

MAYBE
1 Corinthians 8:1-13; 10:23-33

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In a newspaper article, Hilary Stout asks the question, “Are you and your spouse illness compatible?” In the array of marital discord, there are some big issues: money, religion, and in-laws (to name a few). But there is one more big one that we’re all missing. Are you and your spouse illness compatible?

She says there is an “I-feel-worse-than-you” syndrome, which seems to be particularly acute in households with small children. Women complain to other moms that they are exasperated, slogging through housework and kid chores while their ill husbands take to their beds. “If I have a cold, he has the flu,” says one lady. “If I have the flu, he comes down with the bubonic plague.”

A couple of weeks ago, Dan Dubno, a New York television producer, came home from work feeling ill and crawled into bed at 7 p.m., leaving his wife, Lisa Bernstein, who runs a foundation, to deal with homework, dinner, and bedtime for their 8- and 9-year-old kids. “We could both be sick, but I have two children when I’m sick,” says Ms. Bernstein. “When he’s sick, the world may end at any moment.”

For example, Ms. Bernstein had just given birth to their first child – no picnic in the pain and discomfort category. She was holding the new baby, ready to walk out of the hospital room and go home. That’s when Mr. Dubno collapsed on the floor in agony and crawled to the nurse’s station. Turns out he was passing a kidney stone. “You are so competitive,” his wife said. Later, she says, he was pleased to tell her he met a woman who’d passed a kidney stone and said it hurt even more than childbirth. Dubno was not going to be outdone. (*Wall Street Journal*)

Think sick. Be sick.

You’ve heard of the “placebo” effect, “think well, be well.” Take the little sugar pill, and, when you think it’s the right medicine for what ails you, you begin to feel better because it’s in your mind.

But there is something out there called the “nocebo” effect. Latin. Placebo means “I will please,” and it’s exactly what the little sugar pills do. Nocebo means “I will harm.”

Let me give you a few examples. It’s not researched very much because it’s hard for a group of medical researchers to try to make people sick. But there have been some limited tests.

About a decade ago, researchers made a surprising discovery: Women who believed that they were prone to heart disease were nearly four times as likely to die from heart disease as women who didn't hold such fatalistic views. Their risk factors were the same – age, blood pressure, cholesterol, weight. So the higher risk of death had nothing to do with these usual heart disease culprits. Instead, the only difference was their belief – whether or not they believed they were at risk for heart disease. Bottom line: They thought they were going to get sick and die, and so they did.

Arthur Barsky, a psychiatrist at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital said, "They're convinced that something is going to go wrong, and it's a self-fulfilling prophecy." Barsky has published articles in journals as scholarly as JAMA - the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Herbert Benson, a Harvard Medical School professor, said, "Surgeons are wary of people who are convinced that they will die. There are examples of studies on people undergoing surgery who almost want to die to re-connect to a loved one who has passed away. Close to 100 percent of people under those circumstances die." (Brian Reid, "The Nocebo Effect: Placebo's Evil Twin," *The Washington Post*, 4/30/2002)

That's a statement from a Harvard professor. Nearly, one hundred percent who want to die, die.

Dr. Benson is convinced it's true. "The nocebo effect plays a major role in many conditions, especially stress-related problems." (Gardiner Morse, "The Nocebo Effect," *Hippocrates*, November 1999)

Well, the "nocebo" effect was running rampant in Corinth back in the first century. It was tied to concerns about eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

Think it's a sin, it becomes harmful and hurtful.

Transport yourself back to this bustling Greek city – a hub of commercial activity and religious diversity. Look around and check out all the temples to the Greek gods. The worshipers in Corinth routinely sacrificed animals to their gods, and the remainder of the sacrificial animals were sold in the meat markets and in restaurants connected to the temples for resale to the public. In other words, many of the restaurants were offshoots of pagan temples. That's just where you went to eat. And if you went to the butcher shop it was probably supplied by the pagan temples. Meat sacrificed by pagan priests. If you were to go to the Corinthian Burger King, your BK Broiler might include leftovers from a sacrifice to Zeus, the king of the gods. It was just common practice, and nobody really had a problem with it. That's just the way the meat market was dominated in this pagan culture. ("The Nocebo Effect," [www.homileticsonline](http://www.homileticsonline.com), 2/2/03)

Well, no one had a problem with it except some early converts to Christianity who had left a life of idolatry. These followers of Jesus had, of course, turned their backs to the Greek gods, and they felt guilty about eating meat that had been sacrificed to the gods, the idols that they had now left behind. Wanting to be faithful followers of the one God, Jesus, they sensed that eating this tainted

meat would make them spiritually unclean. And the fears about the impurity of the meat was making them miserable. It was “think sick, be sick.”

