

**Love, the Ultimate Authority**  
**Psalm 111, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28**  
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A squirrel lying on a couch in a psychiatrist's office, said, "When I learned, 'You are what you eat,' I realized I was nuts!"

On the surface our scripture is about what is and is not acceptable to eat and what kind of person you are based on your diet. Digging deeper we find guidance on how to handle different perspectives, divisive debates, the value of community and the importance of being a good role model. Looking still deeper we find that the Apostle Paul's key message that resonates with our gospel lesson is "Love is the ultimate authority".

Paul invites us to live the most excellent way of love. The Church in Corinth wrote to Paul seeking his knowledge about eating meat, which was a raging debate. Debate can be "OK" when you are kind and fair, but it had grown into a nasty argument with a wake of hurt people. The congregation was upset, uncertain and fearful. What should they eat? Whose dinner invitation can they accept?

Corinth had a variety of pagan gods. Often they were worshiped by sacrificing an animal. The lowest cuts of meat were burned on the altar. The good quality cuts were grilled and enjoyed as part of the worship festival. The top quality cuts of meat were sold to meat vendors.

It was almost impossible to tell if the meat you were purchasing was from idol worship, free or not. Some Christians were adamant that eating meat that was once a part of idol worship was wrong. After all during the sacrifice there were usually prayers dedicating the food to the false god; prayers asking the idol to come into the food in some mysterious way. Others were recent converts from Judaism. They were concerned about any food that was in violation of the numerous food purity laws. Others were concerned about food safety. Still, others had no concerns about eating idol worship meat. Some even commented that it was good stewardship. The idol meat drove the price down making it possible to give more to the church.

If you were against eating idol worship food, you had a big dilemma. Since you were not able to verify where your meat came from, you could not buy food from vendors or eat food at public festivals. Some even felt it was wrong to be present where idol worship food was enjoyed. Meals were an important way to make personal, business and political connections. What about dinner invitations? How about a wedding banquet?

The church could not come to agreement on this issue so they wrote to the Apostle Paul for an answer. They wanted Paul to use his God inspired wisdom to pick a side

Paul answered. **NRS 1 Corinthians 8:1-13** “**Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by God. Hence, 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." Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth-- as in fact there are many gods and many lords--yet 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. It 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. "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, 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? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 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.**

On the surface it appears that Paul did not answer their question. Paul does not support any of the sides in the debate. Dig a little deeper and you find that a person's attitude is an important part of the issue. Paul, in essence, said that whether or not a person is sinning, depends on whether or not they think they are. It depends on whether or not a person understands that idols are meaningless. It depends on how doing so affects your discipleship. It depends on whether your thoughts, advice and actions draw people together in their love for each other and God or drives them apart and away from God.

Look closer and you will notice that Paul has bracketed his answer with his key message. Paul answered. **1 Corinthians 8:1 & 13** “**Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 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.**”

I asked Spencer what God is trying to tell us through this scripture. Spencer said. Knowledge without love is like hot air that puffs up a balloon which is easily popped or deflated. Love is like a brick wall. Love is the mortar that connects us and makes us strong. I would add that the bricks are supported by the rock solid foundation of Jesus.

**“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up”.** It is also translated. **“Yes, we know that “we all have knowledge” about this issue. But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church. We sometimes tend to think we know all we need to know to answer these kinds of questions—but sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds. We never really know enough until we recognize that God alone knows it all.”**

Paul identifies that the real sinful danger here is diminishing love for others. It often starts with pure intentions to live God’s will. You offer your perspective on some matter. You use your knowledge to proof text scripture to validate your position. The church even does it, forming taskforces to use their knowledge to write a statement on their perceived understanding of God’s will. If knowledge is not fueled by love and prayer, it soon puffs up, causing a sinful spiral. Knowledge can deceive you into thinking you have a better understanding of God’s will than another, that you are more holy than the people on the other side of the issue. Puffed up on knowledge without love, one rationalizes that they are normal and others are abnormal, that they are right and others are wrong, that they know what it is like to be another. They then ridicule another’s position, becoming arrogant. Puffed up with even more knowledge without love, the other side is demonized and hated. At this point the dangerous sin is not which side of the issue is right rather it is the arrogance, dislike, hate and lack of love for others.

