

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

Life in the Moral "Grey Zone"

(1 Corinthians 8)

Study #11

Introduction: "Thus saith the LORD" or "It depends..."

Often, the authors of the New Testament paint life in terms of holiness / unholiness, obedience / disobedience, righteousness / sin.

Don't lie, steal, gossip, or complain. Don't murder or commit adultery. Do tell the truth and be generous. There is no debate here. In these cases, the Bible is clear. *"Thou shalt...thou shalt not."*

At the same time, we recognize that the Bible - and life - don't always reduce to things that are *"always right"* or *"always wrong."*

I'm thinking of matters like getting married or not, buying a new car or not, changing jobs or not, sending your kids to public or private or charter or home school.

And other things...

Should a Christian invest money in companies that are active in business that violates the Bible's standards of morality? May a believer use legal CBD or THC products? Use debt to make purchases? Play the lottery?

These are issues where there is not a *"Thus saith the Lord."* The clear direction isn't quite so clear. Things aren't black and white.

Do you find it disconcerting to hear me say that there is a moral "grey zone" in life - and I'm not talking about my hair.

Do you hear me mention a "grey zone" and worry about the danger of a moral slippery slope? Are you concerned that someone could use "the grey zone" as a license to sin?

You don't like the idea of "situational ethics," but you have to admit that what you do or don't do in life doesn't always fit into the category of *"holy"* or *"unholy."* Sometimes, *"It depends..."*

Today, the Apostle Paul takes us into the world of *"It depends..."* because of a pressing issue that faced the Christians in Corinth.

By addressing their issue, he provided them and provides us with a north star principle to help guide our decision-making when there is no *"Thus saith the Lord"* about what we're facing.

This morning, Paul will point us to wisdom in making decisions in *"the grey zone."*

Review...

Since starting to look at this letter back in May, we have completed two mini-series, one dealing with the importance of unity in the church and the other dealing with marriage and singleness issues.

This morning, we begin a new short section that addresses itself to tricky issues that relate to how we relate to each other in the church - especially when we disagree.

The disagreements in view are not theology, but of life choices, matters of wisdom, and how to get things done.

Over three Sundays, we'll consider the theme of Christian liberty, the freedom we have in Jesus to say *"Yes"* or *"No"* to matters in *"the grey zone."*

We'll confront the reality that other Jesus followers - for a variety of reasons - will come to different convictions about the same matters.

And we'll see that despite these differences, we are still called to love each other, accept each other, and serve Jesus - together.

I'm eager for us to learn from what the Apostle Paul has for us today as he interacts with a question the Corinthians had written to him about in a letter.

The Pluses - and Perils - of Knowledge (vv. 1-3)

[1] Now concerning food sacrificed to idols...

Prior to believing in Jesus, the Gentile believers in the church had done this. Regularly. Now they want to know whether, having become Christians, they should continue to do that or should they stop doing that?

That's the situation they're facing and that's the issue Paul is addressing. That is the backstory to our passage today.

Full disclosure.

In my years of serving as a pastor, I've never had anyone approach me and ask whether they should eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. THAT is not a particularly pressing issue for us in 21st century San Antonio.

But the principles Paul gave the Corinthians for dealing with their issue will prove extremely helpful to us as we face our own uniquely 2025 challenges.

We're listening with wide-open ears to what Paul has to say.

But Paul didn't immediately address that topic. He took a short detour from idolatry to another topic: knowledge.

[1] Now concerning food sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge.

Paul had already commended the Corinthians for having plenty of knowledge. (1 Corinthians 1:5)

Lack of knowledge wasn't the problem and giving them new information wouldn't solve the problem. In fact, knowledge was contributing to the problem in the church.

Knowledge isn't bad and it isn't at all a bad thing to learn. Paul isn't saying that we are to shun knowledge. But we who like to learn need to be aware of what increasing knowledge can do to us.

With all the advantages knowledge brings, ***[1]...Knowledge makes one conceited.***¹

That's a noteworthy comment, coming from Paul, a VERY knowledgeable man.

He was a cheerleader for the idea that Jesus followers should increase in the knowledge of the truth. Yet Paul saw the danger of knowledge.

Knowledge is necessary and good. But those who have great knowledge - in any arena of life - will be tempted to become haughty and arrogant toward those who have less knowledge.

This arrogance is pretty hard to take when it shows up in the world of medicine, law, or science. It is unbearable in someone who follows Jesus.

What has to be in place to deal with a "grey zone" matter like eating meat sacrificed to idols is love.

[1]...Knowledge makes one conceited, but love edifies people.

Paul reminds all of us that there is an element of walking with Jesus that is more important than knowledge: LOVE. (And we might as well get used to hearing that, because Paul is going to beat that drum over and over again throughout this section!)

