



LOVE IN DIFFERENCE

Sunday 19 June 2022

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Paul planted a church in the sophisticated Greek city of Corinth – the Manhattan or Las Vegas of the ancient world. It was a cosmopolitan and promiscuous city of sex, drugs and idol worship. A city teeming with all sorts of practices and times. These young believers were caught between two kingdoms.

The letter of Corinthians 1 is really a series of short essays answering issues and questions in the church that were resulting in arguments and division. Questions about leadership tensions (chapters 1-4), issues about sex and marriage (chapters 5-7), about charismatic gifts and community etiquette (chapters 11-14), questions about resurrection (chapter 15); and right in the middle we are back at the table addressing this issue of eating meat associated with idolatry (chapters 8-10), but you have to read the whole chunk to make sense of it because Paul takes several tangents so I will just try and explain the book ends of the argument.

"Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that "We all possess knowledge." But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God." (1 Corinthians 8:13)

Paul only gets half a sentence into this divisive issue and he can't wait. He immediately gets to the very heart of his core answer to the whole letter of Corinthians on all the issues, which is that freedom is always constrained by love. *Love trumps knowledge or rights or gifting.* Knowledge puffs up. Ain't that the truth! When we think we know something, we feel we have something on other people. We feel superior. We have power or influence... Knowledge exalts the possessor, but love exalts the recipient. And Paul's point here is not that knowledge is bad, but that there is often a critical gap between 'knowing' something and the way that 'knowing'

is expressed and lived.

And notice also a core approach to how Paul deals with this issue is, as D.A. Carson puts it, his "Yes, but" argument and it's right through Corinthians: "Yes. Yes, we possess knowledge, but knowledge puffs while love builds. Those who think they know something... but whoever loves God is known... Yes, you can get married - but it's also good to stay single." And he does this with spiritual gifts: "Yes, you can have all the gifts - but if you don't have love you are a noisy gong." There are some points where Paul is blunt and he has nothing positive to say, like in the case of incest in chapter 5; but when it's not a matter of sin, when it's a disputable matter, Paul is always trying to acknowledge both sides of the debate and come back to the core motivation of love. Read the whole letter and see how often you see this...

Ok back on track: in v4: "*So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols...*" What's happening here? In the streets of Corinth there were many temples dedicated to many gods and out the back of many of those temples were marketplaces, including butcher shops. It may seem cruel to you but animals were routinely killed in temple rituals. And so what are you going to do with all those dead animals? Some of the meat may have been burnt up. Some would be essentially barbecued and part of the ceremony was to have a temple feast and eat it at tables before the idol (sounds a bit like the food court at Westfield, the temple of materialism). But there is still too much meat to eat and so some would go out the back door and be sold in the meat market. Maybe because it was used in the temple some people saw this as special meat endowed with the powers of the gods it was offered to protect them? Or maybe it was cheap meat, and who doesn't like a bargain! I'm not sure which one it was.

So, the Corinthian church is debating and dividing over whether you can eat the meat from the temple butcher or not. Sounds trivial? Well in that city it was as important as halal meat is to a Muslim today, or no meat to a vegetarian.

Now, for many of the Corinthian Christians, they had knowledge that lifted them above the Corinthian culture. They understood two fundamental truths:

"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." (1 Corinthians 8:4-6)

For some, the knowledge of the gospel had resulted in a new worldview: that an idol is nothing more than stone or wood. While there are counterfeit gods in the culture and there are spiritual powers, there is no God but one God. These people have a truth that

strips away the superstition of the culture, that puts the cultural practices and idols in right perspective, that dethrones them. They know better. They are free from the old superstitions. They are free to eat whatever they want - a scotch fillet is a scotch fillet.

"But, Paul says, not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled." (1 Corinthians 8:7)

Many believers are still so enmeshed in the culture they were raised in that they don't yet see things this way. When they eat at one of these temple feasts or even purchase meat from the temple butcher, they still feel like they are right back there worshipping Apollo, or Dianna, or whatever other idols, or at least propping up the pagan economy. Their conscience is screaming at them, "Run away from this."

A weak conscience is not as you would think - "people going soft on sin" - it's the opposite. It's people with a basic and undeveloped understanding of the knowledge of the Kingdom, still thinking in pagan categories of right and wrong. Interestingly Paul doesn't want to just say they've got it wrong and they need to just grow up and understand the truth, because he wants people to act in line with their conscience not silence it. Isn't that interesting? Someone's conscience may be well informed or misinformed, but don't squash it because it's part of what makes a person God's image bearer.

