

As we come to chapter 8 Paul is continuing to answer questions that the Corinthian believers have posed to him. And by the way, they are not asking these questions like some college student in a theology class who poses some theoretical problem to their professor.

These Christians in Corinth are concerned about real problems that are taking place in their midst which not all in that community of believers are agreed upon as to how they should solve them. They would like answers; answers which some of them may use to bolster their particular bent for selfish reasons, and therefore further dividing themselves.

Others of the Corinthians are looking for answers simply to know God's will concerning their lives as they desire to honor God, fearing that their past lives may get in the way of their ability to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior.

And so, when Paul begins to address this next issue he knows full well the problem they face, as he was there in Corinth a number of years back, and experienced the particulars they are dealing with now. And so, he jumps in with both feet to give them God's perspective on this next issue.

1CO 8:1-3 "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 2 The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. 3 But the man who loves God is known by God."

The first part of verse one identifies the problem. "Now about food sacrificed to idols...". But what immediately follows seems to be out of place, at least on the surface. We might think that Paul would have gone directly to verse 4 as he begins to answer the question about food sacrificed to idols.

Instead, what he does is to set the stage for taking away the possibility of any of these Christians using the answer Paul gives to further divide that church in Corinth. We see the way the question was posed to Paul here in verse one.

"We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

It seems apparent that some of the more seasoned saints in Corinth were writing to Paul concerning things they had some knowledge on. But it is also apparent that they were using their knowledge not simply to inform other believers, but as a way of making themselves look more spiritual and therefore trying to prove themselves right while proving the others wrong.

Again, this is the bedrock upon which divisions are made. And what Paul is trying to do is to reunite this group around the truth of God's word which cannot be separated from the love of Christ.

To suggest that all's we need is truth at the exclusion of love is to miss the point of what Jesus told the Samaritan woman when He said, that we must worship the Lord in spirit and in truth.

To worship and serve in spirit is to do so in the fruit of the Spirit which must include love. But to worship and serve in the spirit to the exclusion of truth can be just as dangerous. We need both.

And Paul cautions these people not to be lopsided in their approach in loving and serving God, and each other, as they go forward in their faith in Christ.

And so, when Paul says that knowledge puffs up he's not suggesting that knowledge is a bad thing. It's only when we use knowledge for selfish reasons like trying to "one-up" another person that it becomes a threat for puffing oneself up, or making oneself look good at the expense of putting someone else down, or boasting in knowledge while not walking according to that knowledge.

Without knowledge, that is knowledge about God and His will, no one would be saved. Knowledge is essential, as Paul points out when writing to the Christians in Rome, as he desired to see his Jewish brethren saved from the penalty of their sins.

ROM 10:1-2 "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. 2 For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge."

Their zeal was based on their own perspective of what they thought knowledge was, not based on the knowledge which was truth according to God's word.

In fact, Paul even commends these very Corinthian believers at the beginning of this letter concerning their knowledge about God and His word.

1CO 1:5-6 "For in him you have been enriched in every way - in all your speaking and in all your knowledge - 6 because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you."

Knowledge, especially as it relates to our salvation, is not a bad thing. But knowledge, even Godly knowledge, can be used to tear down instead of build up if it's not coupled with love. This is Paul's point as he begins to address this problem with things sacrificed to idols.

And by the way, this does raise another question. Why in the world should things sacrificed to idols become such a point of contention among these people in the first place? These were Christians. They were not sacrificing things to idols. What's the big deal?

The big deal is that everyone else in Corinth was, and these Christians in their everyday dealings with people had to make some decisions as to how to interact with these pagan people.

Practically everything in the Greek and Roman culture of that day centered on religion in one form or another. And up until Christ rose from the dead and the church began to grow, the only religions which were of any consequence were the pagan religions and their gods and Judaism.

The two never came together. The Jews knew that these pagan religions were something to be avoided along with most of the pagan people who practiced them. They felt themselves superior because of their association with the one true God. And yet, as Paul pointed out to the Romans, "they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge." (Rom.10:2)

And so, it was a false sense of security as they were touting a relationship with God through the law which really didn't exist. They were just as lost as the pagans as they continued with a false view of who God was and the means by which they could come to Him which they felt was through the law, yet without faith in the promises of God.

