite of the relationship, has destroyed relationships in the past, and it's not healthy! I guess what I want to confess is that issue of pride that it's led to what's around my neck. It's not a noose, it’s a faceguard. This faceguard is the only thing I feel comfortable wearing in public if I have to wear a face covering. I bet you're saying, “Well I think it's stupid to wear a face covering,” and yes that's where I stood and continue to stand. I hate these things. When this first the face mask mandate came out I hated it, and I said “I will not. I refuse.” and I'm not saying you're this way. This is Brandon's confession. This isn't meant to step on toes. You hear me for what I'm saying, not for what I'm not saying. Okay? Can we have that agreement today? The pride issue was that I refused to do that because I don't want to be forced to do something I don't want to do. And rightly so! I don't want to wear one, I still don't, but I started this second face mask mandate feeling convicted. I don't know if you've ever been under conviction before but it's this uneasiness and you wiggle a lot (and I wiggle a lot anyway), and you squirm, and you fight, and I know it's a spirit spiritual conviction. It wasn't because I had too much caffeine or not enough caffeine, and I started to realize that the Holy Spirit was prompting me. *“It's not about you. It's not about what you want, it's not about what you desire, it's not about what you believe specifically about this issue. It is: are you taking the freedom you have and are you abusing it and lording over others because of a deeper-rooted issue of pride in your life?”*

This is bigger than a face mask issue today, I want you to know that! But the enemy will use the tools at his disposal to divide and conquer God's people! Do you want to know why I'm starting to feel the conviction? Firstly, because my heart wasn't in the right place and aligned properly with God's heart. But secondly, I'm starting to see how this is affecting the church on social media, on the news in the newspapers, and here's what's happened: it's gotten into the church and instead of Jesus being the focus, guess what's become the focus? Face masks! “If you wear one then you're this political party or this bent. If you don't wear one, then you're this political party or this bent.” What's happened? It's become such a polarizing issue because of the politicization of the pandemic, regardless of where you stand on the issue, that it has become such a wedge within the church.

We are the ones that are to be lighting the way, not playing the silly games the rest of the world is playing! I have had to swallow some really hard pills during this pandemic, during this time of racial tension, and this chapter kept coming back to mind. I've never preached on this chapter. I probably should, but I've never preached on this chapter. I'm gonna be reading from the Message version because I read several different versions of Scripture on this specific passage, but the message I think opens this up for us a little bit better for the contemporary context. It's from first Corinthians chapter eight. (I'm throwing my whole media crew off because I had a ton of prepared stuff here that, quite honestly, we're probably not going to get to today so I'm gonna save it for next week all right?)

There was an issue going on in the church of Corinth. They were so messed up. They had infighting and bickering over carpet colors, pews versus chairs, worship styles, just kidding. They had it over tongues-speaking versus not tongues-speaking, they had it over “I have a special knowledge that you don't have, Nana boo-boo” seriously that's what was going on in this church. I think the church at Corinth was a church that struggled with pride. It was all about the individual, and not about the body of Christ. When you read 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, they are letters from Paul. I remember sitting in seminary, and our biblical scholar professor who was a specialist in the Pauline Epistles (which are Paul's letters to the church) she said, “it's almost as if the first Corinthians letter was like ‘you guys are going to hell!’ and then the second letter was like ‘you know I'm sorry for blowing up on you like that.” So you can read both letters and determine for yourself. But he is a lot more laid back in 2 Corinthians. He's addressing and rebuking issues in the Corinthian church that had become so divisive that they were tearing the church apart. In chapter 8 he talks about an issue during that day and age, much like a face mask issue today, that was becoming so divisive that he had to address it. It was about meat offered to idols. They had several different pagan temples in virtually every city you could go to in the Roman Empire, and they would sacrifice animals to their idols and use the meat at the markets outside of these temples. There were those in the church that said you can't eat meat offered to idols and that's sinful and the other side said it doesn't matter if you eat the meat or not.

