

Working Through Differences

1 Corinthians 8

We are heading back into 1 Corinthians this morning after about a 4 week break. We're getting close to halfway through this book and there's been a lot to talk about. The issues in the church of Corinth were many, and they were similar to a lot of issues we face today, so we can learn a lot from this book. Today we are in chapter 8 in which Paul addresses a new issue that the church was struggling with, and it had to do with their differences when it came to what to do about eating meat and other food that had been sacrificed to idols – a very common practice at that time. Was it right? Was it wrong? Some people thought one way, some thought the other... What were they to do?

When it comes to right and wrong, we don't always land in the same place. Our perception is influenced by many things – our family upbringing, personal experiences, understanding of Scripture, education, information sources... Many things feed into what we think, and because of that, even we as Christians, though we all have the same Bible, land in different places on a lot of issues. Here are some big ones...

- How many of you think there's just something wrong with taking a long shower? I can't imagine how or why anyone can take a shower longer than 5-7 minutes and let all that good hot water run down the drain... Believe it or not, others in my family don't think the same way!
- How many of you think that in order to be a good, upstanding Christian, you need to clean all the food off your plate? We were on vacation in Utah and I watched a table filled with teenage boys and a couple dads order shakes and when they got up and left I was appalled to see that some of those glasses were still over half full! The outrage! How can you waste that much ice cream! I was always taught I had to clean my plate and not waste food. Think about the starving children in Africa! Apparently they didn't feel the same way.
- Or how about driving the speed limit... What's the right speed to drive? Is it the posted speed? Slower? 5 over? 10 over? Whatever you want as long as you don't get caught? I don't know why, but in my head it feels right to drive 4mph over the speed limit. If I ever get pulled over for that or less, I would feel like I'm being wronged, but if it's 5 or more, I have no excuse... Unless I'm driving through North Dakota, because that's just different. One

year I was cruising through ND with my cruise set at 82mph – 7 over the speed limit. I thought I was doing good, because it felt like I should be doing at least 9 over. But then I got pulled over and was given a ticket! Can you believe it! That just seemed wrong.

There are a few issues that are crystal clear in the Bible and we all agree about what's right and what's wrong, but there are many that are not and Christians disagree. My examples were lighthearted, but some of our disagreements are more serious and can create tension and division. When I was growing up I remember Christians disagreeing about things like drinking alcohol, Halloween, divorce and remarriage, and watching rated R movies. In recent history there's been a lot of disagreement about who to vote for, whether or not to wear a mask, and whether or not to get the vaccine. People feel strongly on both sides of these issues – they think their perspective is right and others are wrong. And this of course is leading to tension in churches, there's a lot of conflict and division.

How do we work through these differences? Is it possible to find peace and harmony in the church when people disagree about these kinds of things? Paul deals with this issue in our passage for today and gets to the heart of what's most important to God, so let's see what he has to say and listen to what the Holy Spirit may be saying to us.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-3.

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up. ² If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

So the issue at hand was eating food, especially meat, sacrificed to idols. I love eating meat – there's nothing like a juicy steak, or a rack of ribs, or fresh pulled pork like we're going to enjoy in a few minutes. We can enjoy meat by just going to a restaurant or picking some up at a grocery store and fixing it at home. But in Corinth, it was different. Almost all the meat was prepared as part of a pagan religious feast or festival. Feasting was part of their worship of idols, which was very common in their society. So if you were going to eat meat, you were going to do it at a temple feast, or get it from the market where it was likely to have come from an idol feast and had been dedicated to an idol.

Should you eat meat? Should you attend the feasts? Christians started thinking through these issues and making decisions and they didn't all land in the same place. Some thought it was ok to eat, some thought it was wrong. Some thought it was wrong to attend the feasts, but ok to eat meat at home, even if it had been sacrificed to an idol. Some felt strongly about their convictions and started seeing that those who differed from them were wrong. There was tension and conflict in the church, and they brought it to Paul's attention.

