

Love Always Goes Well with Steak

1 Corinthians 8:1-6

August 8 & 9, 2009
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After weeks in 1 Corinthians 7, we now take a deep breath and step into another controversy in the Corinthian church. Remember, Paul is writing in response to questions that the Corinthian church had sent him. What have we seen over and over thus far? The Corinthians and their struggles are very similar to the issues we deal with in the contemporary church.

Chapter 8 introduces another one. Now this is going to be shocking, so try not to be shocked. One of the problems in the Corinthian church was Christians in the church disagreeing. Their disagreeing turned into arguing. Arguing became rancor and division. Can you believe that? I derive some strange pleasure in seeing the early church, pastored by Apostles and early church heroes, having problems. It makes me feel better. Many people romanticize this era of the church and think, *If only I could be a part of the early church when everything was blissful and perfect and everyone loved everyone all the time.* Those are people who have not read their Bibles. Beginning with the Grecian widow controversy in Acts 6, the church has always struggled because a church is not a building, it is people. Whenever people are involved, there are bound to be problems.

Part of the reason is the breadth of potential disagreements in a church. There are so many categories of life and faith that there is no way we will ever find someone who agrees 100% with us. In fact, much of the time, I am not sure I agree with myself. Think of all the potential points of disagreement: doctrine; faith; philosophy of ministry; Christian liberty; views on relationships, marriage and parenting; perspectives on recreation, money, possessions, politics, worldview, etc. Many of these are areas about which the Bible says absolutely nothing, leaving people to create their opinions in a revelatory vacuum. Opinions become convictions and convictions become battlegrounds and soon it is an ecclesiastical Gettysburg.

Many of you have seen Christians get ugly. In fact, your presence here today at Bethel Church might come after years of disillusionment with churches and the nasty version of Christianity you have experienced. I could be wrong, but I would bet that what really turned you off in the past wasn't the doctrine and it wasn't the organizational structure and it wasn't the ministry strategy. What really turned you off were the attitudes that were sometimes haughty. Hypocritical. Lacking in love. Somewhere along the way someone made a minor thing a major thing and forgot that love is the major thing.

Today's message is titled, *Love Always Goes Well with Steak*. We have some cultural bridges to cross to understand 1 Corinthians 8. We will get to those, but first, let me read all of chapter 8.

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. 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." For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus

Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 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? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

Our text today is verses 1-6. This is a big deal and Paul gives it huge space in the letter. His answer continues into chapter 9 and to the end of chapter 10. There are 64 verses on how to live in Christian community; specifically, on how to love each other in spite of our differences.

Idols and Idolatry

Let's tackle verses 1-6 which sets the table for the rest. We begin with idols and idolatry in the ancient world. This is difficult for us because we have been conditioned by our culture NOT to think about the universe as being the playground of a pantheon of gods. Other than the small percentage of Hindus, Buddhists, and New Agers, American religions are monotheistic. Christianity. Judaism. Islam. Most American cults have a monotheistic foundation. Atheism and agnosticism may not be monotheistic, but not they are not polytheistic either.

So when we read biblical history in the context of ancient polytheism, it is dominated by the struggle of monotheistic Judaism, and later monotheistic Christianity, against a passionately polytheistic world. For example, the Israelites cross the Red Sea in an amazing display of divine power. A short time later Aaron builds the golden calf and the nation is all too eager to bow down to the god of the Egyptians. How many Americans watch a movie like *The Ten Commandments* and see people bowing to a statue and think, *What kind of person would do that?* A billion in modern day India and hundreds of millions more in human history would do that. From the perspective of their worldview, it made perfect sense. They grew up believing the storms came from Zeus and the waves from Poseidon and the sun was the god Apollo. The ancient world was filled with myths and stories and traditions that kept people in constant fear of the gods.

Their gods were their explanation for reality. Of course, we are the same. The gods of our culture represent our attempt to explain the reality around us and are in essence the same as the Greeks and Romans – power, sex, money, prosperity, beauty. What is different is the form our gods take. They made physical representations of their gods so they had somewhere to focus their worship. We do the same. A flyby of Chicago would show what we worship. Soldier Field. Merchandise Mart. United Center. Navy Pier. Sport. Money. Art. Pleasure. The human gods never change.