But Judaism is not the immediate problem in Corinth. It didn't appear that these people were trying, as did some of the Galatians, to introduce Judaism, and particularly the law as it relates to things

like circumcision and keeping of certain holy days, as a means of having salvation from God.

Rather, idolatry is the problem in Corinth and the immediate problem in the church at Corinth. How so?

Well, as I mentioned before, these Christians were not practicing overt idolatry. But, there wasn't an area of their everyday lives that didn't butt heads with idolatry.

If you wanted to feed your family there was a very good possibility that some of the food you ate was sacrificed to idols. If you wanted to have any fellowship with family members who were not Christians there was a good chance that any meal you ate with them had food that was sacrificed to idols.

The celebration of births, or marriages, even deaths which were everyday occurrences in Corinth, involved the gathering of family around the table. And every Christian in Corinth, not unlike most Christians today, had family members who were not saved.

This is why the question to Paul was even raised. The practice in Corinth, as in most of the cities of those days, involved practices which sacrificed foods, and in most cases meat, to idols. And there were particular reasons for this.

It wasn't just to gain the favor of their false gods, it was also to protect them from evil spirits which they believed would find their way into the lives of people by being ingested, literally by being eaten. They believed that evil spirits would hide in the food. This certainly puts a new twist on sending your food back to the chef.

And so, the safest way of protecting themselves from such an invasion was to take it to the temple of their gods and have the priests offer it up on the altars. With such a practice they were assured that these evil spirits would be driven out and that the sacrifice to their god would also ensure peace and prosperity.

The way it worked was that a portion of the animal was burned on the altar. Now, this process wasn't free and so another portion would go to the temple priest which was usually a best part of the animal. The third portion went to the one who brought it to the temple.

Now, you can imagine that when most of the people in the city came to the temple with their sacrifices that this would produce an enormous amount of food. There was no way the temple priests

could eat all of it especially since they didn't have freezers to store it away in.

So, what do you think they did with it? They weren't stupid. They sold it back to the people of the city; double billing if you will. But, since their meat was usually the best cuts, people were more than willing to buy it from the priests, knowing that it was safe from any evil influence.

The problem for the Christians was that there was no way to avoid some of this meat at some point in their lives. They knew that even accidentally they may eat some of this meat. So, what do they do?

Well, some of the Christians in Corinth knew what to do. They had been instructed according to the word of God. They had knowledge. And with their knowledge they knew what Paul was about to share with them concerning meat sacrificed to idols.

But, Paul isn't simply interested in regurgitating knowledge these people already had about the problem. He's more interested about promoting the peace and unity of this church in Corinth.

You see, there were many brand new Christians who did not have this knowledge, or at least not to the extent that some of the more seasoned saints had. These new Christians just came out of that pagan way of life and for them to even entertain the idea of joining back in with the ways of old was more than they could handle.

And evidently, the more mature Christians were saying to them that there is no problem with them eating this meat and that they should do so without their consciences being bothered by it. But their consciences were bothered and in the process they felt they were sinning against God.

This is what Paul is addressing in the first three verses of our text. He's exhorting the more mature Christians to consider how they disciple the younger believers. He doesn't want them to force feed these babes in Christ to where their consciences are effected in such a way where they may feel it's actually okay to sin against God.

The older Christians were saying that we have freedom and liberty in this area. And it's true, there are many areas where we may have freedom as the Scriptures may not directly forbid such practices.

JOH 8:31-32 "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

2CO 3:17 "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

GAL 5:1 "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."

But, simply because there is freedom in Christ it does not mean we are free to sin or to cause others to sin. "Christian liberty is not unbridled license." (John MacArthur)

1PE 2:16 "Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God."

When it comes to these areas where we may have freedom or liberty in Christ there is always the danger of two extremes: 1) Legalism or 2) License.

