



Catalog No. 792
 1 Corinthians 8:1-13
 14th Message
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 September 9, 1990

MOTIVATED BY LOVE

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

God has been doing some surgery in my life. I trust he is using these messages to impact others, but even if he chooses not to work through me, I know one major purpose of my preaching through this book has been for God to work in me. A number of years ago I came across a quote from Marian Jacobsen's book, *Saints and Snobs*, that has stayed with me in a special way. Her words relate well with what the Lord wants to say to us this morning from our studies in 1 Corinthians. Here is what she wrote:

If any group of Christians who claim to believe and practice all God has said in His book will face up to their personal responsibility within the family of Christ, and to the real needs of Christians around them, their church will impress its community with the shining goodness of God's love—to them *and* among them. Such a transformation probably would do more to attract others to Jesus Christ than any house-to-house canvass, evangelistic campaign or new church facility. People are hungry for acceptance, love and friends, and unless they find them in the church they may not stay there long enough to become personally related to Jesus Christ. People are not persuaded, they're attracted. We must be able to communicate far more by what we are than by what we say.

That last phrase has stuck with me, because much of my ministry has been based on the persuasion, not the attraction factor.

In the eighth chapter of 1 Corinthians we come to the second question the Corinthians had asked the apostle Paul in the letter they had written to him. It involved a very thorny issue in Corinth, as it did throughout the early church: "*concerning food sacrificed to idols.*" Although this is not immediately relevant today, we will see that the deeper issue is a common problem. It is this: How much should I let other people control my actions? Paul's answer gives a principle that applies to many similar situations we face today.

William Barclay helps us understand the issue the Corinthians faced. He writes:

Sacrifice to the gods was an integral part of ancient life. It might be one of two kinds, private or public. In *private* sacrifice the animal was divided into three parts. A token part was burned on the altar... the priests received their rightful portion...; the worshiper himself received the rest of the meat. With the meat he gave a banquet. Sometimes these feasts were in the house of the hosts; sometimes they were even in the temple of the god to whom the sacrifice was made... The problem which confronted the Christian was, "Could he take part in such a feast at all? Could he possibly take upon his lips meat that had been offered to an idol, to a heathen god?" If he could not, then he was going to cut himself off from almost all social occasions.

We need to remember also that first century people had a strong belief in demons and evil spirits. They felt demons were always seeking to gain entry into people's bodies. These spirits settled on the food as a man ate and so got inside him, they believed. One of the ways to avoid that was to dedicate the meat to some god, because

they believed evil spirits would not touch food which had been dedicated to a god.

For the most part the gentiles at Corinth who had become believers had attended such meals all their lives. It was the basic restaurant of antiquity, and every kind of social occasion was celebrated in this fashion. What had happened was that after their conversion, and after Paul departed from Corinth, some of the believers returned to the practice of attending these cultic meals. They seemed to have defended their position in their letter.

Their defense rested on the fact that they knew better. They knew about idols, and they knew there was nothing to them. How can you worship something that doesn't really exist? Their attendance at these temples was irrelevant since they were merely eating with their friends and not worshipping what did not exist. They had knowledge about food also, and they knew that food was irrelevant to God. And since what they ate was unimportant to God, where they ate it must be as well. And thirdly, in their arrogance they were beginning to doubt Paul's knowledge and authority. There was a question in many of their minds as to whether he had the proper apostolic authority to forbid them on this matter.

Paul takes three chapters to answer this issue. His first concern in the verses we will look at today is the ethical basis of their argument. Their problem was primarily in their attitude. How relevant that is to our world today! Of course, we don't struggle with meat sacrificed to idols, but we do struggle with similar issues that are relevant to our culture. Take drinking, for instance. Or dancing. We could discuss the merits of Christian schooling, public schooling or home schooling for children. We could talk about different styles of worship. We could make a list, and the list would be different in every culture. But, as we will see, the list is unimportant. What is crucial is the ethical basis on which we make decisions.

In these verses we will be faced with two different ways of dealing with ethical issues. We see those two ways explained in vv. 1-6.

I. Examining a difficult issue: Two contrasting solutions

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but loves edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him. Therefore concerning the things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we exist through Him. (1 Cor 8:1-6 NASB)

Notice that following Paul's mention of the problem of eating meat sacrificed to idols what follows seems like a non sequitur. It doesn't seem to have anything to do with what he has just written; he doesn't talk about eating or food or idols at all. The real problem is much deeper than the surface issue. Thus Paul goes right to the heart of the matter. In verses 1-3 there is a contrast between two ways, two solutions to dealing with difficult issues: the way of love and the way of knowledge. I believe there are two points Paul is making in these verses.

