

***“Love Builds Up”***

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

January 29, 2012

At the beginning of Advent 2010, a little more than a year ago, Alex and I made a commitment to try and preach from the Scripture readings from the Revised Common Lectionary over one three year cycle for a number of reasons: 1) it keeps us centered on Scripture - the Word of God - as the primary focus of our preaching; 2) we get the full scope of the Bible – both the O.T. and the N.T., 3) it gives God a better chance of speaking through us instead of us just picking and choosing; and 4) it forces us to preach from some of the passages that we may otherwise just ignore. For the next couple of weeks, our passages from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians are ones we might normally skip over. But if God has given us all of the Bible, then He has a word for us in whatever passage we may look at, for Paul says in his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to Timothy:

*“All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man (and woman), of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* 1 Tim. 3:16-17

“Now about food sacrificed to idols” (1 Cor. 8:1). We really can’t connect with that today. But in the days that was written, and for centuries before, people worshiped all kinds of different gods. And one of the ways they worshiped those gods was by sacrificing foods to them, especially the meat from animals. There were many pagan rituals and festivals that people attended. At these festivals a part of the animal would be burned as the sacrifice and the rest was prepared for the feast that followed, in honor to that specific god. It wasn’t just a question of what one was eating, it was a question of identity and loyalty. Was one identifying with their new identity with the Christian church or their former identity as citizens of Corinth?

What activities Christians should engage in or not engage in became a big issue for the early church. The Jerusalem Council had already determined that the Gentile converts should “abstain from things sacrificed to idols” (Acts 15:29). The issue here isn’t really about eating the meat, it is about idol worship, which was and still is considered serious sin by God. An idol is anything we put on the same level, or even close to the same level as God. And it isn’t so much what and who we say we are devoted to, it is where who we give our time, attention, money to. It might be a person, or perhaps a hobby, or our job. The list of possible idol worship is endless.

*Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.* 1 Cor. 8:7-9 (NIV)

In every one of Paul’s writings he writes about how Christian’s have been set free. We have been set free from the law through what Jesus did for us on the cross. Set free from the bondage and slavery of sin. Set free from the guilt of not being able to live up to God’s perfect expectations. There is perhaps no place that Paul talks about it more than in Galatians, chapter 5:

*If it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Galatians 5:1*

*The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. Gal.5:6b*

*You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command; "Love your neighbor as yourself." Galatians 5:13-14*

We talk a lot about freedom. In the 11:00 a.m. service we sing the song, "I Am Free." "I am free to run, I am free to dance, I am free to live for you, I am free." Our country, the United States of America, is said to be built upon the foundation of freedom. The beginning of our country's founding document, *The Declaration of Independence*, reads "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty (Freedom) and the Pursuit of Happiness." Are those really inalienable rights that have been given to us by God? What happens when our freedom and happiness interferes with the freedom and happiness of others? What happens when our happiness goes against God's will for our lives? We have been given tremendous freedom, but Paul cautions us on how we are to use our freedom.

The early church was experiencing a clash of cultures. There were those who had been traditional or orthodox Jews and then there were the Greek Gentiles who had recently converted to the faith. And since they had recently converted they still engaged in some of the pagan practices, such as the sacrificial feasts. To the Jewish Christians that was an abomination.

It might be similar today to a recently converted Christian continuing to hold membership in a secret society, like the Masons. Who by the way do many good things, but where does their ultimate loyalty lie, with the society or Jesus Christ? Paul says "there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 8:6). Or perhaps a new believer was formerly a part of a band that performed regularly in bars where people regularly get drunk and do drugs. For many people who convert to Christianity they need to get as far away from their old life as possible. I was one of them. But for others cutting the ties is extremely difficult. For the Corinthians the problem centered on the fact that idolatry had been so much a part of their daily lives that it was difficult, if not impossible to eat a meal or attend a public festival, without connecting it with the idol that the meat was sacrificed to. While some could go to those events and eat the meat without any second thought, others couldn't do it without worshiping the idol or at least causing them to question.

Almost all the converted Christians knew worshiping idols was wrong. Some could eat the meat and abstain from worshiping the idols, others could not. "The spirit is willing, but the body (flesh) is weak" (Matt. 26:41). It's not enough just to have the knowledge to overcome something. "We know that we all possess knowledge" (1 Cor. 8:1a). // A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. A lot of knowledge can be an even more dangerous thing. Why? Paul tells us, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1b). "The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God" (1 Cor. 8:2-3).

