

Love Builds Up

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

I like to build things. It is satisfying to see a project constructed. The combination of time, and effort, and skill coming together to make something worthwhile, something functional, or something beautiful. Most of my projects involve digging in the dirt. But projects come in all manner of shapes and sizes.

I want you to fix in your mind some project in which you are involved. It could be a daily chore, or a more extended project. It does not matter. How do you feel when someone comes along and in one way or another destroys the work that you have done? How do you feel if you have been working all day to clean the house, and your husband, or your kids, immediately begin undoing the work that you have accomplished? How do you feel if days, or weeks, of time and effort, are torn down by someone through their carelessness or negligence, or even through their evil intent? It makes you angry, does it not? You feel a sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach.

Well, you are God's construction project. He has set himself to the task of building you into something special. What exactly is His goal in you?

Each one is unique. God's work in each of us is specific to who we are with our specific personality and talents. But it is also right to say that God is doing the same work in each one of us. He is working in us to construct us into vessels of love – love first towards Himself. He is constructing a people for himself who are eager to love Him above any other love. But simultaneously, he is working in you a love for the rest of the Body of Christ – for other believers.

I know, that seems pretty simple. When you go about your day, it gets so much more complex than that. But when you boil it all down, this is the work that God is doing.

You are his construction project. He is working to destroy in you, your love of self, and replace it with a love of Him and your brothers and sisters in the Church.

How do you think God will react to you, if you, through your words or actions, in some way destroy his work in one of your brothers or sisters in Christ?

What will be God's response to you, if you tear down what he is building up?

That is the issue in today's sermon. We are going to talk about a specific issue that many of us will find terribly difficult to relate to. The eating of meat that has been sacrificed to idols. I am confident that not one of us is struggling with that question today. But, the principle of building up or tearing down applies to each one of us in a thousand ways.

And God, in his wonderful providence, has given us a test case. It is a good test case because we can look at it without our own personal feelings getting in the way. And once we get the principle firmly fixed, we will be able to apply it in areas that matter to us.

Read I Corinthians 8:1-13.

Now concerning food offered to idols:

we know that "all of us possess knowledge."
This "knowledge" puffs up,
but
love builds up.

Food offered to idols

Paul is again dealing with a specific problem in the Corinthian church. Through the study of the text and the practices of ancient Corinth we have been able to piece together the issue.

In Corinth, like many other cities of that time, pagan worship was common. This worship was not entirely unlike the worship of Yahweh in the OT. Don't get me wrong. In some ways it was very different. But there were some common practices. Certainly, the one to whom the worship was offered was different.

It is important to recognize three different levels in which a person could participate in eating of food sacrificed to idols.

The highest level is that you could actually participate in the offering. You would be in the presence of the priest while he was sacrificing the animal. A portion of the sacrifice would be consumed on the altar representing the portion that is reserved for the deity. A second portion was reserved for the priest. And a third portion was reserved for the worshipper. It is difficult to imagine being involved on this level and not being called and idol worshipper.

The second level involves eating a meal in the temple precincts. The worshipper would invite friends and relatives to join him in the feast that resulted from his offering. There were individual rooms adjoining to the Temple where you would gather for this meal. In this case, you would not be directly engaging in the Temple worship. But still, there is a close association with the pagan offerings.

The third level involves the priest taking some of his portion and selling it in the market. He could not eat all of the meat and he had no good way of storing it. So, he would sell it in the market and make a profit for himself. This meat would then be sold to whoever wanted to buy it. This is the lowest level of association with the pagan worship itself.

Understanding these levels is important to help us see that the questions of life are not always black and white. You could present the question in a black and white way: Is it right for a Christian to participate in idol worship? Presented this way, the answer is very simple: No, you should not!

But life is rarely this simple. In this case, we can see three levels of engagement. There may even be others that we do not know of. The questions then become more complex. And most of life is complex, meaning that there are always multiple factors to consider in choosing how connected we will be with the world around us.

Some of those factors are external to us. Some of those factors involve what is going on inside of us. Some of the Corinthian believers, who had recently been saved out of the worship of idols, felt in their hearts that if they ate of this meat, even if they bought it in the market, they were continuing to worship those same idols. They wanted nothing to do with idolatry. And eating meat that had previously been offered to idols just felt wrong to them.

