



gracefellowship

Series: Crossroads: Between Kingdom and Culture
Title: Putting Others First

Date: May 5, 2024
Passage: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Today we are moving into a new conversation Paul is having with the church in Corinth. If you remember, the first 6 chapters dealt with issues Paul heard about through a representative of the church when they came to visit him. The next several chapters give us a look at Paul answering questions that the church specifically asked him about. As they are growing in their understanding of what it means to be followers of Jesus there are many areas they have questions about when it comes to their behavior and beliefs. Remember, they don't have the NT Scriptures to guide them. Paul is writing the New Testament in real time! They probably have access to some of the earliest manuscripts of the gospels- especially Mark's gospel- but from there the church is trying to figure out how to transition from pagan religions and practices to Christian faith and practices. They are literally standing at the crossroads of the Kingdom and the culture.

This morning as we jump into 1 Corinthians 8 we are going to begin a new discussion that will basically span the next 3 chapters. Paul is going to address the ideas of the liberty we have as Christians, but more so, the love we are supposed to demonstrate.

We just read the text together a few minutes ago, so you already know Paul is writing to the people living in the city of Corinth about eating food sacrificed to idols. That's a strange thought for us today and probably no one in this room has that as a stumbling block in your life. So, while I do want to give the historical context around why this is a big deal in Paul's day, I also want to help us think today about areas we might label as "Gray Areas" when it comes to walking in the freedom Jesus gives us while also having brothers and sisters who may struggle with our freedoms.

The conversation of chapter 8 really centers around two words: Liberty and Love.

Greek view of Liberty: I can do anything I dream up!

5th century BC philosopher Protagoras wrote: "Man is the measure of all things."

In other words, there is nothing greater than man to determine what we can do with our freedoms and liberties. In many ways this philosophy of self-determination also fits modern America's view of liberty. "No one has the right to tell me what is right or wrong, good or bad. If it's good for me, it's good."

Now, weigh that thought process against the Christian view of Liberty: I consider in love my weaker brothers and sisters in the choices I make. Our decisions are not made from self-determination, but from the perspective of self-denial.

With all that in mind, let's go back and read what Paul wrote to the Corinthians again and then we will attempt to bring some cultural context to the passage.

:: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

1 Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that "We all possess knowledge." But knowledge puffs up while love builds up.

2 Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know.

3 But whoever 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 possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, 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 rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

10 For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols?

11 So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.

12 When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.

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

If you and I want meat for our meals we go to a local grocery store and get fresh cuts of meat for that juicy hamburger or steak or whatever you are hungry for. Accessing meat for meals wasn't as easy in the ancient world. They didn't eat meat nearly as often as we do. But when they did want meat there might be a meat market somewhere around you, but there was almost always a Temple around you. In both Jewish and Gentile cultures there were religious practices that required sacrifices. A portion of the sacrifice would go to the god being worshiped, a portion of the sacrifice would go to the priest offering the sacrifice and the priest's family, as a means of income, would often sell the remaining part of the meat. The places of worship served as a location to get meat for your family meals.

This is where the issue starts coming in that frames the conversation Paul is having with the Christians in Corinth: what do we do about eating meat that was sacrificed to idols?

There was a stigma, especially among Jews, about eating meats that came from a temple where false gods were worshiped. The Old Testament dietary laws restricted the Jews from eating certain meats, like pork or shell fish, or anything that still had the blood in it. A couple weeks ago we looked at Acts 15 and the council of Jerusalem where the Apostles convened in order to determine what needed to happen with Gentiles who were becoming Christians. Some thought they needed to convert to Judaism and take on the teachings of the Law of Moses. But others, like Peter and James, stood up and said, "Even those of us who were raised as Jews couldn't keep the Law of Moses! Why would we put that yoke on the neck of others?" (My paraphrase) Instead, they agreed to write a letter welcoming new Gentile converts and giving a few simple instructions:

:: Acts 15:28-29

28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:

29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.

These specific things were huge sticking points of contention between Jews and Gentiles. As God was working through Jesus to make two people groups into one family- Jew and Gentile into Christians- there were things that easily became stumbling blocks to Christian fellowship and food was one of them! The Gentiles felt a lot of liberty to eat anything they wanted. The Jews still saw this as being forbidden- even though through the ministry of Jesus, the dietary laws were lifted.

In Mark 7 Jesus addressed this with the Pharisees and His disciples.

:: Mark 7:14-23

14 Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.

15 Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

[16] [a]

17 After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable.

18 “Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them?

