

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Less Me, More Us Falls Ch. PM 4/14/2024

Today we do not hear disagreements about whether the meat in our church crockpots was previously offered to false gods. How is this passage relevant to us?

It is relevant because it shows us how to handle **gray areas** together.

Some things are always right. It is always right to pray, to worship, to speak the truth, to praise God, to give, to work, to serve others.

Some things are always wrong. It is always wrong to dishonor God, to swear, to steal, to commit adultery, to commit murder, to harm others.

But there are issues that do not fall neatly into the category of right or wrong. These gray areas are prone to causing divisions.

Some things to know as we study the ancient issue of food offered to idols.

1) There were no refrigerators, so perishable food had to be used quickly. Once they butchered an animal to offer the meat as a sacrifice to false gods, they a) burned up part of the meat as a sacrifice, b) the false priests ate some of the meat, and c) the false worshippers ate some of the meat. The rest was sold at the market.

2) The market at the center of town was publicly visible and unavoidable. There was no other food market. Christians had no choice to go elsewhere, for there was nowhere else.

3) Their beliefs about demons. In the ancient city of Corinth, many believed that one way that demons could enter people was by demons attaching themselves to food. Newly converted Christians might believe that if meat could have a spiritual demon, then it could be spiritually tainted by being offered to a false god.

4) There were differing opinions about the spiritual status of this meat. Some Christians saw nothing wrong whatsoever with eating the meat, other Christians had the opinion that for the honor of Christ that they should not eat the meat.

5) Poverty caused another wrinkle. This meat was the only meat that poor Christians could afford. They only had enough money to buy a few cuts of meat.

6) No simple practical solution. The nearly obvious solution of preserving a few cuts of meat that would not have been offered to false gods, either was not common, was not feasible, or simply was not set up as established practice.

7) The meat was not slaughtered according to Old Testament food rules. Some of the believers in Corinth would still prefer to buy and consume meat that had been prepared that way, while others disagreed.

With those things in mind – no refrigeration, downtown was the unavoidable center of activity, beliefs about demons on foods, differing opinions, poverty, confusion about which meats had been offered where, and religiously unacceptable meat processing, we better understand why the issue caused so much disunity.

Within a gospel community, Christ wants us to decide our gray areas with others in mind.

1. My viewpoint is not enough, I need yours also. (v.1-6)

We notice in Corinth there were two approaches to gray areas. 1) cautious and tender people – afraid to do things because of fear that it MIGHT be wrong. If they attempted it, they were conscience-stricken and miserable. 2) the other approach to gray areas was bold people. Not afraid. Not struggling with feeling guilty. Charging ahead, full steam.

The problem was maintaining good relationships between the bold people and the cautious people. The bold would participate and eat the meat, and make the cautious people squirm. The bold would get impatient when the cautious raised objections. The bold would chide the cautious, saying, ‘Don’t know that there is only one true God, so all the other gods don’t exist.’ It was the bold who were saying the issue was solved by sharing knowledge. The bold would say that if the cautious knew what they were supposed to know, they would eat the meat.

Paul wrote in verse 1 that this sort of knowledge puffs up. Knowledge and correct beliefs were not enough to preserve good relationships between believers. They also needed humility and love. Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:15, ‘*speak the truth in love.*’ Yes, we need bold people who will speak the truth, but in order for the cautious people to receive those words of truth, the cautious people need to know that the bold people love the cautious people. The bold people could be correct, but rude, and therefore cause damage to others within a community. Besides, their knowledge was limited, as Paul went on to write in verse 2. No one knows as much knowledge as he ought to have. In verse 3, Paul explained that anyone who loves God does not develop the sort of arrogance found in the bold persons of Corinth. Wise people do not brag about how much they know.

Rather than knowledge as the issue, Paul informed them that the real issue was whether they loved God. Those who truly knew God, also truly loved God. It was because God loved them first. The apostle John agreed with this teaching, when John wrote in 1 John 4:19, “*We love, because God first loved us.*” All of their knowledge of God Himself and all of their knowledge of the things of God were a gift of God’s grace, so none of them had anything about which to boast.