Was Paul saying that knowledge is always a bad thing? No. Jesus said, “Love the Lord God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength (Mark 12:31).” Knowledge with those other things is a good thing but on its own it can be dangerous. Biblical knowledge, on its own, might even be the most dangerous. That’s what Jesus criticized the Pharisee’s, the religious of his day, the most for. Knowledge puffs up, it inflates a person with pride. It doesn’t take too long for us to get puffed up. We have all been there.

Illustration: It’s like blowing up a balloon. Our ego gets inflated. We start feeling pretty good about ourselves. But you know what? All it takes is one little comment. Perhaps a facial expression. A posting on facebook. A comment that someone mentions to another and it gets back to us. Boom, it’s over just like that. “Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.”

If knowledge is simply a cognitive process, then Paul says “we have not yet known as we ought to know.” In God’s ideal, the heart, soul, mind and strength all go together. In true knowledge, intellect and emotions go hand in hand. The true knowledge of God does not come about through the acquisition of information concerning Him, it comes through seeking Him, loving Him, loving others, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Here was the big issue for Christians in the early church and is still the big issue for us today. We are all at different stages of our Christian spiritual journey. Some are new to the faith, recent converts, or “infants in Christ,” some are much further along, and some we would call “mature Christians.” And the interesting thing, there is not always a direct correlation between the movement from an “infant in Christ” to a “mature Christian” with how long someone has been a part of the church or how long one has referred to him or herself as a Christian.

We have been given tremendous freedom by God. But as God’s people we are called to care for the weak, those for whom it says in v. 11, “Christ died.” “Be careful that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block for the weak.” You know that saying, “God helps those who help themselves” is not a biblical truth. The truth is “God helps those who cannot help themselves.” He is a defender of the poor and the needy, the disadvantaged. Jesus came for those who recognize their need for a Savior. Those who are poor in spirit are the candidates for Christ’s true riches. It is only when we can recognize our own spiritual bankruptcy outside of a Savior that we can receive the help we really need.

There is an inconsistency with the gospel message when I engage in sin and when my behavior causes someone else to sin. Yes, Christ died to secure salvation for all who believe in Him, but He also died to put away our sin. Paul says, that if we should entice another brother or sister to sin, then in effect, we have sinned against him or her and we have sinned against Christ. Paul went so far to say that if by his eating meat caused one of his weaker brothers to stumble, to fall into sin, he would never eat meat again.

Is eating meat a problem for us today? No. Not too many of us eat meat to idols. But we do have issues today. What are some of the issues we struggle with today?

Alcohol - the Bible does not say that drinking alcohol is sin, but it does say that drunkenness is. So for those who drink to the point of drunkenness it becomes a serious problem. If one's alcohol use becomes a stumbling block for someone else, that too becomes a problem. Which is why most Mennonites have traditionally chosen to abstain from alcohol all together.

Dress - We have run the entire spectrum, from requiring head coverings and dresses for women to coats for men. Today we have the issue of wearing clothing which might expose too much. Is it sin in itself? Some would say yes, some aren't so sure. How about if it leads to sexual immoral behavior or causes someone else to question?

How about gambling or buying lottery tickets? What if it goes to support education and other social institutions, is it OK then?

How about the music we listen to, that with suggestive lyrics, or the movies we watch, or the internet. Might that cause someone to stray from their Christian walk?

How about the "Pledge of Allegiance" to a country - Is that idol worship? Yes it is OK to give reverence and respect to our leaders and even a nation but does pledging allegiance go too far?

How about all the people that we set up as idols - whether they be actors, actresses, musicians, athletes, political figures. When does it cross over from admiration to idolization?

How much attention should we give to sports?

Is there right or wrong answers to all those questions?

In the life of the church we are going to encounter a wide range of people who have a wide range of different positions on politics, how to manage money, how to raise one's children, dress, how much time we should devote to sports, education, vocation, and on and on and on. And the overriding concern has to always be love. Love for God, love for Christ, love for our brothers and sisters in Christ, love for our neighbor, love for our enemies, love for those whom are the weakest.

Christian liberty or "Freedom in Christ" is supposed to bring God's people into a new kind of relationship with God. It gives us rights and privileges that were unknown before Christ's coming. But it is not always about our life, liberty and happiness. In fact it might just be the opposite. "Freedom in Christ" might even cost us those things during our life here on earth, so we can one day realize the unimaginable blessings that Christ did bring in the life to come.