

Love limits our freedom

- 1 Corinthians 8:1-13
- This sermon will be just a bit more brief than usual, as I want to leave time for the Moldova report later in the service. Last week we saw that Paul's first concern with the issue of whether to eat meat sacrificed to idols was not the meat question but the heart question. Those who had knowledge that an idol has no real existence were not acting in love toward their brothers in Christ who were weak in faith and still believed that an idol had some power, and therefore they would not eat. Your knowledge, Paul says to the stronger brothers, puffs you up, but God wants you to walk in love toward your weaker brother. Love builds up. Paul then gives them four basic truths, before he provides one clear application.
- **An idol has no real existence. (vs. 4)**
- Idolatry has existed since the fall, and it can take many forms. Our heart is an idol factory, Martin Luther said, and anything we are willing to sin to get or sin to keep from losing can be an idol. We can make an idol out of our family, or our job, or financial security, or pleasure. Anything that steals our heart away from the one true God is an idol. "You shall have no other gods before me," God thundered from Mt Sinai. The idols Paul refers to here were inanimate objects made out of wood, stone, or metal, which the pagans worshiped, thinking these gods could help them with their crops, their fertility, the weather, or even victory over their enemies. Paul agrees with what the Corinthian church had written: "we know that an idol has no real existence." There are many "so-called" gods, but as Psalm 135:16-18 says, "The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths but do not speak; they have eyes, but they do not see; they have ears but they do not hear, nor is there any breath in their mouths. Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them."
- We know this to be true, Paul says. But then he says in verse 7, "However, not all possess this knowledge." New believers may not be mature enough to understand that their former idols have no power, except what they attribute to them. Though it is true that idols have no real existence, they can still wield power over a believer because of his lack of understanding.
- **There is no God but one. (vs 4-6)**
- We know, Paul says, that there is no God but one. Then in verse 6 he takes the Shema out of the Old Testament ("Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Deut. 6:4), and brings it into the New Testament, looking back at the cross, where we came to know God through Jesus. There is one God and Father: all things are from him and for him. There is one Lord Jesus Christ: all things are through him, and through him we exist. He doesn't mention the Holy Spirit here, not because the third person of the Trinity is not also God, but because it was not necessary in this context. Paul tells us who God is and that we know him through the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the only way we can know God, as Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me." Also, God is the only one who gets to decide who God is. We cannot manufacture a God out of wood. Or out of money. We cannot make up a God like someone who says, "Well, this is what God is to me. He is a warm puppy and a latte after a hard day." Or, "God is the one who believes in me and always speaks positive reinforcement to me." Or, "God is in the rocks and the trees, and one day we will all be melted into God and be God!" All nonsense. We are not given the option of deciding anything about God that contradicts what God has clearly revealed about Himself in His Son and in His Word. It is there that we are given the truth that gives us a place to stand. These verses give us a short course on the doctrines of God, Christ, creation and salvation.
- **Food will not commend us to God. (vs. 8)**
- We are no better off if we eat or don't eat. "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Romans 14:17) Also, we are not loved more by God if we eat. And we are not loved more by God if we don't eat. You can substitute for "eating and drinking" many things we do that we find ourselves thinking, "This will finally make God

love me more.” Pray more. Read the Bible more. Read theology books more. Witness more. These are all good things, and it is good to do them. But they will NOT make us more acceptable to God. They may make us more useful, but they CANNOT make us more acceptable to God than we already are.

- **When we sin against a brother or a sister, we sin against Christ. (verse 12)**
- Paul gets to this critical truth after explaining that the one who eats meat sacrificed to idols in front of a brother who believes that would be sin for him encourages sin in that weaker brother. You have knowledge that your brother doesn't have yet, and you feel free to do this because of your knowledge, but knowledge puffs up when it is not married to love. “By your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.” And, you didn't just sin against him, you sinned against Christ. Paul first understood this, I believe, on the day he met Christ. Paul was a persecutor of Christians and was on his way to Damascus to throw more into prison, when he was apprehended by Jesus who said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” I am reminded of when David cried out to God in Psalm 51, “Against you, you only, have I sinned.” We know that he sinned against Bathsheba and against her husband, but his heart was pierced by the realization that his sin was ultimately against God. So, with those four truths as his evidence, how does Paul make his closing argument? What is his application of this truth?
- **Application: verse 13. “Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat.”**
- Two things, **First, notice that Paul, strong believer, applies this principle to himself. And he makes an appeal to the strong in this passage, not to the weak.** One writer, and I couldn't find a name on this paper said this:
 - “The ‘weak’ man in this discussion is the man who is hypersensitive on such matters; he is the ... Christian who tends to cut out anything and everything doubtful, just in case it might harm his relationship with God. (he really doesn't understand justification by faith in God) Paul clearly wants such a ‘weak’ person to grow into a ‘strong’ position. Yet he does not here attempt to persuade him into such a position of strength. (He doesn't scold the weak, but appeals to the strong). His own stress falls on the ‘strong’ man who has been freed: ‘you must voluntarily restrict your freedom.’ Thus the strong must readjust to help the weak, not vice versa.”
 - Paul addresses the strong again in Romans 14:21 “It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.” Why? Because love sets the limits on our freedom. Because a brother or sister is more important than any ‘right’ that I can lay down. So, first, Paul addresses the strong, instructing them to make sure they are not leading any weaker brothers or sisters astray.
 - **Second, the strong have to decide when and how much to lay down their rights.** Some believe that Paul became a vegetarian after this. Others do not. We cannot say for certain. I like what Simon Kistemaker says about it: “Did Paul suggest that every Christian should become a vegetarian? No, not at all. But Paul is willing to go to any extreme to avoid hurting the conscience of anyone for whom Christ died. And if that extreme means not to eat meat for some time, Paul readily adapts. He submits even his Christian liberty to the principle of love.”
 - John Calvin writes, “He is using hyperbole, of course, because it is hardly possible for anyone to abstain from meat all his life long, if he continues to lead a normal life among others. Even so, he means that he would never avail himself of the freedom, which he possesses, rather than cause the weak to stumble. For that freedom should only be used if it is controlled by the rule of love. I wish careful thought would be given to this by those who turn everything to their own advantage, so that they cannot bear to give up even the smallest whit of their rights, for the sake of a brother. I also wish that they would attend not only to what Paul teaches, but to what he sets before us by his own example. How far ahead of us Paul is!”
 - The issue here is love for the brother or sister whose faith is weak. We want the faith of the weak brother or sister to grow stronger. That means work on their part and on ours as well. They need to be pursuing

stronger faith through reading the Word and walking in obedience to it. We need to be pursuing them with the love of Christ, teaching them and leading them by a godly example, and not willfully putting a stumbling block in their way. When those things are happening in the church, there is unity among the brethren, and we are all growing towards the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ!

- Prayer
- COMMUNION