Had Paul gotten off topic? No. The bold Corinthians thought the fix was to teach the cautious people that it was okay to eat the meat. But Paul revealed that the actual problem was the bold believers having a lack of love for the cautious believers. That is, the bold in the church were thinking that they were better than other people, because they were more knowledgeable. The bold assumed that they could think their way out of any problem, and so they were often chiding others for a lack of knowledge. The bold would not love their way through the problem, and bring people together.

Paul was showing them the need for a different kind of knowledge, the knowledge that only the humble and loving could learn. So, Paul pushed them toward humility and love, opening the door for them to learn to say, as it were,

repeat after me: My viewpoint is not enough, I need your viewpoint also. An action of mine, which would not be a sin in itself, could still become a sin for me to do if it harms another person. I recognize that my own knowledge is inherently limited, and therefore my knowledge alone cannot be the sole factor in my making of my decisions within a gospel community. I must add to my knowledge, also my care for others and then re-calculate how I should now think, what I now understand, what I should now do. That brings us to the second point.

2. We must all care for the tender ones. (v.7-11)

Verse 8 – the use of food did not have anything to do with their standing with God. In the Bible, Jesus taught this same truth. Matthew 15:17-18, “*Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.*” So, Jesus taught the same point as Paul, basically saying...

What they EAT, cannot bring them guilt.

However, what they SAY, can bring them guilt.

Now we better understand about why the Bible did not give clear instruction whether or not believers should eat food sacrificed to idols. It was because...

- a) Those who did eat the meat were not one bit closer to God than those who refrained from eating the meat.
- b) Those who did not eat the meat were not one bit closer to God than those who did eat the meat.

You can imagine the bold and confident people cheering after verse 8 – ‘yeah! See?! I have a right to do whatever I want! If some Christians cannot eat this meat, it’s their problem, not my problem. I have a right to do whatever I want.’ But Paul was about to give the bold people another surprise. The Christian life is not a solo flight. Every Christian, no matter how bold he or she is, can never say that he or she does not need to care how his or her actions impact his or her fellow Christians. Here it is in verse 9, in the words of Paul “*take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak*” (or the cautious, tender person).

Why? Because as Paul said to the bold and confident people in verse 7, not everyone possessed this knowledge that they had. Some were recently converted, and they were new to Christianity and they were just getting started on learning such knowledge. When they just start attending a new religion, there was a lot to learn! Christianity touched every aspect of their lives. If the new converts recently had been worshipping idols, now how could the bold and knowledgeable Christians expect the new converts to so quickly think so differently about idols, and food offered to idols?

To the bold, it was just meat. But to the cautious or tender, it was still “food [that had been] sacrificed to idols.”

Because of this fact – the fact that in the opinion of the cautious ones the food was viewed as food that had been sacrificed to idols – as a result the bold were not totally free to eat the meat. Say what? Why not? In order to explain this important perspective to the bold and knowledgeable ones, Paul told a little story here, starting in verse 10 – let’s suppose that a Christian whose conscience was still troubled about eating the meat offered to idols, saw a fellow Christian go into one of the false temples and eat that food? What kind of effect would the action of the bold Christian have on the cautious Christian? And here is the key question. **DO YOU CARE? DOES THE BOLD CHRISTIAN EVEN CARE ABOUT THE EFFECT THAT HIS ACTIONS HAVE ON THE TENDER CHRISTIAN?**

Most honest people would admit that in Paul’s example, the first Christian would have a bad impact on the second Christian. **BUT DOES THE FIRST PERSON CARE ABOUT THE SECOND PERSON?**

About Paul’s story, it is a real test for the bold Christian...

Do you know what a caring person would say – then we cannot eat!

Do you know what an uncaring person would say – so what?

And in verse 11, Paul addressed that lack of caring directly. By the bold believer’s so-called ‘knowledge’ the result was that a cautious and tender person was destroyed, “...*the brother for whom Christ died.*” This was not ramped up drama for the sake of drama. Paul had not simply tacked on these pious words about the cross and the death of Christ in order to shame them and in order to clinch and win the argument. No. This was the important truth at the base of the issue.

How could a bold believer, who claimed to know God and claimed to know the things of God, be so unaware of the fact that Christ cared enough about the tender brother or sister to die for him or her, and secondly, be so unaware that the willingness of Christ to die for that brother ought to inform the bold believer’s willingness to decline to eat some meat for the sake of that brother or sister?