I like it when politicians get a conscience vote. It reminds me that they are not just always having to follow party lines. I guess that's the privilege of being an Independent, that every vote is a conscience vote. And part of what makes us not like your pet Fido is that you have an inner moral voice, a sense of right and wrong. And regardless of whether your sense of right and wrong is right or wrong with regard to the truth of the gospel, it's better to mature a person's conscience than squash it.

So here is the but: whether your conscience is strong or weak, Paul says, *"food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do"* (1 Corinthians 8:8). Don't get too worked up in either direction because this is not a matter of salvation but of conscience situational to the person.

So Paul goes on:

"Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ." (1 Corinthians 8:9-12)

The real issue, then, is NOT "how do you get the person with the weak conscience or undeveloped knowledge to be more knowledgeable?" But if you are the one with the strong conscience or developed knowledge to set aside your rights and freedoms for the sake of the other! I think in our language Paul is talking about empathy here. You may be the smart one in the room, but is intellect numbing your sensitivity to the people around you? Is your IQ killing your EQ? Are you blind to the emotional needs of those around you? What good is having justified rights and freedoms and puffed-up knowledge if it causes a brother or sister to stumble? When we all get to heaven God is not going to do a round of Bible trivia with you. He is not going to see if you went to Bible College or got a MBA or a Doctorate of whatever... Nor is He going to check how well you exercised your rights and freedoms.

What counts is how you extended the table of your life and love because, Paul says, anyone who loves is known by God. God says, "That's my child. See how they love!" So, you say to yourself, "Ok, I think differently, but am I causing someone to stumble or am I damaging the church of Christ?"

Lets get practical here:

- Sure, I don't need to be committed to Christian community - it's not a salvation issue - but is my freedom causing my kids to stumble in their own formation?
- Sure, I don't need to serve in a Christian community - it's not a salvation issue - but is my freedom causing others in the church to burn out because they are carrying all the load?
- Sure, I'm free to go on a holiday with my girlfriend - it's not a salvation issue - but does my freedom cause others to fall into temptation?
- Sure, I'm free to drink alcohol - it's not prohibited by Jesus - but when I go out with a mate who had a drinking problem, is my freedom really all that thoughtful?
- Sure, I'm free to live a really affluent lifestyle and Instagram every moment of it - it's not a sin to be wealthy and happy - but is my freedom causing someone to miss out, or feel like that's the perfect vision of life, or they're a failure if they don't have it?

What are the tables of our Western Culture that we are sitting at that we have to stop and think. "How is my being here affecting others? Do I need to constrain my freedom to love well?"

Paul puts it this way in chapter 10, verse 23-24, *"I have the right to do anything," you say - but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything" - but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.*"

Did Christ stand on His rights? He knows everything, but He limited Himself. He had legions of angels to call on, yet He didn't stand on His rights. So you ask, "Sure, I could act

differently - but am I damaging the church of Christ?" We limit ourselves to love others.

In chapter 10 Paul puts it this way:

"If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience." (1 Corinthians 10:27-28)

"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God - even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved." (1 Corinthians 10:31-33)

Or as he says back in chapter 8, verse 13, *"Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall."*

In the end, do what brings glory to God and do not do whatever may hinder the church of God or people on their journey to salvation.

Does all that mean that we just ignore false beliefs and let everyone follow their conscience no matter where it takes them? No, we can be fundamental on the core and flexible on the fringes. There are plenty of things to divide over: politics, human sexuality, liberal, conservative, end times, sovereignty vs free will, church governance structures, social justice or evangelism, activity of the Holy Spirit, hymns or Hillsong... It's never-ending, just like it was in Corinth. But what unites us is more important: the nature of God, the cross, the empty tomb, and the way of salvation. For over 1500 years the Apostles' Creed has provided a good foundation for unity - a core foundation:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

I think we need core beliefs to unite us, but make sure they don't puff us up; and that our primary motive is not being right, but being loving and thinking carefully about how we speak truth and live truth in love. We need to think about what will bring God glory and what will be beneficial for the people around you and promote the mission of God. As we do this, you create more room for others at the table of your life.