

Finally! A sermon about food sacrificed to idols! Pastor, why have you waited so long to talk about this?

Now, I’m being facetious. Imagine that. But this message really is about food sacrificed to idols, at least on the surface. Dig just a little deeper though, and you will see that this is even more about an attitude. There was an attitude problem in the Corinthian Church, and the problem was that people were misusing the knowledge of God's truth. They were using this knowledge without giving love its proper place. They were getting puffed up with pride rather than building others up in love.

What a temptation for members of a Bible-based church! We have knowledge. We have God's truth preached in our pulpits and proclaimed in our publications. We take a stand against false teachings. These are good things. But how tempting to become puffed up, thinking, “We have the right teaching and others don't. How could they be so blind?” Problem: love doesn’t do that. We need to listen to what Paul says here.

How tempting to take our stand on the knowledge we've learned from the Bible and disregard love since that word is so often misused! But to disregard love is to disregard the Bible.

Love builds up. I hope you walk out of here remembering those three words today. Biblical knowledge is necessary, but without love, it will be misused. Love builds up. But be clear on what love is. Love knows the true God. Love places others before our own rights. Love sees others as Christ sees them. That's the love that builds up.

So, about the food sacrificed to idols, because I know you’ve been on the edge of your seat, wondering. Some of the Christians in Corinth reached this conclusion: “There is only one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All these idols are nothing. So if I eat meat sacrificed to them, I'm not worshiping them. They don't even exist. Eating is eating, and I can do it giving thanks to the one true God.”

Notice Paul does not say that they've misunderstood what they've learned. Their knowledge is correct, but they are using it to puff themselves up rather than acting in love to build others up.

How do we know they were puffed up? Because they failed to see the harm this did to their fellow Christians. Maybe some of them were so fully convinced that idols were nothing, they had no pangs of conscience about eating that meat. It did not harm their faith. But many who knew the true God and believed in Jesus still felt that eating such meat was honoring the idol. It was a well-established custom that a portion of an animal would be brought to the idol's altar and the rest of the meat would be part of a public meal or sold in the marketplace. From little on up they had been taught that this was to honor the idol. Do you see why even after coming to faith in Jesus, their conscience would trouble them about eating such meat?

So Paul wants the Christian, whose knowledge lets him eat that meat since he knows an idol is nothing--he wants that Christian to weigh the outcomes. On one hand is eating some meat, which won't bring you any closer to God, and on the other hand driving a fellow Christian away from God by leading them to go against conscience. So even if knowledge says it's your right to eat that meat, should you? Love says no. Love says with Paul, “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” (1 Corinthians 8:13). Love places others before our own rights.

Do you think about this before you make your choices in life? You see, this isn't just about eating meat sacrificed to idols. Do you make your choices based on your rights, or based on what will be beneficial for the faith of your fellow Christians? We live in a society that champions individual rights above all else, and when we deal with the world, to a certain extent we need to protect our rights. But when dealing with our fellow Christians, love builds up, even if that means giving up my rights. Knowledge can prove it's your right, but love places others before our own rights. Love builds up.

Examples: In the New Testament Era, God does not give us rules about how often to come to church, how much to give, how often to celebrate Communion, how much to study God's Word, how often to pray, what kind of entertainment to enjoy, and so on. But as we choose to do or not to do those things, do you think about how it affects other Christians? Does your example lead others closer to Jesus, or give them an excuse to drift away?

Now it's getting uncomfortable. How often have you and I done what is not necessarily wrong 'in and of itself' but it was harmful to someone's faith? It's almost impossible to estimate, but it is sin. Did you hear the apostle Paul? "When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ." What hope do we have, since we are almost certainly guilty of harming the faith of others?

Here's the hope we have. Remember how Jesus sees you. Remember how Jesus sees you and not just you, but every other person as well. Yes, he knows our sins, but he sees you and me as someone for whom he died. He died to pay for my lack of love. He died for our choices that ended up leading others away. He died for you and all your sins. That's how huge his love for you is. He set aside His right to be rewarded for His perfection, and instead, experienced a punishment He didn't deserve, so it would not fall on you. That's love. And that's the source of all forgiveness. If someone hurts you, you may have a right to be angry. The world says, "in your anger, go for revenge." Forgiveness from God is voluntarily giving up your right to seek revenge, and is instead a move towards restoration. It's the only thing that can break the cycles of hate that do so much to damage our world.

This is an invitation to see your fellow Christian through Christ's eyes. He died for them, sinners though they are, just as he died for you. Why would I insist on my right if it would harm my brother or sister for whom Christ died?

It's one thing to win an argument; it's another to love someone into the truth. Let's plumb the depths of God's Word to learn how to balance knowledge on one side, and love on the other. And when we get it wrong, may grace prevail, and let love build up.

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St. Mark Lutheran Church, Chesterland, Ohio

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