Others, rightly recognizing that the meat was just meat, felt no objection to eating this meat. Maybe it was less expensive or a higher cut. Or maybe they just did not see the need to find out if it was used in idolatry or not.

How Paul works through these issues is even more important than his specific conclusions. If you can learn how Paul reasons, then you will be able to use his reason in any situation you find yourself.

Side note: Why does Paul not simply give the rules of the Jerusalem Council from Acts 15? Does his council here contradict the Jerusalem Council? He will argue that the Christian has the right to eat meat offered to idols.

Acts 15:28-29 ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

My guess: The Jerusalem Council is primarily dealing with freeing Gentile believers from having to keep all of the Jewish ceremonial laws, for the sake of enabling Jewish and Gentile believers to worship together. The question in Corinth does not directly apply since the majority of the Church was Gentile. But this is just a guess and I have to simply accept that Paul had his reasons and his reasoning here is not contradictory with the Jerusalem Council.

Paul begins with a statement: "All of us possess knowledge."

This statement is most likely one that was used by the Corinthians in the letter that they had sent him. Paul speaks it back to them, with a bit of sarcasm. The Corinthians all believed that they had things figured out. This was the underlying cause of the factions in the Church. Each group believed that they "understood" what was right more than the others around them.

To some it was obvious that any Christian worth his salt would go to the inconvenience of choosing meat that had not been sacrificed in pagan temples.

To others it was obvious that meat was meat. There were no lingering demons in the meat that would get into you if you ate it. Quit making such a big deal about this.

And there were likely several other factions, all possessing knowledge that everyone else ought to accept as Gospel Truth.

In this way, we are very much like the Corinthian believers.
We all have the inside track on the answer to life's problems.
Our personal wisdom is superior to those around us.
We all "suppose" we have knowledge.

I am a teacher. I love to study to learn to find new knowledge all the time. And, I absolutely believe that the Bible is the best source of knowledge. The Bible calls us to study and learn the knowledge it contains. Knowledge is a good thing. Paul is not condemning knowledge. But he is challenging one of the dangers of possessing some knowledge, and thinking that the possession of knowledge is sufficient for life.

Step one is to think that you possess knowledge that others do not have.

Since knowledge is valuable, it then has the effect of increasing your importance to others around you. And that leads you to then feel in your own heart that you are more valuable.

Step two is that your knowledge has the effect of "puffing you up."
"knowledge puffs up"

It inflates your perception of your own importance.

You are like a balloon. I am sure Paul did not have a balloon in his mind, but it works.

You are like a balloon. On the outside you are looking so great and important. But there is nothing of value on the inside. Just air.

Step three is then that because of your being “puffed up” you do not actually use the knowledge that you have to serve others and to build them up, but rather to tear them down, or to manipulate or control them.

The only answer to this downward path is love – true biblical love.

The only way to keep yourself from being “puffed up” is to love. It is significant that Paul’s answer is NOT to cease learning. “Knowledge puffs up so let’s all be ignorant, and quit learning.” That would be terrible. We need knowledge. But we need knowledge that is joined together with true love. Love is the pinnacle for which we are striving. We are not simply striving for knowledge. We are striving for love.

Paul will make a case that knowledge without love is not really true knowledge at all. In fact, knowledge without love is not true knowledge.

² If anyone imagines that he knows something,
he does not yet know as he ought to know.

Knowledge without love is nothing more than the imagination of knowledge.
Until your knowledge has the effect of producing love in you, you do not really know.

A person can list the attributes of God. He or she may even be able to teach a class on each of those attributes. But if that knowledge does not lead you to heartfelt praise of God, you really do not have a true knowledge of God.

A person can possess valuable knowledge. But until one uses that knowledge to serve and love others, they have not really understood God’s intended purpose of the knowledge itself.

The things in this world, down to the very atoms, were designed by God to reveal His glory, or to express his love towards us. And if we do not somehow grasp this as we learn knowledge, we have missed the true intent of knowing the specifics of the world in which we live.

Love is relational. Therefore, knowledge is designed to serve the relationship: either of humans to one another or of our relationship to the Divine. And without its culmination in love, knowledge is empty knowledge.

If you are not growing in your love to God and love to others, you are not really growing in the fullness of knowledge. You just have the shell of knowledge. You are like that balloon. And when God pricks the balloon, you will find that all you have left is a stretched out piece of rubber, useless.

