LOVE BUILDS UP

1 Corinthians 8:1–13

Key Verse: 8:1b

“But knowledge puffs up while love builds up.”

Do we need to be responsible for others? Doesn’t each person have to give an account of himself or herself to God? (Ro14:12) Of course we shouldn’t be blaming our bad choices on others. But the Bible says that each Christian has a responsibility to our fellow believers, and really, to all people. Yet some people never really *feel* responsible for others. Can we make rules and enforce it? Where does a healthy sense of responsibility for others come from, anyway? In today’s passage Apostle Paul says it comes from love. Our church communities no longer have this controversial issue of food sacrificed to idols. But if we’re serious about helping non-believers and welcoming them into our fellowship, issues similar to this one will arise. In fact, whether we’re aware of it or not, in so many ways we’re always influencing each other, whether it’s in the right or the wrong direction. In this study we want to think about the obstacles to having the kind of love Paul teaches, and how we can really overcome them. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

In this long letter called 1 Corinthians Paul is responding to a previous letter that some people in this church wrote to him, in which they had asked him questions about various things. In chapter 8 Paul turns to their question of food sacrificed to idols. He actually doesn’t finish on this topic until the end of chapter 10. This was a hot topic for believers not only in the city of Corinth but also in Rome (cf. Ro14). Throughout the Roman Empire there were temples to idols all around, and people would go to these temples on a regular basis to make animal sacrifices and have a meal there. Recently researchers found papyrus from this time that were formal invitations to come to such feasts in these temples to idols. They were inviting their family and friends to come join them. It was a major part of people’s social lives. This issue spilled out into the public marketplaces as well, where leftover meat sacrificed to these idols would be sold. When people became Christians, it meant leaving a life of worshiping idols behind. And this affected even the kinds of food they would eat. If the meat had been sacrificed to an idol, some Christians were saying to never eat it; others were saying it didn’t matter. In our time it kind of would be like being invited to go out to a party or a movie or a dance or a bar where there’s no Christian presence and no spiritual purpose. But what if I tell myself I’m trying to make friends and bring these people to church? As a Christian, should I go, or shouldn’t I?

How does Paul respond to such a question? He starts with remarks that seem totally unrelated. He first says, “We know that ‘We all possess knowledge’” (1). He’s quoting something here, something *they* were saying. What did it mean? It seems to be their way of saying, “We don’t need to ask anybody—we already know what to do.” In fact, the words “know” or “knowledge” are repeated in this chapter ten times. The people in this church prided themselves on their knowledge. Paul wrote them in 1:5: “For in [Christ] you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge.” But then Paul went on to attack worldly knowledge (1:21; 2:2). And in the first seven chapters of this letter Paul asks them ten times, “Don’t you know?” (3:16; 5:6; 6:2,3,9,15,16,19; 7:16) Though these people thought they had so much knowledge, it wasn’t leading them to make the best choices in their real, day-to-day lives.

And Paul goes on. Read verse 1b. Actually, knowledge is good, isn’t it? Paul said earlier that knowledge “enriches” us (1:5). In fact, God wants all people to be saved and “to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1Ti2:4). We need to hope that God will help people to repent and lead them to a knowledge of the truth (2Ti2:25). In this confusing world, knowing the truth seems so hard and yet it’s so important. Our Lord Jesus promised that if we hold to his teachings, we’ll know the truth, and the truth will set us free (Jn8:31,32). He called the Holy Spirit “the Spirit of truth” who guides us into all the truth (Jn14:27; 16:13). In the midst of so much deception and so many lies, Christians are those who “know the truth” (1Jn2:20,21). In fact, the church itself is called “the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1Ti3:15).

But here Paul says that “knowledge puffs up.” It’s easy to understand. “Puffs up” means it makes us proud. When we think we know something, it tends to make us look down on those who don’t. That’s why it’s hard even to be around someone with a “know-it-all” mentality. Though they don’t realize it, such people think they know even better than God! (2:16) This is why Proverbs 11:2 says, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.” Knowledge and wisdom are two very different things, aren’t they? In this letter Paul repeatedly has had to rebuke this church for its pride and boasting (1:29,31; 3:21; 4:7; 5:2,6). Even Christians, those who think they’re following Jesus, can be very proud. But Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart…” (Mt11:29) To really learn his humility, we have to engage in a great inner battle against our worst hidden enemy, our own pride. We’re way more proud and puffed up than we realize. And the funny thing about being puffed up is that we don’t know we are, but others do. Being puffed up with pride actually makes us harmful and toxic.

In contrast to mere knowledge, Paul says that “love builds up.” It means love is so much better than knowledge, so much more useful! Paul’s going to talk a lot more about this in chapter 13. But here, in essence, the love he’s talking about is “agape,” the selfless kind. People try to gain knowledge to build themselves up, but when we gain love we learn how to actually build others up. A puffed up person tends to knock others down, but a genuinely loving person builds them up. The Greek word for “build up” is literally the word used for construction of a building. As the saying goes, “It’s hard to build a house, but easy to set it on fire.” But this isn’t about buildings; it’s about people. We can build people up in many ways, some good, some bad. In verse 10 Paul uses this same Greek word to say that people can be “emboldened” or “built up,” but it’s to do the wrong things! We need to think carefully about what we’re encouraging others to do. We may think we’re loving them, but it’s not the kind of love that’s building them up spiritually. It’s like the new mother of a sick baby who refused to give the baby to the doctors, saying she loved it too much, and the baby died.

