

Let love dominate all you do

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Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God. 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. 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 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 not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall. (1 Corinthians chapter 8)

Introduction

This passage tells us that we need to let love dominate all that we do. We need to think about the consequences of our actions upon others. If an activity, though justifiable in one way from Scripture, might lead another believer to sin, then we must not engage in that activity, at least not in the presence of that

other believer.

We need to understand the background for what the apostle is talking about here. Much of the meat that was for sale in the markets had previously been offered in sacrifices to idols. There was a difference of opinion amongst the believers as to whether it was right in God's sight to buy and eat such meat. Some believers were quite happy to buy such meat and eat it, since they reasoned that the idols to which the meat had been offered had no power, and so any ceremony that had previously been performed as the animal was slaughtered was of no consequence. Other believers had a bad conscience about eating what had been previously offered to an idol, as they felt that by doing so they would be participating in the worship of idols, which something which is very wrong in God's sight. The danger was that if those who were happy to eat meat which had previously been offered to idols ate such meat in front of those who did not think it was right, those who thought it was wrong to eat such meat might go ahead and eat. In the process they would violate their consciences, which would lead to serious problems in their spiritual lives. The apostle says that those who have the spiritual knowledge that meat that has been previously offered to idols is no better or worse than meat that has not need to use that knowledge in a loving way. They need to be careful that the exercise of their freedom to eat does not lead their fellow believers to go against their consciences and so sin.

The issue of meat that has been offered to idols is not one which concerns many Christians in this country today, although it is still quite a hot issue in other parts of the world. But there are still issues over which Christians disagree, and where we need to be careful over the exercise of the freedom that we think we have, so that we do not encourage someone else to violate his conscience. Some examples of issues where Christians have differences of view are the use of alcohol, watching films or going to the theatre, dancing, and the use of the Lord's day. In more general terms, what the apostle says here has relevance to our lives in general: we need to be careful in general that we do not act in such a way as will lead other believers to sin.

What the apostle says can be divided into the following sections:

1. What counts is not so much knowledge as love, vv. 1 – 3.
2. Being able to justify your actions from Scripture does not make them always right, vv. 4 – 8

3. The welfare of your brother is more important than the exercising of your freedom, vv. 9 - 13.

1. What counts is not so much knowledge as love

In verse 1 Paul says "Now about food offered to idols, we know that we all possess knowledge." He may be again quoting back to the Corinthians what they said in a letter to him, as he has done at other points in this letter, but, as it has been at those points as well, his answer is "yes but". Yes indeed, he concedes, we all possess knowledge, or at least many of us. But we need to make sure that the knowledge we have leads us to act in a loving way, otherwise it is not real knowledge at all. He then makes a memorable statement of his own: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Mere knowledge by itself, if it does not result in us being loving in our thinking and acting, will simply lead to pride. It will lead to our heads getting puffed up with our own conceit, like a balloon gets puffed up with air. Just as the balloon has nothing really inside it, so the person who is puffed up with conceit does not really have anything of any worth in his head. Whereas true knowledge leads to love God and to love others, and therefore will build others up.

The Greek word that the apostle uses for "love" here is that unique word in the Bible which describes the love which God has for his people, and which we are to have for God and for one another, the word "agape". If you love in this sort of love, you are concerned not for your own happiness or pleasure, but for the well-being and happiness of the other person. You are thinking not so much of yourself as the other person. And the apostle says that if you have this sort of love, rather than being puffed up about yourself, you will act in a way which helps the other person to grow in his knowledge and love of God, and therefore to be a happier person.

The apostle then adds, in verse 2, "The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know." If our so-called knowledge has led us to be proud about it, and to look down on others whom we feel have inadequate understanding, then we do not have any real knowledge at all. Whereas the person who has true spiritual knowledge will love God and be loving towards others. This person, says the apostle, is loved by God.

Now what the apostle says here has application to matters far more widely than the issue of food offered to idols. It has an impact upon our whole approach to

the study of the Bible, and of Christian doctrine. We must not misunderstand the apostle. He is not saying that it is bad to have spiritual knowledge. Again and again in this letter and in other letters he commends spiritual knowledge and understanding, and urges believers to seek to deepen their understanding, and prays that their understanding will grow. But the whole point and purpose of growth of understanding is that we should become more loving. If our study of the Scriptures does not generate this love in us, we have completely missed the plot. Later on in this letter, in chapter 13 verse 2, the apostle says that "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." In 1 Timothy 1.3 the apostle urges Timothy to teach the truth. He says that the "goal of this command is love." The whole point of teaching the Scriptures is that God's people might have love.

