

15. Living by love or knowledge

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The hot issues in the Corinthians church were not whether or not to go to the movies, play cards, or drink beer or wine casually. Instead, they worried about the correctness of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

Some argued that eating the meat sacrificed to idols wasn't wrong, because it is nothing more than a piece of meat; while others, that it was as bad as idol worship itself. Undecided and unsure, they brought the issue to Paul and dumped it in his lap and expected him to solve the situation.

This issue of eating meat that was sacrificed to idols is so complicated that the apostle Paul spends chapters 8, 9, and 10 to address it. But we are only to study chapter 8 this morning, where Paul speaks to them about the idea of a genuine love that is willing to restrict its liberty.

A. KNOWLEDGE PUFFS UP, BUT LOVE EDIFIES

1 Corinthians 8:1-3 Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. 2 And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. 3 But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him.

Paul first talks about the principles of knowledge and love before he starts to answer the question regarding eating the meat sacrificed to idols. Christian behavior must be based on love, not knowledge; and the goal of the Christian life is not knowledge, but love for our God and His people.

The meat offered on pagan altars was usually divided up into three portions: one portion was burnt in honor of their pagan god; one portion was given to the worshipper to take home and eat; and the third portion was given to the priest. If the priest didn't want to eat his portion, he sold it at the temple restaurant or meat market. The meat served and sold at the temple was generally cheaper, but in excellent quality. In other words, they were good steaks, ribeyes, prime ribs, and lamb chops for less money. What a deal, right? That is the main reason why the Corinthian church is having a problem with it.

I just love the way the apostle nailed the comparison between knowledge and love in one single sentence in v1. Intellectualism often inflates a person with ego like an overinflated balloon. It gives a mirage of self-importance to the person. But this balloon can be popped with a single comment against it.

But edification, which means "building up" with love is something else. Just as one has to lay brick upon brick in order to construct a solid building or wall, so we must lay one loving deed and word on another if we would build a solid life that will last.

With that in mind, let me take a side step and ask you this question: Do the people around you know you as a person who builds others with kind and encouraging words and listening ears and through that, do they see Jesus in you? Or do they see you as a non-stop motormouth that boasts about your own knowledge? If you have a motormouth, you cannot have listening ears because you are so in love with your own words and voice.

When I was learning Judo in the high school that I attended, I didn't care to spar with some guys because they barely learned their low degree skills, but they thought that they were the Judo experts. During the sparring sessions, they came in hard and crazy, but only to find out that there was someone who had better skills than them. But the other black belt guys were more courteous, because they were humble and knew better.

Both knowledge and love have an effect on our lives; both of them make something grow. The difference between puffs up and edifies is striking; it is the difference between a bubble and a building. Some Christians grow, others just swell.

There is only one true knowledge that really matters in Christ. It is the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

V3 says, "known by Him." Isn't it an awesome thought that we are known by God personally? He not only knows us as who we are, but also He cannot keep His eyes off us because of His unfading love for us.

B. AN IDOL IS NOTHING

1 Corinthians 8:4-6 Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.

Before we go any further, let's take care of the baseline here: The presence of an idol in a temple was no solid proof that their god existed. Later, Paul would point out that idolatry was basically the worship of demons. So the conclusion was logical: A non-existent god could not contaminate food offered on his altar.

There is only One True God, idols are not competing gods, including satan, like Hollywood tries very hard to make spiritually ignorant people believe. Idols are nothing, so are the so-called gods. There are many images that are supposed to be representations of divinities. But these divinities are nothing, the figments of fancy imaginations and these images have no corresponding realities.

V6 is another verse that shows the equality of the lordship of God the Father and the Lord Jesus as God Himself.

C. ACTING ON PRINCIPLE OF LOVE

1 Corinthians 8:7-8 However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8 But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse.

Paul is reminding the Corinthian Christians who know that there is nothing to an idol to remember that not everyone knows this. And if someone believes there is something to an idol, and they eat meat that has been sacrificed to an idol, their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

Why is their conscience considered weak? Not because their conscience doesn't work. Indeed, it does work – in fact, it overworks. Their conscience is considered weak, because it is wrongly informed. These people didn't realize that the meat itself

wasn't immoral, rather morally neutral. Meat is meat. And eating meat would not affect their relationship with the Lord.