Paul continues this contrast of love and knowledge. Read verses 2,3. What do these people think they know that they ought to know much better? It’s God himself. It’s not enough to know *about* God; we need to know God *personally*. It’s not about intellectual ability; it’s about having a personal love relationship, about loving God genuinely and knowing that he knows all about me and still loves me.

Look at verse 4. Here Paul comes back to the subject at hand. He uses two quotes here, which are sayings that these Corinthians themselves used: “An idol is nothing at all in the world,” and, “There is no God but one.” These must have been very helpful sayings to people coming out of an idolatrous past with idols all around them still. But why is Paul mentioning these sayings? He’s agreeing with their “knowledge,” that even if food has been sacrificed to an idol, it doesn’t do anything to the food, because the idol isn’t even real. But he goes on to say more about this. Read verses 5,6. He seems to be implying here that even some powerful, knowledgeable people on earth may be like “gods” or “lords.” But he turns the focus here away from them to God the Father and to our Lord Jesus Christ. It’s such a beautiful and powerful expression of real knowledge of God. Read verse 6 again. This knowledge gives us the conviction of where we came from and who we live for. Without the knowledge of God, we’re puffed. We think we made ourselves, we think we’re self-sufficient, and we live for ourselves. But when we truly know God, we know that all things and all people came from him, and, we live for him. When we truly know God, we know our Lord Jesus, the one through whom we were made, the only one who makes us truly alive, and the only one through whom we can really live. It’s the complete opposite of being puffed up; it’s the true humility of utter dependence on him. Look at verse 7a. Not everyone, including even the “know-it-all” people, really know this truth about God. Paul is also talking about new Christians who are not yet grounded in it.

What’s Paul talking about? Read verse 7b. There are several things here. First, these people “are so accustomed to idols.” Literally it means they’re so familiar with having intimacy with idols. It’s like people with old addictions they can’t overcome, even though they know it’s wrong. The food sacrificed to an idol reminds them of their old lives when they gave themselves over to idol worship and all that went with it. Next, Paul says “since their conscience is weak.” He uses this expression “weak conscience” three times here (8:7,10,12), and mentions “conscience” another three times in chapter 10 (10:25,28,29). We’re familiar with a guilty conscience, but what’s a “weak” one? Our conscience reminds us of what’s right and wrong and guides us to make the right choice. But a weak conscience can’t help us because it’s not so sure. How does somebody’s conscience become “weak”? Partly it’s after we’ve gotten used to living in a wrong way. And partly it’s when we’re surrounded by those also living in a wrong way. A weak conscience may also mean we lack the will to follow what our conscience is telling us to do. With a weak conscience we give in to doing wrong, even though we know it’s wrong. Lastly, Paul says here that “it is defiled.” What’s defiled? The food? No. The weak conscience. It means their conscience is further polluted, stained or contaminated. When our conscience is ruined, we’re headed for big trouble.

In verse 8 Paul also agrees with their knowledge that food is not important to God. They were using this knowledge to justify eating food sacrificed to idols. He goes on. Read verse 9. This is a very important Bible verse. It tells us that none of us is living as an island all to ourselves; we’re living among other people. It’s fashionable today to demand our rights. But we’re taught here to give up our rights for “the weak.” In the world, the weak are pushed aside, marginalized, despised and forgotten. But God, who is the strongest, is most mindful of the weak, and he wants his people to be so also. He wants us to put the needs of the weak ahead of our own. Why would we do this? As Paul said in verse 1, it’s because we love them. It’s a love that makes us more aware of what others are struggling with, and thus, more careful in what we say or do around them. If we’re indifferent to people’s struggles, we can’t say we love them. This is especially true in God’s church. Today many people try to find a church that fits them, where they have peers and feel comfortable. It becomes a kind of clique or social gathering. But Jesus wants his church to welcome the weak and build them up.

We all would like to just enjoy ourselves freely. But we’re also called to be the people of God who help others spiritually. Read verse 10. Here Paul rebukes these people with all their knowledge going into an idol’s temple to enjoy a meal, all the while ignoring a weak brother or sister who is there. By nature we all tend to be self-centered. We all need self-discipline and training to be more mindful and aware of our impact and influence on others. Paul continues to rebuke their knowledge. Read verses 11,12. These are very strong words. Paul says we can destroy others. He means, in a sense, we can be responsible for sending them to hell! He says we can wound their weak conscience. By being indifferent or negligent towards others, Paul says we’re sinning against Christ. He concludes not by telling them what to do, but by setting the example. Read verse 13.

Today we learned that we need real knowledge. It’s the knowledge of God. It’s the knowledge that leads us to his love. And it’s a love that seeks to build up others, especially those who are weak. May God make our church fellowship such a beautiful place of unselfish love that welcomes the weak and is careful and patient to build them up in Christ. Let’s read our key verse again, verse 1b.