In these verses you can see that in their differences they were valuing something over another – they were valuing knowledge over love. They all thought they knew what was right. Paul recognized that they all had knowledge – some from Scripture, some from past experiences – they had knowledge that was leading them to their conclusions, but those conclusions were opposed to each other. There wasn't universal agreement, there were disputes and disagreements. And in their disagreements, they were valuing knowledge over love.

And Paul points out some major problems with that. He first points out that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Knowledge can lead to pride – intellectual arrogance. Each person thinks they have the better handle on Scripture, the deeper insight into the issue, the greater wisdom based on past experiences. They think they know more and know better than those who disagree.

Love, on the other hand, builds up. It doesn't puff up like a balloon that's going to burst, it builds us up into Christ. It lays a firm foundation and a lasting structure in a person's heart. When a person grows in love it makes them more like Christ. When you value love most, it builds up, but when you value knowledge most, it puffs up. The Corinthians were doing that and Paul was concerned. It didn't matter who was right at that point.

Another problem that Paul points out in verse 2 is that knowledge is always lacking and incomplete. So if you think you're the expert and have it all figured out for everyone, you don't. There's a lot you don't know. There's a lot you can't know. None of us has complete or infinite knowledge. There's always more that we don't know. In fact, if we have a humble attitude, we come to find that the more we know, the more we don't know.

And the third problem he points out is implied in verse 3. If you value knowledge more than love you veer away from God because “the one who loves God is known by God.” Love is at the heart of who God is, so to connect with God and be known by him, love is the way to go. Knowing more can be helpful if it increases love, but if it hardens your heart it will push love aside.

The people in Corinth were valuing knowledge over love in their disagreements and it was pushing love aside and causing major problems. So it didn’t matter so much to Paul who was right, what mattered was they were heading in the wrong direction and needed to get back on track.

I’ve seen a lot of Christians placing a high premium on their knowledge in the past year and a half – knowledge of viruses, masks, vaccines, presidential candidates, and so on. I’ve seen a lot of Christians quoting Scripture to support their point of view. I’ve seen a lot of Christians pointing to their experiences or the experiences of others to prove their point. I’ve seen a lot of relentless posts on social media as they champion their cause.

But you know what I haven’t seen much of? Love. It seems to me that we’ve been valuing knowledge over love and it’s caused major conflict and division. Christians have been going in the wrong direction and need to get back on track. So let’s see what Paul had to say to the Corinthians who were in the same position.

The rest of what he writes in this chapter is addressing those on one side of the issue – those who believed they had the right to go to the idol feasts and eat the meat and other food that had been offered to them. These Christians believed they were right and should be able to exercise their rights. But let’s see what Paul had to say.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:4-6.

⁴ Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”— ⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

So Paul affirms the theology behind their position. They were basically saying that they had the right to eat because idols aren't real – they're just wood, metal, or stone. There's only one God and they believed in him. Even though they were in a culture that worshipped many different gods, they had only one God and he was the one who created all things including all food for them to enjoy and be sustained. So to attend an idol feast or eat food sacrificed to an idol was nothing to them. It had nothing to do with idol worship for them and they were free to do so. Paul agreed from a theological perspective. They were right and had an accurate biblical argument to stand on. And if that was the only factor to consider it would be the end of the story. But it wasn't the only factor to consider, and Paul points that out next.

And I think we need to see this as well. Just because you have a biblical argument to stand on to support your point of view, doesn't mean that's the end of the story. Sometimes our biblical arguments are just plain wrong – I've seen a lot of misuse of Scripture lately. And even when we're right and use accurate interpretation, that doesn't mean we can automatically exercise our rights. There are other factors to consider...

Read 1 Corinthians 8:7.

