

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 AM

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[0 : 00] So, good news for you. After today, we will be halfway through 1 Corinthians. Isn't that great? We're moving at the speed of light.

So fast that we're probably going to finish the letter by next year. It's going to be great. If I were to give a simple title to the passage or the sermon this morning, it would be this, Love Alone is Edible. It addresses a common problem, especially in highly educated churches. The belief that spiritual maturity is defined primarily by what we know.

1 Corinthians is a letter that focuses on gospel application. What does Jesus' death and resurrection mean for my life, for our lives? How do we live it out together personally and communally?

And in the first four chapters of his letter, Paul addresses the fighting and the biting and the arrogance and the jealousy that is leading to division in the church. And he commends to them a gospel unity at the foot of the cross.

[0 : 59] And then he goes on in chapters 5 to 7, and Paul addresses sexual immorality in the church and the church's response or lack thereof to it. And the goal for him all throughout is gospel purity at the foot of the cross.

And now as we don the doors of chapters 8 to 10, Paul addresses idolatry and the church's rights-based ethics. And the goal is gospel love at the foot of the cross.

So Paul's taking us on a journey from unity to purity to love. And throughout the whole of 1 Corinthians, there is no stone of our lives that is left unturned. Every area of life is brought under the sovereign love of the crucified Christ.

And so as God speaks to us today through 1 Corinthians chapter 8, what he speaks is a word of correction for those who have become puffed up by their knowledge.

Verse 1, knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. It was about 11 years ago that I was sitting in the Chan Center at UBC.

[2 : 06] I was graduating Regent College after 4 years of rigorous intellectual labor. I was graduating with a Master's of Divinity, I'll let you know. It's a horrible name.

Supposedly after 4 years I had mastered the divine. It only took 90 credit units, friends. And the convocation speaker at my graduation was a woman named Sarah Williams.

She used to be a former member of St. John's, and she had 3 degrees from the notorious Oxford University. As she walked to the lectern, she walked with a yellow rubber thing in her hand.

She walked up to the lectern, and without saying a word, she spent 40 seconds blowing up a balloon, as large as she could blow it up with hot air. And then she held it out in front of the crowd of people and let it go, and it made all its blubbery noise and went all over the place, and then landed on the floor as a lifeless, deflated piece of rubber again.

And she leaned into the microphone and said in her posh British voice, which for an American just wows you, anything she says is amazing.

[3 : 14] And she said, knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. And then she proceeded for 20 minutes to challenge and exhort us as new graduates to enter the churches and marketplaces to which God was sending us, not as these newly enlightened ones who come to sit on judgment on others, but as humble ones who have been called to kneel and serve.

It was some 10 years prior, I was in grade 11, and I had just had a revival of faith. I was about 16 years old, and in my newfound eagerness to learn, I graced the office of my unsuspecting youth pastor with my presence on a weekly basis.

Thank you, Mark Ashworth, for everything you do for us. He would limit me to one hour per week, and I could ask him any question I wanted.

So we covered it all, resurrection, gender, trinity. Really, how can Christ be fully God and fully human at the same time? I don't get it. And each walk, each time as I walked out his door, he would hand me a book and say, go read this.

I would read it, and I'd come back the next week, and I have a whole series of questions again. But he would stop me as I was in the doorway every time, and he'd say, hey, Jordan. I'd turn around, he'd look me in the eyes, and he'd say, don't forget to love people.

[4 : 33] And he said it to me every week for a whole year. Hey, Jordan, don't forget to love people. Honestly, 1 Corinthians 8 is a very slippery passage.

It's hard to get a hold of. It's kind of like trying to hold ice with wet hands. But as we try, I don't want us to forget the main point that Paul is saying. He's saying, St. John's Vancouver, do not forget to love people.

Verse 1. Now concerning food offered to idols, we know that all of us possess knowledge.

This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Verse 2. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.

Verse 3. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. One gets the sense that what Paul is saying here is drawing us very close to the heart of how the gospel is experienced and lived out in our lives.

[5 : 39] And he juxtaposes two types of knowledge and their fruit. On the one hand, there is a form of knowing about God that, while not theologically wrong, can lead to arrogance towards others.

It can puff us up. And it can lead us to actions which wound others. And on the other hand, there is a form of knowledge that is birthed from love and leads to love.

A form of knowledge that is not us knowing God simply, but God knowing us. And it's a form of knowledge that leads to love for others. It builds up and it protects others.

