

"What about the Gray Areas?" 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Introduction

- I've got a ten question quiz for you. These questions are really black and white—not difficult at all. Ready?
 - 1) How long did the Hundred Years War last?
 - Answer: 116 years, from 1337 to 1453
 - 2) Which country makes Panama hats?
 - Answer: Ecuador
 - 3) Catgut comes from what animal?
 - Answer: From sheep and horses
 - 4) In which month do Russians celebrate the October Revolution?
 - Answer: November. The Russian calendar was 13 days behind ours
 - 5) What is a camel's-hair brush made of?
 - Answer: Squirrel fur
 - 6) The Canary Islands in the Pacific are named after what animal?
 - Answer: The Latin name was Insularia Canaria—Island of the Dogs
 - 7) What was King George VI's first name?
 - Answer: Albert. When he came to the throne, in 1936 he respected the wish of Queen Victoria that no future king should ever be called Albert
 - 8) What color is a purple finch?
 - Answer: Raspberry red
 - 9) Where are Chinese gooseberries found?
 - Answer: New Zealand
 - 10) How long did the Thirty Years War last?
 - Answer: Thirty years, of course. From 1618 to 1648¹
- You know what? Some things just aren't as black and white as they seem. One of the most difficult things about the Christian life are the gray areas of Christian living. Is this okay? Should I as a Christian participate in this? Can I do that? Is it okay to listen to this? Can I watch that? Go here? Stay there? Be with them?
- We are called to hold the middle ground between being holy and different and set apart on the one hand and salty and relevant on the other. Don't you feel this tension? If you don't then you've probably gone to one of the extremes, either you've withdrawn and have no salty influence whatsoever or you've gone to the other end and you've blended Christianity and

¹ Sermonnotes.com

pagan principles and values. How do you walk that tightrope in a day and age when so many of the things we face simply aren't addressed by scripture?

Transition

That's what 1 Corinthians 8 is all about. God is a good God. His word is clear. His will for us is not confusing. And I believe this passage teaches that...

Proposition

- **When navigating the gray areas of the Christian love for others must guide us**
- Let me say it like this. Some things are clear and those decisions are easy. The Christian and sexual immorality. They don't mix. Idolatry. Doesn't mix. Selfishness. Doesn't mix. Greed. Doesn't mix. Theft. Doesn't mix. Murder. Doesn't mix. Lying. Doesn't mix. Other things aren't that clear. Scripture doesn't address a lot of things. Can a Christian practice meditation? Is it okay for a Christian to go to the bar and have a beer with the guys in order to build relationships and share the gospel?² Should Christians work on Sunday? We could add a thousand more. As hard as we try, some things just aren't black and white. They're gray. What's culturally acceptable for a Christian and what isn't and how do you navigate those gray areas? God gives us some guidance in 1 Corinthians 8.

Transition

Wouldn't it be nice, when faced with a gray area, to just pull out a compass and know which way to go—how to proceed? This passage is like a compass. Here's your compass. A normal compass has four cardinal points: north, south, east, and west. This passage has three points; it's a three pointed compass.

Organizational Sentence

- **Three cardinal points to give us bearing when navigating the gray areas**
- And it all begins with love for others. You are not the center of the universe. Your personal behavior, if you are a Christian, must be dictated by love for others within the community—within the body of Christ. We must make decisions in life on the questionable areas always thinking of others and how those decisions affect others. Not in a people pleasing kind of way but in a loving, concerned "how will this affect my brothers and sisters in Christ" kind of way. **Gray areas are navigated by love for others.**

Transition

Let me just set the stage for you by explaining the particular gray area the Corinthians faced. It's not something we deal with nowadays, although in some countries it still is. What's important is the way in which Paul walks them through the gray area.

Background and Setting

- The issue Paul writes about in this chapter, he specifically mentions it in 8:10 and then again in 10:1-22, is "the eating of sacrificial food at the cultic meals in the pagan temples."³ In Corinth during Paul's time there were pagan temples all over the city. There were even state

² Some instances of 'gray areas' taken from Blomberg's commentary, p. 166.

³ Fee, p. 359.

sponsored, Rome sponsored festivals in which animals were sacrificed to various pagan deities. Meals were always a part of these festivities. There were three parts to these meals: the preparation, the sacrifice, and the feast. And the meat of the sacrifice itself was divided into three portions: that burned before the little 'g' god, that given to the worshipers to eat, and that some that was placed on the 'table of the god,' which was tended to by the cultic priests. The small print details to these feasts are debated but what's not debated is that the people thought the gods were present as they ate this sacrificial meat and that there was a ton of peer pressure to participate in these festivities. In fact, if you didn't you were ostracized. And so some of the Corinthians, after giving their lives to Christ, some of them returned to the practice of attending these cultic meals.⁴ Gray area. What to do?