A. The evidence of maturity is love, not knowledge

Both of these ways are described in v.2:

knowledge puffs up
but
love builds up

I would define the way of knowledge in this way: *Those who use their knowledge to benefit themselves.* This is contrasted with the way of love, which in this context would be: *Those who use their knowledge to benefit others.*

Paul reminds the Corinthians that their emphasis is totally wrong. The purpose of our faith is not knowledge, but love, says Paul. He begins by stating, "We are aware, along with yourselves, that we all possess knowledge." Knowledge was preeminent in Corinth. They were enthralled with human intellect and eloquence. The word of wisdom and the word of knowledge were preeminent gifts in Corinth. They are the first two items in the list of spiritual gifts in chapter 12; and speech and knowledge receive special billing in contrast to love in chapter 13. In their minds being spiritual meant having knowledge. It is probable that in the Corinthians' letter they had used the word "build up" with reference to knowledge. That was certainly their conviction—that it was knowledge that built up. Paul's words would have stung deeply. Not only does knowledge not build up, it puffs up.

Knowledge on its own, particularly the kind of knowledge paraded by those Corinthian experts, only puffs up, leaving its possessors like an inflated balloon. Knowledge is important; we all possess some, but on its own it is inflated and empty. A Christian needs to be filled with love because love builds up. Prick a balloon and it bursts; lean on a wall and it holds your weight. Knowledge used selfishly merely creates pride. It makes you feel superior. It doesn't make any difference which side you are on in the argument, on the side of freedom or on the side of restriction, knowledge tends to create pride. Those on the left look down their noses on whom they regard as uptight Christians, wondering when they are going to grow up into true freedom. Those on the right react the same way, looking down their noses, and wondering how others could possibly regard themselves as Christians and do the things they do. It doesn't matter which side you are on. Knowledge puffs up. It is love that edifies. The evidence of maturity is not knowledge, but love.

In verses 2-3 there is a second contrast drawn between the way of love and the way of knowledge. The principle is this:

B. True knowledge is found in one who has discovered how to love

There are a number of textual variants in these verses that have given rise to different translations and different interpretations of what is being said here. I have translated vv. 2-3 this way:

If anyone thinks he has arrived at knowledge,
he does not yet know as he ought to know;

but
if anyone loves,
this one truly knows.

I don't think Paul is saying, as some translations render it, that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing (which is true). He is making the much stronger statement that if anyone thinks he has arrived, that he is in the know, that very fact is evidence that he doesn't have the real thing. Like the one who "thinks he is wise" in chapter 3, the one who thinks he has knowledge is self-deceived; true knowledge has eluded him. True knowledge is not found in the mere accumulation of data, nor even in correct theology. When that correct theology has helped me to live in love with those around me, then I really begin to understand what knowledge is all about. Further, it is at that point that I also begin to learn how much I don't know.

Paul begins this way because he basically has no argument with the Corinthians' theological premise. But he knows that what they are doing with their knowledge is wrong—and that is the more serious problem. So he begins by qualifying their understanding of knowledge itself. Our behavior as Christians is not based merely on our knowledge alone—that can lead to pride and the destruction of others—it is based on love, on the use of that knowledge to help and benefit others.

The tyranny of "knowledge" as the basis for Christian ethics has a long and unfortunate history in the church. When you finally have your theology together, it is tempting to use it as a club on others—and this happens from those on the theological right as well as those on the left.

This doesn't mean that knowledge is either irrelevant or unimportant. It is both relevant and important. Paul agrees with the Corinthians' understanding of the nature of God. In fact, in agreeing with them he makes one of the most powerful theological statements in the letter, in verse 6, in his emphasis of the uniqueness of the only God. The God whom Christians worship as Father and Son stands in singular contrast to all the others who are thought to be gods but are not. In fact, one could preach an entire sermon based on the theology of v. 6 alone, dealing with the activity of the Father and Son, etc. But I do not think Paul's concern is with philosophical theology, but with the practical implications to the situation at hand. In v. 6, instead of saying all things exist for him, he says we exist for Him. The point is that we exist for God's purposes. We have a relationship to him that ultimately must determine how we behave and relate to others. Knowledge is important, but it must always lead to love.

I am always leery of teachers whose enticement to follow them is the promise of leading you to "deeper insights" or "special revelation." Such appeals are invariably made to one's pride, not to becoming a more loving Christian. While it is true that insight leads to freedom, we must be careful not to allow knowledge to become a demand for freedom and the insisting on our rights. This is what was happening at Corinth. Biblically, knowledge is never an end in itself; it is only a means to a greater end, which is the building up of others. That is what Paul wrote to Timothy. "The goal of our instruction is love, from a pure heart and a good conscience, and a sincere faith."

All theology goes back to a basic watershed of two ways of thinking. First, there is the mind of Christ, which is revealed in Philipians 2. Christ was equal with God, but he regarded that equality as an opportunity to serve. He used his advantage to advantage others. He humbled and lowered himself in order that society might be rich and redeemed. By contrast, there is the mind of Satan. He was a cre-

ated being, but he was superior to other creatures in many ways. He was the most glorious and knowledgeable of all the angels, but he recognized his superiority and saw it as an opportunity to use his advantage to disadvantage others and to serve his own selfish desires.

Thus, we have two minds: the mind of Christ, which seeks to humble itself to serve others, and the mind of Satan, which exalts itself to serve its own interests and destroy others.

