



Christ Lutheran Church

605 South Fifth Street • Norfolk, NE 68701

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Pastor Chip Winter, Director of Ministries

"Yes I Can. But, No, I Won't" – 1 Cor. 8:1-13

4th Sunday in Epiphany – January 28, 2018

Pastor Chip Winter

Grace to you and Peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. The text for our sermon is the Epistle appointed for the day and already read for us from 1 Corinthians.

My dear family in Christ, sometimes, even though we can do something, we don't do it so that someone else doesn't get hurt. We can sum that up with the phrase, "Yes, I can, but, no, I won't." Can you picture yourself in the stands at a sporting event? There, it's possible to blame the other participants for their errors when your child loses the contest. There, it's possible to yell at the official for what was obvious to your eyes as a blown call. There, it's possible to get so caught up in the contest that you get angry. But, in your heart of heart, you know those are not the things to do. Yes, you could do them – you have the "right" to do them – but no, those things shouldn't be done.

Mike Matheny, manager of the St. Louis baseball Cardinals, wrote a book for players, coaches and parents and he entitle it *The Matheny Manifesto*. It came out of his coaching Little League and a letter he wrote to parents. Essentially, it calls for integrity while playing hard. You play smart, but your respect yourself, your teammates, your opponents, and your craft. It also details how parents are to act at their kids' games, with the key word being *respect*.

It teaches that even though you can yell, blame, complain and be obnoxious, you don't do these things. Instead, by not doing them, you teach your kids good sportsmanship.

In our text, the Apostle Paul is setting forth that principle: **“Now, concerning food offered to idols...”** (1). I know that verse sounds strange: not eating meat? What's this all about?

In Corinth in those days you would find all sorts of temples and shrines to various idols and false gods. The sacrifice of animals would occur in those places and then the meat of those sacrifices would be split three ways. (1) Some would be left at the altar for the false god. (2) Some would be eaten by the people who worshipped there, often in special meals or celebrations – birthdays, anniversaries or family events. (3) The rest would be taken to the marketplace and sold. That being the case most people eating meat would be eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol.

Complicating this is that these temples or shrines were the meeting places for the society. They were the **“times square”, “divots”, fairground community centers”, “golf course clubhouses,”** or **“knights of Columbus halls”** of the day – if you were having a gathering, that's where it would be. The meat for the meal would come from the altars where it had been sacrificed to false gods.

Now some in the congregation of Christians there knew these were false gods. They were idols of wood or gold or stone and that in contrast to that there was One True God. Such food was not getting them any closer nor pushing them any further from Jesus. It's just plain food since idols don't truly exist. **“We can go ahead and eat such meals.”**

Others had previously been very involved in such idolatrous sacrifices. They had trouble separating the eating they were doing now from the eating they had done then in worshipping idols. So, their consciences were hurt. This eating could lead them back to the idols and away from Jesus.

This is where St. Paul steps into the situation. He isn't talking about things that are definitely wrong here. He isn't dealing with the actual worship of idols – which would of course be wrong. And he is not dealing with adultery, stealing, abusive anger, using profanity, getting drunk or other things that are forbidden. No, he's talking about a rather gray area – can we eat this meat, or not? Can it be eaten in the privacy of our own 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 own home, since you know the idol is face and you don't at all mean to worship it.”** He returns to this in chapter 10 saying, **“No you can't be 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. That meal 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 sacrificed to idols, then?

Here the principle we started with comes into play. **“Yes, I can, but no, I won't because it might hurt someone I'm with.”** See, they might think eating that meat that was sacrificed means it's okay to worship the idol too. Out of love for a brother or sister who could stumble, even though you could, you don't.

Now, how does this apply today since we don't have the same problem of meat sacrificed to idols? Reading a couple of books related to this they came up with the same example. I brought with me a glass. The words on the glass refer to Concordia Seminary (hold up the glass). So, is it okay to have a glass of bourbon or gin? Yes. Certainly, I'm not talking about getting drunk. The Bible says that's wrong. But we can have something to drink.

Let's think about this with Paul. Did you know that in the U.S. today one out of six Americans are problem drinkers or alcoholics? Jami and I have a friend fighting for sobriety and it's

difficult to do that in our society. Many grocery stores have huge sections for alcohol. Walk into a gas or convenience store and alcohol greets you at the door, at the counter or in the refrigerated section. Birthdays, anniversaries and holidays can involve alcohol, as do sporting even tailgate parties. Or someone will put on Facebook or related media a picture of some alcoholic drink with a comment about destressing after a long day. Alcohol is throughout our society. People like our friend, people you know, need strength and encouragement when the cravings hit and the opportunities are everywhere. Sometimes they need you and me, from the church, to say, **“No, I won’t drink in front of you, even though I can. I’ll have water, or juice or soda or whatever.”** It’s a loving effort to keep someone from being tempted back into destructive behavior.

Some people have trouble with spending money (hold up credit card). Unable to keep credit in line they rack up huge 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 do something else. Could you go shopping? Yes. But for the sake of someone who could stumble into some sin, you don’t.

Clothing worn on a hot day when people struggle with sexuality (hold up flimsy shirt for a hot day). Yes, I can. But for the sake of our brother a sister in Christ, I won’t. Buying a lottery ticket when someone is struggling with gambling? (holding up a lottery ticket) Yes, I can. But for the sake of a brother or sister in Christ, I won’t. Eating certain foods when someone is struggling with weight. (hold up a brownie mix) Yes, I can. But for the sake of a brother or sister in Christ, I won’t.

I know there have been times, back to *The Matheny Manifesto*, when I have been less than generous with officials. I was a poor sport.

Do you think we’ve exercised our freedom to do something but hurt a brother or sister in the process? Of course, we have. Sometimes we’ve done it without knowing it. I imagine we’ve had too

many times when we weren't even taking into account someone who was struggling in a certain area of life. Maybe we didn't care if someone was struggling – it's my right, I'm going to do it. Shame on me.

Even for those times, though, Paul has some good news in this passage. 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 could become His brothers and sisters in His Church.

He goes through the agony, the beatings, the bloodshed to become the once for all, onetime sacrifice for us all. No sacrifices needed at any shrine. Not meat needs to be offered up to Him. No other false gods or idols allowed. We have only one Savior, our Lord, and His name is Jesus.

Even more, in the freedom He now gives us, when it comes to those things He doesn't forbid us or command us, He wants us to serve one another. We are not to assert our rights, but in love do what we can to keep our brothers or sisters 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 it: Because of Jesus, I can do this; but because of Jesus and my love for my brother or my sister in Christ, this time I won't. Amen.