Transition

So how does Paul guide them? Listen. **Blue directional point.** Verse 1. *Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.* 2 *The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.* 3 *But the man who loves God is known by God.* **Correct theology alone won't decide the matter.**

Main Points

- I want you to notice first off the abrupt change in subject. We go from marriage and circumstances in chapter 7 to *food sacrificed to idols*. Big switch in subjects. And right away Paul tells us the issue at hand, the gray area. Food sacrificed to idols or as verse 10 says *eating at an idol's temple*. What's his answer? Verses 2-3. Except notice there's nothing in those verses about food or idols.
- I find it interesting that in the first three verses not a single word is mentioned that directly deals with the subject at hand. What Paul is doing is superseding the visible hot-button gray area issue with a more important principle. In other words, gray area. That's the surface issue. But the real issue as a Christian has to do with how you see the gray area and then deal with it. And that's what Paul does in verses 2-3.
- You can navigate gray areas with either *love* or *knowledge* as Paul puts it. It might help if you substitute theology in place of the word knowledge. You can navigate gray areas with head knowledge—theology or love. And what Paul seems is that when you're faced with a gray area correct theology, yeah, that's good but theology alone won't decide the matter. What will? Love.
- Knowledge leads to puffy heads—big brains on a stick—but love does even better. It builds others up. Listen to how **Gordon Fee** puts it. This is profound. "The problem with conduct [based] on knowledge is that it results in even greater sinfulness. Paul's point is not that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Rather, the one who thinks he is in the know by that very fact has given evidence that he does not yet have the real thing."⁵ The real thing is love. You want to find your bearing? If you navigate the gray area using love as your compass you'll come out all right. If not, you'll end up like the Corinthians, who opted for knowledge, and you'll end up taking the wrong fork in the road.

⁴ Fee, p. 360-2.

⁵ Fee, p. 366, 367-8.

- For someone like myself who's theologically oriented, who thinks in theological categories, this is a great help. The scary thing is that churches tend to become like their pastor. Both positively and negatively. Don't become too much like me in this area. Theology will only get you so far. Churches that have all the right theology and no love for each other or their community they make God sick. What are we? If we have all the theological knowledge in the world and yet aren't motivated in any way by love, for God or for others, who cares.
- True story. Two 4th grade classes. One motivated by knowledge the other by love. You tell me who really gets it in the end. The teacher of the first class introduces her students to a game called "Balloon Stomp." A balloon is tied to every child's ankle. The object of the game is pop everybody else's balloon while protecting your own. The last person with an intact balloon wins the game. The 9-year-olds get into it and things are over in a matter of seconds. One balloon is left and its owner is, of course, the most disliked kid in the room.
- A second class comes in later that day and they're asked to play the same game—only this time the class is filled with developmentally disabled children. When the instructions are given, it seems the only idea the kids grasp is that the balloons are supposed to be popped. But instead of fighting each other off, the children begin to help pop each other's balloons. They form a kind of balloon-stomp co-op.
- One little girl kneels down, holds her balloon carefully in place—like the holder for a field goal kicker—while a little boy stomps it flat and then kneels down and holds his balloon still for her to stomp. On it goes until the very last balloon is popped. When it does everybody cheers. You tell me "Who got the game right, and who got the game wrong?"⁶ Knowledge? Those who properly and truly understood the game? Or love? Love hands down. Let me appeal to you. Love. Do you know this *love that surpasses knowledge* as Ephesians 3:18 talks about? Love like Christ loved. Love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. And love others with sacrificial Christ-like love.

Transition

Are you ready for the **second directional point**? **Get your theology right.** Wait a minute you're probably thinking. First he says theology alone won't cut it. Now he says get your theology right? Which is it? Both. Love is the priority. But love without proper theology is equally atrocious. Verse 4. Listen. *So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), 6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.*

- Paul navigates them through this gray area of attending cultic meals and eating food sacrificed to idols by appealing to theological truth. When you're faced with a gray area you can't just lovingly blunder your way through it. **Get your theology right.**
- Most likely, even though the NIV doesn't have quotation marks, there are two Corinthian slogans quoted in verse 4. *We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world.* First quote. *There is no god but one.* Second quote. Some Corinthians most likely were arguing in favor

⁶ Dave Stone, in the sermon "A Reason for Self-Denial" (Southeast Christian Church, Louisville, Kentucky); citing Robert Roberts, *An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge University, 2003); submitted by Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky.

of eating out at the temple restaurant because idols really weren't gods. They had done their theological homework. Paul taught them well. I think their reasoning went like this. "Idols are nothing as we were taught. Just wood and stone. Can't talk. Can't do anything. Can't answer prayers. Therefore, it's okay to eat at my old temple. I'm a Christian now. I believe in the one true God. Not this fake idol-god." And Paul probably nodded. "Yeah I did teach you that. All that's true and good Christian theology, yes. But it's incomplete."