Knowledge PUFFS up; Love BUILDS up.

¹ Great knowledge doesn't make humility impossible. But knowledge often doesn't promote humility.

So, to those in Corinth who “knew” - they had knowledge of God’s truth, knew the mysteries of the faith, knew the fundamentals of Christian doctrine - and were very impressed with how much they knew, Paul says,

[2] If anyone thinks that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know...

Or

“Easy there. Don’t be so self-impressed. Real ‘knowers’ are more aware of how much they still have to learn than by how much they know.”

The kind of knowledge that isn’t sourced in love doesn’t build anybody up - and it doesn’t move God.

What moves God, impresses God, touches God’s heart, and brings pleasure to God? This: ***[3] but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.***

God recognizes and rewards those who love - Him and other people.²

So, now, “knowing” that the key to addressing the issue at hand (eating or not meat sacrificed to idols) is not knowledge, but love, we’re in a proper posture to listen to God’s message to us in Paul’s counsel to the Corinthians.

The Truth About Idols (vv. 4-6)

Idols are Nothing (7:4)

[4] Therefore, concerning the eating of food sacrificed to idols, we know that an idol is nothing at all in the world, and that there is no God but one.

Objectively, there was no life behind the wooden and metal and stone images of pagan deities. They were images and nothing more. Making a sacrifice to an idol was sacrificing to thin air.³

²This seems to me a reasonable way to understand this cryptic comment. So, also Grosheide (In [First Corinthians](#) in The International Commentary of the New Testament series) and Joseph Dillow ([Final Destiny](#), p. 322).

Many of the Corinthian Christians had been saved out of idolatry. They had not known the one and only true God.

So, since everybody is going to worship something, they had worshipped these images, thinking that in doing so they were actually worshipping the Greek and Roman pantheon of gods and goddesses.

Now that they are Christians, they know better. This is what they now know.

There is Only One God (7:5-6)

[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 only one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.

In the unbelieving world of Corinth, people believed that “gods” abounded, resided in heaven, and sometimes interfered with life on earth.

Christianity flatly contradicts this and says that atheism and polytheism are tragic lies. There is one God. He created everything there is and we find our purpose in living for Him.

Plus, Jesus is co-equal with the Father, the co-Creator of all things, and the only Sovereign Lord. To which we say, today, “Amen!”

So here is the question that was plaguing the Christians in Corinth: *“We’re not going to worship idols anymore. But, given that there is nothing to idolatry, aren’t we free to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols?”*

Social get togethers in Corinth frequently involved a meal around a sacrifice. Did a Christian have to cut himself off from such gatherings?

³ Paul will later explain that idolatrous worship is actually more than nothing. It is worshipping demons. (1 Corinthians 10:20-21)

As well, we know that meat sacrificed to idols was often sold at the city's meat markets at cut rates. Wouldn't it be perfectly all right to buy the less expensive "already-been-sacrificed-to-idols" meat to feed a Christian family?

Some Christians, firmly convinced that there was only one God, figured, "*How can there be any harm in eating meat that had been sacrificed to a block of wood or stone? What difference does it make if I eat with friends in the temple of a non-existent deity?*"

We can follow this Christian's thinking. We get what he's saying. And we might think that Paul would be persuaded by this logic and would answer, "*Sure. Go ahead. Go to the temple and eat before the idol.*"

It is at this point that Paul clears his throat and says, "*Well, it depends...*"

He reminds his readers that not all Christians have progressed to the point where they have this level of knowledge. Some have strong and some have weak consciences.

To Eat or Not to Eat (vv. 7-13)

Categories (8:7-9)

The weak and strong conscience Christian (8:7)

[7] However, not all people have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

Some Christians, because of their previous experience with idolatry, are not able to accept the idea that idols are nothing. These, Paul identifies as "*weak.*" They have weak consciences which condemn them if they eat meat sacrificed to idols.

Elsewhere in this section of 1 Corinthians, Paul says that the "weak" Christian is weak in conscience, weak in knowledge (v. 7), and

weak in will, in that he can be influenced to act contrary to his conscience. (v. v. 10)⁴

The strong is strong in precisely the same areas where the weak are weak: faith, knowledge, conscience, will.

The strong, knowing that "***an idol is nothing at all in the world***" (v. 4) have consciences which don't condemn them for eating meat sacrificed to idols.

The weak have more scruples than the strong. And it isn't always easy for the strong Christian to see the harm he might cause the weak when he takes certain actions.

This is one category of thinking about "the grey zone." We must take into consideration the reality that some believers will have strong, and some will have weak consciences.

