

Sermon 01-28-2018
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
1 Corinthians 8:3
By
Pastor Christopher Miller

At first glance, what we're going to focus on today doesn't seem to have too much impact on our lives as Christians today. The primary Scripture we are going to focus on is the reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 8. The heading in our pew bibles is "Concerning Food Sacrificed to Idols." Well, that doesn't sound like something we deal with very much, does it? Not too many idols around. Not too many sacrifices happening to them. But as we go through this passage today, I think we will discover that while the exact situation may not be the same, the principles we can learn are universal.

Psalm 1

But before we get to the passage itself, let's get some context. Psalm 1 was probably ringing in the ears of the Corinthians when they asked Paul about this. They saw what was happening around them, and heard these words:

*****read*****

When they see food sacrificed to idols, they think of walking in step with the wicked. The Corinthians are asking Paul about this because they know that God does not want them to associate with works of darkness, but what about this situation? It's food, and food is good, right? They want to know the best way forward in a confusing situation. That sounds to me like about 90% of the conversation in the church right now. So, how does Paul go about answering this question?

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Paul doesn't get to the point right away, but makes an important distinction that will come up later.

*****read 1-3*****

You know that I do enjoy the knowledge. I'm a brain guy. I love picking out details and sharing them and teaching about them. But Paul is right: knowledge puffs up. How many people do you know that believe that their level of education makes them better than other people. I've fallen into that. Paul points out the most important knowledge.

To be known by God produces love.

What I know isn't important, but what God knows is. And if he knows me, I love him. He even gets into this later in this book: faith, hope, love, but the greatest of these is... (love) So, the further conversation that Paul is going to enter into here is going to surround

knowledge and love, and how they play together while we live in the world. So, let's dive in.

*****read 4-6*****

We have come upon this knowledge through the work of Jesus Christ. How many times did he encounter "gods" of other persuasions? Let's look at one of those times now.

Mark 1:21-28 (slide)

One thing to learn here: when the Word is being taught, these other "gods" show up.

*****read*****

Here's the craziest part of this story: the impure spirit is not lying. He's not lying if you think of "us" as the ones like him, and not the people sitting there. Yes, Jesus has come to destroy impure spirits, and the devil himself. Yes, Jesus is the Holy One of God. We know that these evil things, these wicked things are out there. And we know that because of the work of Jesus Christ, they are rendered impotent, ineffective, capable of nothing at all, in the shadow of the power and glory of Jesus. So, if they are nothing, what difference do they make to us? None at all, but here's Paul's move: they may make a difference to your neighbor. Head back to 1 Corinthians.

*****read 7-8*****

***(slide)* So there are brothers and sisters of the Corinthians out there who see these "gods", see the food sacrificed to them, don't realize that the "gods"**

are nothing, and are concerned when seeing people eat that food. But what does this sound like in our society today? What are some things that we know don't have any power in our Christian walk at all, but still worry others? What about *alcohol*? I used to be one of those that had the attitude that Christians should not drink. My knowledge changed, and I was called to Montana, and now one of my favorite stories of my time here is when some of our guys on a church work day were downing a sixer in my driveway. But for some Christians, that continues to be a problem, for many reasons, including family or personal history. Or what about *media choices*? Some people can do perfectly fine with watching movies and TV shows with violence, or sex, or representations of people's lives that might not be in line with Christianity. There are others that cannot handle those sort of things at all. Or what about *praying together* with non-Christians? This is a clear connection to Paul's situation, because there are literally other "gods" involved. For some, they know these gods are nothing. For others, it wanders into dangerous territory. Paul says in verse 8 that in these situations and more, we are no worse if we do not engage, and we are no better if we do. We are also no better if we do engage, and no worse if we do not. There is only one thing that matters in these decisions: love of neighbor.

*****read 9-13*****

(slide) You may have all the knowledge in the world, you may be able to handle things that others can't, but that does not give you the right to wound the conscience of others. Love is ultimately what has changed us, and love may ultimately be what changes our neighbors. Paul tells the Corinthians, and us, to take the concerns of our neighbors seriously. Part of this is the public and private dimensions of our actions. In private, we are accountable to God for the actions we take and the choices we make. In public, we have to think about our neighbors, and building them up and not tearing them down. Not everyone is going to have the knowledge about life that we do, but we also know that God knows them just as much as he knows us. He knows their hearts like he knows our hearts. And he doesn't want our knowledge to harm those he cares about and loves. He also wants us to remember what things are truly evil, and reserve our words for calling out the damage that the world does to our neighbors. Because that's why he came in the first place, to undo damage done. He came to know us, so that we may love him and our neighbor. And there is no god better than that. AMEN.