What is an idol?

An idol is what God calls anything we hold as more desirable than Him. The Corinthians didn't call their idols "idols." Their idols were gods to them. For an idol to be an idol it has to be placed ahead of something else that it shouldn't. When there is nothing else to put ahead of something, the idol is your god.

This is where the current phenomenon of *American Idol* is helpful in understanding this. As you know, the show begins with tens of thousands from all over the country. Each round places some ahead of others. The Top 25. The Top 10. The Top 2. But there is only one *American Idol*. He or she is the one who is *put ahead* of all the rest.

An idol is what God calls anything we *put ahead* of Him. This is why in God's top Ten Commandments, number 1 is, "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" (Exodus 20:1-3) Here is how our church doctrinal statement says it:

The triune God is perfect, beautiful, and glorious in all of His attributes. These attributes include, but are not limited to: holiness, sovereignty, power, justice, wisdom, truth, faithfulness, mercy, goodness, and love. God's infinite worth demands that mankind ascribe ultimate glory to Him, and His immeasurable value means that nothing should be honored or treasured more than God Himself. (Bethel Church Doctrinal Statement)

The Issue of Idol Meat and Idol Feasts in Corinth

This is what was happening in Corinth. The center hub of the city was the temple where Aphrodite was worshipped. Temple worship involved the bringing of an animal to the temple as a sacrifice. The meat was divided into three parts. One part was consumed in the sacrifice, one part went to the priest, and one part went back to the person who brought the sacrifice. In a day, the priests received way more meat than they could eat, so it was often sold in the markets of the city. Much of the meat sold in the city had previously been offered in worship at the temple and it was hard to know if it had been or not. It's not like their grocery stores had "idol-free" freezer sections.

The other part of this controversy had to do with the meals and feasts at the temple. These feasts were a big deal in Corinth. They were the social gatherings and celebrations of the city. The issue in the Corinthian church was whether it was appropriate for Christians to eat meat offered to idols and could Christians go to the temple and participate in these meals? Some in the church said yes and some said no. Eating idol meat is not an issue we deal with. What is helpful however, is that Paul gives us a paradigm for handling the issues we do deal with.

Living by love is more important than living by knowledge

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up. (1 Corinthians 8:1)

You will notice that there are quotation marks in verse 1. "All of us possess knowledge." Paul is likely quoting from their letter to him. In their letter, the Corinthians emphasized that they understand that an idol isn't anything (see verse 4). Paul likely taught them that when he was there. They were doctrinally correct. Paul affirms this in verse 4 by quoting Isaiah 41:24 and Deuteronomy 4:35. These supposed gods in Greece were no gods at all for there is only one God "*the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist.*" (verse 6) That's a strong monotheistic theological statement. The Old Testament affirms it. Every Jew quoted the Shema twice a day, *Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one.* He continues with a Christological statement, "*and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.*" (Verse 6) This is Trinitarian language. One God, the Father *and* one Lord, Jesus Christ. The Father is the source of all things. Christ is the mediator of all things. Aphrodite and Zeus and Poseidon and all the rest of the pantheon are NOTHING. The idols are nothing. They are just wood and stone. That's it.

I watched a *YouTube* video this week of a religious procession. In the procession they were parading a large religious icon into the room. Those gathered were very reverent as the icon passed by. People were singing reverent songs. Unfortunately, one of the carriers was an older fellow and his grip slipped, and the giant statue came crashing down and smashed into pieces. Everyone's shocked. It's one of those moments. Wouldn't you say that if your god can break, it's probably not worth worshipping? Idols aren't anything and meat offered to idols doesn't mean anything. It doesn't affect the meat at all. So Paul affirms their doctrine, but that is not their problem. Their problem was their attitude about it toward others in the church that weren't there yet in their understanding.

Paul says in verse 7 says that not everyone possesses this knowledge. There were two groups in the church. Those that knew a free conscience about eating meat offered to idols AND those that still had lingering superstitions about the idols and their conscience didn't allow them to eat idol meat. Paul focuses first on those who had the right knowledge. They were right, but something very important was missing.

