

## **The Way of Love** (1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

Life Way research did a study about the state of the church in America. When they surveyed pastors about their most significant struggle, pastors pointed to the disunity in their congregation. What's the cause of the division? Pastors said that much of the division last year had to do with the vastly different perspectives on issues related to the handling of the pandemic. "Some are scared to death, while others are convinced it's a hoax," said one pastor. "Trying to minister to both ends of the spectrum is exhausting."

Today the division continues and much of it seems to be related to vaccine mandates. Some insist that getting the jab is a biblical mandate and the measure of whether you love you neighbor, while others are convinced it's a precursor to the mark of the beast.

I want to submit to you that what's killing the unity of the church today is not differing perspectives on serious matters like vaccines mandates. The division is a symptom of a much deeper heart issue that has been exposed by the pandemic.

Differing perspectives on serious matters has always been and always will be a reality among Christians. But the bigger issue in many churches today is not the prevalence of disagreements, but the absence of Christ-likeness. Let me be clear, there are some essential Christian truths that we must not compromise for the sake of unity (i.e. the virgin birth, Christ's substitutionary atonement, and even issues of morality). Paul makes clear in his letters that there are times when believers should break fellowship with an unrepentant brother or a sister that is sowing discord and division in the church.

However, much of the division in the church today does not stem from disagreements about Christian orthodoxy or the church's statement of faith. The issue is not a lack of knowledge concerning the great doctrines of the bible as essential as they are to the Christian faith. The problem is not so much what we believe, but a disconnect between what we say we believe, and what we practice.

Unity, which Jesus made very clear is the distinguishing mark of the authenticity of our Christian faith, is deteriorating today. And the breakdown of this unity, which Christian must fight against to be credible witnesses for Christ, is not due to a lack of bible knowledge. Christians must grow in bible knowledge, but knowledge without love will lead to a kind of self-righteousness and arrogance that tears down rather than builds up the body of Christ. This was a major problem in the church of Corinth and continues to be a problem in many churches today.

**Main idea:** Knowledge of God's word, although essential, can inflate the ego, but love builds up the church.

This morning we are going to consider 3 ways that love keeps knowledge from making us prideful and humbly acts to lift others up.

## 1. Love Builds Up

The first way of love that we want to consider this morning is that **love builds** up whereas knowledge without love can tear down. In the previous chapter Paul dealt with questions concerning singleness and marriage and the challenges these two gifts from God can present in maintaining undivided devotion to God. In chapter 8, Paul transitions to another question, which seemed to be causing division in the church, namely whether or not to eat food offered to idols. Paul writes:

*“Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Corinthians 8:1).*

Apparently there were some in the church of Corinth who had no problem going into a pagan temple and eating food offered to idols. To clarify, the reason some in the church had no problem with this wasn't because they worshipped pagan idols.

On the contrary, as verses 4-6 explains, it was because of their knowledge that an idol is nothing, and that there is no God but one (v.4). However, others in the church, because of their former association with idols, could not disassociate what they ate from the worship of false gods.

If you recall, there were factions in the church of Corinth. And the different factions in the church were centered around their knowledge and associations with prominent leaders in the church. Some groups were more progressive about matters like eating food offered to idols, and others were more legalistic and would forbid it. But what these factions, which were divided by their contrasting views, failed to grasp was that knowledge alone was not the sole basis for how Christians decide to act.

Our actions as Christians, which can influence and impact others, are not to be compelled by knowledge alone, but by love. When a mature believer thinks about whether to take a certain course of action, he/she doesn't rely on the knowledge of their rights alone. Rather a mature believer, who is rooted in love, considers the interests of others. Although they might have the freedom to satisfy their appetites, building others up is more important to them than their personal rights and freedom to gratify their desires.

Notice that while addressing believers, whose knowledge gave them a sense of superiority and controlled their behavior, Paul continues: *"If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. <sup>3</sup> But if anyone loves God, he is known by God"* (1 Corinthians 8:2-3).

We must be careful not to interpret what Paul is saying here to mean that acquiring knowledge, especially theological knowledge, is not important. Paul is addressing those who imagined or thought they had reached a level of knowledge that gave them liberty to act as they please without regard for others. Referring to those who think that their knowledge had liberated them to exercise their rights without re-

gard for others, Paul states: “*he does not yet know as he ought to know (v.2).*”

Now Paul does not mean here that a believer can’t attain knowledge about God, but that if your knowledge about God does not lead to love for God and love for others, you don’t have the superior knowledge that you think you have. Paul makes this clear when he continues in verse 3: “*But if anyone loves God, he is known by God*” (1 Corinthians 8:3).

In other words, Paul is explaining that a person who truly has knowledge of God is not the person who feels free to act on his knowledge without regard for others. The person who has divine knowledge and understanding is one whose knowledge produces love for God.

And a person who knows and loves God will love what God loves, namely people. They will not live for themselves, but for the one who loved them and gave Himself up for them. When your knowledge of God leads you to love God you will be free not to live for self, but to build others up to know and love God.

