

January 28, 2024

“What Governs the Grey”

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (9-13)

**Intro:**

Ever have one of those arguments that seems to be over something relatively unimportant? You know, those ones that seem way more intense than what the focus of the argument would warrant? For example, having a full blown, all out argument over which tone of white paint to use for the trim in living room. Not that I am pulling that example from my own life... Cindy and I never argue about paint color. I give my opinion, and she tells me why I should never be allowed near that wall of little color swatches in a paint store. But, the argument about eggshell white verses ivory that escalates into huge shouting match where words are spoken that should never be spoken, and tears are shed, feelings are hurt, and somewhere in all of that the question forms of why is this such a big deal in the first place?

The reason it is a big deal is often that there is a bigger problem beneath the surface, but that problem is too hard to deal with and so all the focus goes into the minor, surface issue.

A similar situation is when you have an important task to do at work but instead of doing it, you give all your attention to a less important one so you don't have to deal with the bigger, more important task. It is just easier to deal with the simple, surface thing than it is to dig down and deal with the deeper issue.

As we turn to 1 Corinthians 8 this morning, we find Paul addressing a similar sort of problem.

**The Passage: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13**

Paul has received word, or a letter, from the Christians in Corinth alerting him to the fact that all is not well in the church. Part of that word contains questions about behaviour that they want Paul to settle for them. One of those questions

concerns the eating of meat that has been sacrificed to idols. There is some division among the believers about how to handle this issue.

Before we get into Paul's response, I want to point out that the meat referred to was likely not the piece that was placed on the altar. That meat would have been consumed by fire or dealt with in some other ritual. No, the meat in question here would have been part of the same sacrificial animal, but instead of being placed on the altar, it was saved and sent to the marketplace to be sold. The problem was that a person didn't always know where the meat they were being served came from and so it made eating at someone else's home difficult – if that person believed that any meat from an animal used for sacrifice was also part of that sacrifice.

It appears that in Corinth there were people who believed it did, and other people who felt just as strongly that it didn't. Or more accurately, the second group believed that their freedom in Christ made it a moot point and it was really nothing more than just another cut of meat.

For Paul, there is more going on here than this debate about eating, or not eating, food offered to idols. But before he can get to the deeper issue, and the governing principle, he needs to deal with the surface issue.

So, should people eat meat offered to idols? Paul's simple answer is that there is no reason a believer could not do this. On the surface. He reminds the Corinthians that they have a new knowledge and understanding of idols and gods – that idols are not real, that there is only one God who created everything, and one Lord, Jesus, through whom creation happened and in whom they have new and true life. So, on that point, eat the meat.

But, there were those believers for whom this was not so clear. For them, the process of offering animals in sacrifice, and the meat that is the byproduct of that sacrifice and subsequently sold, is part of the process of worship. It is not simply a matter of where the meat came from, but the eating of such meat makes them

participants in worshipping those same idols. They have not yet fully embraced the understanding that those gods are not real. It is not always easy to completely erase and replace a lifetime of belief and practice.

And that was the surface argument they wanted Paul to speak directly about – which understanding was correct.

Paul doesn't really answer. He simply acknowledges and reiterates what the Christians already know about God and about worship. He doesn't even condemn those believers who are still in the position of believing that the gods of their former lives are real. He does state that they are weaker in their faith, but he does not call them out as having no faith at all. Like us, they were all at different places in their faith journey.

### **The Deeper Issue:**

This leads to the deeper issue, and the deeper instruction for the people. How do they commune and worship together when there is such a difference in understanding?

This is the question for us as well. Christians in the western world are not concerned about whether their meat was part of a sacrifice before it was sold in the grocery store. Chances are very good that it was not. It is one of those situations in Scripture that seems only relevant to the original audience. How then should we read this passage to gain insight for our present-day faith journey?

We pay attention to the solution that Paul offers to navigating disagreements, especially when the disagreement seems to be focused on something that is not all that important. He specifically tells those whose “superior knowledge” allows them freedom in what they eat, and in other situations, to take into account that not everyone is at their same level of understanding and growth as Christians.

Paul is really not talking about meat any longer. He instructs those who are stronger in their faith not to behave in a way that could cause other, less mature, believers to act against their own faith. This applies to any “controversial” issue in the church – the consumption of alcohol for instance. Many Christians believe that consuming any amount of alcohol is a deadly sin, while others believe that as long as there is not drinking to excess and getting drunk, then having a craft beer or glass of wine every now and then is not a problem. But there is a problem if the Christian who is freer in his faith drinks that beer in front of a brother or sister for whom this is still a struggle, and that less free Christian then feels pressured to also have a beer. The result will be that the less free one will feel a great weight of guilt. In effect, they stumble in their faith and drinking beer really has become a sin for them. This, Paul says, is the true issue: not who is right about the meat, but how fellow believers in the church should behave for the betterment of everyone.

**Conclusion:**

The answer, for Paul, is very simply to not do the disputed thing. Or at least not do it in the presence of the believer for whom it is a very real struggle. The focus is on putting other people and their needs ahead of our own desires. Freedom in Christ does not mean that we can do whatever we want without considering the impact on other people. Freedom in Christ is the freedom to consider others and to joyfully put their needs ahead of our own.

And for that, Paul gives the governing instruction – it is not the knowledge that we are free that should drive or guide us, but love. Love is what strengthens the church. Love is the willingness to put the needs of others ahead of our own wants. The freedom to do something also carries with it the freedom to not do that thing. When we can only see or act from one side of freedom, then we are not yet fully free, and it is the responsibility of those believers who are free to not make it harder for others to become free.

This is especially important to remember when it comes to the grey areas of life. There isn't always a clear and obvious answer, and valid arguments can be made for and against these issues. Rather than insisting on only one response, or one

way of thinking, or one action, because we think we have the superior knowledge or faith, focus on how best to love, and show love, to the other person. It might be by instructing and helping them to see more clearly the way you see right or wrong, but more likely it will be simply to walk with them as they sort it out, withholding your own opinion, allowing the Holy Spirit to form their faith, just as He is doing with yours.

Let's pray.