You know why I'm addressing this. Do you know how many phone calls and comments I've gotten, “why aren't you requiring people to wear a mask and not turning them away if they don't come in with them” or “why are you even suggesting anybody wear a mask” and it puts your leadership in a bit of a position. I just want to be together, and be the church. Wear a mask or don't. Do you think the church can secure your physical health 100%? No! If you were to succumb to this virus and still die, God can secure you for an eternity. That is the bigger question and the larger conversation we need to be having as a church. If you're at risk, come at your own risk. If you're not at risk, don't be arrogant and pompous about it.

**1 Corinthians 8**

**The question has been coming up regarding meat that's been offered up to an idol should you attend meals where such me to served or not? We sometimes tend to think that we know all we need to know to answer these kinds of questions** (“I know everything about this, I've read this I've done that, I'm in this social media group, I know exactly the right answer”) **but sometimes he says our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds** Ouch! And I'm saying this for me not for anybody else, again trust me before I've gotten up here today I was nervous in that seat right there. I didn't want to talk about this.

**We never really know enough until we recognize that God alone knows it all**. How many of you would raise your hand today and say that you know everything there is to know about everything? If we're being honest with ourselves, we don't know everything. I mentioned a few weeks ago I went to college for ministry. I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in church ministry. I have had to do the Greek language studies. I have Hebrew books in my office as a part of the necessary things of becoming a pastor, and going on to complete my master's degree and looking at philosophy books from Plato to Aristotle up through the 20th century and 21st century. It’s not to puff up this knowledge but, you know what I realized about learning so much? How much I don't know. The more I learned, the more I read because I'm an avid reader. I love books, and I desperately want to know what I don't know, and it's a lifelong pursuit for me because I know I will not know it all till I reach heaven. Paul tells us, “for now we see through a glass dimly or darkly but then we shall see him face to face. We shall know as we are fully known”. He's continuing in the same thread of thought from first Corinthians chapter 8.

**Some people might say and quite rightly that idols have no actual existence that there's nothing to them, that there is no God other than our one God, that no matter how many of these so-called gods are named and worshipped they still don't add up to anything but to a tall story.** **They say again - quite rightly - that there was only one God the Father and everything comes from him and that he wants us to live for him.** **Also, they say that there is only one master - Jesus the Messiah** – **and that everything is for his sake, including us.** Who's our master? President Trump? Barack Obama? Hillary Clinton? George W? ‘Murica? Who's our master Church? Because I see so many in the church that is walking around like President Trump is our master, or Governor Wolfe is our master, or Rachel Levine is our master. Do you believe then there's only one master Jesus the messiah, and that everything is for his sake including us?

**In strict logic, then, nothing happened to the meat when it was offered up to an idol. It’s just like any other meat. I know that, and you know that. But knowing isn’t everything. If it becomes everything, some people end up as know-it-alls who treat others as know-nothings. Real knowledge isn’t that insensitive.** That's another one of those kick to the guts for me, because I pride myself in knowing, and knowing more, and doing more. Church, in Christ's Kingdom and economy we are to consider the other person before we consider ourselves. It is the enemy who seeks to steal kill and destroy that'll say ‘you can't step on me! I have rights!’ Actually, in Christ, to make it to heaven, you have to lose everything first. Even your rights to you! You say, “Brandon you're manipulating and twisting the scripture!” Challenge me on this. Not because I am a know-it-all, but because I'm telling you, I have tried to find ways biblically to back my pride, and every time I come up empty! No matter what issue it is. When I want to push my know-it-all knowledge, guess what happens? I always get taken down a notch, and that hurts. Because falling from pride is a long way down.

**We need to be sensitive to the fact that we're not all the same at the same level of understanding Some of you have spent your entire lives eating "idol meat," and are sure that there's something bad in the meat that then becomes something bad inside of you. An imagination and conscience shaped under those conditions aren't going to change overnight.** They have an internal conviction. For others, it may not wrong, but this is not a heaven or hell issue. Their consciousness isn't going to change overnight. They're saying some people used to eat this meat offered to idols believing that they were doing an act of worship for this false god. Now they've broken away from that and they only worship the God of heaven and earth. That is what they believe, that is now what they know, and to go back to that old pattern of life is not something they're willing to do. That mentality is not going to change overnight, so what does it behoove those of us who may be more mature in the faith to do to concede that they are on a learning curve just as we once were and still are we none of us have achieved perfection yet.

