

Love Trumps Liberty: 1 Corinthians 8

Introduction:

Good morning, please turn to 1 Corinthians 8 in your Bibles. As you turn there, let's remind ourselves of what's come before in the book. It is always important to place the text of scripture in its appropriate scriptural context. Paul has been levying heavy charges against the church at Corinth, because they are a divided bunch of people. They have written to him about these issues, divisions and factions, and Paul is addressing their concerns while pushing towards a greater point: mutual love & unity in the church. The issue to which Paul is responding in chapter 8 is no different. The reason that we think he's addressing something that was written to him is that he begins with the phrase "Now concerning..." He has used this same phrase 3 times, and it also indicates a break from the previous issues of sexuality and marriage, though the train of thought remains the same.

To give us a bit of historical context, temples during Paul's time were not how we often envision them today. They were a place of worship and sacrifice, but they were also cultural centers and, in fact, banquet halls. People would bring their sacrifices to the god that they were worshipping and then they would eat the feast with their families. If there were leftovers, other people would be welcome to join in. If there were still leftovers, they would be sold at the market. To this point, some Jews wouldn't even eat meat if they could not secure their own butcher because they would have nothing to do with idol worship.¹ You can imagine how this might present a problem for followers of Christ who are living in a city filled with such temples.

Let's look at how Paul deals with this issue that the church is having.

Knowledge, Love & Pride

Read verses 1-3

Paul begins his correction of the church at Corinth, by sidestepping their question, which was probably something like this:

"Paul. Some of the guys have been going to the Temple to eat dinner once a week, and some of the new guys have been complaining about them. Now, we all know that there's nothing wrong with this, because the idols aren't real, right? So what should we tell them?"

Paul saw that there was a division in the church, among believers. There were some that were hell-bent on people never entering the idol temples, and those who didn't see it as a such big deal. So, like Paul often did, he sidestepped the issue at hand in order to line up for the kill. He wanted to show them the root of their issue.

He begins: "all of us possess knowledge" (1a)

¹ N T. Wright, Paul for Everyone, [2nd ed., --for Everyone: a Major New Series of Guides to the Books of the New Testament (London: SPCK, ©2004), 97.

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There is an assumption being made by the church at Corinth, that everybody knows a particular truth, and Paul says that this truth is what is making men and women in the church prideful and pompous.

"This knowledge puffs up, but love build up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know." (1b-2)

So a particular piece of knowledge has some people feeling elated, prideful, perhaps better than others. And as we will see in the coming verses, this is knowledge about God. We often refer to these things as doctrines, truths about God.

How, then does knowledge puff somebody up?

Let me give you an example. My oldest son, **Judah**, is in the beginning stages of potty training, which is fun and more than a little bit frustrating. As a matter of fact, just about the only fun thing is that he wears Batman underwear. Earlier this week, after I had repeatedly asked him if he needed to use the bathroom, he said no and peed in the corner. Which is cute right? Unless you're cleaning it up. I got frustrated! Because who wants to clean up pee! I asked him over and over!

You see, my understanding and ability to listen to my body had made me arrogant and ignorant of what my son understands. He's 2. He is learning. I wrongly expected that my child should already have this understanding, when he hasn't learned yet.

When someone reaches a point of understanding, very often they can forget the journey that led them to that very point, further they can neglect the differing experiences of other people. In other words, their knowledge lacks love.

This kind of knowledge is "knowledge which makes men proud, and is not regulated by a desire of edifying."² - John Calvin (Calvin, 273)

Ambrosiaster said, "Paul means that knowledge is a great thing and very useful to the person who has it, as long as it is tempered by love."³

The knowledge that is being discussed is not the problem. Instead, the problem is the heart of the people.

So, Paul takes them down a peg.

² Jean Calvin, vol. 20, *Commentary On the Epistles of Paul the Apostles to the Corinthians, Calvin's Commentaries*, 500th ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 273.

³ Gerald Lewis Bray, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture. New Testament, vol. 7, 1-2 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, ©1999), 75.

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"But if anyone loves God, he is known by God." (3)

Paul brings relationship into the equation.

