

So What Really Matters? 2024
1 Corinthians 8:1-13, 10:23-31

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 *New Revised Standard Version*

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—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.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

1 Corinthians 10:23-31 *New Revised Standard Version*

“All things are lawful,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience, for “the earth and its fullness are the Lord’s.” If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—I mean the other’s conscience, not your own. For why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else’s conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that for which I give thanks? So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.

After completing the first two years of classes during seminary,
typically, a year-long internship was the third year of the program.

One of the internships that I contacted and considered
was among the Anaktuvuk Eskimos at Point Barrow, Alaska.

Among the Anaktuvuks, alcohol abuse is a huge & devastating problem.

When I spoke with the pastor who would have been my supervisor,
he told me during the phone interview that if I served there,
no alcohol was ever permitted, not even when I wasn’t working.

He went on to explain and made very clear,
that even though I might not have a problem with alcohol,
for the sake of those whom I would be serving,
I was expected to abstain while I was up there.

The Apostle Paul would have fully endorsed that way of thinking,
of putting the needs of others and the good of the community
well ahead of our own needs, before my rights and desires...

... as the Apostle describes in the Corinthians passages today,
**by accepting limitations imposed by Christian love,
and placing the good & welfare of others ahead of my own.**

Both passages today are part of a longer-larger section in response
to misunderstandings & conflict in the church at Corinth, vs. 1:10~11

Now I appeal to you, ... that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you,
but that you be united ... For it has been reported to me ... that there are quarrels among you, my
brothers and sisters.

It is important for us to understand and appreciate
the cultural context that's causing the conflict.

In ancient Corinth, there weren't any butchers or grocery stores,
and any meat for sale in the marketplace was almost always
what was left over from animals sacrificed at pagan temples.

For some, the more recent converts from idolatry and paganism,
it still seemed to them that such meat had somehow been tainted.

**Eating that meat possibly previously sacrificed to pagan gods
felt to them like they're still participating in pagan worship.**

For others, those who had been Christians for a longer time,
and were theologically more sophisticated and knowledgeable,
they knew that since idols were inanimate & lifeless objects,
obviously those idols had no power to effect the meat,
so they felt total freedom to eat whatever they liked...

... almost as a sign and proclamation that God's grace set them free.

In truth, the idol of a false god couldn't do anything to the meat,
and those who were concerned about it, were misinformed about it.
BUT there was far more at stake here than just being aware and knowing
the correct theology & having the right knowledge & understanding.

**We too can be absolutely right factually and theologically correct,
yet by our actions and treatment of others, be totally in the wrong.**

Years ago there was a very bright and talented young man
who was working in one of our stores for a while,
but Pat always had to be right, and usually was factually.
But he would get so intense and argumentative proving he was right,
that upset and angry customers would storm out, never to return.

What I couldn't get him to understand and appreciate,
was that if winning the argument drove the customer away,
then it really wasn't much of a victory – or a good thing,
and in fact, if he kept winning and proving he was right,
I would end up going out of business & unable to pay him.

Sometimes there is a much larger issue that just being right.

We can become destructively proud of our advanced learning
fiercely insisting on our way, even to the detriment of others.

As Paul explains, our more important consideration,
ought to be our relationships within the Church,
on the supporting the faith of those others,
who are also infinitely loved by God, vs. 8:1.

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." **Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.**

Puffed up - Paul was describing
a loveless intellectual knowledge and accumulation of facts
that can become prideful, arrogant, divisive and ego-driven,
and that feels free to pressure and belittle others,
because we know best and have all the right answers.

Sometimes we so over-value our own biblical knowledge and insight,
and we can be so impressed by our own theological sophistication,
that along the way, we can do harm to the faith of others,
perhaps even causing them to waver in the walk of faith...

...just as Paul pointed out to the Church in Corinth, vs. 8:7, 9
the more **mature** Christians had allowed their **superior** knowledge,
to harm the faith of those they were called to love as family,

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so
accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their
conscience, **being weak**, is defiled. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a
stumbling-block to the weak.

being weak - refers to
young Christians being vulnerable to misunderstood influences
of more mature Christians that could throw them off track,
and be faith-destructive to the weaker, more recent believers.
The more mature believers needed to be aware and help to foster faith,
and look out for the spiritual welfare of the more recent believers.

I remember a 1960's highway safety campaign that ran on television.
The narrator would say,
"Sam was absolutely right ... he definitely had the right of way."