But if your so called enlighten knowledge of God does not lead you to love and count others more significant than yourself, Paul says you don’t know as you ought to know (v.2). In fact, in 1 Corinthians 13:4, Paul is even more emphatic; he concludes, if you had all knowledge and understood all mysterious, but have not love, you have nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2).

Notice that Paul also adds that when a Christian has the knowledge that he ought to have he not only loves God, “*he is known by God*” (v.3b). When we truly know and love Him, we’re not proud about of how much we know and love God, rather we are humbled that God knows us and has set His love upon us in Christ. We’re in awe that we have been accepted in the Beloved, (Ephesians 2:6)—that as God loves His Son He loves us (John 15:9). It’s this knowledge of God’s love that liberates us to build others up in love.

This brings us to a second way that love keeps knowledge from making us prideful, and humbly acts to lift others up.

## 2. Love isn't Puffed Up

Love not only **builds up**, love is never **puffed up**. Notice that the words “*all of us possess knowledge*” in verse 1, which are between quotation marks, seems to have been a motto in the church of Corinth. To this Paul responded, “*This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up*” (1 Corinthians 7:1b).

It's important to note that the knowledge Paul is referring to, which can lead to pride and a disregard for others, is not necessarily bad theology. How many of you know good theology doesn't necessarily equate to possessing godly character or a sincere love for God? In fact, when answering the question about eating food offered to idols, Paul gives a scriptural theology of God that some in the church agreed with and yet their knowledge led to pride and lovelessness. Paul continues:

*“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.”<sup>5</sup> For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—<sup>6</sup> 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.”* (1 Corinthians 8:4-6).

Notice that while answering the question about eating food offered to idols, Paul affirms the foundational and doctrinal truth that there is only one God and one Lord Jesus Christ and therefore idols have no real existence. When Paul explains that in light of the nature of God and deity of Christ an *idol has no real existence* he's not only affirming what he believes, but presumably he's agreeing with what some in the church also believed.

Therefore, because of their belief that there is one God, the Father and one Lord, Jesus Christ by and through which all things were created,

they were able to disassociate the eating of food with the worship of idols. And because of their ability to disassociate the eating of meat offered to idols from the worship of false gods, they viewed this indulgence as exercising of their liberty in Christ.

Now although Paul seems to affirm that eating or not eating certain foods was a matter of Christian liberty, (v.8) he did not condone the actions of some who because of their knowledge felt free to eat food offered to idols. He did not condone their actions because although their knowledge of God was doctrinally sound, remember knowledge alone is not what dictates the actions of mature believers. Rather love is what compels and controls them (2 Corinthians 5:14). And because love and not just sound theology is what controls them, they consider not only their rights but how their actions could impact others.

Notice that after affirming that some in the church had correct knowledge by which they justified eating food offered to idols, Paul continues:

*“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. <sup>8</sup> Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.”* (1 Corinthians 8:7-8).

Although some in the church had knowledge of God by which they had the liberty to eat food that others offered to idols, Paul explains that not everyone in the church had the same level of spiritual understanding. There were new believers in the church, who when they saw those who had knowledge eating food offered to idols, would be encouraged to do the same. However, because of their former association with idols, when they ate the food they could not disassociate eating such food from the worship of false gods and therefore their conscience being weak was defiled (v.7).

But although some in the church, who had knowledge of God, were causing others to stumble they continued to exercise what they viewed as their liberties in Christ. They had no regard for how their actions

negatively impacted others. They had no regard because although they had knowledge about God, they did not have adequate love. And knowledge without love can so elevate a person's ego that their only concern is what is best for themselves. If someone is bothered by their actions because of their lack of knowledge, their attitude is, "too bad, they ought to know better."

Several years ago, my oldest brother, who has a serious drinking problem, was in a season of sobriety. At that time he was living with me. Well he met a woman that attended the church I Pastored at the time. When they started dating they met with me to inform me that they were a couple. Knowing that my brother has battled for years with alcoholism and that the woman he was dating indulged in alcoholic beverages, I advised her that, although I thought it was still premature for my brother to be dating anyone, if they were going to be a couple, she should abstain from consuming alcohol. They both agreed. Well, after dating for about a month they were out for dinner, and the sister in Christ that he was dating thought that to spice up the romance it would be a good idea to order a bottle of wine. Needless to say, my brother not only relapsed, but his life spiraled out of control again. Not long after the young lady ended what had become a very toxic relationship.

To this, knowledge that puffs up would say, "It's not my problem that the man is weak and has no self-control. I'm not going to deprive myself of my liberty to have a glass of wine just because the person at the dinner table with me can't handle his liquor. Am I my brother's keeper? It's my right and no one is going to deprive me of it."

This was the kind of puffed up attitude that some in the church of Corinth had and justified with their knowledge of the bible. But they didn't have the superior knowledge they thought they had. O they understood some theological truths about God, but it didn't translate into love for God. Christians, who truly love God, are *known by God* (v.2). And knowing that they are known and loved by God in Christ humbles them and compels them to love other selflessly and sacrificially.