Those who are redeemed by the blood of Christ are those that love God, and God knows them. This is meant to be disconcerting for the Corinthian church and for us. God knows us. This is not a casual knowledge of likes and dislikes, of hobbies or location, but an intimate knowledge of a person's heart, mind, motive, spirit, demeanor and loves. The God of the universe knows everything about you, and that knowledge should shake you to the very core. For that means that God knows every sinful thought and motivation that you possess. Paul comments on this in Romans 3 by saying that there is "no one good, no not one." That is emphatic. God KNOWS us, brothers and sisters, and he knows that our best moments, days, works, loves are inherently infected by sin.

"the knowledge of God humbles us..." this is what Paul means when he says, "as we ought to know." **In our understanding of God, we ought to be continually humbled and filled with thanksgiving, not filled with self-righteous pride.**

Therefore, anyone whom God knows ought to be walking in love and not arrogance, for God, in his knowledge of us, was not arrogant, but full of compassion, he sought us out.

"We do not know God, but he knows us. This is why Christ said: 'You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you' (John 15:16). This is the fruit of love and the death of pride."⁴ - Chrysostom

Pride dies at the foot of the cross.

After addressing the nature of knowledge and love, Paul turns to the two opposing groups, the legalists and those who prefer Liberty. He first turns to the legalists.

To the Legalists (4-6)

This is incredible doctrine and theology that we must adhere to as Christians. Let me reiterate, we must adhere to this theology. "there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through him."

Many people take Paul's words here and champion them, while divorcing them from the scriptural context. They ignore Paul's argument and instead focus on these words. For example, the Watchtower Society (also known as the Jehovah's Witnesses) take the line "there is but one God, the Father" and ignore Paul's exaltation of Christ as LORD. We must take both. **This is a**

⁴ Ibid, 75.

foundational text on the relationship of the eternal Father and the eternal Son and their unity within the Godhead.

Then, Paul quickly compares the idols (created things) to the uncreated God. And the idols pale in comparison. They aren't things at all friends! There is no need to fear them, or to avoid them, because a man made them, they don't possess power or position any more than the wood or stone from which they were formed.

This is true doctrine. And it is important that we know and understand things like this, because it helps us to better know and understand God and what he is like. Who he is. What he does.

He places the idols that sit in temples and the emperors who sit on their thrones in Rome in contrast to the Triune God who breathes out stars. There is no comparison. It would be like comparing a spec of sand to Haley's comet.

So, Paul confronts the legalists who have their theology wrong, and addresses the nature of God. He tells them about who God is and what he has done. He comforts them and reminds them that these 'so-called gods' in these Temples are, in fact, nothing. But he never chastises them. He never calls them to repent. He corrects them.

This is because Paul is laying the burden at the feet of the other group in the church.

To those who prefer Liberty (7-13)

HOWEVER,

I love the transition here, because Paul does not deny the doctrinal truth that he has just laid out, but he turns to cut the legs out from under those who would abuse this doctrine to the neglect of their brothers.

"not all possess this knowledge"

Clearly there are people in this congregation who don't understand the doctrine that Paul just laid out, or there would be no conflict.

"But some..."

Paul identifies the people as those who used to worship the idols. Those to whom the idols are real in a way that people who haven't worshiped them don't understand.

"their conscience, being weak, is defiled."

Paul, here begins to lay out his argument against this group, because they are missing the love that needs to accompany their understanding of God.

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“Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better of if we do. **BUT take care that this right of yours does not somehow become and stumbling block to the weak.**” (8-9)

As we have already seen, these idols don't have power in light of the majesty and presence of the God of the Bible, so the act of going to the temples is not one that Paul really up in arms about. It is a-moral. It is neither good nor bad. What he is concerned about is the weaker believers in the body of Christ.

Many people stop here and take this verse and make a defense for abstaining from alcohol, which this verse can certainly apply to, but it misses what Paul is attempting to show the church at Corinth. This is about the relationship of the brothers who are firmly rooted in the Gospel to the younger believers who are still sorting some of these things out. **It is not about abstinence, but it is about discipleship.**

I have been in more than a few heated discussions over what is referred to as Calvinism. I remember once, after hearing John Piper preach at a conference, wrestling through some of the doctrines of grace and discussing them with a dear friend of mine. Another older brother who was with us at that point snapped at me, and told me that if I didn't agree then I was just wrong. Immediately, I was cold towards him.

