

### *Knowledge in Service to Love*

<sup>CEB</sup> **1 Corinthians 8:1** Now concerning meat that has been sacrificed to a false god: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes people arrogant, but love builds people up. <sup>2</sup> If anyone thinks they know something, they don't yet know as much as they should know. <sup>3</sup> But if someone loves God, then they are known by God. <sup>4</sup> So concerning the actual food involved in these sacrifices to false gods, we know that a false god isn't anything in this world, and that there is no God except for the one God. <sup>5</sup> Granted, there are so-called "gods," in heaven and on the earth, as there are many gods and many lords. <sup>6</sup> However, for us believers, there is one God the Father. All things come from him, and we belong to him. And there is one Lord Jesus Christ. All things exist through him, and we live through him. <sup>7</sup> But not everybody knows this. Some are eating this food as though it really is food sacrificed to a real idol, because they were used to idol worship until now. Their conscience is weak because it has been damaged. <sup>8</sup> Food won't bring us close to God. We're not missing out if we don't eat, and we don't have any advantage if we do eat. <sup>9</sup> But watch out or else this freedom of yours might be a problem for those who are weak. <sup>10</sup> Suppose someone sees you (the person who has knowledge) eating in an idol's temple. Won't the person with a weak conscience be encouraged to eat the meat sacrificed to false gods? <sup>11</sup> The weak brother or sister for whom Christ died is destroyed by your knowledge. <sup>12</sup> You sin against Christ if you sin against your brothers and sisters and hurt their weak consciences this way. <sup>13</sup> This is why, if food causes the downfall of my brother or sister, I won't eat meat ever again, or else I may cause my brother or sister to fall.

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The city of Corinth was on the eastern end of a major trade route between the Adrian and the Aegean Seas. It was a large seaport and populated by merchants and customers from all over much of the eastern Mediterranean region. The diverse cultures and ethnicities of the city brought with them their religions. Consequently, Corinth was filled with shrines and statues to gods from much of the known world. Animal sacrifices were an important part of the worship in pagan temples, and at certain public religious festivals, the meat from the animal sacrifices would be fed to the public. For those who were poor, and they were the vast majority of the population, this was probably the only time that they were able to eat meat.

The rest of the time, after animals were sacrificed their meat was consigned to local markets for sale. Only the prosperous members of society could afford to buy meat. Pagan temples were multi-purpose, used for ritual sacrifices, but also serving as banquet halls and community centers. Wealthier Corinthians would be expected to attend social functions such as weddings or other family and business celebrations at these temples. Meat from the animal sacrifices would be part of the menu. Not eating the offered meat would be awkward and perhaps insulting to the host.

In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, he responded to issues and questions that had been sent to him from the church there. One of the issues raised was the eating of meat that had been offered to idols. Those who weren't well off had never had meat except at public pagan ceremonies and so, for them, meat was completely linked to pagan worship. Those who were wealthier had eaten meat under various circumstances and had served it in their own homes, so the mental association of meat with idol worship wasn't nearly as strong.

In addition, new converts to Christianity hadn't absorbed the concept that idols were simply wood and metal and stone with no power or value. They had chosen Christ over the gods they used to worship but they hadn't fully realized that there was only one God and all the others were nonexistent. So those who were newer to Christianity, especially if they weren't part of the upper class, were very likely to equate eating meat from sacrifices with idol worship.

Some of the members of the church in Corinth wrote to Paul about this issue. The phrase "All of us possess knowledge" is probably a direct quote from the letter of questions that they had

sent to Paul. The phrase, “we all possess knowledge” is like when we say, “Well, everybody knows that such and such is true.” The attitude of those writing to Paul seems to be that those Christians who fear defilement from idol meat are simply ignorant and superstitious. They probably expected Paul to set the record straight and encourage the weak to move into spiritual freedom. So, in Corinth, idol meat was a hot-button issue dealing with the boundary between the church and pagan culture and the strained relationship between rich and poor members of the church.

Paul, however, doesn’t respond in the way that they anticipated. He sees the situation in terms of the relationship between knowledge and love in the Christian life. Now, Paul isn’t against knowledge. Paul often says, “We know this or that” and he agrees with those who wrote to him saying, “We know that a false god isn’t anything in this world, and that there is no God except for the one God.” The prophet Jeremiah had a colorful description of idols. He said, “They are no different than a scarecrow in a cucumber patch: they can't speak; they must be carried because they can't walk. Don't be afraid of them, because they can't do harm or good.” (Jeremiah 10:5 CEB) So Paul agrees that idols have no power, no meaning, and no worth. So meat that was part of a sacrifice to an idol is still just meat.

