Christian Knowledge and Freedom

(Knowledge vs Love)

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Key Verse: 8:9 “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.”

We have studied Paul’s instruction to the saints in the church of Corinth for the last several weeks. Starting from the issues of division, lawsuits, sexual immorality to the issue of marriage, Paul counseled them one by one, case by case according to the gospel principle. In the previous chapter Paul taught them to serve the Lord with undivided devotion whether they married or not. (7:35) Today he counsels them with another issue: eating food sacrificed to idols. While counseling them Paul teaches us the true meaning of knowledge and freedom and how to use them as mature Christians.

First, Food sacrificed to idols. (1-6) Look at verse 1. “***Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up.***” The city of Corinth was the center of trade, business, philosophy, and religion in Paul’s day. The people of Corinth worshiped Aphrodite, the goddess of Greece, and followed the emperor's worship, too. Many kinds of food which had been used for idols came out to markets for sale. They ate them without having any guilty conscience. However, after some of them became Christians, they were hesitant to eat them because Christians were banned from eating food sacrificed to idols according to the letter of the Jerusalem Council. (Ac 15:29) They did not eat the food sacrificed to idols, thinking that by eating them they were worshiping idols (7). Look at verse 7. “***But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificed food, they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled***.”

But there was another group of Christians who had different ideas from them about the food. They were those who possessed knowledge. What kind of knowledge did they have? Look at verses 4-6. First, they knew that idols are nothing. Verse 4 says, “***So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.***” Indeed, idols are nothing but man-made ideas or structures or materials. Second, they knew that there is only one God and one Lord Jesus Christ. Look at verses 5-6. “ ***For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”)***, ***yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.***” Amen! Indeed, there are so many religions and temples around the world, but we believe that there is only one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. So, those who knew this truth were free from all food restrictions. They ate all kinds of food, even food sacrificed to idols, without hindrance from the dietary law. They believed that all foods are good, and idols are nothing. Paul the Apostle’s faith was the same. He said in verse 8. “***But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.”*** Food is food, nothing else. Paul said in Romans 14:17, “*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*” So, it doesn't really matter whether we eat pork chop or octopus or not, against the dietary law.

But what really mattered to Paul was not the food itself, but the attitude and influence of those who enjoyed such freedom. Those who ate food sacrificed to idols made judgment to those who didn’t eat it. Paul rebuked the believers in the church of Rome for the same reason. Paul said in Romans 14:1-4a, “*Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant*?” Here Paul describes those who eat everything as the strong and those who cannot as the weak. They must not judge each other because God accepts both of them. Food is food, it is not a matter related to our spiritual life or relationship with God. Of course, today we select good food for the sake of our health.

Second, be careful to exercise your rights and freedom (9-13) Look at verses 9-12. “***Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ***.” In Christ Jesus we are free indeed. We are free to do whatever we want in the Lord. We also have rights to eat whatever we like because God made all foods good, and Christ restored all things for good. However, we must consider others who are not like us. There are still many young Christians who cannot enjoy true freedom because of their weak conscience. We must be careful when we exercise our freedom and rights in front of them. This is because the exercise of our freedom and rights may become a stumbling block to them or cause them to fall into temptation or into sin. If those whose faith is strong eat the food sacrificed to idols by faith in front of those whose faith is weak, they will be tempted to eat the food or will eat against their conscience. When they eat against their conscience, they are sinning against God. Who are they? Even though their faith is weak, they are precious children of God who were bought at the price of Jesus’ blood. To Christ Jesus, what kinds of food they eat is not important. What really matters to him is not to lose any person who was bought at the price of his blood.

What is Paul’s conclusion? Look at verse 13. “***Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.”***  Yes! This is what Paul wants to say. This is what Paul wants them to do. For the sake of Christ, we do not eat food sacrificed to idols. For the sake of our weak brothers and sisters we give up our rights and freedom. For the sake of building others up, we yield our pride and become humble as Jesus did. In short, we do not save ourselves to save others as Jesus did on the cross. We must have the same attitude of Christ Jesus who made himself nothing to obey the will of God. (Php 2:5-11)

Today we are challenged with similar disputable issues such as movies, clothing, drinking, hobbies, sports on Sunday, and so on. We are free to watch whatever movies we want. We have the right to choose according to our faith with our good conscience. But we know that everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial. Above all, if our freedom causes others to fall into sin, we must reconsider the exercise of our freedom. Several years ago, a few friends of mine and I went to eat lunch together with my daughter Grace and her friend. We were offered a drink of beer. My friends said yes, but I said no, because my conscience was not allowed to drink. As for me, abstaining from drinking was the expression of my undivided devotion to the Lord and my new life in Christ. Still, to other friends, it was okay. If I drank beer at that time, I sinned against God because I drank against my conscience. But I didn’t drink and kept my conscience clear. Later I came to realize that I made the right choice. Drinking beer does not matter to some, still it does matter to others. What really matters is our attitude and influence. The issue of wearing appropriate clothes is the same. We are free to wear whatever we want. But we are asked to wear appropriate clothes for the sake of others. No one wants to see half-naked worshippers during the service. This is the attitude of mature Christians.

Third, knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Paul said in verses 2-3. “***Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God.***” In these verses, what they know is knowledge and what they ought to know is love. They knew that idols are nothing and that there is only one God and one Lord and that we are free to eat whatever. However, they did not know the truth behind their knowledge, which is love. Their knowledge causes others to sin and destroy the work of God. But their love accepts others’ weakness and builds up the unity of God’s church. People often judge based on their knowledge, but God values our heart and judges based on our motivation. When Jesus’ disciples went into the grainfield and ate some of the grain on the Sabbath, they were accused by the religious leaders. The religious leaders were right to judge the disciples according to Moses’ law, which banned working on the Sabbath. But how did Jesus defend his disciples? Jesus quoted the story of David who ate the consecrated bread and gave it to his company, which was lawful only for the priest to eat. And Jesus said, “*God desires mercy, not sacrifice*.” What did he mean by that? He meant that the spirit of Moses’ law is love, not just a practice of the law without mercy. The knowledge of the religious leaders puffed up, and the love of Jesus built up. This is what Paul said in verse 3 that whoever loves God is known by God, not whoever knows God is known by God. Love is superior to knowledge and mercy is superior to sacrifice.

Yesterday I asked one of my Bible students while studying John 8:31-32. “What is truth?” He answered, “fact is truth”. I agreed with him partially, but not completely. This is because facts can be changed depending on how we see and with which perspective we judge. For example, the war between Russia and Ukraine was a fact. But the war is good for Russia while it is evil for Ukraine. Fact is judged differently according to their view and situation. Since Existentialism in the 20th century, our view to see facts became relativistic. They say, “Existence goes before essence.” which means that they judge only based on what exists, what is seen, what is real, not on what is unseen, what exists behind the fact or reality. In other words, they judge all things based on their knowledge and experience, not on purpose or motivation behind them. If those who eat everything had the love of Christ, they would not eat food sacrificed to idols in front of those whose conscience were weak. Paul urged them to grow as mature Christians by exercising the love of Christ, not by storing up the knowledge of the law.

Today we have some similar disputable issues among us. I pray that we may overcome all these issues as Paul teaches us today. We must remember that knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Why not rather lose your rights for the sake of Christ? Why not rather give up your freedom for the sake of others? Why not rather deny yourself to build up others in the church? This is the attitude of mature Christians and the mindset of Christ we must follow today. Amen!