I expect all of us have known some professing Christians who have claimed a very detailed knowledge of the Bible, and who can give a very clear explanation of the great doctrines of the faith, and who will very vigorously refute errors held by Christians and non-Christians, and yet who are proud, self-righteous, harsh and unloving. Such people, the apostle says, have not even begun to understand the truth.

But what about you, what about me? It is easy to see the fault in others, but how much do we really love? Those of us who are married, how do we treat our spouses? Those of us who have children, how do we treat our children? Those who are living in a family, how do you treat your brothers and sisters, especially when they annoy you? If you are in business, how do you treat the person at the other end of a telephone when you have a complaint to make? How do you treat other church members, especially those who you feel have hurt you? How do you treat your neighbours, especially those who make your life a misery with their loud music? If we are unloving towards others, then even if we can give a very clear account of Biblical doctrines, we really are just babies in Christ. Surely if we really understand the Gospel, and if we really understand that we have been saved from going to Hell by the grace of God alone, that we have been chosen by God not because of our virtue but because of his love, then we will be the most loving patient and kind people on the face of the earth. What a tragedy that sometimes total unbelievers seem to be more polite, more patient, and more considerate than those of us who profess to understand the great mysteries of the faith! We need to examine ourselves, and if necessary humble ourselves before God and seek his forgiveness, and seek him to truly know his

love in our lives.

2. Being able to justify your actions from Scripture does not make them always right

In verses 4 to 8 the apostle concedes that those who are happy to eat meat that has previously been offered to idols have a strong case in Scripture. He says in verse 4, "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world, and that there is no God but one." It is quite true, he says, that an idol has no power of its own. There is only one God. He gives reasons for this in the following verses "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 one God, the Father, from whom all things came, and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came, and through whom we live."

Now what the apostle says here is very important for our understanding of the Bible's teaching about God. The "gods" and "lords" of this world are not gods in the true sense of the word at all. They have no real power of their own. They are an illusion. In reality they are just lifeless and powerless lumps of stone and wood. Sometimes they *do* seem to have a power, but as the apostle says later in chapter 10 verse 20, that power is not from the gods but from demons who operate under the guise of the gods. The gods themselves are lifeless and powerless.

By contrast with the gods of this world, there is in fact only one being who can truly be called God, and that is the God who has revealed himself in the Bible. But this God of the Bible has revealed himself as consisting of more than one person. Three persons are revealed in Scripture: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each one of them can properly be called God. They are not "gods" with a small "g" like the gods of this world which have no power of their own. Each of these persons has in himself the attributes that can only properly be ascribed to God, such as eternity, omnipotence (being all powerful), omnipresence (that is being present everywhere), omniscience (knowing all things). Each one can and should be rightly worshipped. Yet there is only one God.

In this passage the apostle mentions two of the persons of the Godhead, the Father and the Son. You see how there is an exact parallel between what Paul says about the Father and what he says about Jesus Christ. About the Father he

says there is but one God, about Christ that there is but one Lord, and throughout the Old Testament the word “Lord” is ascribed to God. About the Father, that he is the one from whom all things come, about Christ that he is the one through whom all things come; about the Father that he is the one for whom we live, about Christ that he is the one through whom we live. Clearly Jesus shares the same divine nature as the Father, and is to be worshipped and honoured alongside the Father.

What the apostle says here should be very helpful for us when we are tempted to worship idols, or when we are tempted to give them too much importance. Remember that the idol you are tempted to worship is no god at all. That car, or computer, or money, or status at work: they cannot save you from going to Hell. They cannot give you satisfaction in your life. They cannot take away your sins. They cannot give you peace in your soul. They are powerless, dumb, deaf, and dead idols. The only God who is to be worshipped is the God of the Bible. Live your life for him, not the idols of this world.

So the apostle is saying here that those who are happy to eat meat that has previously been offered to idols have got the weight of Scriptural truth behind them. They are absolutely correct in their doctrine of God. Those who have scruples about eating meat that has previously been offered to idols are really operating under a defective view of God, and are attaching too much significance to idols.

Moreover, he says in verse 8 that “food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat and no better if we do.” In an echo of what the Lord Jesus says when he says that what goes into a man’s mouth is not what makes him unclean but what comes out, the apostle says that food is really irrelevant to your Christian life. You are not a better Christian if you abstain from certain foods, nor are you a worse one. Food is a matter of indifference, of no direct significance.

