

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series called The Gospel Changes Everything, based on the New Testament book 1 Corinthians, Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, a church he started around the year 50 AD. He has since left the church in the hands of other leaders so that he might start other churches, and he writes this letter around the year 54-55 AD in response to what he is hearing about some of the issues in the Corinthian church. In the last section, Paul addressed the sexual issues that were going on in the church. From chapters 8-10, Paul tackles another issue that is threatening to divide or destroy the church – **how they should interact with the rampant idolatry in their city**. Corinth was in Greece and was part of the Roman Empire. It was therefore a polytheistic city, with many gods and goddesses and temples to those deities, and so it was a regular part of civic life to attend banquets in temples and homes where you would eat food that was sacrificed to those idols. For a church community that believed that there was only one God, and that idol worship was sinful, this was a tricky subject for a young church to navigate. As you'll see, some people found eating food that had been dedicated to idols to be morally wrong, while others did not, and it was causing conflict. Now, of course, most of us don't have to deal with that specific issue in today's world, but the principles Paul lays out in these passages on how to navigate these issues where Christians disagree are very relevant today. Think about things like whether Christians should drink or not, or whether they should participate in practices from non-Christian backgrounds, like yoga.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 - Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ² The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But the man who loves God is known by God. ⁴ So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. ⁵ For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), ⁶ yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. ⁷ But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ⁸ But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. ⁹ Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. ¹² When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound

their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. ¹³ *Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.*

So in Corinth, there were many gods and goddesses, temples and shrines – Apollo, Aphrodite, etc. If a person wanted to take place in civic life, they would have been expected to participate in a festival’s sacrificial meals in the temples of the gods. So the question was, should they decline eating in a friend’s home or in a temple because the meat was sacrificed to an idol, even if it cost them socially? Is participating in these meals a participation in idolatry, a sin against the Lord? Or is it just eating food, and nothing more?

Paul is going to lay out his argument over the next three chapters. But the first thing he does is to lay out a principle that should be familiar to you by now: **in Christ we have freedom, but we are to use that freedom not to serve our own interests but to serve others.**

To illustrate this, he discusses two kinds of people, one with what we will call a “strong conscience” and one with a “weak conscience.”

⁴ *So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.* ⁵ *For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"),* ⁶ *yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.*

Paul quotes the first group, which we’ll call the “strong conscience” group, as saying that “we all have knowledge and that “we know that an idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “there is no God but one.” **They recognize that idols are not real gods – they are just statues representing an imaginary deity.** Therefore, the argument goes that if an idol is nothing, then meat offered to a “nothing” means nothing, so who cares if we eat it? We are free as Christians to eat meat that has been sacrificed to a meaningless statue.

You can imagine where they are coming from. Why should we say no to an invitation where we might share the gospel? Why should we have to leave society over something that isn’t really anything? That’s the perspective of the first group, the “strong conscience” group.

The second group is the “weak conscience” group.

⁷ *Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.*

¹⁰ *For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?* ¹¹ *So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.*

The first group knows that an idol is nothing, and so they eat without it bothering their conscience. The second group, however, has probably come out of a pagan background where they worshiped these idols, and so to continue to participate in this kind of idol sacrifice would be like rejecting Jesus and their very identity in Christ and going back to slavery to other gods. For this group, their conscience prevents them from eating meat sacrificed to an idol, because it would lead them back to paganism.

For the first group, an idol represents a non-reality, a god that does not really exist. **But clearly there is a difference between the ontological nonexistence of false gods and the existential reality of their influence on the sensitivities of those with “weak consciences.”** The gods may not exist, but the existence of idols has a negative effect on those who for whom idols represent their old, pre-Christian way of life.

The problem is that both sides are likely looking down on the others in judgment. The “strong conscience” Christians would see the “weak conscience” Christians as hung up about things that aren’t real, creating rules where there is no need for rules. The “weak conscience” Christians would probably look down on the others as compromising their Christian faith by participating in idolatry.

So how does Paul handle this? He makes two arguments:

1) Your knowledge is incomplete

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ² *The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.*

Yes, he says, you know that an idol represents a god that does not really exist. But you don’t know everything. You may actually be wrong. In fact, as you read

ahead, Paul may be making the argument in chapter 10 that idols are not nothing, but are actually demonic, and so participation in these meals might not actually be harmless but may be participation in a demonic meal.

Knowledge puffs up, Paul says. Having knowledge without love or wisdom can make people overconfident and inflate their ego. They are know-it-all's.

1 Corinthians 13:2 - If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

And in fact, this is what is happening. They have knowledge, but their knowledge is not perfect, and more importantly, they are not acting in love towards their brothers.

