

GRAY AREAS

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Think about some Christian taboos you grew up with. Maybe you grew up being told that Christians aren't supposed to dance, play cards, or go to movies. You might have been told that Christian men have to have short hair, and Christian women can't wear make-up. Or that Christian women have to wear dresses and Christian men cannot wear shorts. Or that Christian boys and girls do not go swimming together ("mixed bathing").

It used to be here in the South that you were not supposed to do any kind of work on Sunday. Somebody told me this week that when she was growing up they couldn't hang out their laundry on Sunday. Somebody else told me about a pastor who actually stopped his car and got out and told somebody to quit mowing because it was Sunday.

Think about other Christian taboos. Christians don't smoke. Christians don't drink. Christians don't cuss. Christians don't pull for Duke (sorry, I couldn't resist.)

Think about all these Christian taboos, and then think about this:

There are some of those things that some of you would *never* do!

And there are some of those things that some of you do *all the time!*

So who's right? Who's wrong? And what do we do if we just flat disagree?

Here's what we need to understand, and this might be a new idea for some of you. ***There are gray areas in the Christian life!***

Most of these taboos we're talking about are **gray areas** –meaning that there's no clear, black and white, direct command in Scripture that says, "Do it" or "Don't do it." And so some Christians say, "Since Scripture doesn't address it, I think it's fine to do it." And other Christians, based on Scripture, see compelling reasons *not* do it.

And what we've got to figure out is, how do we navigate these gray areas?

And, how do we live with each other when we disagree on these gray areas?

Let's look at today's Scripture from 1 Corinthians chapter 8.

The Corinthians were not sure whether it was OK for Christians to eat meat. It's not that they vegans, or vegetarians, or members of PETA. It's that most of the meat being sold in the marketplace was meat that had been used in pagan worship of false gods. The pagan priests would sacrifice the animal to Zeus or Apollo or whoever. They would burn part of the animal on the altar, but the rest of it would be cut up and sold. So when the Corinthians went to their version of Food Lion, there was a pretty good chance that the lamb chops and the ribeye steaks were from an animal that had been sacrificed to an idol.

So the Christians in Corinth are going, “Knowing that this stuff has been used in a pagan ceremony, offered to a pagan god – is it alright for us to eat it?” And they wrote Paul a letter asking him what they should do—and here’s part of his answer:

⁴Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords— ⁶yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

So there you have it. Paul says go ahead and eat it. Don’t worry about it. Idols aren’t real anyway. So eat up! It’s steak for dinner!

But wait! Paul says something else.

He’s already said, “We know there’s no such thing as idols” – BUT:

⁷It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. (1 Corinthians 8:7)

Uh oh. This is a little more complicated than just “yes, it’s right” or “no, it’s wrong.” Cause guess what? This is a gray area! **On this issue**, there’s not a **black & white** always right / always wrong answer.

- What’s OK for one person might be wrong for somebody else.
- What’s OK in one situation, is not OK in another situation.

Look at v. 9 – Paul says, if your faith is strong, and you know idols are nothing, then eating the meat is OK. **BUT...**

.. take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak (1 Corinthians 8:9).

What some people can do with a clear conscience, others cannot. And Paul says, “Be sensitive to that.”

Let’s keep reading:

¹⁰ For if others see you, who possess knowledge,

(that is, the knowledge that there's no such thing as idols)

eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols?

(That is, they might blithely follow your example and go against their own convictions.)

11 *So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed.*

(Because they get dragged back into their old way of life—or they find themselves drowning in an ocean of guilt for doing something they feel is wrong.)

Paul says, even though to you it's just meat, to them it's worshipping a false god. To you the god's not real, so eat up! But to them idol worship hits way too close to home, and they know they have to stay away from it.

It's OK for you. It's not OK for them.

And Paul says you have to navigate this Gray Area with kindness, and gentleness, and concern for the other person:

Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall. (1 Corinthians 8:13)

Paul says “I will limit my freedom voluntarily for the sake of people I care about.” Because what's OK for one person might not be OK for somebody else. And what's OK in one situation might not be OK in another.

There are GRAY AREAS in the Christian life. And we navigate those Gray Areas with love.

Now don't go off all crazy here, OK? I'm not saying there are no absolutes! Some issues are clearly black and white:

- **Adultery:** It is never OK, at any time, for any reason, for me to sleep with my neighbor's wife.
- **Idol worship:** If I were to set up a little statue in my home and bow down to it every morning and say, “It makes me feel good!” – That's wrong. I don't get to do that.
- **Believing in Jesus:** if I were to come in next Sunday and say, “I don't believe Jesus died to save me – if he existed, he was just a man” – that would not be OK, 'cause believing in Jesus is an absolute for us!

There are absolutes! But the thing we need to understand if we're going to live together in relationship is that some things aren't black and white. And we can't divide ourselves over those issues.