This raises a critical question which all of us must ask: Is my knowledge of all that is mine in Christ helping me to become more loving and genuinely caring for the needs of others, or is it making me more arrogant and selfish?

In verses 7-13, Paul spells out in detail the principle shared in 1-3, that love, not knowledge, is what builds up, therefore love is what knowledge is all about.

II. Analyzing the solutions: The advantages of the way of love

However, not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow becomes a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble. (8:7-13)

There are three distinct advantages revealed in these verses of the way of love.

A. Love frees me to see clearly

After returning to the question of food offered to idols, Paul points out that there are some Christians in Corinth who have not really grasped the truths he has just explained. The Corinthians' defense of their eating at temples was, "Everybody knows there is nothing to idols." We often base our action on the assumed idea that everyone understands. But that is not always the case. And Paul says that this certainly wasn't true in Corinth. Some people still think that the idols are real and can therefore contaminate the eater. Though they may tell themselves that the god is only an idol and that an idol has no reality, the fact is that their former way of life is woven into their consciousness and emotions in such a way that these past associations cannot be easily disregarded. For them to return to their former place of worship would mean once more to eat food as if it were truly being sacrificed to the god, just as it had been all their former years. It is love that allows me to see the situation clearly. You think you are building up the weak by giving him your so-called "knowledge," but in essence you are tearing him down and you can't even see it. Love allows us to see others clearly as well. It allows us to see our fellow Christian as the brother for whom Christ died, not just as a good friend in our church or someone in the Sunday school class. The real presence of Jesus in our brothers and sisters is easy to ignore, but Paul says that when we act in such a way that wounds our brother's weak conscience we are actually sinning against Christ.

We probably ought to state clearly at this point that the weaker brother in this discussion is the one who is hyper-sensitive on such issues; the over-legalistic, narrow-minded Christian who tends to cut out anything in his life that is doubtful, just in case it might harm his relationship with God. Paul admits that such a condition is a weakness—and it is obvious that the apostle would want such a weak person to grow. But what I would like you to see is that he does not attempt to persuade him to change his position here. In fact, he doesn't address him at all. His emphasis is directed at the strong man who has been freed by the truth. And his exhortation to this person is to voluntarily restrict his freedom. It is the strong man who must readjust to help the weak, not vice versa.

What do we do with weakness? Do we trample on it? Do we flaunt our strength and show off our freedom in the face of weakness? No. The Christian perspective on weakness is compassion. It is not to make people feel inferior and rejected, but to reach out and help.

There is a second advantage:

B. Love frees me to evaluate accurately

The question that one is faced with in this section is, "Shall I indulge in what I feel free to do?" Paul says that the action is irrelevant. The important issue has nothing to do with food. It is not really important whether you eat the meat or not, whether you drink the wine or not (we could go on with the list). I am no better if I do or if I don't. The significant issue is my brother's or sister's spiritual life. If I am going to compare my momentary act of freedom and my brother's growth, there is no comparison. Because of that evaluation, it may be true that what we want to do is unimportant compared with the possible danger to another's life.

We need to state clearly that the issue here is not the offending of another, but the possibility of injuring someone spiritually. It is matter of someone's conscience being weak, not of someone's prejudices being irritated. There are many instances where people are offended by actions that have nothing to do with losing their faith or hindering their growth. That is not what Paul is talking about here. If that were the case, we could hardly do anything without offending someone. Jesus offended a lot of people. He offended the Pharisees. He offended the Sadducees. He offended politicians. He offended the Jews, and he offended the Gentiles. In fact he was a master at offending people.

Paul is referring to acting in such a way that another will be damaged by our behavior. He is talking about people who, if they emulated us, would be in danger of destroying their spiritual life.

Finally:

C. Love frees me to sacrifice willingly

Paul's conclusion in v. 13 is this, "Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble." When it is a case of actually hurting another, I will gladly practice self-control.

For the Corinthians (and, I fear, for some of us as well), knowledge implies the right to act in "freedom." Thus freedom becomes the highest good because it truly helps and exalts the individual. Biblically speaking, however, the opposite is true. It is love that prevails. This implies the free giving up of one's rights for the sake of others, because life together, in community, is the aim of salvation. That is true Christian freedom.

What a dramatic change of lifestyle it must have been—from “playing the Corinthian” to “being a Christian”! It must have caused tremendous tension in terms of socializing and hospitality. The tendency of one with a weak conscience is to withdraw into the Christian community.

There was a crucial need then, as there is now in the church, for Christians to be properly taught on the things that really matter.

God desires to see our Christian consciences become much more robust. He wants the gospel to penetrate every moral cesspool in the Silicon Valley. If that is going to happen, we are going to have to be less, not more, concerned about doubtful things. We need to have stronger, not weaker consciences. But there are many Christians for whom such strength is a distant dream. And if they are going to grow stronger, we need to be patient, non-judgmental, sensitive, and absolutely committed to the building of the body as a whole. Remember, people are attracted more than they are persuaded.

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