Why? Because I wasn't being allowed to work out those thoughts. I wasn't being allowed to have a discussion, but I was being told what I “had” to believe.

“It won't do simply to tell people to give up the deep inner ideas they have at the moment and adopt some other ones instead; even if they go along with you, their conscience — the very thing you were trying to re-educate! — will be deeply troubled, will be telling them they're in the wrong place.” - N T Wright⁵

I have since, come around on these doctrines and thoughts about God quite a bit, but I had to work it out and process it. This older brother who was calling me to agree with him, was not doing so in a spirit of love, but in a spirit of arrogance.

It is the job of the older brother to lead, guide, disciple, teach, love, direct the younger brother to understand, embrace, remember, love and enjoy the grace of Jesus. The church at Corinth was failing at this.

Paul continues, “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?”

⁵ Wright, 103.

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Paul is arguing that by not walking in relationship with younger believers and instead enjoying your 'rights,' your liberties, your grace in that fashion you are actually calling them to worship another god. You are calling them to idolatry. This is key to understand, what Paul is concerned about here is the worship of God. Many people apply this text to a number of different issues, but it must be understood that Paul is talking about Christians going to worship idols because they don't understand.

Later in this letter, Paul tells the church at Corinth to *flee from idols*. Why would he have to do this unless there were CHRISTIANS who were also worshipping idols. This is a MAJOR problem that is caused by the supposedly 'more mature' believers. Followers of Christ are supposed to be calling people to worship the one, true God, not to walk away from him.

"But you must be careful in case this 'right' of yours leads you to do things which will lure the 'weak' brother or sister back into the old life." - N T Wright⁶

Does your love of liberty trump your love for others?

"And so by your knowledge this weak person is **destroyed**, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." (11-13)

Paul is calling the Corinthians away from the edge of legalism and likewise, away from licentiousness, or the abuse of God's grace. That is, the thought that "well since my sin is forgiven, and therefore my sin has no bearing on my relationship with God, then I can do whatever I would like to do to no consequence." People who ride this kind of thinking neglect that sin is not only an offense to God, but that it is also a declaration to others. There is a horizontal effect of your actions. This faction at the church in Corinth was not connecting their actions to the people around them, but they were isolating them to their relationship with God. Friends, we are not merely individuals who walk with God, we are a community of faith who seeks to walk with God, and as such we must walk together.

"Those who wound a weak conscience sin against Christ. He considers the concerns of his servants to be his own. Those who are wounded make up his own body. These people are destroying the work which Christ built up by his own blood."⁷ - Chrysostom

Are we discipling and taking care of one another?

Are we teaching one another?

Are we loving one another?

⁶ Wright, 105.

⁷ Bray, 79.

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Let's think again about the situation.

If John saw Larry eating at the table in the Temple, and John used to be an idol-worshipper, then John would have concerns about Larry. Yet, if they know one another, and there is mutual love and concern for one another, then John might just ask Larry about what he saw instead of making accusations. Love must permeate our relationships, even in disagreement.

Conclusion:

This can seem like a big burden that Paul is giving to us to practice. How in the world am I supposed to love these people? Friends, here's the heart of the text. We are *all* the weaker brothers, and there is one strong elder brother: Christ. "In my weakness, he is strong." Christ did not merely expect us to get things right through theology, but he walked with the disciples, and laughed with them, wept with them loved them. He walks with us, laughs with us, loves us, weeps with us, and cares for us. This is the command that Paul is working out for us, "Greater love has no one than this, that a man would lay down his life for his friends."

Believers: Are you discipling others? Are your words and actions colored with love? Or are they full of judgment and self-righteousness?

Young believers: Are you seeking understanding? Is someone discipling you? If not, ask someone.

Non-believers: If you're just trying this whole Jesus thing out, understand that we are not perfect people, but we serve a God who is incredible, and walks with us through our issues and problems. He does not leave us in our sin.

God, knowing all of the depths of our sin and depravity came to us and loved us, now, empowered by that love through the Holy Spirit. Let's love one another.