

There's More than 'Meats' the Eye

Series: GRAY AREAS: Following Jesus when Things aren't Black and White # 1

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Introduction: When we were very young and learning things like numbers, shapes and colors, we all started off with the basics.

When you learned shapes, you did not start out with octagons and hexagons. You started out with circles, squares and triangles.

When you started learning about numbers and math you did not begin with multiplication or division. You learned to add and subtract, fractions, and then it got really crazy when numbers and letters got thrown together. $2x + 1 = 7$

When it came to colors, you started out with the primary colors. Red, yellow, blue, then green, black, white, orange and maybe purple. To our young and untrained eyes everything was one of those colors. As we got older, we learned there were different shades of every color and that you could mix the colors to make new colors and variations of colors to the point you were not sure which category it belonged to. Is it blue or is it green? No. It's blue green!

As we move through life things we believed to be simple become much more complicated.

The same is true of our faith. The farther we go in our journey of faith we find some things to be a little more complicated and nuanced than we first thought.

This was part of the struggle the believers in Corinth were having. They were a hot mess. They were struggling to live out their faith in a toxic environment.

They were wrestling with their moral and ethical decision making. As the tensions and uncertainties concerning these things accumulated, questions mounted and so they asked Paul to help them navigate through these issues.

As we look at this passage, keep in mind, the issue is not just what we can and can't do. It is not just about our freedom in Christ. It is about our responsibility to the church, gospel community and the Great Commission.

Let's Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

1Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that "We all possess knowledge." But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. 2Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. 3But whoever loves God is known by God.

4So 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." 5For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), 6yet 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.

7But 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. 8But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

9Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. 10For 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? 11So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. 12When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13Therefore, 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." (NIV) **PRAY**

The first verse says, "**Now about food sacrificed to idols.**" I know what you're thinking. "It's about time we talk about something relevant to my life! Some of you woke up this morning wondering, "Can I eat this ham and sausage or not?"

At first glance, you might think there's no way this text applies to you. That's why I entitled this message '**There's More Than Meats the Eye**'.

Corinth was an ancient city in Greece. It was in many ways the most prominent Greek metropolis of Paul's time. ***It was intellectually arrogant, materially affluent, and morally corrupt.*** 1 Corinthians is the most problem-centered letter in the NT.

To understand this passage, you need to know the city of Corinth was also an extremely religious place. The streets were lined with temples devoted to the worship of pagan gods like Aphrodite, Poseidon, Apollo, Hermes, Venus, and others. Animal sacrifice was part of worship, just like in the Jewish culture. So, a person would take an animal to the temple.

William Barclay said the sacrifice would be divided into three parts.

- One part would be burned on the altar.
- A second part would be given to the priest. He might use it or sell it.
- The remainder would be given to the worshipper, where he could take it back home and eat it or he might sell it at the market.

The Corinthians were not sure whether it was OK for Christians to eat this meat. It's not that they were vegans, or vegetarians, or members of PETA. It's that most of the meat being sold in the marketplace was meat that had been used in pagan worship of false gods.

Some historians note that this meat was often some of the best in town. Other scholars think that it would have been practically impossible to find meat for sale that had not been somehow linked to these temples and that some of the poor may only have a chance to eat meat at these sorts of festivals.

So, when the Corinthians went to their version of Food Lion or Harris Teeter, there was a pretty good chance that the lamb chops and the ribeye steaks were from an animal that had been sacrificed to an idol.

But that wasn't the only hang-up for the Corinthian Christians. The pagan temples were not only places of worship and sacrifice; they were social venues as well. If you were going to have a birthday party, or a wedding celebration, or retirement party you could have your celebration there.

Imagine living in 1st century Corinth that's saturated with idolatry. And then one day you hear a man named Paul talking about how there is only one God who sent His Son Jesus from heaven to earth. He came and lived a perfect life to fulfill the law, died a sacrificial death for the sins of man, rose from the dead and gives eternal life to people who repent of their sin and place their faith in Him. And now suddenly, because of your commitment to Christ, everything has changed - your worship life, your business life, and your social life. This was a serious challenge for these Corinthian Christians.