“Think sin, it is sin.”

And, there were others in the church who were saying, “Nothing doing. We have freedom in Christ, freedom to eat this meat, even freedom to eat the meat in the restaurants connected to the pagan temples, because we all know an idol is nothing. There are no other Gods but the one God, so what difference does it make?”

So we have a problem – a problem in Corinth. Those who know the idols are not real are flaunting their liberty before those who are struggling with meat sacrificed to idols.

So Paul says something. He says something to those who are in the know. And he says something to those who are struggling.

Let’s look at the passage.

Turn to 1 Corinthians 8. The conversation about meat and idols takes place in 1 Corinthians 8, 9, and 10. Paul is answering their letter. They’d asked him questions. He’s responding, as he does throughout this book.

“Now concerning” – which in this book means Paul is introducing a new topic – *peri de*, now concerning “things sacrificed to idols.” They’re saying “we know that all have knowledge.” “Knowledge makes arrogant,” Paul seems to add at the end of verse 1, “but love edifies.”

vs. 2-6

“If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him. Therefore, concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol” – that’s what those with the knowledge are saying there is no God but one. “For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.”

Yet Paul wants them to know, verse 7, “However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.” But they are saying (verse 8), “food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.”

That’s true, Paul says. But look at verse 9. “But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow becomes a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak,

you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble.”

I. Paul’s major message to those who are expressing their freedom in Christ, flexing their grace muscles, is “Quit being so puffed up with your knowledge and try to build up the body of Christ.”

Paul agrees that the idol meat is actually harmless. But he encourages the enlightened, those who are puffed up, to abstain from eating such meat because of other people’s scruples.

Look at 1 Corinthians 8:1. “Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.”

Perhaps in the letter they had written to Paul the strong had asked him to set straight these weak, superstitious, new Christians who were so afraid of the meat that had been sacrificed to idols. “Tell them to get over it, Paul. Tell them to overcome their qualms and enter the world of spiritual freedom that we enjoy.”

Instead, Paul firstly speaks to the strong.

“You really ought to reconsider your motivation for church, for living a life in the community. Knowledge is defective if it fails to build up the community in love. Everybody doesn’t know (verse 7) that idols are really nothing. Paul says, “Don’t let your own freedom become a stumbling block to somebody else in the church” (verse 9).

He begins his argument against their knowledge by saying their knowledge isn’t what’s important. Look at verse 2. “If you suppose you know anything, you have not yet known as you ought to know. But if you love God, you are known by God.” Paul reflects Galatians 4:9, where he commits something of a correction and says, “Now, however you have come to know God, or rather, more importantly, to be known by God....”

What he is saying in Corinthians is your knowledge is not what’s all important. It’s God’s knowledge of you that is all important. So you can’t become puffed up by your possession of knowledge. It’s God’s knowing you that really matters.

His message is this: If you exercise your liberty and you become a stumbling block to those who are weak, you’ve missed the whole point. You’re right. Food doesn’t matter. It doesn’t draw us close to God. It doesn’t push us away from God. But you’re going to cause someone to fall back into idolatry with your practice. The weak will be destroyed (verse 11).

In the closing verses, Paul asks them this question, “Christ died for this person. Can’t you even give up your preference for idol meat for him?”

“And if it comes to that,” Paul says in verse 13, “I won’t ever eat meat again.”

In chapter 10, he’s not primarily addressing eating the idol meat in the restaurant itself but, rather, buying meat from the butcher which has probably come through this ceremonial process at the pagan temple.

1 Corinthians 10:23

“All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify.”

There is that word again. Don't puff up, but edify. It's a word Paul uses a lot, building up.

1 Corinthians 10:24

Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.

To those of you in the know, be careful.

You have to be careful how you apply this passage, and we'll talk about that in a moment. The whole community's, the whole church's scruples cannot be set by the person who is most offended.

To reorient our whole behavior because of one person's oversensitive scruples is really ridiculous. But there are other things that really can cause someone to fall if we are not careful.

II. The second issue Paul addresses is the problem of boundaries between the church and the pagan culture.

The feasts held in the temple were a daily event of Greco-Roman life. For example, the sanctuary of Asclepius in Corinth comprised both an area for cultic sacrifice and several dining rooms that opened to a pleasant public courtyard. The wealthy Corinthians would have been invited to meals in such places as a regular part of their social life – to celebrate birthdays, weddings, healings attributed to the god, or other important occasions. In fact, archeological evidence of such invitations has actually been found – some of them preserved. The wealthier Christians in Corinth would just see it as part of their public and professional duties to network at these banquets, to meet friends and clients, shake the right hands.