**But fortunately, God doesn't grade us on our diet.** Do you think he grades us on if we wear masks? No! **We’re neither commended when we clean our plate nor reprimanded when we just can’t stomach it. But God *does* care when you use your freedom carelessly in a way that leads a fellow believer still vulnerable to those old associations to be thrown off track. For instance, say you flaunt your freedom by going to a banquet thrown in honor of idols, where the main course is meat sacrificed to idols. Isn’t there great danger if someone still struggling over this issue, someone who looks up to you as knowledgeable and mature, sees you go into that banquet? The danger is that he will become terribly confused—maybe even to the point of getting mixed up himself in what his conscience tells him is wrong.** This is one of those issues I've debated most of my pastoral career. If the Lord has convicted you about something that He hasn't convicted me about, and there's really no clear-cut black and white issue in Scripture, then it is wrong for you, but not for me. When we're together though, who should be the one who concedes? Both of us! If have you ever seen those (and there are a lot of them around here in Pennsylvania) single-lane bridges, did you know there are yield signs on both sides? Did you know both sides need to yield to each other as believers in Christ? No matter where you are on certain issues that are considered gray areas of Scripture, we have to yield to one another.

**Christ gave up his life for that person. Wouldn’t you at least be willing to give up going to dinner for him—because, as you say, it doesn’t really make any difference? But it *does* make a difference if you hurt your friend terribly, risking his eternal ruin! When you hurt your friend, you hurt Christ. A free meal here and there isn’t worth it at the cost of even one of these “weak ones.” So, never go to these idol-tainted meals if there’s any chance it will trip up one of your brothers or sisters**

Church, I don't know where you stand on this issue, quite frankly that's your business. I care for each and every one of you and it tears my heart up when I know there are people on both sides of these issues shooting darts, and it tears the heart of God up when these issues become the dividing issues of our times. For the church, there are issues where we have to take a stand on our biblical issues, and then there are others that suck the life out of us. If you fight every battle on every hill, you lose the energy to fight the real battles that mean something for eternity! Church, we've got to rise above this junk, we have to be unified around the core principles of Christ Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. Encourage one another because we don't know how many more days we have left. Whether Jesus comes back or Corona takes us, or we get taken out by a stray bullet, or we lose our lives behind the wheel of a car, or just fall over, we aren't promised tomorrow. We are promised eternal life through Christ Jesus and that's our hope, that's our excitement.

One of the things I hope becomes our testimony as a church is North Main Street Church of God is a place that loves God relentlessly and loves people relentlessly. No matter where they are or who they are. That we love in such a way as to reveal who Christ is so that Christ can transform them! When I stand in front of Christ someday what will be held against me is if I don't take people to the foot of the cross when I've had the opportunity to do so. If you have wrestled with pride about any number of things, and the Lord is speaking to you today, through this message, through his word. He's saying it's time to approach the throne room of grace boldly, humbly, and with all confidence. Prideful people cannot enter the presence of God. If you wonder why God may not be moving in your life, check your pride. He may not be moving in your life because you've blocked his movement in your life by your pridefulness. It is the thing that says, “I can fix it”, “I can do It”, “I know what the right thing is”. God is saying, “I need you to let that guard down a little bit, and let me come in. Let's clean house a bit, let's get some of these albatrosses out of your life that has been weighing you down. Let's clean the place up a bit”.

Concede to one another, love one another despite our differences, and be willing to do the right thing for Christ's sake. Let me pray over you: “Father, thank you, thank you that you love us enough to put up with our silly idiosyncrasies. Thank you, Father, that you care enough to be patient with us even when we're insufferable. But my prayer this morning God is: that your truth would be revealed about what's most important and that we should never use our freedoms and abuse our freedoms at the cost of other people. To remind us of the battles that are worth fighting, and the ones that aren't. Help us to be unified as the body of Christ, through the power of your Holy Spirit, and help us to be a sweet fragrance to our community, we ask all of this in Jesus precious name Amen.”