Here is what the believer’s conscience should sound like, with love for the tender ones: At those times when I, as an individual person, would have the right and privilege to participate, I, as a member of the family of God, will pause to re-consider how the circumstances around my participating would impact my tender brother or cautious sister. I will take into consideration the fact that he or she is more prone to concerns and more likely to struggle with a false sense of guilt. That person matters to me. My impact on that person matters to me. I will operate as a person who is aware of and is interested in managing the ripple effect caused by my actions. That is Paul’s instruction as the thought process for every believer.

All of us must care for the tender ones.

3. We are all tied to Christ. (v.12-13)

Solutions in the controversies, or the gray areas for Christians are not found

by answering one question. Rather, solutions are found by answering two questions. To say that intellectually we can defend our actions and participate in an activity without guilt, is to ask and answer only one question. Are we allowed to do this? The question of knowledge. But the solution of maintaining unity in controversies required that they add the second question – the question of love for the tender Christians. If they participated in that particular action, how would it affect their brothers and sisters in Christ? The solutions in gray areas for Christians in Corinth were not found by answering only one question (the question of knowledge), but rather by answering two questions (the question of knowledge and the question of love).

Knowledge remains fundamentally important, and the freedom that their knowledge brought them was also important truth to be defended.

However, love for their fellow brothers and sisters was MORE important. More important than their freedom and more important than their knowledge of the issues was their love for their brothers. Why? Because Christ valued their brothers and sisters so highly that Christ died for them, as Paul was now building upon what he had just written in verse 11. There were times when the gospel demanded that love for others was more important than their enjoyment of their own privileges and freedoms.

Their love for their fellow Christians was more important than their permission to indulge in their own rightful pleasures!

How does this apply to us? There come times in the gray areas of Christian life, when we are expected by Christ to abstain from things that we would remain free to do in Christ, for the sole reason that our brothers and sisters do not see it that way. Since a brother or sister would be harmed, and our unity would be damaged, we must abstain.

We are not given the freedom to treat lightly those that Christ has paid so dear a price to redeem. We do not have permission to boldly march forward, unconcerned for those we might see as intellectual stragglers. Christ does not allow a bull in a China shop to be free to toss his head around and break all of the fine glass items, just because the bull can do so without the bull hurting himself.

There is a certain ignobility of that answer, when asked why did you do that? ‘Because the rules say that I am allowed to do it.’ That is not a Christlike motive.

The presence of something we want to do, but the presence also of our brother who now prevents me from enjoying what I want to do, becomes a true test for us because it forces this question – which do we love more – enjoying our own rights or protecting our brother or sister?

Controversial gray areas don’t get solved by asking only what we think and then go for it.

In the Christian life, because we are inherently connected to a Christian

community that impacts other people, we don't get to do whatever we want.

There this other principle at stake – being committed to not do those things that will harm others.

To put this teaching into the form of a motto, we could borrow a phrase from the Hippocratic oath used in the study of medical ethics, “first do no harm.”

In other words, “One of the most essential aspects of our Christian freedom is to decline to participate in something that would cause others harm.”

Conclusion:

Unity in times of controversy requires that we all maintain a robust vision for the common good.

Please notice that the title of this sermon is, “Less Me, More Us.” That means, in our decision making our thinking, and our actions and our participation in areas of controversy and disagreements – let there be “Less of me, and more of us.” Less concern for myself, and more concern for all of us. The common good.

Listen to Paul's summary in verse 13, “*Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*” Never! Notice the word Never! Paul permanently would give up his right to eat meat, if his brother or sister needed him to do so. Paul was giving us this statement as an example for us all to follow.

We don't understand true freedom from God in the church until we understand that there are times that freedom must be used to say no to our own desires and wants.

Liberty is for people who love.

True liberty is when I give up my legitimate right to my own liberty in order to meet the higher goal of blessing another person or the whole group of persons.

There is no one who understands true freedom more than the One who gave His life for others. The cross of Jesus stands as the symbol of this lesson of less me, more us. Jesus gave up His life, in order that we might have everlasting life.

In a controversial gray area in the church, we ought not to pursue liberty without love. We ought not to claim knowledge without a desire to serve one another.

Right-thinking Christians choose to do not what is in their own best interest, but rather what is in the best interest of the church of Jesus Christ.

In Matthew 25:40, Jesus said to those who blessed others, “*as you did it to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.*”