And so at first glance it may seem like participating in these meals is harmless, but upon closer look, it may be causing far greater harm than they have imagined. They might be opening themselves up to demonic influence while harming their brothers and sisters with “weak consciences” through their participation. And so, Paul tells them:

2) Love is primary

⁹ Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. ¹² When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.

The “strong conscience” Christians eat in these meals without regard to how it might affect others. Paul points out to them that there are likely some in their midst who have come out of these pagan backgrounds, who worshiped these gods, and have now renounced that lifestyle in order to live faithfully to Jesus, the one true God. By participating in these meals at the idol's temples, therefore, the strong are threatening the faith of the “weak” brothers by leading them to think that it is okay. It may be okay for the strong, because it does not offend their conscience, but it is

not okay for the weak brothers, because for them it is a rejection of Christ and a return to the idolatry of their past. Calls to mind Jesus' words:

Matthew 18:6-7 - But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. ⁷ "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!"

Knowledge alone tells them it's okay to eat the meat. Love, on other hand, would cause them to forego eating in the temples out of a loving concern for their weaker brothers. In a vacuum, perhaps it would be okay; in a community where it would harm the faith of their brothers, it is not okay.

*1 Corinthians 10:23-24 - "Everything is permissible"-- but not everything is **beneficial**. "Everything is permissible"-- but not everything is constructive. ²⁴ Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.*

In this initial argument, Paul does not answer the question of whether consuming food that has been sacrificed to an idol is wrong in and of itself. Instead, he teaches them a principle that is even more important – **what matters most is love towards your fellow Christian brothers and sisters**. Even if eating this meal is morally neutral, under certain conditions it has moral dimensions and can become a sin against Christ.

Listen again to 2-3:

² *The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.*

³ *But the man who loves God is known by God.*

True knowledge includes love. You don't know God unless you are in a love relationship with him.

Now, of course, most of us are not faced with this specific issue today. But the principle has not changed. What are the two main implications for us today?

1) You can disagree with someone and still act in love towards them

This one has huge implications not only inside but outside the church. All around us are people with different convictions. There are some things you find morally wrong and others do not. How are we to get along?

Option 1 – I am right and you are wrong, so I will judge you, condemn you, and exclude you until you change. This was the way of the Pharisees in Jesus' day. This is the way of many religious people today.

Option 2 – There is no right and wrong. There is only what is right for me and what is right for you. Everyone should be free to live as they please, and no one can tell you that you are wrong if you are doing what is right for you.

This approach sounds tolerant, but it is actually just a different kind of tolerance. How does this approach interact with someone who says that there actually is right and wrong? It is intolerant towards them, telling them that they are dangerous and need to change and adopt their worldview, that there is no right or wrong. In other words, this is the self-defeating view that the only moral absolute is that there are no moral absolutes.

Is there a better way? Yes. **Accepting not the other point of view as true, but accepting the person in love.** It seems in this passage like Paul is making a negative evaluation – some are strong and some are weak. And yet he tells the strong that they are wrong in what they are doing because they are not acting in love. The right thing would be to prioritize love, to refrain from eating out of love for their brothers.

Romans 14:10-13 - *You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.* ¹¹ *It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'"* ¹² *So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.* ¹³ *Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.*

Remember what Paul wrote in verse 7:

⁷ *Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*

How did Christ accept you? He didn't just "tolerate" as the world tolerates. Nor did he judge and condemn. He gave a negative evaluation, but then loved you enough

to enter into your life and die for you. Similarly, you don't need to accept what everyone believes as true to love someone. I can think you are wrong and still enter into a relationship with you where I will seek to understand you, respect you, love you, and as God gives me opportunity, share what I believe the truth is with you. Because I know that I am saved by God's free grace, not by own intellect or morality, I can disagree with you without looking down on you. I can disagree with you and still accept and love you as a person.

2) Use your freedom in Christ to serve others

¹³ *Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.*

Paul uses hyperbole to underscore the heavy responsibility a believer has toward his fellow-believers. He may be free, but he is committed to using that freedom not to please himself but to serve others. Remember again this passage:

1 Corinthians 10:23-24 - *"Everything is permissible"-- but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible"-- but not everything is constructive.* ²⁴
Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

Love leads to giving up one's rights for the sake of others

You may say, "I am free to do whatever I want" – yes and no. You are free, but use your freedom to serve others, and in this way, you serve the Lord.

Matthew 25:40 - *"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'*

As Paul wrote:

Romans 15:1 - *We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.* ² *Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.*

What might be some modern-day examples?

Drinking. I may be free, but I will give it up to serve my brother.

Certain movies and music might be fine for me but not for others who look up to me.

Yoga. Some see it as exercise. Others see it as participation in something demonic.

To sum up: Our knowledge is still partial; we need to be humble in our actions. The right thing can be the wrong thing if I am not doing it in love. I will limit my freedom in order to serve my brother and sister and not cause them to stumble in their faith.