Henri Nouwen, in a book, he wrote a little piece reflecting on Christian leadership. But I believe these words reflect what's going on in this passage and apply to all Christians. He says this.

Christians cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our times. He says Christians' leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate, life-giving relationship with the incarnate word Jesus.

[6 : 47] And they need to find there the source of their words and advice and guidance. Dealing with burning issues easily leads us to divisiveness because before we know it, and this is a really key point for our passage, our sense of self is caught up in our opinion about a given subject.

But when we are securely rooted in personal intimacy with the source of life, with God himself, it will be possible to remain flexible, but not relativistic.

Convinced without being too rigid. Willing to confront without being unduly offensive. Gentle and forgiving without being soft. And true witnesses of Christ without being manipulative.

According to the Apostle Paul, we can be theologically correct. It is possible to be theologically correct, but still destructive to the community because our knowledge is without love, and so it does not build up.

And in chapters 1 to 8, the particular knowledge that Paul is addressing with the Corinthians is this knowledge of food sacrificed to idols. The presenting issue in chapters 8 to 10 is whether or not Christians should eat food that has already been sacrificed to idols.

[8 : 08] And this takes place in three different contexts. In the temple precincts, in the public markets, and in the private home. It was a hot-button issue in the first century, Corinth. And in chapter 10, Paul addresses the issue directly.

So in a few weeks, you're going to see how Paul warns that eating consciously of food offered to pagan idols is to enter in some way into fellowship with demons, with evil. The implication is don't do it.

But notice Paul doesn't start there. He starts in chapter 8 by getting at the issue from a slant. He says there's a deeper issue underneath the presenting issue, and it's the Corinthian Christians' lack of love.

This is the root of and cause of every problem they've had so far in the book, and Paul finally just comes out with it and names it for the first time. They think that having knowledge is what it means to be spiritually mature.

And this knowledge has made them prideful and arrogant and self-assured, which has made them forgetful and neglectful of the weaknesses of others. Verse 7, Not all possess this knowledge, says

Paul.

[9 : 19] But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. So Paul is addressing a group of people in the church who are firmly convinced that they are right about idols.

We see this in verses 4 to 6. Like, we know there's only one God, so any claim to any other gods or lords just must be an absolute sham. They must not be realities because there's only one God.

So, in verse 8, food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do eat it or do not eat it because we know that the idols it's sacrificed to mean nothing.

And it seems that in this context, Paul might actually agree with them theologically on their point. But his point is that this knowledge has led them to think that it is their right to act in freedom irrespective of its effects on others.

Notice that. This knowledge has led them to think that it is their right to act in freedom irrespective of its effect on others.

[10 : 26] And this is Paul's main concern here. Living based on their rights is what is most important and valuable for them. It's what they cling to most earnestly.

And for Paul, this shows that they have not yet been gripped by the gospel of the crucified Christ. That's the point. verse 9. Take care that this right, this is rights language which is going to continue, but the word actually means authority or freedom.

Take care that this authority or freedom or right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. And then verse 10. If anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged?

And the language here is the same language as built up. If his conscience is weak to eat food offered to idols. And verse 11.

And so by your knowledge, this weak person is destroyed, the brother or sister for whom Christ died. Here's the heart of the matter according to the Apostle Paul.

[11 : 35] The gospel of the crucified Christ is a gospel of lavish love. I just love the way that that the Apostle John opened up in John chapter 13, the explanation of Jesus' journey to the cross.

He says, having loved his own who are in the world, he loved them to the end. Love is others-oriented. It seeks to build up those who are weak.

It does not insist on its own way and its own rights. And so Paul says, following this gospel, following this Christ, requires that believers be willing to lay down their rights on occasion.

In this case, not eating food sacrificed to idols. Be willing to lay down their rights on occasion to protect the conscience and strengthen the faith of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

And so Paul, in verse 13, states the principle as simply as he can. Therefore, if food makes my brother or sister stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother or sister stumble.

[12 : 43] Friends, I want to try to summarize this as succinctly as I can. I think Paul is saying the primary question for the mature Christian is not, what do I think I have the freedom and authority to do?

But the primary question for the mature Christian is, what do I think will most build up my brother and sister in love of Christ? And this requires personal knowledge.

We have to know the strengths and weaknesses of our brothers and sisters that verse 7 shows us. And this requires personal restraint of the self. We have to be willing to lay things down.

