

Text: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Part 1

Title: Issues of Conscience and Liberty

Truth: Christian love constrains liberty by caring about the knowledge and conscience of others.

Date/Location: Sunday August 9 and 16, 2020 at FBC

Introduction and Background

Chapter 7 addressed the Corinthians' questions about marriage. Paul moves to a new question with "now concerning" in 8:1. The subject matter has to do with food offered to idols. It was a conundrum for the people in Corinth. Some thought one way, and some thought another, so they asked how they should handle it.

Today, we don't have a thought about food offered to idols. What was the problem for the Corinthians?

- A. Idols were ubiquitous. The society surrounding the church was pagan, polytheistic, superstitious, and highly concerned about demonic spirits. If a demonic spirit were to invade a piece of meat, it supposedly could enter the person who ate the meat.
- B. Sacrificing the meat to a "good" god would cleanse the meat from the evil spirits. Alternatively, the sacrifice could have been intended to appease the god or seek some special favor from the imaginary him or her.
- C. The sacrifice was done by offering a piece of meat on an altar, which was basically like a grill with fire underneath. What was not burned up on the altar was consumed at feasts for the god to whom the meat was offered. This might have been done for an official worship function of the god. Or it could have been prepared at the temple for a social event, such as a birthday party. The food was then eaten at the temple. The temple was not only used for worship, but became something of a cultural center. The aura of the idol was never totally absent, however. Leftover meat was sold at the meat market. Consequently, you could be totally uninvolved in idol worship yourself, yet find yourself buying and eating meat that was sacrificed to an idol! Imagine looking at the meat label: "grass-fed," "free range," "cage-free," "non-gmo," "no growth hormones," and "sacrificed to an idol." Or, perhaps you would be invited to a meal at the temple. What will you do?
- D. Some Christians did not like to eat this meat because it was associated with the idol. Christian people with very sensitive consciences were bothered. Others were not concerned and took fork and knife to it!

I. Four Factors to Keep in Mind

There are four factors introduced by Paul and about which we must be conversant to address the proper handling of idol-meat. These factors are **knowledge, love, conscience, and liberty**.

- A. **Knowledge** refers to that which is cognitively known: facts, realities, and truth. This knowledge can be correct or incorrect, fairly complete on a certain subject or somewhat limited. It can contain principles that are well-known, but practiced well or poorly. Knowledge can be used well or in a damaging way, as the passage will show.
- B. **Love** is the supreme Christian virtue. It marks God. God loved us, and therefore we love Him and others (1 John 4:9). We are commanded to love our God supremely and love our neighbors sacrificially (Matthew 22:37-40, John 13:34). Love never fails (1 Cor. 13:8). God directs us even to love our enemies (Matt. 5:44). We love our spouses and children and parents. Without love, we are nothing.
- C. **Conscience** is a part of the immaterial being of every human that has to do with what you believe to be right and wrong. It renders a verdict on our actions or proposed actions based on God's initial creation of the conscience, and informed by later learning and experience. The moral law of God is the initial "programming" of the conscience as it was designed by God (Romans 2:14-16). As part of the image of God, it is a part of all people. There is no such thing as a person totally devoid of conscience, although it may be damaged, and its effect may be greatly muted by a repeated pattern of sin (1 Timothy 4:1-2).
- D. **Liberty** refers to a freedom of choice regarding a matter. "Am I at liberty to choose this or that?" If you have the option to choose, then you have liberty in that area. *Christian liberty* is more specific: there must be freedom and the choices must not be merely *legal* in a secular sense, but *divinely* legal and *righteous*. Among the things you can choose to do, they must all be righteous things, otherwise you do not have Christian liberty in those areas. Liberty runs amok if you consider the choices to be *rights* and demand that you can use them whenever or in whatever context.

Paul speaks of these four concepts in connection with each other—because they cannot be treated separately. All four must be mixed together in the right proportion to have a good Christian outcome. There are going to be problems if you have knowledge without love, conscience without knowledge, and liberty without love. Similarly, liberty without knowledge will go astray. It is to these relationships that we now turn.