There are two groups of people whose conscience is weak:

1) They are new Christians who don't know a lot about Christian doctrines, especially liberty in Christ.

The Greek word for "liberty" is "eleutheria." We get the word "exercise" from that. The Greek term usually denotes "right," "authority," or even "privilege." In certain contexts, as this one, it has connotations of the freedom to exercise one's right. So if the new Christians are having problems, they can be taught and corrected.

A general of Aram of Syria, Naaman was the case in point:

2 Kings 5:18 Yet in this thing may the Lord pardon your servant: when my master goes into the temple of Rimmon to worship there, and he leans on my hand, and I bow down in the temple of Rimmon—when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord please pardon your servant in this thing."

2) They are legalistic.

Legalism has no pity on people. Legalism makes my opinion your burden; makes my opinion your boundary; makes my opinion your obligation; makes my opinion as the only rules for others to follow. If they don't do what my opinion dictates, they are wrong. That is the attitude of legalists. I am sure that you've seen a few of them in your Christian life. If you are one of them, hope that you humble yourself before the Lord and change your attitude.

Nothing will keep a Christian more immature than trying to keep a list of "Dos and Don'ts" and force others to follow.

However, it is better for those who know and understand liberty in Christ to hold their desires back for the sake of those who don't. It is important to note that the stronger believer defers to the weaker believer in love only that he might help him to mature. He does not "pamper" him; rather he seeks to edify him, to help him grow. Otherwise, both will become weak.

Apostle Paul reminded them that no one is less spiritual for abstaining from meat sacrificed to idols.

D. OUR MATURE RESPONSE

1 Corinthians 8:9-13 But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. 10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? 11 And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? 12 But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

The Corinthian Christians who were abusing their liberty might have been thinking it was a small matter to offend their weak brothers or sisters, but they did not understand they were offending Christ. In doing so, they were actually "building up and setting up" their brother to sin. "Emboldened" comes from the word "build up." Their misuse of liberty was building others up towards sin.

Our actions can never be based on just what we know to be right for ourselves; we also need to consider what is right in regard to our brothers and sisters in Jesus. It is

easy for a Christian to say, "I answer to God and God alone" and to ignore his brother or sister. It is true that we will answer to God and God alone; but we will answer to God for how we have treated our brother or sister.

Paul would never allow this principle from the chapter 8 to be a means by which a legalist could bind a Christian walking in liberty through their legalistic demands.

For those who have a weak conscience, they should not use this to bind everyone around them with their own set of legalism: Saying, "According to 1 Corinthians chapter 8, you are not supposed to do that, because it would make me to stumble." If they know how to use the Word of God to make their own issue to others, they should know how to be set free from limitations they put on to themselves. They also should know that they have liberty in Christ.

Before I became a born-again Christian, I used to drink beer and smoked cigarettes. It was not unusual for me to spew out a few chosen bad languages. But once the Lord extended His grace and mercy toward me, all of that stopped. As I became a Bible teacher, I started to watch what I did and how I behaved for others. Now that I am a pastor, I put far more restrictions on myself for the sake of others so that I may lead others with my examples. I know that my examples are far from perfection, but I am striving for excellence for the sake of our Savior.

This is the very point where most stumble in issues relevant to Christian liberty – such as movies, drinking, smoking, music, or television: assuming that one stance or another is evidence of greater or lesser spirituality.

You may think, "OK preacher, you are a pastor. You need to be careful like this chapter 8 describes. But I am a part of the congregation of this church. So I don't have to be careful about others." Wrong, wrong, very wrong! Because you are an ambassador of Christ and you are a representative of the Gospel of Jesus. What you do with your daily action in front of your unbelieving family members and coworkers is far more important than what I do on Sunday morning and Thursday evening. Because they see you everyday.

E. APPLICATION

When we decide not to eat or drink or do something for the sake of others who are weak in Christ, we are doing this in the love of Christ.

By doing so, we are building up those weak brothers and sisters in the Lord and keeping the unity in the body of Christ.

Colossians 3:17 And whatever you do, whether in words or deed, do it all in the name of Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.