The screen would go blank to squealing brakes, a loud crash & sirens.
The next scene was a funeral at a cemetery, the narrator continued:
"Sam was right ---- dead right. **Watch out for the other guy.**"

**Sometimes in the midst of our opinions, plans and certainties,
we can forget that the person we so adamantly disagree with,
is also a precious and beloved child of the Lord God,
important enough that Jesus sacrificed all for them.**

Paul's point was that those other people are more important to God than whatever issue or argument we're trying so hard to gain a win.

A few chapters later Paul describes in this same letter, the appropriate standard for Christian behavior, chapter 13,

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal... Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; ... it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

You can have the right of way --- and still die in a car accident.

In business, you can press your argument, you may even win, but in the end, an offended customer is always a loss.

Obviously we can be absolutely correct in our theology & doctrine, we can have all the facts straight and even the truth on our side, and squash those disagreeable fools like bugs on a windshield, **and still come out the loser --- because,** we have destroyed the relationship, we've injured the fellowship and done destructive damage and harm to that person God loves.

Paul is saying that even more important than our traditions & rules, is our ability to live in community and at peace with others, appreciating, and not crushing the rich diversity among us, or even trying to get everyone to see and behave our way.

Listen to how Paul deals a divisive issue of his day, vs. 8:8-9, 13

"Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, **so that I may not cause one of them to fall.**

Paul's principle is to be willing to limit our own freedom because our relationship with God calls us to live in grace.

Because God's love guides us to love our fellow believers, we would not knowingly hinder or disrupt their spiritual journey, but motivated by love of that neighbor, we strive that all we do or say serves to build up God's people and church... **... always having an attentive concern for our impact upon others.**

The people involved, always matter more than the issues themselves for the Church is really about relationships, **that's what matters**, not a victory over someone, but to reflect God own love & healing.

True spiritual knowledge and insightful faith is when we appreciate and therefore rightly respond to God's love and mercy toward us, by being willing to limit our freedom and liberty because,

we would not knowingly hinder another's spiritual journey.

Now that doesn't mean that we never take a stand for what is right –
but it shifts our emphasis away from prideful arrogance,
from always insisting that we're right and on our own way,
to a deeper consideration and compassion for others,
and God's will for us to do no harm to other people.

Knowing when to take a stand and when to relent for love is not easy.

I find that knowing God's will can be agonizingly complicated
and that the Christian life requires great wisdom & patience,
coupled with that most necessary of commodities,
a true & caring compassion for the needs of others.

So instead of a quick and easy answer, consider Paul's guidelines
for discerning God's will during conflict & controversy, vs. 10:23-

All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful, but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.

If our chief concern is always about being proven right,
and about pushing things through and having it our own way
more than caring about the welfare and feelings of others...
then we will do damage and destroy relationships
which is to fail at bringing glory and honor to God,
or as Paul describes and explains, vs. 10:31

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.

Those of the church with differing opinions **are not our enemies,**
and they are not our advisories
to be bested in debate or through political maneuvering.

As members of the one body of Christ,
even being right, theologically knowledgeable and accurate,
gives us no warrant to injure any of God's other children.

Back in NC, if you are driving a power boat through a canal,
you will see signs that say, "No Wake Zone",
which make you responsible for the damage done by your boat's wake,
by the waves that come behind you after you have passed through,
and require you to slow down & have consideration for others.

We should consider the Church of Jesus Christ, to be a '**no-wake zone**'
where we are called to be sensitive to our impact on other people,
and try not to leave disaster and hurt **behind in our wake,**
and where we do care about how we effect the faith of others.

It's arrogant to blast through always correct - having our own way
while leaving damage, hurt and brokenness behind in our wake,
for having ourselves received grace, Jesus expects better from us,
for the basis of Christian behavior is not knowledge, love is.

In Corinthians, Paul is saying that we have to take into account

concerning those who are affected by our words and actions.
The health of the body of Christ, the Church
takes priority over our own knowledge and freedom,
and there are limitations imposed by love & grace...

... for God has called us to live and serve together as his Church,
and so our call is to hold our convictions with humility,
and to be committed to **a love & grace** that builds-up the body.

Paul is writing about *αγαπε* a self-giving and sacrificial love
modeled after the example of God's own love in Jesus Christ,
**and so given the choice between being loving or being right,
let us choose to be loving, a people of faith & forbearance.**

**As an undeserving yet beloved child of God's grace and covenant,
I want to reflect the love & mercy I've received by being someone
who tries to bring out the very best & most noble in other people.
I want the way I live to draw other people toward the grace of God.**

We are a community of faith called to love and care for one another
and one measure, is the impact we are having on other people,
who are also loved and precious to the Lord...
so, **even theological knowledge and understanding
are subordinate to God's commandment that we love...**

... as Jesus commanded in the Upper Room, John 13:34-35
I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also
should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one
another."