- And in verse 6 Paul elaborates on what they already know. He expands their understanding of who God is. Isn't verse 6 marvelous? *Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.*
- Paul says in verse 7 that *not everyone knows this* referring to what he just said in verse 6. And the implication is that if everyone knew the theological truth of verse 6 then there wouldn't be a gray area. "If you knew what I'm telling you now in verse 6 you wouldn't be going to temples and eating food sacrificed to idols you Corinthians." Christian living is affected by your theology.
- As a pastor, I see it all the time. If people just knew some basic Christian truth, some basic Christian doctrine their lives would be so different. I call it the Hosea 4:6 principle where God says *My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.* We've talked about being too much like the rest of the world. Being convicted of our worldliness is one thing. But correcting it—that's another matter. Is it possible you've compromised on something—what you see as a gray area—simply because you didn't have enough knowledge and understanding to know better? There is a place for Christian education. You know what a dunce is, right? A person incapable of learning. You aren't dunces. But why aren't you taking a more concerted effort to grow in knowledge? Kingdom Standard Time. Remember last week? What are you waiting for? Time's short. Sometimes I think that some of you think because you've been a Christian a long time you've got everything figured out. Let me just remind you of verse 2. *The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.* We have got to keep in our knowledge of God our Savior otherwise we're being disobedient.

Transition

More seriously, we'll do some major damage either to ourselves or to someone else. I want to jump ahead to verse 7 and explain what I mean. *But not everyone knows this. 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. 8 But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. 9 Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?* **Third directional point** on the compass.

Consider the consequence your actions will have on others.

- Just because you might have the theological knowledge to confidently navigate a gray area of Christian living doesn't mean you should. Actions have consequences. And even if not expressly forbidden by scripture some actions may prove detrimental to others. Again, when navigating gray areas love for others trumps everything.

- You see, the problem in Corinthian church was that some were exercising their theological knowledge without love—without any consideration as to how their act of going to the temple and eating meat sacrificed to idols affected other Christians. The issue was not just that other so-called "weaker" Christians were offended by the actions of the "strong," others supposedly more free in Christ. The issue was that some, by their actions, were leading others to do something that violated their conscience. For some, their former way of life was so woven into their consciousness and emotions that "for them to return to their former place of worship would mean to eat as though the meal were truly being sacrificed to a god."⁷
- Here's a good rule of thumb. Concerning gray areas, if you aren't comfortable with it don't do it. It's wrong for you. Violating your conscience is sin. But what's worse is acting on something that your conscience says is okay so that another Christian ends up violating their conscience. Even if your theology gives you the freedom to do something you've got to consider the consequence your actions have on others. When navigating gray areas the thing that must prevail is not what you're free to do. The thing that must prevail is a loving sensitivity toward how that action affects others.⁸ Paul says in verse 13 that if something might cause another Christian to violate their conscience and sin, its not worth doing. *I'll never eat meat again* he says.
- In 2005 a story came out of Istanbul, Turkey. First one sheep jumped to its death. Then stunned Turkish shepherds, who had left the herd to graze while they had breakfast, watched as nearly 1,500 others followed, each leaping off the same cliff. In the end, 450 dead animals lay on top of one another in a billowy white pile.
- Paul says that actions that lead others to violate conscience, you might as well strike them, verse 12. You might as well rain down blows on them—lead them off a cliff. You sin against your brother and even worse, you sin against Christ. Nothing you do is done in isolation. Your actions affect this. Decisions, especially in areas that aren't black and white, must be made carefully—with theological reflection and most importantly love. Verse 11 is strong. *So this weak brother* again not someone who's offended but someone who acts against his or he conscience, that person *for whom Christ died, is destroyed by our knowledge*. There's a lot at stake in how we navigate the gray areas of Christian living.

Conclusion

- As the worship team comes back up to close us I want us to turn our attention to our God and Savior who has through Christ's sacrifice on the cross *cleansed our guilty conscience* as Hebrews 10:22 says.

⁷ Fee, p. 379.

⁸ Cousar, "The Theological . . .," p. 99.