"We're right and you're wrong" – right doctrine, wrong attitude

This knowledge they had about idols being nothing did the opposite of what it should have. Rather than humbling them under the glory of the one God of heaven, they took pride in their right knowledge. *Knowledge puffs up*. Puff is the same word from chapter 4. Remember the puffer fish? They were puffed up with pride in their right knowledge. They knew it all.

One of our favorite cultural phrases is "I know." Ever notice how often we say it and how much we can communicate with it? *I know. I know. I know*. Our pride doesn't want us to say, *I don't know*. Pride puffs up. Paul says in verse 2, *If anyone imagines he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know*. This isn't to say that we can't have certainty in our doctrine. What he is saying is that anyone who pridefully thinks that they have it all figured out shows by their attitude that they don't understand the essence of it. True understanding of the gospel always produces profound humility. Any theological system or belief or church that promotes pride or a spirit of superiority is fundamentally flawed. Why?

The true gospel and the doctrines that flow from it, when properly understood and believed, create an increasing wonder in God and His grace toward me.

That's verse 3. *But if anyone loves God, he is known by God*. How did we come to love God? Know God? Have any advancement spiritually? Grow in our understanding of God? *If anyone loves God, he is known by God*. One precedes the other. The only way we come to have a love relationship with God is that God knew us first. This is similar to 1 John 4:19, *We love because he first loved us*. The only way we have anything – any knowledge, any forgiveness of sin, any hope of life eternal when we die, any peace or encouragement in this life – is completely the byproduct of God knowing us, loving us, bringing into our experience the hearing of the gospel of Jesus Christ; the granting to us of faith, the regenerating of our dead hearts, the precious gift of having God's Word, having minds that can apprehend spiritual truth, knowing fellow Christians who teach, encourage, and model it, and a local church within which to live in community. It is all of God! What do I have that I have not received from God? These truths don't puff us up, they crush us.

So you are all proud that you have figured out that an idol is nothing? You're proud that you can eat meat offered to nothing? This is what's got you full of yourself? Big whoop! If what

you think you know puffs you up, you really don't get the gospel. **The important thing is not what we know but who knows us – God and His Son, Jesus Christ.**

Love is a doctrine too

Many of us here come from backgrounds where there was tremendous pride in being right, in having our idol meat doctrines all figured out. And many of us were disillusioned with the puffed up attitudes that went along with it. Some of you might be tentatively giving Christianity another try and you are here hoping to find something real. Does this resonate with you? Doesn't this explain so much of the rancor and division that has happened on non-essential idol meat eating kind of issues in the church? In other words, that kind of Christianity isn't real Christianity. What has turned you off is not the real thing. Paul is all about right doctrine. It's just, for him, love is a doctrine too.

I remember attending a conference of a group that would trend toward this kind of thing. The speaker was a long revered leader in the organization. He said, *You know, our problem isn't our doctrine, our problem is that we just can't get along.* My friend leaned over and said to me, *Since when is love not a doctrine?*

When non-essential, non-gospel related issues rise to a level where I am willing to spiritually judge my brother for not agreeing with me, I have forgotten the most important knowledge of all, that **I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior.**

What should that mean in a church like ours where we care a great deal about teaching and biblical doctrine? It's not that we shouldn't care about doctrine, but that our doctrine of love shapes our attitude and our tone. It is said of Charles Spurgeon that he quietly prayed a prayer every time as he mounted the stairs to preach, *God be merciful to me a sinner.*

In the body life of our church, as we interact about many important things, some of which we hold as convictions, we should do so with the attitude of that prayer, *God, be merciful to me a sinner.* It's not about the meat. That's a secondary issue. It's primarily about Christ and Him crucified, the hope of glory.

This may not change what we believe but it changes our attitude about it. It seeks to say what will be building up. It maintains a learner's spirit. It refrains from having to say, *I know*, even when we do. It doesn't have to show off or make sure others realize who we are. And foundational to the rest of the chapter, it is willing to personally adjust lifestyle for the sake of our fellow Christian's conscience. Pride won't do that. Love will.

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

This is summarized nicely in the oft quoted proverb,
In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.

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