That's why in chapter 9, Paul's going to go on to talk about his own life in ministry as an apostle, as a model of what this sacrificial surrendering looks like. Chris is going to talk to us about that next week.

And then at the very beginning of chapter 11, verse 1, he's going to invite the Christian Corinthians to imitate him as he imitates Christ. Because all of this, for Paul, is about becoming more like Christ in our relationships to one another.

[13 : 46] So before we talk about application, let me rehearse what we've talked about so far. The main point is this. The problem in the Corinthian church is not about a lack of theological knowledge, but it's a lack of love.

And this is why Paul starts his letter with the cross. It's the supreme demonstration of God's love for sinners. And this is why Paul heads towards chapter 13, where he gives us the sublime description of love that we see in Christ.

Because he wants the power of the cross to transform us into a people of love. He wants us to not relate to the world and to others based simply on our rights and freedoms, but to be gripped by the fullness of Christ's love so much so that we are willing to imitate him in the way that we love others. And so our response to this passage I want to suggest to you should be framed in terms of learning to love one another in response to Christ's love for us. So what does that look like?

How is God inviting us to do that here and now? In the people, in the church, he's placed us. And I don't know exactly all the ways that the Lord may be inviting you to respond to what he's speaking to you this morning, but I want to make a few suggestions and just trust that if there's anything for you, the Holy Spirit will impress that upon your heart and mind.

[15 : 14] So I have three words for you. Thanksgiving, confession, and renewal. Thanksgiving for the love we have experienced, confession of the love we have withheld, and renewal in the love we ought to give.

So Thanksgiving, I think it is worth our time to give thanks for the times when we have experienced love from other people who have chosen to act in ways that are costly to them for our edification and strengthening and building up in Christ.

So basically, people who have chosen to act in the exact opposite way of what Paul's outlining here, people are acting in Corinth. And I've experienced this in a number of different ways in my life. I remember when I moved to California, there was a bishop. The rector that I was taking over for was also a bishop. And I have a long history of taking over for bishops at churches here within. It's really not a wise thing to do. Their foot, their shoe size is like this big. It was amazing. He had planted this church and he loved it so deeply.

[16 : 25] I remember the first conference that I ever went to where this bishop was speaking. He broke down weeping in the middle of talking about this church because it was so dear and close to his heart. And when he found out when I was coming, he intentionally laid down his right to be there and he stepped away for the three months before I came.

He absented himself from the church because he didn't want the church to be grieving when I showed up. And then he came for my installation service when I was installed as rector and he insisted that I preach and not him.

I mean, this is a guy that gets asked to speak everywhere around the world at conferences all over the place. A bit like David, I guess. And he insisted that I preach and not him and it was a horrible sermon.

He was laying down his right as bishop in order to lift me up. Even coming here and working with David Short has been a simple, a similar experience. I didn't tell David I was going to say this because he would say, don't say it.

But David has been rector of this church for almost as long as I've been alive. And the number of times I've been in conversation with him where I'm asking something, I'm pressing him on something, we're talking about something and I'm like, gosh, this guy has every right in the world to tell me, like, just put on his rector's hat and say, he knows better, stop chirping, let's get on with it.

[17 : 55] And not once has he done it. Always welcoming with humility, always welcoming with charity, always making space at the table for partnership. There's a way even in which the children are doing this and modeling this in recent weeks.

Did you know that with our refugee families that we welcomed in recent months, there are a lot of children who are learning English, who are learning a new culture, who are somewhere being introduced to Jesus Christ for the first time, and they are like taking over the children's ministry downstairs, which is such a wonderful gift.

And to hear the stories of the way in which the children have gladly received them and allowed their routines and rhythms to be interrupted so they can make space for others, they are laying down their rights out of love for their brothers and sisters, and it's a beautiful thing to see.

But I also realize that this may raise for many of us the painful sense that we have not experienced love in this way. It may be hard for us when we think about our lives to come up with a memory or an experience where we feel like somebody laid down their rights out of love for us, and I want to say to you that Christ comes to fill in the lack in other people's love.

Notice how in 1 Corinthians 8, Christ is upheld as the one who loves the weak in a way that those who have knowledge have failed to do. Where others wounded, did Christ was wound.

[19 : 21] Where others withheld love, Christ loved us to the end. Where others forgot our sensitive spirits and our weak consciences, Christ bore our burdens and he healed our diseases.