In the world of the legalist there appears to be only black and white. Something is either good or bad. And so, to protect oneself from the bad they make lists of do's and don'ts which exclude certain behavior, even if the Scriptures may allow certain freedoms in these areas.

For example, in some denominations if you want to be a member of that church or if you want to be in leadership you have to sign a form which says you will promise not to do certain things.

You promise, for example, that you won't go to movies, or that you won't partake in other types of entertainment, be it TV, or the theater or sports or whatever. You may have to promise not to wear certain types of clothing if you're a woman, or make-up, or that you have to wear a hat to church.

Now, it may be wise not to go to certain types of movies or to watch certain TV programs, and it may be wise to dress discretely. But following after Godly principles in these areas is different from men commanding you not to do these things when the Scriptures may allow such activities.

Many of these people may keep all of the rules the "legalist mentality" puts forth, but that doesn't guarantee that their hearts are right with God, which is what the Spirit of God is promoting in the lives of His people, as we walk in a way that pleases the Lord in Spirit and in truth.

For the legalist, as John MacArthur puts it, "their lives are law controlled, not Spirit controlled. But refraining from doing things is not spirituality; walking in the Spirit is spirituality. Legalism stifles liberty, stifles conscience, stifles the Word, and stifles the Holy Spirit."

And so, to set up a list of do's and don'ts, more times than not, is a substitute for the work of the Holy Spirit. We have not been given the liberty to play the Holy Spirit in the lives of Gods' people.

But this doesn't mean that we shouldn't encourage people to consider those biblical principles which may address any freedom or liberty we may have in Christ. Because without any consideration for such biblical principles we end up with license which is the opposite extreme of legalism.

With license the problem is not so much black and white as it is that almost everything is gray; everything goes as long as it's not strictly forbidden in Scripture. And so, with this viewpoint there is almost a cavalier attitude toward behavior that might not be strictly forbidden in Scripture and so it becomes "my right" to do it, no matter how it may affect those around me.

This is what Paul is dealing with here in chapter 8. Some of these Corinthians believe that they have a right to pursue the eating of meat sacrificed to idols because it is an area where they have Christian liberty. After all, they have the knowledge to back it up in the word of God.

Yes, that may be true, Paul says, but simply spouting your knowledge without considering where other people are in their walk with Christ is taking your knowledge and puffing yourself up at the expense of others, especially as it does not really extend the love of Christ toward them.

Because if you really loved these weaker brothers and sisters in the faith you would come along-side them with the truth in love rather than coming across as spiritual bullies who belittle these people because their consciences are not as strong.

And to that Paul says, that "the man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know." (1CO 8:2)

You think you know the will of God? You think you know all there is to know about how God might be working in the life of another person at any particular time in their spiritual life? You

know nothing other than your own perspective on the issue, is what Paul alludes to.

Rather, in contrast, "the man who loves God is known by God."
(1CO 8:3)

Is Paul suggesting that these more seasoned saints are not loving God at all? No. What he is saying is that if we truly love God with all our hearts, souls and minds, then in turn, we will love our neighbor as ourselves.

And evidently, they were not loving these less strong believers, but were making them feel like they were useless, ungodly and just plain superstitious because they couldn't rise above the foolishness of the fact that there are no such things as idols.

"We have this knowledge and we know that these idols are nothing more than the imagination of ungodly people." And so, it seems apparent that even in their questions to Paul regarding such issues, they may very well have supported their claim that they can partake of meat sacrificed to idols by giving their knowledge on the issue to Paul in their question.

It wouldn't be hard to imagine this. I mean if you felt compelled to ask a question concerning the bible, because of others in the congregation who didn't know, and you believed you already had the answer, you might frame the question in such a way as to show the one in authority that you already knew, but you were just asking to get verification for their sakes.

And so, Paul essentially parrots their knowledge back to them in the form of the answer.

1CO 8:4 "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."

Paul is saying, "I agree with you that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one."

This is a truth, by the way, but it's a truth which evidently was causing a division, not because it was truth, but because of the way in which it was conveyed by fellow believers to younger Christians at Corinth.

