**January 31, 2021 1 Corinthians 8:1-13**

 ***Not What You Know***

**Scripture: *1 Corinthians 8:1-13 NRSV***

 *(1)Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. (2)Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; (3)but anyone who loves God is known by him. (4)Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." (5)Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth--as in fact there are many gods and many lords-- (6)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. (7)It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. (8)"Food will not bring us close 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 liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. (10)For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? (11)So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. (12)But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. (13)Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.*

**Notes:**

1. 1st century Corinthian church clashed over foods ***sacrificed*** to pagan idols.
	1. This practice poses a dilemma for the early ***Christians***.
	2. At congregational meeting the ***subject*** would come up.
2. “***Knowledge*** puffs up, but ***love*** builds up.”
	1. Your ***freedom*** should not be a stumbling block.
	2. Paul deals with the principle of Christian ***freedom***.
	3. Paul deals Christian ***knowledge*** and privileged position.
	4. Paul advises against over-***fussiness***.
3. ***None*** of us have the right to indulge in a pleasure which might be the ***ruination*** of someone else.
	1. Paul says what he would do, or ***NOT*** do.
	2. Paul’s guide for Christian behavior, the ***standard*** is ***love***:
4. How do we react to ***situations*** and ***topics***?
	1. We are charged to ***love*** our neighbor;
	2. Do not create ***obstacles*** for their faith in Jesus.
	3. Abstain from ***behaviors*** which may be questioned.
5. It’s not ***WHAT*** you know, it’s ***WHO*** you know;
	1. What ***determines*** the way we live as Christians?
	2. ***Know*** Jesus as Lord and Savior, ***know*** his love, and ***share*** that love with others.

**Script:**

Growing up in the church of the Nazarene in the early 60’s and 70’s was difficult. I would be taught what was right and wrong, and then as I went out into the world, I would be confronted by different teachings; different perspectives about what was right or wrong. I would see different rules that were to be observed. I never really understood as a child why some of my friends were allowed to do different things that I was taught was wrong, and other friends were not allowed to do things that I thought was normal. In many ways it was difficult understanding why the rules changed so much from one Christian church to another. I was too young to understand the concept of denominations and conviction.

Many of us here today may have experienced something similar to me. You may have seen the discrepancies between different churches, according to what they thought was right and wrong; and their attitudes towards what you were taught was right and wrong. Many of us here today may not see those differences in our society today; but those differences are there. Otherwise, we would not have different denominations, and there would be only one church where everybody gets along and there are no differing opinions regarding what it takes to get to heaven. The rules we are given to follow would not be a source of contention.

In many ways this is where the church in Corinth is when Paul writes 1st Corinthians. Paul addresses these issues in our passage today; which rules are the right ones and which are not; and what are our rights and responsibilities to our fellow Christians. Turn with me now as we share in the reading of our passage; found in 1st Corinthians 8:1-13.

 *(1)Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. (2)Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; (3)but anyone who loves God is known by him. (4)Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." (5)Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth--as in fact there are many gods and many lords-- (6)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. (7)It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. (8)"Food will not bring us close 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 liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. (10)For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? (11)So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. (12)But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. (13)Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.* ***1 Corinthians 8:1-13 NRSV***

Eating meat that has been offered up to idols is not a big issue here in Bedford County. Actually, I do not think that it is a big issue here in the United States. It is not an issue that we talk much about anymore. In fact, I do not know when this stopped being such an issue of contention. But the Corinthians were having a difficult time with this issue. Probably not too long after Paul sent this letter to the Corinthian church. But the issue is much larger than the source of their meat.

In fact in 1968, Clarence Jordan wrote a parallel version of Paul’s epistles. It was entitled the Cotton Patch Version of Paul’s Epistles. In his writings Jordan substituted the church in Corinth with the First Church of Atlanta. And the subject is not about the source of their meat; but rather whether it is permissible to work on Sunday. An issue that was a hot topic in 1968 and even through the 70’s. But it is not a topic that creates as much disdain as it once did.

To say first century Corinthian church had issues with food offered to idols is an understatement, the controversy had people taking sides and looked like it was headed for a church split. It was definitely a sticky situation, sticky enough for Paul to write this letter.