But, says the apostle in verse 7, “not everyone knows this.” Not everyone understands these truths in the way that those who are happy to eat meat previously offered to idols do. Some people still think of gods as having real power, at least subconsciously, and so if they eat meat that has been previously offered in sacrifice they think of it as having been offered to an actual god. So they feel guilty if they do so. And if a person acts in a way that they feel guilty about, then according to Scripture, they are sinning. As the apostle says in a

parallel passage in Romans 14, in verse 23, “the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not proceed from faith is sin.”

So the point the apostle is making is this: even if you can find Scriptural arguments to establish the freedom you believe you have to engage in the particular activity you want to engage in, that does not necessarily make it right for you to engage in that activity. You need to think about the effect you might have on your fellow believer. Will your fellow believer who sees you do what you do be led to copy you, and do the same, even though he feels guilty about doing so? If so, do not do the thing you are thinking of doing, for the sake of your fellow-believer who has what the apostle calls a “weak conscience”.

3. The welfare of your brother is more important than your freedom

The apostle goes on to speak in verses 9 to 13 of the great importance of fellow believers, and the terrible sin of being an occasion for them to stumble into sin. He says in verse 9, “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.” You have got the “right” to eat meat that has previously been offered to an idol. But be careful in case your exercising of your “right” leads to your weaker believer being led to stumble. Here the apostle is echoing what the Lord said, as recorded in Matthew 18:6: “But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” Even the most apparently insignificant fellow believer is of infinite value to God. Do not do anything which might lead him to sin.

This is reinforced by what the apostle says in verses 10 and 11. “For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, won’t he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.” Your fellow Christian is a brother. He is someone for whom Christ died. If he is led by your actions to violate his conscience he will be “destroyed”, not in the sense of going to Hell, but in the sense of having his Christian life seriously harmed. How can you hurt someone who is so valuable to God?

This reasoning continues in the next verse, “When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their conscience, you sin against Christ.” The Bible tells us

again and again that what you do to Christ's people you are doing to Christ. If you show love to Christ's people you are showing love to Christ. If you injure Christ's people you are injuring Christ. How can you show contempt for Christ by showing contempt for Christ's people? He died for you! Surely this must mean that you love him, and so love his people.

The apostle concludes in verse 13, "Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall." He says that the welfare of his brother in Christ is so important that he is prepared never to eat meat again in the rest of his life, if it will prevent his brother from falling into sin. The well being of a fellow Christian is far more important than the exercising of my personal freedom in this or that matter.

What the apostle says here has application to many areas. Clearly, in matters where there are differences of opinion with other believers, we need to be sensitive to the consciences of others. For example, you may be persuaded that drinking in moderation is acceptable for you as a Christian, but you may happen to know that your brother in Christ may believe that as a matter of principle Christians should not drink at all. In that case the loving thing for you to do is to keep your views to yourself, and certainly not to drink alcohol in front of that believer.

Again, you may have fairly "liberal" views as to the observance of the Lord's day. You believe it is a day for remembering Christ and meeting with God's people, but you may not have any problem about, for example, playing football on a Sunday. However, your brother in Christ may have a very strict understanding of Sunday as the Sabbath day, and very particular views as to what should and should not be done on the day. In this case you should keep your opinions to yourself and not do anything which will cause distress to your fellow believer.

But the passage has implications for a much wider range of issues as well. When you get dressed, you need to think, "Could the way in which I am dressed lead my fellow believer into sin. Am I going to be a source of sexual temptation for my brother or sister in Christ?" Parents, we are told not to exasperate our children. What does that mean, if it is not to provoke them into sin? We need to be careful, especially when we discipline our children, that we do so in a way which is manifestly fair and right, and is not clouded by our own personal mood or anger. We need to speak to our children with love, as fellow human beings

made in God's image, and, potentially at least, our brothers and sisters in Christ. We should not provoke them to sin by being patronising or by saying cruel or unkind things.

The same is true for relationships in general. We need to be sensitive to other people, and think of the effect upon others of what we will do or say. That comment or joke that we make may be at one level legitimate, but is it upbuilding? Will it do good to the other person, or will it cause distress. We cannot just blame other people and say to ourselves, "they shouldn't be so sensitive." If you know someone is very sensitive on a matter, it is not necessarily loving to tackle the issue head-on. Look for some other way of broaching the subject or dealing with the issue that will not provoke your brother to have sinful thoughts towards you.

Overall, what is to be the rule for our actions? Love. We are to think not "what do I want to do?" but rather, "what will do the most good to my brother or sister in Christ?" and then we are to do the thing which is the answer to the second question. How can we consistently love in this way? Only by coming to Christ and receiving from him his forgiveness, and then by constantly meditating on the love that he has for us.

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