

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Knowledge of God

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

"Now about food sacrificed to idols" "What about it?" you may ask. "Sounds like a non-issue for twenty-first century folks here in Bryans Road, Maryland. Maybe the folks in first-century Corinth needed some guidance on the matter, but that's thousands of years, and thousands of miles, from us. Besides, we've got plenty of other more contemporary topics to sort through in the life of our congregation."

In one sense, you would be right. Idol meat isn't a subject of debate for us. These days, we're more heavily engaged in other potent issues like sexual identity, marriage, racial and ethnic reconciliation, environmental concerns, and economic inequality. So when, at the beginning of today's text, Paul turns to the topic of food sacrificed to idols, it's tempting to think we should just pass over this chapter and move on to something more relevant to our current setting. But if we look more closely, I believe we'll see that the way Paul opens this section of his letter gives us important insights that can continue to shape our relationships with one another and our behavior toward one another in the life of the church.

Note that before plunging into the complexities of the idol meat dispute in Corinth, Paul takes a step back and lays out his general philosophy on the matter. He spends the first three verses talking about the relationship between knowledge and love. "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge" (v. 1a-b). This expression, "We all possess knowledge," may have been a slogan that was widely used by many in the congregation at Corinth. We know from other places in Paul's letter that "knowledge" was prized among the Corinthian believers. "Knowledge" was an "in" word in the city and in this particular church.

"Knowledge" was a way of talking about insight or understanding given by the Spirit. And in this particular matter, the knowledge was this: There is only one God, so these pagan idols are nothing other than lifeless statues. There's no genuine reality to them. They don't have power to help or harm anyone. So Paul basically says, "Yes, you're right, we all have this knowledge. It's fundamental to our faith, individually and together. Plus, we have the knowledge that non-Jewish believers don't need to seek God's approval by following Jewish dietary laws. In that respect, food is a matter of indifference to God. I don't disagree with you on any of this." That's what Paul is essentially telling them.

So why, then, doesn't Paul wholeheartedly support those in the church who want to attend feasts held in pagan temples, where meat left over from the sacrifices is being served? Or if some of that meat ends up on the open market, why not tell those in the church who want to buy some of it and eat it to go ahead? Theologically, it's completely justifiable. It doesn't contradict anything that the Spirit has revealed about the one true and living God. It's understandable that for those in the church at Corinth who feel this way, this looks like a slam dunk case. If they want to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols, they're certainly free to do so.

But Paul reminds them that there's more to this idol meat issue than just their own rights and freedoms. Theologically, they're correct. But right doctrine isn't the only factor in play here. It's not just about what you know. More importantly, it's about how you love.

Paul knows that the Corinthians are fond of slogans, so he gives them one of his own: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (v. 1c). As soon he says that, you can hear some of the egos in the congregation start to deflate. In fact, Paul has already used this vivid metaphor a few other times in his letter, warning the Corinthians about becoming swollen with pride toward one another (4:6, 18-19; 5:2). Not that Paul doesn't see the benefits of knowledge. He realizes that knowledge can be a good thing that edifies and strengthens the church. He even opened his letter by expressing thanks for how the Corinthians have been enriched in knowledge (1:5).

And yet, at the same time, Paul recognizes the dangers of knowledge. He sees how it can breed spiritual elitism and create division within the fellowship of believers. Possessing knowledge is one thing, but letting it lead you into a sense of superiority over others in the congregation is something else. That's the way it is with many things in the life of the church. Things that are gifts of God, entrusted to us for building up the community of Christ's people, can end up being used in ways that weaken or divide the congregation. Take money as an example. In and of itself, money can be a good thing. But what if someone becomes focused on how much they're giving compared to how much they think others are giving? Or when it comes to music, what if someone dwells primarily upon how much better their voice is compared to the voice of the person standing beside them in the ensemble? Or in the ministry of teaching, what if one Bible study leader nurtures a sense of being vastly more informed and capable than the instructor of the group just down the hall? The potential for spiritual pride, and the strife that often comes with it, are constant dangers within the life of a congregation.

Benjamin Franklin vividly remembered a visit he made as a young man to see the Puritan preacher Cotton Mather, as well as the life lesson he learned. Franklin recalled:

He was showing me out of the house, and there was a very low beam near the doorway. I was still talking when Mather began shouting, "Stoop! Stoop!" I didn't understand what he meant and banged my head on the beam. "You're young," he said, "and have the world before you. Stoop as you go through it, and you will avoid many hard thumps." That advice has been very useful to me. I avoided many misfortunes by not carrying my head too high in pride.¹

When it came to the fellowship at Corinth, there was too little stooping and too many heads held too high, partly because of the value placed on spiritual knowledge. That's why, in today's text, we hear Paul trying to pop the bubble of those in the church who had a swollen sense of self-importance. As far as knowledge goes, they probably were further along the path of Christian understanding and maturity than some others in the congregation. But in other respects, maybe they weren't as far along as they thought.