In ancient Greek and Roman world, every town had temples dedicated to pagan gods. In the bustling city of Corinth, there were plenty, a reflection of the mixed population. We would see Roman soldiers, merchants, Jews, easterners from Phoenicia and Phrygia, slaves, freedmen, sailors, etc. By the middle of the first century, when this letter was written, the population was approaching three-quarters of a million people, two-thirds of whom were slaves. The city had become a byword for loose living; phrases like, “to live ‘like a Corinthian’ meant a life of immorality and debauchery. Corinth was home to the Temple of Aphrodite with 1,000 sacred priestesses who were temple prostitutes. There was an ancient saying: “It is not every man who can afford a journey to Corinth.”

It was common practice for worshipers to offer sacrifices. If you were bringing a sacrifice, you would walk into the temple leading a goat or a sheep. One of the priests would ritually kill the animal, clean the carcass and place its body on the great stone slab of the altar. There it would be burned, until a plume of smoke wafted its way to the heavens, a pleasing scent the people of that day believed influenced the gods. Only a small portion of the sacrificial meat was actually incinerated, often a mere token was used, a part as small as some of the hairs cut from the forehead. The rest was nicely roasted, and was used in one of two ways: some say the meat was carved up on the spot, and served in the temple, as a great feast; others say it was packaged and sent to the butcher-stalls in the town marketplace, where it was sold — the profits to benefit the temple. Some scholars even think the sale of meat in the marketplace was a priestly monopoly, that all meat had passed through a pagan temple, on the way to the butcher-shop. This meant that if you were a Christian and wanted to eat meat at all, you had to put aside any spiritual scruples about where it had been.

Either way, this practice poses a real dilemma for the early Christians. They have pledged to follow Jesus Christ, and to turn from the pagan deities. Yet what do you do when your next-door neighbor invites you to the Temple of Artemis, to celebrate his son’s coming-of-age with a sacrifice and a great feast? Or what do you do when you stroll down to the marketplace to buy food for supper, and you realize the meat in the butcher-stall spent the morning up on the high altar of Zeus?

A loud debate broke out in the Corinthian church, over these issues. There is a conservative faction that loudly proclaims that no Christian should ever eat meat sacrificed to an idol. The liberal faction is more laid-back, “We know these pagan gods, so-called, are not gods at all; to us, meat is meat, and we are not worshiping as we eat it. So what is the big deal?” Every time they called a congregational meeting in the Corinthian church, that tired old subject would come up. The conservatives would accuse the liberals, the liberals would snap back at the conservatives… the old, familiar charges and counter-charges would be raised. Nobody would ever win the argument, and, after the meeting, both sides would gather separately in the parking lot afterward and say, “Ain’t it awful?”

Finally, someone suggests they write to Paul about it, along with questions on other contentious subjects as well; questions about divisions in the church, moral issues, legal questions, ecclesiastical roles, worship practices, even theology. What the Apostle sends back, in reply, is this first letter to the Corinthians. By the time he gets around to dealing with this meat offered to idols issue, he is responding to them almost in the way they have couched their question bumper sticker style. The Corinthians have been making their arguments with one-liners; “we all possess knowledge, …an idol is nothing at all in the world …there is no God but one.”

So Paul’s response is a bumper sticker of his own; “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Paul agrees with the liberals, that the old pagan idols have no power over Christians; there is no spiritual harm caused by eating the sacrificial meat. But then he says to the liberals, “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.” Don’t you eat that meat, he says to the enlightened folks, if by doing so you might cause any of the conservatives to lose their way, and fall back into paganism.

Paul continues his argument in chapter 9, he deals with those who invoke the principle of Christian freedom. He points out that there are many things that he is free to do but he abstains from doing them for the sake of the Church. He is well aware of Christian freedom, but equally aware of Christian responsibility. Then in chapter 10 he deals with those who declare that their Christian knowledge and privileged position make them quite safe from any infection. He cites the Israelites who had the privileges of God’s Chosen People and yet fell into sin. He advises against over-fussiness; in other words, if you make your purchase in a local butcher, exercise the ancient principal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. If you go to someone’s home and they make a big deal about serving you something they inform you it has been previously dedicated to a pagan deity, an in-your-face challenge to your Christian commitment, you should best politely decline. In other words, BE CAREFUL!!!

