

Tough Love

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 † First United Methodist Church, Des Moines
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In 1968, Bill Milliken wrote a book entitled *Tough Love*. At the time, he worked for the Teen Challenge ministry with members of street gangs.

Since then many others have used the phrase “tough love.” At times, it has been used to describe behaviors far removed from what Milliken intended. Some applied the term tough love to the practices used in boot camps for troubled youth – practices which were often abusive and cruel.

More consistent with Milliken’s intent, families and friends of people addicted to alcohol and drugs have used the term to describe an effective way to help people break their addictions. For them, tough love is the intentional choice not to continue to enable the addict to maintain her or his addiction. Family and friends sit down with the sober addict and state clearly what they are and are not going to do if the addict begins using drugs or alcohol again. Basically, they give the addict a tough choice: you can have us in your life or you can have drugs in your life. You can’t have both any more. It’s your choice.

In this practice, the recipient of the tough love had to make the difficult choice.

But in Corinthians, Paul describes a different form of tough love, where the one giving the love makes the more difficult choice. Remember what Paul advised the church at Corinth? He told them that they should give up anything they had the complete right to do or to have if having it or doing it caused another believer to fail as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Paul mentions this practice often. He restates and elaborates it in his letter to the Romans (ch. 14). It is one way to practice what he taught the church at Thessalonika: “encourage one another and build up each other.”

In fact, this practice embodies Paul’s admonition at the end of this letter (and which I share with you every Sunday): “Let all that you do be done in love.”

Paul obviously believed that love should shape all our choices. In a choice between what we want most and what is loving, Paul sees no choice at all for a Christian. A Christian must always choose the loving action.

In doing so, Paul believed, we love as Christ loved us. Christ’s love is a love that surrenders. In his letter to the church at Philippi Paul includes what scholars think was an early of hymn of the church which describes Jesus’ choice to become human this way:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.”

Christ surrendered his divinity – emptied himself of the divine – by choice. It was a choice made in love, and it reveals the kind of “tough love” Paul wanted the Corinthians both to understand and to practice. Jesus had every right to remain within the community of love of the Godhead, but, for love, he surrendered that existence.

And we, Paul argues, are to do the same. In love, we should surrender even those things we have every right to have and every right to do when our having them or doing them hinders a sister or brother in Christ from following Jesus Christ as well as they can.

Jesus makes an even more stringent claim on us. While Paul limits the practice of the tough love of surrender to fellow members of the church, Jesus said we should love our neighbor as ourselves. By neighbor, Jesus means anyone and everyone we come in contact with every day.

When facing a decision about how to live, Paul can’t be clearer: We cannot stop with the answer to the question, “Do I have the right to do this or to have this?”

We must always ask a further question: “Does doing this or having this build up the faith of my brother or sister in Christ?”

The answer to that question determines what we should do. The answer to that question is tough love, for us.

By which I mean it is both tough to do and is Christ-like love.

In the name of the One God, Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.