³ But if anyone loves God,
he is known by God.

Paul never ceases to surprise me. I would have expected him to say. But if anyone loves God, then he possesses the fullness of knowledge. Instead, he speaks of being known by God.

How does “being known by God” relate to what Paul is talking about?

It could be that Paul is simply stating that God approves of the person who loves. God commends the person who loves.

But being known by God may imply the affection of God and true relationship that God has towards them. Obviously, God, the One who possesses all knowledge knows everyone. But the person who is filled with love for God is one on whom God has placed his saving affection.

If we have made the connection that one does not truly know until he truly loves, then it follows that the one whom God truly knows is also truly loved by God.

In other words, the person who gives out love to God, has first had God's glorious love poured out in his heart.

Paul is likely referring to one of the most precious truths of life itself. We must first receive the love of God into our hearts. And only then will we possess true love to give it back to God and to others.

As you are walking around in your bodies and learning tidbits of knowledge, keep in mind that you have not completed your quest for knowledge until it has resulted in your being a conduit of God's love to others.

This doesn't make the pursuit of knowledge less important at all. We all ought to be on a quest for truth. Hopefully, our quest takes us to the pages of Scripture. This is God's revealed truth. But knowing that goal of knowledge is the increase of love will prevent us from simply being "puffed up" with knowledge like a balloon.

Now, Paul is going to apply this to the particular question of whether or not to eat "food that has been sacrificed to idols."

Obviously, Paul will begin with a statement of objective truth. He is going to explain truth that should inform the knowledge of the Corinthians. But as we will see, he will not finish with the mere imparting of knowledge.

4 Therefore,
 as to the eating of food offered to idols,
 we know that "an idol has no real existence,"
 and
 that "there is no God but one."

The first truth that Paul wants to make clear is that idols do not have a real existence. What does he mean by this?

It is generally accepted that behind false worship lies demonic activity. Satan, wants us to bow down to him rather than to the true God.

And, demons are real beings. They are not true gods. But they are powerful beings.

1 Corinthians 10:19-20 ¹⁹ What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons.

the truth, but getting people to embrace and fully apply that truth in their hearts is another thing altogether.

Their former association with idols makes it terribly difficult to no longer attribute godlike qualities to demons.

And so, Paul says, “not everyone possesses this knowledge”. It has not gotten down deep into their heart such that they can be said to be renewed. The result is that when they eat food that has been sacrificed to an idol, they feel like they are dining with gods, gods other than Jesus.

Their conscience has been defiled. In other words, it has not yet been renewed in the image of Christ. How wonderful that Paul does not disdain these people! He does not look down upon them for being stubborn or hard-hearted. They have simply been deeply broken by their previous lives of sin.

Paul describes their conscience as being weak. He is not belittling them. Instead, he is calling those who have been granted greater “strength” to use their strength to compassionately love those who are weak.

God loves those who are weak. He loves to give strength to the weak. He does not crush the weak. Rather, in love he builds up. And so, God expects those who have been given grace to “possess” the truth to extend compassionate love towards those who are having a more difficult time.

Some Christians accept a truth and are able to internalize that truth relatively quickly. Others accept the truth intellectually, but internalizing its implications happens more slowly. What is the responsibility of those who have internalized the truth towards those who are still struggling?

Love which builds up and does not tear down.

8 Food will not commend us to God.
 We are no worse off if we do not eat,
 and
 no better off if we do.
9 But
 take care
 that this right of yours
 does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

Eating or not eating a certain food is not really that important.

Whether or not you eat or don't eat a particular food in no way commends you to God. The fact that you can eat a meat offered to an idol does not make you better in the eyes of God. You cannot go around saying, “Look at me, God loves me more, because he has given me the right to eat this meat.”

Not in the least. I know that those who love bacon are glad that the Jewish food restrictions have been lifted for Christians. But whether or not you do or do not eat meat has no value when it comes to your relationship with God.

Paul sticks a needle into the balloon of both the one who eats and the one who does not eat. Essentially, he tells them both, “Don't get cocky. It's not the important.”

But, what is important is whether or not you are expressing love towards your brother or sister in Christ. This is deeply important. And God cares very much about it.

You must be careful to not do anything that might cause your weaker brother to stumble.

How does this work?