None of us has the right to indulge in a pleasure which might be the ruination of someone else. We do not have the right to demand some liberty, which may ruin another’s faith. You may have the strength of mind and will to keep that pleasure in its proper place, that course of action may be safe enough for you, but you have more than just yourself to think about, there is that weaker brother or sister. An indulgence which may be the ruin of someone else is not a pleasure but a sin. Would you do something in front of your children that you would not want them to do?

Paul does not tell the Corinthians what they ought to do. Instead, he brings this section to a conclusion by saying what he would do, or, in this case, NOT do. “If what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again,” Why? “…so that I will not cause him to fall.”

Paul lays out the appropriate standard for Christian behavior. We know the passage as 1st Corinthians 13. It begins “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” Many hear these words and think about marriage, it is so often read at weddings, but it is really not limited to that. This is simply Paul’s guide for Christian behavior.

As to dealing with the issue of food offered to idols, the standard is love; “love is patient, love is kind…it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered …It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” In the face of the overwhelming reality of Christian love, the chew-’em-up and spit-’em-out rules of debate are suddenly suspended; the mudslinging is over; negative behavior is stopped in our lives.

As we hear some of the church-related social issues that are debated today: abortion, human sexuality, stem-cell research, intelligent design, and so on; part of me wants to argue, another part wants to scream, and then there is third part that just wants to shake my head and walk away. Social media runs the gambit of these differing opinions and subjects. And I see people of the church arguing on both sides of these subjects.

How do we react to these situations and topics? Over the past few months, I have been asked my opinion on several topics. First should we be concerned with the prophecies regarding the end times? What is my opinion regarding Covid 19 and the restrictions placed on us? I will not share my opinion, because my opinion is mine. But this is what Scripture says, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:5 NRSV) (Matthew 22:37) (Mark 12:30) (Luke 10:27); “… love your neighbor as yourself:” (Leviticus 19:18 NRSV) (Matthew 19:19) (Matthew 22:39) (Mark 12:31) (Galations 5:14) (James 2:8); “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matthew 18:6 NRSV) (Mark 9:42)

It seems obvious that if we love the Lord, we are charged to love our neighbor; and if we love our neighbor, we are charged to not create obstacles for their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; and to keep from creating stumbling blocks for others, we must abstain from behaviors and actions which may be questioned by those of a weaker faith.

This week I received this question. “As American Christians, should we be concerned with the president’s executive orders signed on his first day? About 60,000 oil field workers who had work Monday and Tuesday and with the stroke of a pen, they are unemployed. Reversing the pro-life to pro-choice, raising the minimum wage to $15/hr? What should we do in God’s sight? Should we let it ride or let our voices be heard?”

I can’t say I have a good answer to all of these questions. In fact, when I receive these types of questions I feel as if they are trick questions. My response is very simple, “We should be good Christians.” But also remember this little truism “It’s not **WHAT** you know, it’s **WHO** you know.”

That’s right, it’s not **WHAT** you know, it’s **WHO** you know. In the context of modern life this explains why some folks get ahead and others do not. But in the context of the life of faith, it can be equally valid, not as an excuse for failure or an explanation for success, but as a wonderful way of living out our understanding of the gospel. What determines the way we live as Christians? WHAT we know? Or WHO we know? What do you think Jesus would do?

Listen to Paul once more, “Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.” Remember, it’s not WHAT you know, It’s WHO you know. Listen to these words of Paul taken from the Message,

*“(1)If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. (2)If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. (3)If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.*

*(4)Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, Doesn't have a swelled head, (5)Doesn't force itself on others, Isn't always "me first," Doesn't fly off the handle, Doesn't keep score of the sins of others, (6)Doesn't revel when others grovel, Love takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, (7)Puts up with anything, Trusts God always, Always looks for the best, Never looks back, But keeps going to the end. (8)Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. (9)We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. (10)But when the Complete arrives, our incompletes will be canceled. (11)When I was an infant at my mother's breast, I gurgled and cooed like any infant. When I grew up, I left those infant ways for good.*

*(12)We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us! (13)But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation; Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.” 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 MSG*

I pray that you know Jesus as Lord and Savior; I pray that you know his love and that you understand we are called to share that love with others around us. I pray that you know the Father in heaven as creator of all things. And I pray that you know the voice of the Holy Spirit and that you heed his call in your life.