19 For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

20 He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them.

21 For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come— sexual immorality, theft, murder,

22 adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

23 All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

[a] **Some manuscripts include here the words of Mark 4:23**

Jesus tells us that the food that goes into our bodies isn’t not what makes us unclean, it’s what is hidden in our heart that is sinful. So eat whatever you want! But what the New Testament writers are going to do is help us think in a loving way about interacting with different people.

Paul is going to say in 1 Corinthians 8 that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up! You may have knowledge of the freedom and liberties you have in Christ, but when you are around another believer who has not discovered those same things, don’t give them a lecture or bible study trying to convince them to your side! Just love them by putting your liberties to the side.

In other words, don’t use your knowledge against someone. I enjoy watching the show The Big Bang Theory. It has the best theme song of any show out there and a great cast. One of the main characters is a genius named Sheldon Cooper. Sheldon is an astrophysicist and knows everything...or at least he thinks he knows everything! In fact, that is one of his character flaws. Because Sheldon is so intelligent, he likes to share his knowledge- but he does so in ways that often belittle or humiliate other people. He is puffed up by knowledge but very rarely demonstrates love and people constantly struggle in their relationship with him.

In our day and age we may not struggle with eating food sacrificed to idols. We would agree with what Paul said:

:: 1 Corinthians 8:4-6

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.

But maybe you have a Christian brother who is an alcoholic and is recovering from years of alcohol abuse. It would be unloving to drink in front of your brother and potential tempt him in that arena.

Or maybe you have a sister who is a vegan and struggles with people eating meat—even if it wasn’t sacrificed to an idol! You wouldn’t love your sister well if you invited her over for dinner and laid out a whole spread of meat based casseroles!

You know there is nothing wrong with having a glass of wine; you know there is nothing with eating meat. But in those instances you are wrong because your knowledge offends your brother or sister and causes them to stumble.

Kenneth Bailey said this in his book, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes, Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*:

1. You know idols do not exist. Therefore, you have the right and freedom to eat “idol food.”
2. Your responsibility to love other believers may require you to set that right aside.

Paul then brings the conversation to a huge climax and lays a serious accusation at our feet.

:: 1 Corinthians 8:7-13

⁷ But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, 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 rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

¹⁰ For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols?

¹¹ So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.

¹² When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.

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

This verse right in the middle of the passage is so powerful:

9. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

Paul appeals the stronger believer to love and sacrifice for the weaker believer. The gospel gives me power to love other believers above myself.

Next week we are going to look at where Paul draws some of this personal philosophy from when we talk about chapter 9 and draw back on the life of Jesus that Paul discusses in Philippians 2.

But here's what this might look like for us practically:

- There may be some movies you feel complete freedom and liberty to watch that you should not in the presence of weaker believers.
- There may be some books you read that you should not recommend to weaker believers. Let's just take a fictional series like Harry Potter for instance. You read the books and let your kids read them. But you have friends who see the world of wizards and spells as evil and do not want their kids reading them. Don't be the parent who lets your friend's child read the books at your house against their parent's wishes. That's not loving behavior.
- I remember having conversations with people when I was a Youth Pastor who hosted events in their homes for our students and I would have to tell them they couldn't have alcohol at any point or time while they were hosting teenagers. Do they have freedom and liberty to drink alcohol? Yes. Is it loving to do that in front of students- especially some who may grow up in houses where alcohol was forbidden for Christians? No!
- Imagine a brother in Christ comes over to your house for dinner and you are a proud gun owner and have guns laying out in various places around your house. Your guest says, "Guns make me very uncomfortable, would you be willing to put them away while I'm here?" And your response is, "No, the second amendment guarantees my right to bear arms!" Is that a loving response to your brother? And may I remind you that the constitution does not hold the same position of authority that the Bible holds.

I lost some of you on that last one, didn't I?

Here's the point, and I'm going to close with this today: **If I continue to do what offends my brother/sister in Christ, I am sinning against them and against Christ.**

Paul takes this idea so seriously that he says you don't just offend someone, or begrudge someone, or displease someone, you sin against them. And you sin against Jesus. This goes back to the question Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment. His reply was that we are to love God with all our heart, soul and strength, and love our neighbor as our self. Unloving actions toward others are sinful!

So here's Paul's response to all this: "If what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall."

Translation: My personal liberties will not get in the way of me loving people well and helping them follow Jesus instead of tripping over one of His followers and missing Him.

Do we have that same attitude and approach to loving people? When you are standing at the crossroads of the Kingdom and the culture, what things from the culture are you willing to lay down to love your brothers and sisters in Christ well?

Let's ask the Holy Spirit to help us know how to navigate this and how to listen for His wisdom and show grace to others.