Another categorical reality all Christians are to reckon with is that it really doesn't matter what sorts of food you eat.

The neutrality / no-big-deal-ness of nourishment (8:8)

[8] Now food will not bring us close to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.

Under the Old Testament Law, food was definitely a thing. The Mosaic Law told the Jews what they could and could not eat.

They could eat "clean" animals, (those mammals that divided the hoof and chewed its cud), some birds (chickens, ducks, geese, and turkeys), and fish with fins and scales.

Everything else was unclean and, therefore, off limits. No bacon or lobster.

⁴ In Romans, he writes that those who are "weak" are weak in faith (Romans 14:1, 23); not weak in faith in Jesus who is mighty to save, but in firm conviction before God that what he is about to do is right.

One of the radical changes Jesus brought about had to do with food. He did away with all kosher distinctions.

Mark's Gospel records the time when Jesus pointed out that **[Mark 7:18]...whatever goes into the person from outside** (referring to food) **cannot defile him, [19] because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated."**

To make the point explicit, Mark wrote, **[7:19] (Thereby [Jesus] declared all foods clean.)**

The matter of food was a big deal in the early church.

As Gentiles came to faith in Jesus, some Jewish believers wanted them to keep the Old Testament's dietary laws.

The church held a council (Acts 15) to look into the matter and concluded that God had given no commands with respect to what a Christian should or shouldn't eat.⁵

Besides being healthy or not and tasty or not, food is no big deal. God approves of you eating whatever you want to eat.⁶

All Christians should understand the moral neutrality of food.

And Paul gives us one more category when we're thinking about matters in "the grey zone."

Liberty causing stumbling (8:9)

[9] But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

After my two knee surgeries in 2022, I would occasionally use crutches or a cane.

⁵ As Paul writes, here, eating is a "lawful, permitted" thing (1 Cor. 10:23), a "right" (1 Cor. 9:4), and a "liberty, freedom." (1 Cor. 8:9; 10:29)

⁶ How often I have wanted to tell my friends who are Muslim and who are so concerned to eat food that is halal - an Islamic form of kosher - that Jesus has cleansed all foods!

The words "**stumbling block**" make me think of someone greasing the tips of my crutches or putting some trip hazard in my way during that season.

Jesus used the image of "**stumbling blocks**" a few times during His ministry.

Once, He told His disciples, **[Luke 17:2] "It would be better for [the one who causes someone to stumble] if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin."**⁷

That's very severe language and Jesus said it the way He said it for good reason. It is a serious matter to act in such a way as to tempt or cause someone else to stumble or to sin.

In our passage, Paul pictures someone walking with Jesus, taking "next steps" with Jesus, eagerly following Him.

But someone does something to trip her up. It's like they tie piano wire to two trees on either side of the trail and the Christian face plants when she hits the wire.

After the stumble, that believer isn't walking with Jesus anymore. It was a spiritual catastrophe.

It is possible that a believer with a "strong" conscience might, in a lazy, unthinking way⁸ exercise his liberty (say...to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols) and run roughshod over a believer with a "weak" conscience.

Paul, speaking to the "strong," says to take care to NOT do that.

Now, keeping the categories in mind (Christians with "weak" or "strong" consciences; food is morally neutral; don't be a stumbling block), Paul provides us with two "case studies."

⁷ He said the same thing about those who cause children (and the childlike in faith) to stumble. (Matthew 18:6; Mark9:42)

⁸ Or inadvertently, unintentionally, naively.

Consequential Case Studies (8:10-12; 10:27-30)

Wounding a fellow Jesus-follower (8:10-12)

[10] For if someone sees you, the one who has knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will his conscience, if he is weak, not be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?

The strong-conscience Christian is thinking, "I'll set a good example by publicly taking part in an idolatrous feast, knowing that the food is just food and nothing more. Then, my younger brothers and sisters will be instructed and built up to do the same thing / to enjoy the same freedom that I do."

All of which is true...except that unlike the "strong" believer, the "weak" may decide to eat but will be eating against his own conscience.

Eating anything is, in and of itself, morally neutral. But if someone is convinced that by eating meat he violates God's standard, then eating meat becomes sinful to him, because violating conscience is sin. (Romans 14:23)

The strong has actually caused the weak to "stumble." Or, as Paul puts it...

...he has ruined the one for whom Christ died

[11] For through your knowledge the one who is weak is ruined,⁹ the brother or sister for whose sake Christ died.

You have made a mess of your brother's next step journey with Jesus. Your sister was walking well - and you wrecked it.

...he has wounded the conscience of the weak

⁹ This is a very common word used in the Greek New Testament. (*apollumi*) It is often translated "destroyed."