And so in all these things, our experiences, whether there's lack or whether there's experience of love and joy, we are appointed to Christ who loved us to the very end, and we are asked to give thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands.

Second application, confession for the times when we have withheld love. When we have wounded others because we prioritized our own rights over theirs.

I think the most obvious example here is COVID. Just sense the tension in the room rising per second. I was not here, so I don't know how things happened up here.

I was down in the States, so I can tell you that things got a little crazy down there. But what I found most revealing was not simply that some people were pro-mask, some people were anti-mask, somebody were pro-vaccine, some people were anti-vaccine.

[20 : 27] What I found most revealing was how people thought about other people and the decisions that they made about these things. I mean, it was stunning sometimes.

It was absolutely stunning. to see how people in the body of Christ, how they thought of each other and treated each other as just ignorant, as moral monsters, as enemies, as those not worth their love.

And sometimes it took the form of straight-up arrogance, like, if people only knew what I knew, they'd know that I'm right, and they wouldn't be so sensitive or irrational in their views. If those people would simply stop burying their heads in the sand and listen to the right news sources, we wouldn't be in this mess.

And then sometimes it just took the form of kind of lackadaisical freedom. Everyone should just be allowed to think what they want to think and do what they want to do. Everyone should do their own research, make up their own minds, and do what's best for them personally.

Nothing should compromise our individual rights. That's the goal. And the problem with the straight-up arrogance is that people felt trampled and belittled and misunderstood and harassed and wounded by words and actions of others.

[21 : 50] And the problem with just like the open-ended freedom is that people felt left behind and overlooked and unheard and uncared for and forgotten. And their personal weaknesses and needs and desires and longings were of little consequence to their brothers and sisters in Christ.

If ever there was a time when it was revealed how deeply seated a rights-based mentality is in our hearts and minds, and how wounding that could be for the body of Christ, it was during COVID.

And this really struck me as a pastor, as we started meeting together again as a church, and I started having all these pastoral visitations with people, I realized that as some of the social limitations caused by COVID were being lifted, the wounds were definitely not lifted.

People were living with wounds by things that were said or unsaid, things that were done or undone, decisions that were made or attitudes that were fostered that fell far short of love.

And for some of us here, I don't know, but may the Lord convict you if so. We may need to come to grips with the wounding effect that our words and actions or lack thereof had on the lives of others.

[23 : 06] And we may need to ask God, are there people I wounded to whom I need to reach out and with whom I need to make amends? 1 Corinthians 8, I think, invites us not only to thanksgiving for the love that we have experienced, but to confession for the love that we have withheld.

And finally, it invites us also to renewal in the commitment we ought to give to one another. And the times when this will mean laying down our rights for the sake of others.

There are a million examples we could give here of marriage, of friendship, in the work context, I mean, you name it. But I'm just going to talk about one that's very internal to us and very concrete. Like, what do our Bible studies in our community group times and discussions look like? Are they primarily about gaining knowledge, knowing all the right answers, and displaying our learning to others?

Or are they about loving God, being known by him, becoming like Christ crucified, and building one another up in love? How do we make sure that our conversations and our contributions and our relationships lead to the heart stuff of repentance and confession and prayer and adoration and encouragement and love?

[24 : 29] Now, don't get me wrong. I can imagine some of you thinking that, oh, Jordan doesn't really, he's not really into this whole studying the Bible thing. I spent ten years of formal education studying the Bible. Like, I care about this stuff a whole lot.

I wouldn't be up here if I didn't. But St. Augustine, in his work on Christian teaching, in my time studying, I came across this book, had a profound influence on me. He said, Scripture is the face of God for now. So studying the Bible is very important to the Christian life. But he says we must never forget its purpose. In our study, if we are not led to love of God and our neighbor, then we must go back and study again, because we have not yet learned what God wants to teach us. Thanksgiving for the love we have experienced, confession for the love we have withheld, and renewal in the love we ought to give, none of this is possible, my brothers and sisters, without God's free and eternal and steadfast and untiring and joyful love for us in Jesus Christ. [25 : 37] And none of this is possible unless by the Holy Spirit he is powerfully and assuringly and peacefully at work in us and through us and our relationships. And so it's only fitting that we end with prayer. Oh Lord, you have taught us that without love, all our deeds are worth nothing. So send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love, the true bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whoever lives is counted dead before you. Grant this for your sake, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Amen.