Notice that to those who thought they had superior knowledge of God, but would not give up their entitlements for the sake of a weaker brother, Paul continues:

*“But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup> For 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? <sup>11</sup> And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. <sup>12</sup> Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ” (1 Corinthians 8:9-12).*

As Paul exhorts the Corinthians believers, are we taking great care to ensure that what we believe is our right to do or not to do does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak? Does our knowledge of God compel us to give up our rights and our preferences for the sake of others and to preserve unity or does our so called knowledge of what the bible says lead us to insist on our own way? Can you respectfully agree to disagree with a brother or sister that has a different perspective about vaccines or does your “superior” knowledge compel you to write them off and accuse them of not loving their neighbor or of taking the mark of the beast?

When our knowledge leads us to focus more on our rights than our responsibilities in a way that disregards the needs and interests of others we sin not only against our brother, who Christ died for, but we sin against Christ (v.12).

This brings us to a third truth about the way of love that keeps knowledge from making us prideful, and lifts others up to know the love of God.

### **3. Love Gives Up**

Love that is of God and that ought to compel and control our lives not only **builds up** and is never **puffed up**, but **love gives up**.



Having exhorted believers to take care that their rights and entitlements did not somehow become a stumbling block to a weaker brother, Paul concludes:

*“Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble” (1 Corinthians 8:13).*

What compelled Paul to say such selfless words, *I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble*? While the knowledge of others about God led them to claim their rights, Paul’s knowledge of God led him to give up his rights. In a similar passage, Paul exhorted the believer’s in Rome: *“Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. <sup>21</sup> It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble”* (Romans 14:20-21).

Brothers and sisters, the true test of whether or not you truly know Christ is not based on how high you can score on a bible quiz. The true test of your knowledge of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ is love. The more you know God in the person of His Son the more you will love Him (1 Corinthian 8:2-3). When you love God you will love your brothers and sisters for whom Christ died to save. And when you love others the way that Christ loved you your knowledge of Him will not lead you to cling to your Christian liberties, rights or preferences, but instead you will gladly give them up for the sake of building others up in Christ.

Does talking about giving up liberties for the good of others make you nervous? As one commentator suggests, “If nervousness sets in when an individual thinks about freedoms that he might need to give up for the common good, that is a clear indication that he is enslaved by his entitlements.” Stephen Um

When you have knowledge of God that produces love for God and others, you understand that the goal of Christian liberty is not about building yourself up; its about building others up, especially the weak. And to build up we must be willing to give up.

Recently I got a call from a former staff member of a ministry that I'm associated with. Robert, the former staff member shared with me that he resigned from his ministry to accept a call to serve as an associate Pastor at his home church. The church he serves was planted a couple of years ago and although it has grown considerably, it's not at a place to be able to offer Robert a full time salary. Nevertheless he accepted the full time position knowing that he would have to raise his own support. He called me to ask me to pray and to consider financially supporting him. While we talked, he also shared with me that the Pastor of his church was the first to commit to supporting him. In fact, the Pastor, who had 10,000 saved up to buy a house, gave all of it to Robert to help raise the support that he needs. Robert shared with me that his Pastor's selfless generosity helped to fuel his own faith at a time when he was feeling weak and questioning whether he had made the right decision.

O brothers and sisters, love builds up and it does so by compelling us to give up our time, our tastes, and our treasure for the common good of people. What enables us to love others by giving up our rights for their good? Love for others flows from our love for God and our love for God grows when we set our minds on His love for us in Christ.

Remember, after quoting what seemed to be a motto in the church of Corinth, *all possess knowledge*, Paul writes: "*But if anyone loves God, he is known by God*" (1 Corinthians 8:3). What Paul is saying here is that it's not those who boast in how much knowledge they have that are *known by God*, but those whose knowledge of God leads to love for God. And our love for God grows not by acquiring knowledge to impress God or others, but by being impressed and humbled by the thought that we are *known by God*, that He has set His love upon us, and delights in us through Christ.

Commenting on the awesome truth that we are loved by God in Christ, Martyn Lloyd Jones writes, "People often say, 'I feel my love for God is so small.' Quite right, I say the same thing. But the best cure is not to try to do things within yourself and work up some love from the

depths of your being. The way to love God is to begin to Know God's love to you, and this doctrine is the high road to that love. Therefore realize His interest in you. The God who has loved you to the extent of sending His only begotten Son to endure and to suffer all that for you loves you with a love that you will never understand, a love that passes knowledge. If we but knew God's love to us, it would revolutionize our lives. The way to love God is to begin to know God's love to you."

## **Conclusion**

Beloved, when we know God's love for us, we are set free to love others the way Christ loves us—we will love with a love that builds up, is not puffed up and that will give up even our Christian liberties for the good of others and for the unity of the church that Christ died for.

May we set our minds daily on the awesome reality that we are known by God, that He has set His unchanging and unfathomable love upon us in Christ so that we might be set free to build others up in love to the glory of Christ our Savior and Lord.