Now, we Methodists have a great slogan that sums this up:

In essentials, UNITY
In non-essentials, LIBERTY
In all things, LOVE

IN ESSENTIALS, UNITY:

That means that there are some essential beliefs that we all need to agree on. These are the things that are black and white: Belief in God...belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord...belief in an unseen force called the Holy Spirit, which is God's presence at work in the world and in our lives...dependence on GRACE, which is God's unconditional love and undeserved kindness.

Now, we have a clear and succinct statement of the essentials that has stood the test of time. It started out centuries ago as something people had to say when they got baptized – this was how they preserved the essentials. It's the earliest statement of Christian beliefs that we have.

It's called **The Apostles' Creed**, and I'd like to invite you to stand and say it with me:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth*

*I believe in Jesus Christ,
His only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
Born of the Virgin Mary
Suffered under Pontius Pilate
Was crucified, died, and was buried
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again
He ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and will come again to judge the living and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The holy catholic church,
The communion of saints,
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting. Amen.*

Those are the essentials – and in the essentials, we have UNITY.

But when it comes to **NON-ESSENTIAL** matters, we give each other **LIBERTY**.

John Wesley said it like this:

“As for those opinions which do not strike at the root of Christian faith, we are content to think and let think...”

Now, in our world today, there are lots of issues on which equally committed Christians disagree: **For example...**

Drinking: some Christians point to a verse in the Bible that says, “Do not get drunk,” and they say Christians should abstain from alcohol

--other Christians say, “it says don’t get drunk, not that you can’t drink at all – and besides, Jesus himself drank wine!”

Dancing: Some Christians say, “Look, there’s dancing in the Bible—King David danced for joy!”

--other Christians say, “Yeah, but his dancing wasn’t like the bumping and grinding and spanking that’s going on today.”

War: some Christians point to the verse that says, “Thou shalt not kill,” and they say war is never justified

--other Christians point to the wars fought by God’s people in the Old Testament and say that sometimes, war cannot be avoided

Politics: some Christians say, “I’m gonna vote Democratic, because the Democrats support social programs that help the poor and needy.”

--other Christians say, “I’m gonna vote Republican, because the Republicans are stronger on moral issues and family values.”

Worship Styles: some Christians point to verses that say, “*Make a joyful noise to the Lord!*” and they say, “See, we oughta’ have worship that’s loud and raucous”

--other Christians point to verses that say, “*The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him*” and they say our worship services should be quiet and reverent.

Here's what you must understand: As strongly as you might feel about these issues, the bottom line is that they fall into the category of NON-ESSENTIALS because they *don't strike at the root of our faith*.

On these issues, we have to agree to disagree agreeably. Because in Non-Essentials, we give each other liberty.

And finally, **In All Things, LOVE.**

Go back to verse 1 of today's Scripture:

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. (1 Corinthians 8:1b)

In other words, whatever it is you think you *know* about a Gray Area, what's more important is that you *love* the other person. Knowledge puffs up, meaning you think you're something—"I know more than you." But love builds up—it strengthens relationships. Even when you disagree with somebody, you can still build them up by loving them despite your disagreement.

Remember what Paul says just a little later in this same letter to the church at Corinth. In chapters 12-14 he's writing about another disagreement in the church. And right in the middle of that discussion, he says, "*And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is ... love*" (1 Corinthians 13:13, NIV).

And what did Jesus say is the sign of being his disciple? "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples" – that you agree with one another? No. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples—*that you love one another*" (John 13:35 NIV).

In the essentials of our faith, let's stand strong in unity. In the non-essentials, let's give each other liberty. But no matter what we agree on or disagree on, above all things, let's show each other LOVE.

Now, I want to try a little experiment here. Let's pretend like we've got two groups of Christians in this room. You folks over here on the right - let's pretend you're the Christians who don't drink, don't dance, don't go to R-rated movies, and you don't play cards, except for "Uno"—maybe.

And y'all on the left - Let's pretend you're the Christians who'll drink once in a while (but you don't get drunk) – you're OK with dancing, you're OK with R-rated movies if they're any good, and you might take part in a poker game as long as the stakes aren't dangerously high.

Here's what I think Paul would say to each group:

R: Don't call them flaming heretics

L: Don't call them fundamentalists

R: It's not your place to judge them

L: It's not your place to tell them their convictions are dumb

R: You can't throw them out of the church because you think they're too loose

L: You can't look down on them because you think they're too strict

R: You *might* need to remind yourselves that you've been saved by grace and not by works

L: You *might* need to remind yourselves that the grace that saves us also calls us to a holy lifestyle

R: You need to make sure you don't become self-righteous

L: You need to make sure you don't abuse your freedom

And I think Paul would say this to *both* groups:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

... if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions ... but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

(Even people who disagree with you!)

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:1, 2b, 3a&c, 5-6, 7-8, 10, 13)

LET'S PRAY: Lord, help us to stand strong in unity on the essentials of our faith. Help us to give each other liberty on the non-essentials. And above all else, Lord, help us to love one another as you have loved us. Amen.