

At first glance, some of us might find today's reading a little bit irrelevant:

- In Corinth, there were multitudes of gods, and idols, and pagan worship...
- At the butchers shop, it was almost impossible to buy meat that had not been sacrificed to some kind of false god.
- In their community, they didn't have an RSL or a sports club to be the hub of the community – they had pagan temples.
- And many of these pagan temples had purpose-built dining rooms, so that if you wanted to host a business function (or a social function), you'd book a room at the local pagan temple, and invite all your guests along. And the sacrifice of the day was not only "The Chef's Special" – it was the whole menu.

In Corinth, it was very difficult to find tucker, that hadn't been offered to idols.

And this was an issue for them, because this is the culture, that the Corinthians grew up in. Before they became Christians, at almost every meal, thanks was given to one or more of their pagan gods...

So, how did they handle all this, when they repented of idolatry, and turned to Jesus?

Well, as with the church today, it seemed that there were 2 distinct lines of thought. There were those who preached "liberty", and there were those who preached "legality".

Those who preached liberty would say, “Well, we **know** that an idol is **nothing**. It’s nothing but a block of wood.” ... The prophet Isaiah made a joke about this once, when he told the story about someone who cuts down a tree. :

**Isaiah 44:16** Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, “Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!” <sup>17</sup> And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, “Deliver me, for you are my god!”

And Isaiah draws out the absurdity of it – they’re not even smart enough to realise:

<sup>19</sup> .... “Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals; I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? (detestable) Shall I fall down before a block of wood?”

It’s absurd. And we **know** this. There is nothing real about an idol. There are no other gods. In a couple of weeks’ time, Paul **will** tell us what is really behind pagan worship – it’s the worship of demons, but the idols themselves, and the meat that is offered **to** them, are merely building materials and protein...

We **know** this. The **pagans** don’t know this – they believe that an idol is actually a god. But **we know** better. We know there **is** only one god – The Lord God almighty.

And Paul probably quotes the perspective of those who preached liberty, when he says:

<sup>4</sup> 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.”

<sup>5</sup> For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”— <sup>6</sup> **yet for us there is one God**.... And one Lord Jesus Christ....

And so, those who preached liberty, would say, “There’s no problem with eating meat dedicated to Idols.” “**We know** that they’re not real.” *It’s just like “It’s OK to go to your cupboard in the night time – there’s no monster in there.”*

Those who preached liberty, **may** have even felt they were even free to attend functions at the pagan temple, and to eat whatever was dished up to them there.

So, some within the church held **that** view,,,, Others held a very different view.

When the Gentiles were first beginning to be saved, a debate arose in the Church (which was mostly Jewish), around “What laws should be required of the Gentiles?” Do they have to become Jews? Do they have to get circumcised? Do they have to keep our food laws? Do they have to keep our cleanliness laws? And so the apostles and the elders met at Jerusalem, at what is now known as “The Jerusalem Council. And this is what they decided:

**Acts 15:19** .... we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, <sup>20</sup> but should write to them

to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.

And the reason for this, is because “The Gentiles aren’t the only Christians in the church”. The Jews were the most prevalent. Even in Corinth, there were most likely Jewish Christians in the church. And they didn’t want the Jews to feel ‘at odds’ with their Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ.

And so the Jerusalem council said, “Don’t eat meat sacrificed to idols”.

And that became the rule, that many lived by, and they **knew** that was the rule. So, who was right? Were those who preached liberty, right? Or were those who preached the legality, right? Should they eat meat sacrificed to idols? Or should they abstain from meat sacrificed to idols?

And the way Paul answers their question, is what makes this bible reading relevant for the church of today.

**You’re both wrong!!!** You think you have knowledge (well we all have knowledge in part) – but you think your knowledge is greater than it is... The way you’re using the little bit of knowledge you have, is evidence of how very little you know at all...

You **claim** to know what is right. You **claim** to know what is wrong. But by the way you’re treating your brother, it’s obvious “you know nothing”...

He said, “**Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.**”

The evidence of their only partial knowledge, was the lack of love and the lack of concern that they had, for their brother.

Now, I think at this point, I’m going to have to ‘press the pause button’, because (before we go on) there is a very important distinction that should be made:

The issue of whether someone ate meat sacrificed to idols or not, was **not** a moral issue **in itself**. Paul is very clear on this. In V8 he says: <sup>8</sup> **Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.**

Alright, this issue is ‘morally neutral’ **in itself**. There is no right or wrong, when it comes to eating meat that has been sacrificed to an idol.

And so we cannot take what Paul says here, and apply it to issues that **are** moral issues, such as:

- Lying;
- Stealing;
- Murder;
- Unforgiveness;
- Adultery;
- Gossip;
- Slander;

All these **are** moral issues. Christians are forbidden from doing these things (always).

- It's **never OK** to lie
- It's **never OK** to steal
- It's **never OK** to murder
- It's **never OK** to be unforgiving
- It's **never OK** to sleep around
- It's **never OK** to gossip
- It's **never OK** to slander

Because the children of God have the Spirit of God, and God's Spirit will have no part in that way of life (and they're just a few examples)...

But what we eat, is a morally neutral issue... Other morally neutral issues might be:

- Whether you work on a Sunday or not. We're not forbidden from doing work on a Sunday, but some feel we shouldn't.
- Whether you wear a coat and tie to church or not, is a morally neutral issue. There's no reason you have to wear a coat and a tie to church, but you go to Tonga, and you'll soon find out that you're expected to.
- Drinking alcohol is a morally neutral issue. It's not a sin to drink alcohol. It's a sin to get drunk, but drinking in moderation (in itself), is morally neutral. And yet some feel we shouldn't.
- Whether someone joins the army or not, is a morally neutral issue. It's not a sin to fight for our country, but some feel that we shouldn't...