But over time that the Apostle Paul had been gone two teams formed in the church: Team Meat and Team No Meat; or Team Liberty and Team Legalistic.

Team Meat were Corinthian Christians who had grown in their faith and understanding. Their reasoning went like this. "We have accurate spiritual knowledge. And this knowledge is that there is only one true God. These idols aren't real." How can you worship something that really does not exist? How can we deliver these people from their idolatrous ways if we act as though what they do is real?

Team No Meat were appalled at the idea. "We used to go to those temples, and we used to worship those idols. Therefore, the question arose among the Christians: "If a Christian eats meat offered to an idol is he/she not participating in some way in the worship of that idol?" God saved us out of that, and there's absolutely no way that we should have anything to do with that again. **It's wrong for me, and it's wrong for thee to eat that meat.**"

You recognize immediately that this is a problem still common in the church today. Some Christians will not have a Christmas tree because that custom originated with the pagans of Northern Germany who decorated a tree at the winter solstice. There are others who will not use Easter eggs because that originated with the

pagan spring festivals when the egg, the symbol of fertility, was offered to a pagan goddess.

I would add that if they are going to be consistent, they ought not to use the names of the days of the week either because they are named for pagan gods. There is "sun"-day and "moon"-day; there is "Thor's"-day (Thor was the god of war in the pantheon of the Norse); and there is "Woden's"-day (Wednesday), and all of these are pagan names.

In fact, the names of the months are pagan names. January is named for the Roman god Janus, the two-faced god who looked backward to the old year and forward to the new. March was addressed and dedicated to Mars, the god of war in the Greek pantheon. [\[story - Neighbor next door\]](#) This is the kind of thing what they were wrestling with there in Corinth.

Here's what we need to understand, and this might be a new idea for some of you. **There are gray areas in the Christian life!**

In fact, the title of this sermon series for the next few weeks is: GRAY AREAS: Subtitle: Following Jesus when Things aren't Black and White.

Gray areas are issues that the bible does not take a strict stance on or does not discuss in depth. Instead, **the Bible gives Christians the liberty to make God-glorifying decisions based on their convictions.**

Some Christians say, "Since the bible doesn't address it, it must be ok to do it." Other Christians, based on Scripture, see compelling reasons not to do it.

How do we navigate these gray areas? How do we live and worship together when we disagree on these gray areas?

This topic is so important that it takes Paul 3 chapters, (8,9,10) to cover all he wants to say. But while the Corinthians wanted a yes OR no answer, Paul gave a YES AND NO answer.

First, Paul gives...

I. THE BLESSED PRINCIPLE: YOUR KNOWLEDGE MUST BE BALANCED WITH LOVE.

V1, "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that 'We all possess knowledge.'" See how that is in quotes? Paul is quoting the Corinthians. They were saying, 'Paul, you don't have the corner market on spiritual knowledge. We all possess knowledge.'

Paul says, "Yes, I know we all have knowledge." Then he lowers the boom: **"But knowledge puffs up while love builds up."** 'Puffs up' means to inflate with pride. Before he deals with their public behavior he shines a light on their inward attitude. He says you're theologically correct, but you're spiritually wrong. You've allowed this knowledge of God to make you more arrogant and prideful about who you are. Your spiritual knowledge has inflated your ego.

Now, let's be clear. The problem wasn't having too much spiritual knowledge. He wasn't saying you're too smart for your own good. Christianity is not an anti-intellectual movement.

God never blesses ignorance. In fact, God tells us to pursue and have knowledge. Because a lack of knowledge is spiritually devastating.