[12] And so, by sinning against the brothers and sisters and wounding¹⁰ their conscience when it is weak...

Paul is using a word here - "**wounding**" - that was used to describe the pre-crucifixion beating of Jesus with a rod over His crown-of-thorns bearing head.

Our consciences aren't infallible guides to what is objectively right or wrong. But we are each to listen to our conscience.

If we violate our conscience once, it becomes easier to do so twice. If we violate it frequently enough, our conscience develops calluses so that we can't hear it anymore.

The strong Christian never wants to lead a weak Christian down the path of going against their conscience.

...he has sinned against Christ

And finally, to the strong Christian who causes a weak Christian to stumble, Paul writes, **[12]...you sin against Christ.**

A couple of chapters over, Paul addressed a similar scenario involving food.

This time, it is with the involvement of someone who doesn't believe in Jesus - and he gave much the same advice.

Doing damage to an outsider (10:27-30)

[27] If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions, for the sake of conscience. [28] But if anyone says to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat it, for the sake of that one who informed you and for the sake of conscience; [29] Now by "conscience" I do not mean your own, but the other person's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? [30] If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered about that for which I give thanks?

¹⁰ "**Wounding**" - only place it is used in a non-literal sense in the NT. Usually refers to beating vigorously.

When a Christian was invited to an unbeliever's home to eat a meal, Paul assures that Christian that he or she has perfect freedom to say, "Yes, I'd love to have dinner with you."

Not only that, but that Christian can feel free to eat any food that is placed before him - even food that might have been offered to an idol as a burnt offering. That's OK.

Just don't ask your host, "By the way, this meat wasn't offered to an idol, was it?" Ignorance is bliss.

Then Paul throws a curve.

If the host volunteers, "Oh, and just so that you know, this meat was offered as a sacrifice to the gods last night..." the Christian should push the plate away and NOT eat. He is to refrain from eating "**for conscience's sake.**"

And for the sake of whose conscience should he not eat? Not his own, because, after all, the Christian knows that an idol is nothing.

It is the conscience of the host Paul is concerned for. And for the exact same reason he expressed in chapter 8.

The host, entertaining a Christian, could end up thinking that the Christian who knowingly eats meat sacrificed to an idol is actually engaging in idol worship as he eats.

This would legitimize idolatry in the mind of the host. For that reason, the Christian who is informed by his host that the meat on the plate before him has been involved in idol worship should not eat it.

Paul says that he won't be party to causing that kind of offense.

Conviction (8:13)

[13] Therefore, if food causes my brother to sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to sin.

Paul's words raise the bar of Christian behavior really high.

No Christian is at liberty to assert his "rights" if that means doing harm to someone else. The most important thing is not the "right" of the strong, but the well-being of the "weak."

If I have had or heard challenges to the whole matter of how we are to live in "the grey zone," it has to do with this issue. How are the strong to relate to the weak?

Am I just to forget my freedoms and never enjoy them? So, if any of us are having that thought, here's this...

I read a book a year before Kathy and I moved to San Antonio to begin the ongoing experiment that has become Northwest Community Church.

That book shaped my understandings about church in ways that impact me to this day. That book was Decision-Making and the Will of God, written by Gary Friesen.

When it comes to the matter of the strong adapting their behavior out of sensitivity to the weak, Friesen argues that we instinctively to that all the time.

In the book, he told the story of the time when he was a kid, late in getting home for dinner. To make up some of the lost time, he decided to take a shortcut through an open field on the way to his house.

Half-way across the field, he realized that what he thought was an unused field was being used at that moment by some grownups who were honing their archery skills.

Those archers had every right to be there and to shoot their arrows on that field. They were exercising their liberties, lawfully.

But when a small boy in his ignorance wandered onto the archery range, the rules changed. The archers stopped when they saw Gary.

If one of the archers had kept shooting, because, he thought, *"It's an archery range!"* and Gary had been wounded or worse, that archer would have been held accountable.

While the freedom to shoot is a right on an archery range, it is not an absolute right. The safety of others is more important than the freedom to shoot.

At a big picnic for a church or a business or for a family, if the adults are playing volleyball, it can get pretty competitive. Spiking is allowed. Go hard or go home. But if children join the game, the rules change.

If you're driving through an intersection on a green light but see someone walking across who is infirm or who may be disabled, you don't continue on because, *"Tough luck, fella, the light's green."* No. You wait for him to cross before driving through.

Conclusion:

When faced with a decision in a realm in which the Bible gives no clear guidance, we are to be guided by a concern to not be a stumbling-block, to not wound a brother or a sister, to not damage another's conscience.

In other words (and we aren't surprised by this), we are to be guided by love.