

“To Eat or Not to Eat” based on 1 Corinthians 8

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on January 28, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

We're tempted to look at a passage like this and say, *“Paul is criticizing knowledge. We don't need to know a whole lot. Ignorance is bliss.”* It's tempting to say, *“Oh, this about food sacrificed to idols. It doesn't really apply to us. Why on earth would we read this?”*

The truth is that knowledge can be very positive. It's good to know things. But sometimes knowledge can be identity forming to the point that something we know about ourselves or something we know about someone else ends up defining who we are or defining of who another person is. In those circumstances, we tend to misuse our instinct to belong. We take our desire to be in community with one another and use it to exclude or to get others to see things the exactly the way we see them. That's what Paul is warning about.

In truth, we can become 100 percent convinced that just about anything right or wrong is fundamental to our identity or someone else's. We can point to the changes in our lives which have helped us achieve what we consider right, or we can point to how we overcame something or never struggled with it. We can say, *“I've never struggled with a sin, therefore, I'm better.”* It becomes ingrained in our identity and therefore, if someone accepts or rejects our truth when we profess it to them, it can feel like they are rejecting us.

This teaching today comes in the context of a whole letter. The eighth chapter is right in the middle of the letter, but it's not the climax of the letter. Throughout the letter, Paul is talking about “love” or “agape” in Greek. The key point is when he defines this word later on in 1 Corinthians 13. We all know the reading because we hear it at every wedding. But it's a strange verse because we hear, “Love is patient. Love is kind.” We hear adjectives, but they're all verbs in the Greek and expectations of action.

We need to then think about the context of people eating food sacrificed to idols because they “know” the idols are no big deal. They are then pressuring others to do the same when those people are struggling with doing so. You can almost imagine someone saying in Corinth, *“Well if you were a real Christian you would have no problem eating that meat because you'd know the idols are fake.”* Think about the person on the receiving end of that. Think about how you felt when on the receiving end of that. How does that help their faith? How does that help your faith?

From that context, let's explore the definition Paul gives us here when he says, *“Love is long suffering (patient). Love is serving (kind). Love is not boasting. It is not puffed up. It does not act rude. It does not seek its own things. It does not irritate. It does not keep a record of wrongs. Nor does it accept injustice as grace. But it is gracious with others in truth. Love protects all things, is faithful in all things, hopes in all things, perseveres in all things.”*

What if emulating this drove the way we acted, especially with people with whom we disagree? What if we set an example and handled our frustrations using this as our model? What if instead of trying to affirm our own identities by making sure we fit in the definition of whatever we want, we instead just shared our stories with others using compassion and empathy.

In the book, “The Places that Scare You,” by Pema Chodron, she writes, *“Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we*

know our own darkness well, can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity."

I've not actually read her book yet, but I came across this quote in another book called, "Daring Greatly," by the shame researcher, Brene Brown. Chodron's words floored me because that definition of compassion is exactly what the gospel is all about. God our healer, out of compassion, sent the Son who being fully one with God, shared in our humanity to be equal to us. In living our life. He lived in our darkness even to the point of death on a cross, a shameful death for us. The Son shared in our darkness by being "God with us" in our humanity so that we might be saved, which, in Greek and Hebrew, also means healed, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is also "God with us" in a new way.

By this we are empowered to share in the work of God by reconciling us with God to reconcile with each other. Within each of us there is a heart that longs for connection. We long to connect with a god and with other people. In Corinth, they knew eating food sacrificed before idols didn't matter and that the idols weren't real. They were sacrificed to nothing. It sounds like those who knew this were using that "real Christian" label to justify themselves or condemn others. Ultimately, this is simply shaming. They used shame to make people violate their own conscience.

They used judgment, and the gospel may tell us that we are guilty of many things, but we are not to be ashamed. We may be flawed and imperfect, but I'm telling you that for God, you are enough. You are loved just as you are. Does that mean you don't make mistakes or that you can do whatever you want? No. It means that we are not identified by our mistakes.

Brown writes, *"The majority of shame researchers and clinicians agree that the difference between shame and guilt is best understood as the difference between, 'I am bad,' versus 'I did something bad.'"* Her words show shame is rooted in judgement of our selves or others when we let things that happen define us or others. One of my favorite examples is that there is a difference between saying, "You are a thief," or "You stole something from me." There's a difference. One is shame. The other calls out guilt. The label is judgement. The statement that wrong has been done is guilt and to forgive is to convict, not condemn.

When Jesus says not to judge lest you are judged, this is what he is talking about. When we judge others with shame, we are made susceptible to judgement and shame because we validate these methods and use them against ourselves. Guilt allows for the acknowledgment of the wrong that has been done. It allows for forgiveness and grace rather than judgement and condemnation.

Brown says that guilt, not shame, is the driving force of actual change. It doesn't help to just identify someone as some label and think that this is going to change behavior. *"Shame is destructive. Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes it can change and do better."* The world says that *"shame is a tool for keeping people in line, "Not only is this wrong, but it is dangerous..."*, she adds., saying, *"there are no data, supporting that shame is a compass for good behavior. Shame is much more likely to be the cause...than the solution."*

In our reading, Paul says some of the people were destroyed because of what people were doing with their knowledge. Imagine where those people end up. Do they turn away from the knowledgeable? Do they fall away from the church and the knowledge and awareness of God's love?

Beloved, we should know a lot of things. Knowledge should also be constructive. But love is always constructive. When we love as Paul described, being all of those things in his definition, and when we trust that God loves us in that way, we reveal the Kingdom of God. God is long suffering with us. God serves us. God does not keep a list of wrongs and so on.

When we trust that this is the way God loves us and we trust God enough to love the people around us this way, think about the change we will see in the world. Think about the positive change and constructive change, building us up and building others up as we encounter them. We're all imperfect and we can all make improvements. Guilt helps correct things. But the good news is that we are not defined by our mistakes.

We're not defined by whether we have the strong conscience or weak conscience "to eat or not to eat." We are loved by God through the unearned gift of our Lord Jesus – God in our flesh. God's faithfulness means we can respond faithfully so the love poured in our hearts by the Holy Spirit can flow out of us without us needing to be "right" on all the rules of the games. Instead, we can recognize that we do all need to be "reconciled" to God and with one another. Amen.