Isaiah 5:13, **God says, "Therefore My people have gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge."**

Hosea 4:6, God says, **"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge."**

Prov. 4:5, **"Get wisdom! Get understanding!"**

Paul's point is not to stop gaining knowledge. Jesus said, **"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."**

A. Knowledge is ESSENTIAL, but not SUFFICIENT.

Christian liberty and freedom are almost always defended from the point of view of knowledge. Paul points out that their knowledge is correct; but,

First, "knowledge puffs up"; knowledge creates pride; it makes you feel superior. It does not make any difference which side you are on, on the liberty side or the limited side, knowledge tends to create a sense of pride.

ILLUSTRATION: Our word *sophomore* is instructive at this point. Sophomore comes from two Greek words, *sophos*, which means wise, and *moros*, which means foolish or moron. The word sophomore, then, literally means **"wise fool."** It alludes to the fact that a sophomore is far enough along in the educational process (the second of four years) that he/she is likely to know just enough to be dangerous—and just enough not to want to learn more. As someone put it, "The best substitute for being wise is being sixteen."

The apostle also says there is something else wrong with knowledge:

Secondly, knowledge is always incomplete. He says, "If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know."

Whenever we have a view that some attitude, or action, or freedom that someone exercises is wrong, we are always seeing things only from our point of view. We don't consider that perhaps their view of things may be as right, or even more right, than ours.

ILLUSTRATION: In his book, The Discoverers, Daniel Boorstin pointed out that "the greatest obstacle to discovering the shape of the earth, the continents and the ocean was not ignorance but the illusion of knowledge." People "knew" that the world was flat and couldn't believe those who said otherwise. Nothing can set back learning as much as the presumption of knowledge.

Paul shifts the emphasis from knowing to loving. The key to the Christian life isn't knowing all the answers. The key to the Christian life is loving God and loving each other. Remember the two great commandments.

All this is building up to Paul's argument that something else is needed to settle these kinds of problems. Knowledge is not enough. [pastor baptizing a dead infant] **Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.** Knowledge, in other words, is self-centered, but love tends to build up and edify.

B. Three advantages of Love over Knowledge.

First, knowledge tends to generalize. All of us possess knowledge. "Everybody knows that this is true." We base our action on an assumed idea that everybody understands the reason for what we are doing. But love does not do that. **Love individualizes.** Love says, "Not all possess this knowledge. Not everybody is acting out of the understanding that I have come to. They may not see things the way I do."

Many Christians struggle at that point. Do you flaunt your strength and show off your freedom? No. The Christian view is help them. Do not put them down; do not make them feel rejected. Reach out and help them along.

Secondly, love evaluates clearly. The struggle is, "Shall I indulge in what I feel free to do?" Paul points out that, it is not that important whether you eat meat or not.

We are to consider our influence upon others and weigh the fact that what we want to do may not be very important at all, compared with the possible danger to another's spiritual life. We are our brother's keeper.

Thirdly, if you exercise your freedom at the expense of a brother and sister in Christ, we are being a "stumbling block."

There are two major categories of sin in the Scripture.

Sins of omission – When you should do something, but you don't.

Sins of commission – When you shouldn't do something, but you do it any way.

This could be called the sin of Loveless Liberty.

In many situations today, where arguments arise over these kinds of things, **it is not a question of somebody's conscience being weak; it is a question of somebody's prejudices being irritated.**

Knowledge puffs up a person, but love builds up a church. Knowledge may make a person smart, but love makes a church strong. Knowledge that sticks to the mind but does not touch the heart is dangerous.

Warren Wiersbe said that **knowledge without love is brutality. But love without knowledge and truth is hypocrisy. We need to have both.**

That's why Paul says later in 1 Corinthians 13:2: *"And though I have the gift of prophesy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."*

As one pastor used to say, **"Some Christians grow; others just swell."**

He wraps up this point in verse three with something amazing. **V3, "But whoever loves God is known by God."**

Notice Paul doesn't say that if you know a lot of God's Word, then you are known by God. It's not about information. It's about love. If you love God, then you are known by Him. When your love is attached to your knowledge, it creates something awesome. It creates...a relationship.