⁷ However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

So one factor to consider is that not everyone sees things the same way you do. In this case, Paul points out that for some in the church, their knowledge was influenced by their former way of life and association with idols. So in their minds, they couldn't separate the idol feasts and eating of meat from the worship of idols. For them, to go to the feast or eat the meat was to worship the idol. That's what they used to do. They had been deeply involved in that kind of idol worship and they couldn't do those things anymore because according to their conscience it was sin. It was putting themselves in a position of overwhelming temptation to indulge in idol worship.

Paul points out to those who wanted to eat meat that they needed to consider where the others were coming from – their biblical argument wasn't the only factor. And again I wonder, how much have Christians done this lately? People get

so wrapped up in proving why they're right, that they don't listen to their brothers and sisters who think differently than they do. They don't consider why they've landed in a different place. They just make assumptions and cast judgment based on their point of view without considering where the other person is coming from. But Paul says this is an important factor. We'll see how important as we move along, but first he points out another factor to consider before insisting on exercising our personal convictions.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:8.

⁸Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.

So he tells the Corinthians that wanted to eat meat that exercising their rights and beliefs about meat would not bring them greater approval with God. What you do about eating food will not commend you to God. If you don't eat meat (and go against your beliefs), you are no worse off before God, and if you do eat meat, you're no better off. God isn't impressed by following your point of view on this matter.

What about us? Do we think that following our views about masks or the vaccine or who to vote for will commend us to God? I've seen many Christians link their views on these issues with what they think is commendable to God – that he will be very pleased with them for following their convictions even though that means standing in opposition against their brothers and sisters. They believe their perspective is God's will and those who differ are deceived and in sin.

But that's a faulty view of God. God doesn't commend one group of Christians for sticking to their guns while condemning the other for sticking to theirs. He is looking for something different – something that he does find commendable and that's what Paul points out in the last few verses.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:9-13

⁹But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? ¹¹And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹²Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding

*their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.*¹³ *Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*

God doesn't favor a person exercising their rights at the expense of a brother or sister in Christ, even if they have solid biblical ground to stand on. In fact, he considers it sin – sin against them and sin against Christ. If eating in an idol's temple or eating food offered to idols causes a brother or sister to stumble, you should not do it. You should lay down your rights for the sake of the other.

I see Paul describing love in these verses. He is going back to what he said in the first part of this chapter and calling them to love – it's far more important than knowledge; it's far more important than exercising your rights. What's commendable to God in situations where we land in different places on these issues, is that we practice love toward one another.

Paul describes what that looks like in a similar context in the book of Philippians. In that church there were two prominent women who were in opposition to each other and this is what Paul said: Philippians 2:1-8: *“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy,² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. [That sounds great, but how is that possible when Christians have such differing viewpoints?] ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*

The love that Christ demonstrated to us is at the heart of who God is and how God wants us to respond to one another when we don't see eye to eye. He wants us to practice humility. He wants us to count others more significant than ourselves. He wants us to look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others. This is exactly what Christ did for us. He legitimately knew all the right answers. He had the right to point out all our faults and condemn us, but he humbled himself to the point of death so that we could be one with him.

And what I think Paul is telling the Corinthians is that's the attitude God wants them to have toward one another – especially those who disagree with them. God values that attitude far more than using our biblical arguments and knowledge to point out why we think other people are wrong. He values that far more than stubbornly insisting on being able to exercise our rights. So Paul declared in the last verse: *“Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”*

Are we willing to go there when we land in different places than each other over the issues we've been struggling with? What do you think that means for us when it comes to our differences about the vaccine? What does that mean about our differences when it comes to wearing masks, or who to vote for? What level of importance have you been placing on your knowledge of these issues? Has your knowledge replaced love for your brothers and sisters in Christ?

I believe God's desire is for us to humble ourselves before one another, consider where others are coming from, listen to them, and be sensitive and respectful toward one another. You don't have to change your perspective to theirs, but we do have to love one another as Paul has described. This is the way that we work through our differences and enjoy the unity of the Spirit. This is how we become different than the world and give glory to our Savior.