Pastor John Ortberg tells about a time when he and some friends went to an open-air street fair that included a mechanical bull. The guy operating the bull said, "Watching it isn't nearly as fun as riding." So Ortberg told the bull operator that he wanted to ride. The operator took one look at his middle-aged body and asked, "Are you sure?" That comment simply reinforced Ortberg's resolve to go through with it.

The operator explained that the bull had twelve levels of difficulty. "It might not be easy," he said, "but the key is you have to stay centered on the bull. You have to follow the bull. You have to shift your center of gravity as the bull moves."

So Ortberg got on the bull and it started slow. Then it began moving faster and jostling around. At first, Ortberg was holding on real tight. Then he remembered the operator's advice and loosened up. As the bull kept moving faster, jolting and bucking and jumping, Ortberg was hanging on sideways, his arms flailing around all over the place. He just hung on until the bull slowed down and stopped. It wasn't pretty, but he made it. He imagined how surprised the operator would be that he had triumphed. But as Ortberg looked over at him, the operator shook his head, smiled, and said, "Nice job. That was level one."² Ortberg acknowledges that that experience taught him a lot about overconfidence and humility. Put simply, he wasn't nearly at the level he thought he was.

There were some in the congregation at Corinth who thought that when it came to knowledge, they were at a level much higher than where they actually were. Their confidence in the power of their spiritual knowledge was actually keeping them from making progress in holiness, and was fracturing the fellowship of God's people. So Paul reminds them that knowledge, without love, means that they don't really know as they should. In verse 2, he writes, "The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know." In other words, if someone thinks he or she has arrived, when it comes to spiritual knowledge, then that in itself is a sure sign that they haven't arrived, because true knowledge, true progress in Christlikeness, always involves love, specifically love of one's brothers and sisters in Christ. That's why Paul goes on to tell those who were "in the know" in Corinth that yes, they're free to eat meat sacrificed to idols, but they should remember that some in their church who are younger in the faith still aren't fully convinced that it's okay to do so. Consequently, it's better not to eat the meat than to trip up a fellow believer who's still growing in Christ. Knowledge always needs to be tempered and guided by love.

Later in his letter, Paul articulates this same conviction, in eloquent and poetic form, when he addresses problems generated by the way that the Corinthians are exercising their spiritual gifts. "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" (13:1). Paul then applies the same logic to several other gifts and practices, including knowledge. One of my seminary professors wrote a commentary on 1 Corinthians, packed with helpful information on the historical background of the letter and penetrating insights on its meaning for contemporary readers. But one of the things that always stood out to me about the book was its dedication page. He dedicated the book to his wife, and then quotes part of 1 Corinthians 13:2: "And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge . . . but do not have love, I am nothing." You see, that's the kind of true knowing that Paul is talking about. Not knowledge as an end in itself, as a tool to gain status or standing, but knowledge used to build others up.

And this kind of knowing is rooted in grace. Notice how Paul frames verse 3 very carefully, using the passive voice. He says, "But the man who loves God *is known by God*." True knowing, says Paul, is defined by love. Love for God and love for others. And this kind of love is only possible because of God's prior love for us. So ultimately, this is the knowledge that matters most—God's knowledge of us. Without God knowing us first, and loving us in Christ, our knowledge of God wouldn't even be possible. That fundamental reality about the Christian life, and the life of the church, is always there to keep our pride and our status-seeking in check.

Preacher William Willimon has said, "There are those who know everything about Jesus except that he is love, who use the Bible like a bludgeon, people for whom Christianity is a way to divide, separate, put down others. Without love, faith, the Christian faith, can become cruel, ugly."³ No one knew that better than Paul in his relationship with his churches, especially the congregation in Corinth. So he writes to bring humility where there's pride, self-sacrifice where there's self-centeredness, and unity where there's division. And as we listen in on the exchange, God reminds us that it's not just what we know, but how we love. When knowledge is used to build up others in the church and to strengthen them in their life in Christ, that's where you'll find the true knowledge of God.

¹ "Benjamin Franklin," *PBS* (November 2002).

² John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) 98-99.

³ Quoted in *The Living Pulpit*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July-September 1992) 7.