So first, "Your knowledge must be balanced with love."

Then Paul moves to his second point. He gives...

2. THE BIG PROBLEM: YOUR 'RIGHTS' CAN CAUSE OTHERS HARM.

V4, "So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: **(Now that we have the principle we can see the problem.)** "We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one." He's quoting them again. He's agreeing with their knowledge. 'You're right, idols aren't real."

V5-6, "For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), 6yet 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." (NIV)

You've got the correct theology." Now, he gets to the problem...

V7-8, "But 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. 8But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.” (NIV)

The problem was the more mature Corinthian Christians were saying our spiritual knowledge gives us rights. The went from “my knowledge” to “my rights” because they were acting without love.

Their rights were negatively affecting other believers who didn't possess the same knowledge. Paul says your rights are a stumbling block to other believers. V9-11, ***“Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. 10For 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? 11So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.” (NIV)***

He doesn't say your rights distract other believers; it destroys them. It leads them away from Christ. It doesn't give you the right to influence a less mature Christian into doing things that don't affect you but might destroy them.

It's never right to claim my rights at the expense of leading other Christians down the wrong road.

In fact, that's the last point Paul makes. He gives...

III. THE BEST PRACTICE: In essentials, UNITY; In non-essentials, LIBERTY; In all things, LOVE

V11-13, ***“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.”***

Their attitude toward meat was not wrong. Their assessment of idols and idolatry was not wrong. But their dismissive, selfish and uncaring attitude toward others was wrong. We are our brother's keeper.

I am not talking about those people who have their spiritual soap boxes and hobby horses and get offended if you say Happy Holidays instead of Merry Christmas or because you have a fall-festival or trunk-or-treat on Halloween.

True biblical knowledge will not lead us to be less loving.

A. IN ESSENTIALS, UNITY:

That means that there are the things that are black and white: Belief in God...belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord...belief in the Holy Spirit.

One of the early statements of Christian beliefs was called The Apostles' Creed.

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

Was crucified, died, and was buried

On the third day he rose again

He ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father,

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

The communion of saints,

The forgiveness of sins,

The resurrection of the body,

And the life everlasting. Amen.

The AG has sixteen fundamental truths

Those are the essentials – and in the essentials, we must have UNITY.

B. In NON-ESSENTIAL matters, we give each other LIBERTY.

Think about some Christian taboos you grew up with. Maybe you grew up being told that Christians aren't supposed to dance, play cards, or go to movies. You might have been told that Christian men must have short hair, and Christian women can't wear make-up. Somebody asked Adrian Rogers, "Dr. Rogers, do you think it's a sin for women to wear makeup?" He said, "I think it's a sin if some women don't wear makeup!"

Or that boys and girls do not go swimming together ("mixed bathing").

Think about other Christian taboos. Christians don't smoke. Christians don't drink. Christians don't cuss. Christians don't pull for Duke, because they're the blue devils. [\[story of Peggy Morgan\]](#)

Is smoking wrong? One story I read about a pastor's very first church in North Carolina, in tobacco country. He said they had a picture on the back wall of the church, showing one of the deacons smoking a cigar. They didn't think it was wrong. Most of those people were tobacco farmers.

In our world today, there are lots of issues on which equally committed Christians disagree: For example...

Drinking: some Christians point to a verse in the Bible that says, "Do not get drunk," and they say Christians should abstain from alcohol.

—other Christians say, "Didn't Jesus turn water into wine? Wasn't that His first miracle?" "It says don't get drunk, not that you can't drink at all.

Some people have said, "Well, if social drinking is okay, what about smoking pot? The Bible doesn't say anything about it, and if God created it, it must be ok to smoke it. There's no verse that says, 'Thou shalt not smoke pot.'

One guy, was talking to another guy, and he said, "What's wrong with smoking pot? God made pot." His friend said, "Yeah, God made poison ivy, but I don't see you rolling around in it."