Alright, so what Paul is telling us here, only applies, to 'morally neutral' issues.

And what does he say? “**Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.**”

In Corinth, those inclined toward liberty, were quite right – an idol **is** nothing. And they **knew** they had the liberty to eat whatever meat they’d bought from the butcher. They didn’t have to worry about where it had come from, or who killed it, or why... And so they thought they had it all sorted – their **knowledge** puffed them up. And those other people who didn’t see it their way, they saw as being “weak”, and “If only they’d accept what **we** know, then they’d have the same liberty that we do...” (If only they could be as enlightened as us)

And Paul says, “You think you know stuff, but you know nothing, because you’re not loving your brother.”

Love limits liberty.

Yeah, they **did** have the liberty to eat the meat, but not if it was going to harm their brother.

You see, not everybody saw it the same way as they did. There were **new** Christians there, who’d just come out of a life of idolatry. For them, the worship of other gods, was still very fresh and very real. At this stage, they were still unable, to see an idol, as merely a block of wood.... To them, it was a means of worshipping other gods...

To become a Christian, they had recently repented of their idolatry. They had to leave it all behind, and begin to worship Jesus Christ, and Christ alone.... And so they were unable to eat meat from the pagan temple, without also acknowledging the pagan gods.

And so Paul says, “You might know that an idol is nothing, but it’s not nothing to everybody...”

V9 says: <sup>9</sup> But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. The Principle: Love limits liberty.

If you (in your puffed up knowledge) go and eat at the Pagan temple, and a newer or a weaker Christian sees you doing it,, if that causes that weaker Christian, to go against his conscience, and to eat food, and in doing so, enter into the worship of idols, you’ve destroyed your brother...

And worse than that, when we sin against our brother or our sister in Christ, we sin against Christ himself...

I’m going to leave the issue of food offered to idols at this point, because we’re going to pick it up again (a bit more) in a few weeks’ time, when we get to Chapter 10.

What we’re going to focus on though, is the principal of “Love limits Liberty”, and how we can apply it today...

Sometimes churches make unnecessary rules, that make it harder for new Christians to fit in. Likewise, sometimes, the exercise of freedoms (by those who are stronger), make it harder for those who are weaker, to resist temptation...

Let me give you an example. In our culture, I reckon the drinking of alcohol, is a **very** good example...

Some people claim to have the knowledge, that drinking alcohol, is always wrong. (That's not what the bible says (by the way)), but they claim to have this knowledge, and this knowledge puffs them up, and they expect everybody to follow their rule. But this expectation, simply adds another legality that God never put there.

And so those who promote "liberty", might claim to have the knowledge that it's **not** wrong to drink alcohol – it's our **right** to drink alcohol... And **their** perceived knowledge puffs **them** up...

And to a certain extent, they would be right. It's **not** wrong to drink alcohol...

But what if we had an alcoholic in our church? Or what if we had a new Christian in our church, who could never stop at just 1 or 2, but had the habit of getting drunk???? Would it be right for others in the church, to drink alcohol in their presence? No, it wouldn't.

Love limits our liberty. It **wouldn't** be right for **any** of us to drink alcohol in their company – It wouldn't be loving – it would just be increasing their temptation....

And so, living as a disciple of Jesus, isn't about standing up for our own rights. It's about giving up our rights, when it's the right thing to do. It's about sacrificing our liberties, for the sake of our brother or sister in Christ...

**Knowledge puffs up...** I don't think that means "all knowledge puffs up" – But when we perceive to know something that others don't, and we begin to judge others by that 'perceived knowledge' that's being puffed up, **But love builds up...**

When we get to Chapter 13, in that great passage on love, Paul says "Even if I have ... **all knowledge,.... But have not love, I am nothing.**"

You see, if love for our brother is what's missing, we've missed the most important part of knowing God. It means we know nothing about God... God isn't interested in how much we know (which is just as well, because I don't know much) – He just wants our love... When we love God, we are known by God – that's the knowing that counts – not that **we** know all about God, but that God knows us...

In 1 John 4, it says:

<sup>20</sup> If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. <sup>21</sup> And this commandment we

have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father,

We thank you for Your great love.

We thank you, for the little bit of knowledge that we **do** have about You,

But we pray, that it would never puff us up.

Lord, please forgive us, for when we **have** been puffed up in pride.

Forgive us, for when we have **not** loved our brother.

Forgive us, for when the freedoms and the liberties that we take, have made it more difficult, for our brother to not sin.

Lord, this chapter today, has made it so clear, that if, what we believe we know, causes us to **not** love our brother, we know nothing.

And we pray for this church, of Bush Disciples – that we would **always** love one another...

That we would give up our rights – that we would give up our liberties (if needed), because we love our brother or our sister in Christ.

By your Holy Spirit, please help us to know, if liberties that we currently exercise, add to the temptations of someone in our midst.

And help us to never put up barriers that prevent new people from coming to Christ.

And Lord, may we know the blessing of being known by you. Our minds are incapable of knowing everything about you, but we take comfort in the fact that You know us.

We love You, Lord. And help us to demonstrate our love for You, by loving our brother and sister in Christ.

Amen.