It is true that an idol is nothing. In our day and culture it may be a bit harder for us to identify with this, but there are still things even in our world which would qualify as idols.

For example, did you know that certain pagan religions today in our country make up charms and idols to come against the work of Christ? They actually will try and curse Christians as they form a doll, for example, into the means by which they can cast a spell.

Voodoo, Santeria, Wicca, which is a form of witchcraft, along with more diabolical forms of Satanism all use points of contact, like dolls or other objects, to try and force their wills on other people.

These are idols which represent their perceived god/power or gods to either protect themselves or to harm others. They believe there is power in the object, not unlike how these pagan people in Corinth believed there was power in their idols to protect them from harm and promote good in their lives.

Now, suppose there was a person who was recently saved out of voodoo who was now a part of a church. And suppose that they went on a missionary journey down to Haiti with a team of believers from that church. Can you imagine how they might feel if they went into a village where they knew voodoo was practiced?

Can you imagine how they would feel, knowing the power they've seen in the practice of voodoo and its evil results in the lives of people they knew, maybe even in their own lives in the past?

And now, the team goes into the village to share the gospel, maybe even going into the house of these people who are voodoo worshippers, while this relatively new convert lags behind. In fact, this new convert chooses not to enter the village at all. Suppose one of the team members makes fun of them and begins to chastise them for being so faithless and not trusting God in that situation.

How does that approach build that person up in the faith? You've given them knowledge, but what you haven't done is to understand what is going on in their lives as their conscience deems this not to be a good idea, based on their past experience with this religion and the people who practice it.

To you and me we know that there is no such thing as an idol that has power in and of itself, and that we have the freedom and the liberty to not only go into such a village, but to even partake of a meal which might have been blessed by one of their voodoo gods.

Paul says, "I realize this. I know that there is only One true source of power and dominion and that is the only God who exists. I know that you are strong enough in your faith to not be bothered or

intimidated by such things. But, what about the brother or sister who is? How will you instruct them?"

By the way, though you and I might speak of such things as being silly, I know that there are many Christians who wouldn't think these things to be silly. I know that there are Christians who won't walk into a strange room without claiming the blood of Christ on that house.

I know that there are Christians who have burned their secular music CD's or tapes because they feel that they possess the possibility of some demonic influence in the actual tape or CD. I know this to be true because I did it many years ago as a new believer.

I know that there are Christians whose consciences will not allow them to go into a New Age bookstore because they know that the owner is into witchcraft. I know this because I've gone into a New Age bookstore with another believer who was doing research in this area, and there were reservations on our parts to the extent that we prayed for God's protection before we went in.

Did that building in itself have the power to hurt us, or even the people in that building who were into witchcraft, have power in themselves to cast some sort of spell on us? Absolutely not. Did my albums that I burned in Gainesville so many years before have the power to hurt me simply because I had them in my trailer? Absolutely not.

But you couldn't have told me that then. And yet, over time I learned that despite the reality of evil spiritual powers, greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world. Does this mean we flaunt our power in Christ or that we taunt Satan as though we possessed some inherent power in ourselves? I would hope not.

Because even the power we possess in Christ is not ours, but the Lord's, even as there is no idol which possesses any power, but only that which might be used by Satan to keep people bound to their idols and superstition.

There is only one true God and there is only one truth as it pertains to life and death and that is what the apostle John records for us in his first epistle.

1JO 5:10-12 "Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God

has given about his Son. 11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."

This is the reality. This is not superstition or some wishful thinking. This is the truth. And as believers we are to grow up into this truth and hold fast to the fact that there is no god but the one true God. And therefore we need not fear the enemy. And we'll look at this more closely next week.

We are sealed by the Holy Spirit and we need not be intimidated by the enemy's tactics, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't respect our enemy for who he is; a creature who has rebelled against his creator whose power has blinded the eyes of many.

But you know what? God can open the eyes because He is God. This is the one we serve. This is the one who is almighty and all powerful. The same God who appeared to our father Abraham and said in Gen. 17:1, ".... "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless."

May we do just that in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father, and to the honor of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.