10 For if anyone sees you
who have knowledge
eating in an idol's temple,
will he not be encouraged,
if his conscience is weak,
to eat food offered to idols?

Up to this point, Paul has simply been discussing whether or not one should eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols. It is easy to infer that he has been talking about the lowest of the three levels: that of buying the meat in the market and taking to your own home to eat it.

But here in verse 10 Paul speaks of eating in the idol's temple. I believe this a reference to what I have called Level 2: eating in the rooms adjacent to the temple.

I believe that Paul will condemn Level 1 in chapter 10.

But if Paul has mostly been talking about Level 3, why jump to Level 2 now?

Because Level 2 is more far more provocative. Eating previously sacrificed meat in the confines of your own home is not nearly as provocative as a person going to the pagan temple and eating food in the actual temple. This is a much bigger deal.

Paul makes his point using an activity that was more closely associated with pagan worship.

This is important because the concept of not putting a stumbling block in front of someone can also be abused. You cannot always be walking on eggshells fearful that you might lead someone into sin. And, ultimately, people are responsible for their own choices.

Paul does not really take the time to try to draw the exact line in the sand. Rather, he wants people to focus on the responsibility to love.

In this case, when the weak brother, who feels like he is associating with false gods when he eats previously sacrificed meat in his home, sees his fellow brother going into the temple, he might be tempted go against his conscience and eat the meat. Or, he might even receive an invitation from someone to go to temple for a meal. And against, his conscience he might go.

But how is the weak brother eating meat sacrificed to idols sin for him?

It cannot be because he is actually participating in an activity that is objectively wrong. If so, then it would be wrong for the strong brother as well. But Paul is clear that he has a right to eat this meat.

No, what makes it sin for the weak brother is that he is going against his conscience. His mind has not yet been renewed to the point that he can eat without going against his conscience.

Maybe with time his mind will be renewed. But it has not yet been so. And so, to eat would be, for him, sin.

But the sin of the weak brother is not Paul's main point.
Paul's main point is the sin of the strong brother.
It is the sin of destroying what God is building.

11 And so
 by your knowledge
 this weak person is destroyed,
 the brother for whom Christ died.

What does it mean that the weak person is destroyed?
It does not necessarily mean that this person has "lost their salvation."
It can simply mean that in some way this person is "torn down."
And remember, Paul's point at the beginning was that love "builds up."
In other words, by your "supposed" knowledge, you are not acting in love.
You are harming your brother rather than building them up.

Take some time to work through your beliefs with them. Try to inform them in the truth. But don't simply tell them, "It's no big deal; come on; I'm doing it."

Now, Paul goes for the jugular. This brother whom you are destroying, is the brother for whom Christ died.

Paul's point is that Jesus deeply loves this person whom you seem to not care about at all.
Jesus has expressed his love for them in dying for them.
He has given up all his rights to pour out his love in the form of shedding his blood.
What are you doing for them?

You are only concerned for your own self.

12 Thus,
 sinning against your brothers
 and wounding their conscience when it is weak,
 you sin against Christ.

By taking your partial knowledge, you are not only committing a sin against your brother. You are ultimately sinning against Christ, whom you claim to love.

The knowledge that you think you possess is only a knowledge of your imagination. You don't know anything.

13 Therefore,
 if food makes my brother stumble,
 I will never eat meat,
 lest I make my brother stumble.

Paul's conclusion is to not eat idol-sacrificed meat. There are further nuances to this whole discussion that will come out in later chapters.

But the specific conclusion is not as important as the guiding principle.

1. This principle only applies if you are dealing with some practice that is indifferent in terms of helping you grow closer to God. Positively helpful activities should be continued whatever other people think.
2. As a Christian who is being constructed by God to “build up” to love, I will gladly abstain from a freedom for the sake of not “tearing down” a fellow Christian. It is more important to help my fellow brother or sister from going against their conscience, than it is for me to exercise my personal rights or privileges.

Applications

1. Are you growing in your love towards God?
2. Do you use your knowledge to love others? Or has it simply puffed you up?
3. Do you look down upon your fellow Christian who has a weaker conscience? Or are you truly striving to encourage and build him or her up?

In all of your daily activities remember that if you belong to God, then you are his construction project. And remember what it is that he is constructing. He is working to make you into his image – no longer a lover of self, but now and forever, a lover of God and his people.