But there’s more that must be considered. Verse two says, “If anyone thinks they know something, they don’t yet know as much as they should know.” The more we know, the more we should realize how much more we don’t know. Some members of the congregation in Corinth don’t yet understand that there aren’t any other gods, that idols are only wood, stone, and metal, and that meat is just meat. However, the folks who wrote to Paul only consider what they know, and don’t consider the way their actions might bear on those who don’t know. They have knowledge but not love. They have the liberty and the right to eat meat, but the well-being of the weaker members of the church must be considered. The church isn’t a privileged guild based on intellectual strength. The church is a community of people who wander off in wrong directions but respond to the outstretched arms of God. Knowledge by itself doesn’t save us. God’s love for us, God’s grace saves us.

Saying “we all possess knowledge” is ignoring or excluding those in the church who don’t share their opinion. This attitude of, “Well, everybody knows. . .” is condescending and arrogant. Paul repeatedly talks about the sin of being “puffed up.” (1 Corinthians 4:6, 4:18-19, 5:2) In chapter thirteen of this letter to the Corinthians he famously writes, “If I have the gift of prophecy and I know all the mysteries and everything else, and if I have such complete faith that I can move mountains but I don't have love, I'm nothing.” (1Cor. 13:2 CEB) And “Love never fails. . . . As for knowledge, it will be brought to an end.” (1Cor. 13:8 CEB) Knowledge that isn’t put to work in love, knowledge that becomes a stumbling block for another, is wrong. Jesus warned against placing a stumbling block in front of others. “As for whoever causes these little ones who believe in me to trip and fall into sin, it would be better for them to have a huge stone hung around their necks and be drowned in the bottom of the lake. (Matthew 18:6 CEB)

Rather than being arrogant about their knowledge, the folks in Corinth need to focus on love, specifically, loving their fellow Christians. Love isn’t just a sentiment. It works, it acts, it does things, and it builds up both the giver and the recipient. It changes the one who is loved and the one who loves. It’s a transaction, yes, but both parties benefit.

Martin Luther expressed the dichotomy and the tension clearly when he said, “[A] Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” (*Three Treatises* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1970) 277)

Today’s passage in First Corinthians brings two questions to mind. First, what idols do we unwittingly worship today? Like people all through history, we’re immersed in our culture and we unknowingly devote ourselves to cultural beliefs and practices. What are the appropriate relationships between the church and the culture? What cultural gods do we show more devotion to than to God, who gave us this world and dwelled with us as Jesus Christ? What are our possible idols – wealth, fame, influence, personal comfort, physical beauty, power, national pride, or pursuit of extreme experiences? Put another way, to whom or to what do you belong? When something

takes over and runs your life, that's idolatry. It could be work, your health, wanting a boat, or even a relative. What sub-cultures claim our loyalty? When do they become more prominent in time and money than our relationship with God? There are many fine groups that we can allow to suck up more time and money than we devote to our faith. Examples include Masons, Shriners, Eastern Star, college fraternities and sororities, DAR, ACLU, NRA, Lions, Rotary, Elks, VFW, and AARP. Be on the alert for possible idols in your life.

The second issue for us today is to avoid actions that might jeopardize another person's faith. There may be greater risk of doing that than we realize. In our culture that puts such high value on individualism, we can be insensitive to how we affect others. And like those ancient Corinthians, it's so easy to feel smug when people do things out of superstition or odd fixations. After all, we know better!

Anything less than love is condescension or pity. Really true, really important knowledge is that God knows and loves us – all of us, from the least to the greatest by whatever standard you wish to use. All people are precious in God's sight.

Applying the teaching in today's text can be complex. This is NOT about avoiding dancing or dressing in a certain way that might cause offense to others. The entire Christian community should not be hostage to the standards of those who hold the narrowest or most legalistic view. If a course of action is clearly the right one and failure to do so would cause harm, then one shouldn't fail to act because it would cause hurt feelings.

This lesson applies only to those situations that might actually jeopardize the faith of others. The folks in Corinth had the freedom to eat the meat – and the freedom to *not* eat it. Paul told them, "Christ died for this person and you can't even change your diet? Don't be so focused on your own freedom that you disregard you effect on weaker members." Love takes precedence over the exercise of freedom. When others might be sucked back into idol worship, what is the loving thing to do? We must first recognize today's idols and take care that we don't let our freedom influence those who are still too weak to resist falling into the trap of worshiping them instead of God. Amen.

Don't let knowledge puff you up.  
Be aware of life's idols and  
don't do anything that would  
tempt another to stray from their faith.