So what are they going to do? They're invited to the party. It's hard, but Paul says when it comes to going to the pagan temple, don't go.

Paul was saying, honestly, I think, “Whatever it costs you, in that situation don't go.”

Yet the boundaries aren't always black and white. He continues in chapter 10 to say, “Well now, wait a minute. If you're not in the temple restaurant yourself, but if you're eating in someone's house who is an unbeliever, don't ask any questions. Just go ahead and eat it” (verse 27). “For all the earth is the Lord's, and all it contains,” he says, quoting a psalm. Just eat it and don't ask any questions. But if someone brings it to your attention, “Hey, this came from the pagan temple,” you have to stop eating it. Not because of your own conscience, but because of the conscience of someone who is weak around you.”

Just pass on it, if it's a big deal. You don't want to send mixed messages to an unbeliever about who you are worshiping.

Sometimes the boundary is clear. Sometimes the boundary is gray. But be careful. Always try to build up in love and not puff up in knowledge.

Thinking of others causes you and I to ask a lot of questions about where we go and what we do.

III. There is a third thing he says, however, and I don't want this to be missed. He says to the weak, "You've got to start doing some growing up."

Eugene Peterson translates 1 Corinthians 10:30-31 this way.

"But except for these special cases mentioned above, I'm not going to walk around on eggshells worrying about what small-minded people might say; I'm going to stride free and easy, knowing what our large-minded Master has already said. If I eat what is served to me, grateful to God for what is on the table, how can I worry about what someone else will say. I thanked God for it, and He blessed it!

"So eat your meals heartily, not worrying about what others say about you – you're eating to God's glory, after all, not to please them. As a matter of fact, do everything that way, heartily and freely to God's glory."

To the weak (he does call them weak), Paul says, "It might be time for you to do some growing." And certainly the community cannot be governed by the person with the weakest conscience in the room.

"Grow up," Paul says.

In the end, I say this: Be careful how you live. Don't live with just yourself in mind. Live with the whole community, the church in mind. Something might not hurt you, but it might hurt someone else. Just be careful. When you become a Christian, you become part of a community and you lose a lot of individual rights. Paul says don't exercise your rights. Exercise your love.

Let me give you a most modern example of a new arena of cultural conflict. How do we, the people of God, fit into the context of social networking on various cyber-sources? It's an interesting phenomena to me, and I don't really understand it. But I've observed it. One who behaves by normal, acceptable standards and has a Christ-like lifestyle in his everyday life, suspends his moral judgment and behaves completely differently on the Internet. People post things to their Facebook or Twitter pages that they would never say to a colleague at work. Or, if you're a teenager, you post things you would never say to your parents or your pastor. Once we enter cyberspace we feel as if we have anonymity – no one will know who we are. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I'll just speak of our students for a while, although I know adults are every bit as guilty of double identity on the web.

A recent study revealed that right at 40% of teenagers had posted something on their webpage that they later regretted.

Thirty-seven percent have used a website to make fun of another student.

Twenty-five percent of our teenagers – that’s one in four – have posted a false identity. You don’t post a false identity to exhibit good behavior.

Twenty-four percent have hacked into someone else’s social networking account.

And 13% of teenagers have posted a nude picture of themselves or others online.

(Jill Tucker, “Social networking has hidden dangers for teens, <http://articles.sfgate.com/2009-08-10>)

What you don’t realize, students, is that whatever you put on your webpage today may haunt you for the rest of your life. An alcohol related post-prom picture may be there to greet you as you sit down for your first job interview. A nude picture of yourself on the web is a digital tattoo that remains forever.

One college professor says that the psychology of the Internet makes people feel invisible. And they conclude there won’t be any consequence for their actions. While you would never go out in the middle of the high school courtyard and yell out profane and mean things about someone in your history class, you might be willing to do that on your Facebook page.

There is actually something known as a cyberethics consultant. I found one by the name of Patty Yamano, who says “if you’re a good person in life, you should be a good person on the Internet. But kids don’t understand the relationship between real life and the Internet because it’s not concrete” at the moment. (Chris Berdik, “Facebook Morals, MySpace Manners,” www.edu.edu/today/node/2763)

I can’t tell you how many times someone has said to me, “I was so disappointed about his or her Facebook page. I can’t believe he posted that picture.” One of our staff members struggles, having seen the Facebook pages of church members. “I just try to get it out of my mind. I don’t want to change my thoughts about her. I don’t even want to associate her with those words or with that picture.”

You may have the freedom to say or do a lot of things, Paul is saying. But are you building up the church? Are you offending others? Are you putting your own selfish desires and expressions of freedom ahead of the image of the body of Christ?

As yourself two questions before you engage in any behavior, real or virtual. Is this good for me? Is this good for the people of God?