Almost any decision could be inserted into Paul’s letter. As a pastor I have seen how passionate people are about their faith and church. Most of the time, it is a wonderful, loving passion, that builds up others and themselves with love. Unfortunately sometimes one becomes fixated on a particular color for the tile in the bathroom, the font size, type and layout of the bulletin, the type of bread used in Holy Communion, the location of the welcome station, the style of church furnishings, the type of music, the order of worship. Defining God’s will is challenging. Is slavery, women’s equality, abortion, homosexuality, eating food used in idol worship God’s will? Does God value mission or bible study more? Evangelism or education; sprinkle or dunk in a river, faith or works, liberal or conservative, democrat, republican or independent, tradition or innovation? It seems that Paul’s message here is: if your love for God and others is growing by debating these choices, excellent, however the moment your perspective diminishes your love for another then put your knowledge on the back burner until your love for those on the other side of the issue is once again growing.

Paul’s conclusion stresses the importance of loving community. Paul wrote **1 Corinthians 8:3** **“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.”** This is a huge sacrifice by Paul. This means turning down invitations to dinners, weddings and festivals. This means becoming vegetarian.

This is very challenging to anyone who places a high value on personal freedom. Love for others trumps individual freedom. Love trumps knowledge. Love trumps being

right. Love trumps all. Loving community is more important than self-fulfillment. Loving relationships are more important than knowledge. Being a loving role model is more important than having the right answer. Be a building block instead of a stumbling block. Martin Luther put it this way. “The Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none, and the Christian is a perfectly free dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Before you act or speak, stop, then determine if what you are about to say or do is loving and helpful to others or insensitive, inconsiderate and hurtful to others.

My parenting style is to encourage the kids to be bold, take risks and enjoy life. Abigail is a gymnast. She has been trained on the bars and has strong upper body strength, therefore at the park, I am fine with her climbing up a swing and practicing gymnastic moves from the bar that suspends the swings. However when other kids are around I ask Abigail not to do this because I realize that other parents would not approve. Appropriate behavior can become sinful behavior if it hurts another.

In a conversation or at a bible study, make a decision not to be selfish. Share only that which builds others up, deepens community and encourages worship of God. Share and act in ways that reveal love. Even if you are certain that you know right from wrong and appropriate from inappropriate. Sometimes, that alone is not enough. If you are truly interested in living God’s will you must consider the wellbeing of the community. Love is a greater authority than right knowledge. Jesus said **John 13:35** “**Everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.**”

How can you reveal love by sacrificing for others in harmony with Jesus sacrifice for you? You may enjoy steak yet when you are having lunch with a vegetarian enjoy a salad. Occasionally give up your preferred music so others can be inspired by the music that feeds their spirit. Step aside from the pleasure of talking with friends after worship in order to listen to a guest at church.

A fable is told of a lady who was capable of loving everyone. God sent her an angel who said, “You may have any gift you wish for.” The lady said, “I would like good to be done through me, but without anyone noticing, not even me, because I want to avoid the sins of vanity and arrogance.” So the angel arranged for the lady’s shadow to have the power of healing, but only when the sun was shining on her face. In this way, wherever she went, the sick were healed, the earth grew fertile, the sad became joyful, the hating became loving. The lady was oblivious to the multitude of miracles because when she was facing the sun her shadow was always behind her. Focused on God’s love she became so loving that she spread love wherever she went.

When Jesus began his ministry people were accustomed to the scribes teaching in the synagogue, interpreting the laws, debating the issues in the light of God’s word, recommending how to live in accordance with God’s will. The gospel of Mark proclaims. **Mark 1:21-28** “**They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for Jesus taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in**

**their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching-- with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee."**

What was Jesus authority? Perhaps it was the authority of love. Instead of debating whether it was right or not for an unclean man to enter the synagogue, Jesus lovingly welcomed him. Instead of debating the type and magnitude of the man's sin, whether or not he was repenting or his penitence, Jesus lovingly forgave him. Instead of debating whether or not this person should be isolated, Jesus lovingly welcomed him into the community. Instead of debating whether or not this person is normal, sincere or faithful, Jesus lovingly trusted him. Instead of debating whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, Jesus lovingly healed him. Perhaps Jesus astounded and amazed because of His love.

**Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Amen**