Dancing: Some Christians say, “Look, there’s dancing in the Bible—King David danced for joy!”

—other Christians say, “Yeah, but his dancing wasn’t like the bumping and grinding and that’s going on today.”

War: some Christians point to the verse that says, “Thou shalt not kill,” and they say war is never justified

—other Christians point to the wars fought by God’s people in the Old Testament and say that sometimes, war cannot be avoided

Tattoos & Piercings

Worship Styles: some Christians point to verses that say, “Make a joyful noise to the Lord!” and they say, “We ought to’ have worship that’s loud.”

—other Christians point to verses that say, “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him” and they say our worship services should be quiet and reverent.

Coffee – HE brews

What Are Some Other Examples of Gray Areas?

Dating, kissing, gambling, lottery tickets, clothing, music, movies, television, birth control, spending your money, home schooling, working moms, etc.

Every one of the topics mentioned above are either never discussed in Scripture or are discussed only briefly.

Here’s what you must understand: As strongly as you might feel about these issues, the bottom line is that they fall into the category of **NON-ESSENTIALS**.

Let me bring this home. The rights BOX.

There are certain actions the bible says are wrong no matter what (10 commandments, i.e. murder, lying, cheating, stealing). And there are certain things that are right no matter what (Fruit of the Spirit).

We all have a rights box. In my rights box are the things I believe to be permissible, allowable, and justified within my Christian liberties. I can do these things with a clean conscience and not be sinning. Now, the contents within the rights box of every Christians are different.

Listening to secular music, drinking alcohol, teaching your kids about Santa Claus, playing cards, mowing your yard on Sunday. Paying tithes and giving offerings. We could go on and on.

Smoking and drinking alcohol are not in my rights box. (Examples)

Some people think all songs without the name Jesus are wrong, and they won't listen to it. They think people who listen to Journey are on a journey to hell. So, if I know someone has trouble with secular music because it takes them back to their wild days of sex, drugs, rock and roll, and I know they're convicted by God not to listen to it for their own spiritual benefit, I'm not going to listen.

Love trumps my rights. Love is better than liberty.

Sometimes people grow and they can put some things in that used to be convicting. Sometimes they grow and must take some stuff out they used to do because now it's convicting.

In Essentials – UNITY, In Non-Essentials, we give each other LIBERTY.

C. And finally, In All Things, LOVE.

When you exercise your right and you knowingly influence another believer to violate their conscience and what they know is wrong for them...you are not just sinning against that person. You also sin against Christ who died for them.

When I let my rights be more important than the life and walk of a person for whom Christ died, I've made myself and my rights more important that the work of Christ and His cross.

Paul, then, says this incredible thing: V13 ***“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.” (NIV)***

What's Paul saying? Real freedom is not demanding my rights. Real freedom is knowing my rights and being willing to give them up for someone else's benefit. That's real freedom and that's real love.

Go back to verse 1: ***Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.***

What did Jesus say is the sign of being his disciple? ***“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples” – that you agree with one another? No. “that you love one another” (John 13:35 NIV).***

Paul says to both groups in chapter 13: ***“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” If I have all faith, to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions ... but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor. 13)***

In the essentials of our faith, let's stand strong in unity. In the non-essentials, let's give each other liberty. But no matter what we agree on or disagree on, above all things, let's show each other LOVE.

CONCLUSION:

There are five main questions that Scripture teaches that we should ask ourselves to answer under the umbrella of “does this honor God?”):

- 1. If the Bible teaches that something is sin, then it is sin. Do not do it.**
- 2. Does it Negatively Affect a Fellow Believer?**
- 3. Does It Affect Your Testimony to Unbelievers?**
- 4. Does It Go Against Your Conscience?**
- 5. Is It Unwise?**

APPLICATION

Do you give people grace in gray areas?

What are some gray areas in which you tend to judge that you can begin to be gracious in?

What are practical ways you can begin to believe the best in others?