II. Knowledge and Love, v. 1-3

The opening three verses summarize the situation and Paul's teaching on the matter. Verses 4-13 expand on the summary.

- A. The believers in Corinth—at least the mature ones—had a certain level of true knowledge about God and idols and meat offered to idols. The specific content of this knowledge will be given in the next section.
- B. But there is a severe danger in “knowing” that is disconnected from love.
 - 1. Knowledge puffs up. This means that it makes one proud and can cause an inflated view of oneself. This is a characteristic of the fleshly mind. It is a real evil of large amounts of education. It is present even in theological studies. A person who grasps a new doctrine, like the doctrines of grace, can become very proud that they look down upon others who do not understand those doctrines or who hold a different variation of them. What is meant to humble mankind—the doctrines of *grace*—produces an opposite result because of the pride of knowledge. Sinners tend to do that with the gifts of God, even the gifts of His special grace. See 1 Cor. 4:7.
 - 2. Christian love will make every effort to build others up rather than puff oneself up. This is the opposite of pride.
 - 3. When knowledge is prioritized over love, then pride is exalted, edification does not happen, sin occurs, and people are hurt.
 - 4. Paul does not speak of another danger—love without knowledge, as if we suppose that love can be prioritized over knowledge. This latter is the common tendency in the modern era.
 - 5. Therefore I have placed “knowing” above in quotation marks. If anyone prides himself on his knowledge, verse 2 says, then he does not know it as he ought to know it! What an irony—knowledge held with pride is not truly knowledge at all. We could say it this way: knowledge held in pride is not wisdom. We ought to know—but we ought to know truth with humility.
- C. Verse 3 initially may seem out of place. But it puts knowledge and love in their proper relationship. It is one thing to “know.” It is entirely another matter to love God. When one loves God, that proves that God knows the person, and the person knows God. In this knowledge will be an increasing measure of humility because we are growing like God and we see God for Who He is. Such love will guide our use of what we know to strengthen others instead of to promote ourselves.

III. True Knowledge, v. 4-6

Verse 4 begins with a “therefore” which follows on from the principles just stated. It is like this: “Now, let’s apply what we have just said to the situation about eating things offered to idols.” The text begins by addressing the true content of knowledge that the believer holds.

A. Idols are nothing. Read Isaiah 44:14-20. Even one as well placed as Amaziah king of Judah worshipped idols (2 Chron. 25:14). Solomon failed in this as well (1 Kings 11:4-10). In the end times, the peoples of the world will follow the same and will refuse to repent (Rev 9:20).

This knowledge is tempered by the fact that pagans make sacrifices to *demons*—that is, idols are “backed” by demonic powers (1 Cor. 10:20). The idol itself is nothing, but the connection to the dark underworld of the Devil is a bad problem.

B. God is the only true and living God. There is no other god who exists. In Isaiah 44:8, God makes this claim of Himself. Logically there can be no other gods. The Greek, Roman, and Hindu pantheons are figments of the overactive religious imaginations of man’s dark heart. So yes, there are many gods and many lords, in the eyes of the world. But there is truly only one Ultimate; only one eternal being, and that is the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Polytheism is the default viewpoint of pluralism. People say today that whatever “your” higher power is, that’s fine. If it works for you, good. But that is just another way of saying that “we” are our own gods.

C. The specific identification of our God is given in verse 6. There is one God, the Father. From Him come all things. We exist for Him, for His pleasure and for His will. There is also one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father. From Him come all things (John 1:3) and through Him all things are sustained so that we can live (Col. 1:17, Heb. 1:3).

D. The Christian confession is that God is unique, and there is no other. It is also that Jesus is God and Lord. It is that Jesus arose from the dead. We confess that God created the world, that humans rebelled against God, that each of us are sinners, that the penalty of sin is death, that Christ died for sinners, that if we repent and trust in Christ we will be saved from eternal death. We confess that Christ is coming again, and Christ is King, and Christ will reign over the world in righteousness. We proclaim that God is holy, that Christ is eternal, that God made all things, that the Spirit convicts the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. MAP