

Living In The Gray
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February 1, 2009

(1 Corinthians 8 NRSV) Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. {2} Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; {3} but anyone who loves God is known by him. {4} 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." {5} Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth--as in fact there are many gods and many lords-- {6} 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. {7} 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. {8} "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. {9} But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. {10} 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? {11} So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. {12} But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. {13} 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.

Those of you who have gotten to know me, or have engaged in Bible study have come to learn that I don't see the world as black & white — most of my world is colored in shades of gray.

And for some of you that is rather frustrating — because you want there to be a RIGHT or a WRONG choice. You want things to be ABSOLUTE.

My eyes don't see the world that way —> but believe me, I have tried!
Sometimes I wish that I could make everything absolutely black and white — but it doesn't work!

What I have tried to learn is that life is really lived within the gray — understanding that every choice that I make has consequences that are sometimes good and bad.

Let me give you a simple case in point.

A few years ago, Jeff and I preached about the need to switch over to CFL's (Compact Florescent Lightbulbs) because they can save enormous amounts of electricity – which saves coal from being burned – which reduces greenhouse gases.

Shortly after preaching that sermon I came across an article that suggested the CFL's aren't that great because they contain mercury and when we throw them out they will contaminate our soil and water.

So which is better – more greenhouse gasses or the risk of mercury if the CFL's aren't disposed of correctly?

It's not black and white → but somehow we have to live within the gray because we have to do something. We cannot just sit on the sidelines and let everyone around us make choices.

As Christians we have been called to make the best choice we can by gathering as much information as we can and the sharing that with the world. And to do that sometimes we have to think outside the box.

You probably have heard this story before, but it really illustrates what I am trying to say –

A person was having a conversation with God one day and said, "God, I would like to know what heaven and hell are like."

God said: "No problem!", so he led the person to two doors. God opened one of the doors and the person looked in. In the middle of the room was a large round table. In the middle of the table was a large pot of stew, which smelled delicious and made the their mouth water.

The people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished. They were holding spoons with very long handles that were strapped to their arms, and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful. But because the handles were longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths.

As yo can imagine – our friend shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering.

That God said is hell.

They went to the next room and opened the door. It was exactly the same as the first one. There was the large round table with the large pot of stew which made the holy man's mouth water. The people were equipped with

the same long-handled spoons, but here the people were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking.

"I don't understand," our friend exclaimed!

"It is simple," said the Lord. "It requires but one skill. You see they have learned to feed each other, while the greedy think only of themselves."

This is the same problem that Paul is addressing in our Scripture passage this morning.

Paul puts it this way, from The Message

The question keeps coming up regarding meat that has been offered up to an idol: Should you attend meals where such meat is served, or not? 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.

Some people say, quite rightly, that idols have no actual existence, that there's nothing to them, that there is no God other than our one God, that no matter how many of these so-called gods are named and worshiped they still don't add up to anything but a tall story. They say—again, quite rightly—that there is only one God the Father, that everything comes from him, and that he wants us to live for him. Also, they say that there is only one Master—Jesus the Messiah—and that everything is for his sake, including us. Yes. It's true.

In strict logic, then, nothing happened to the meat when it was offered up to an idol. It's just like any other meat. I know that, and you know that. But knowing isn't everything. If it becomes everything, some people end up as know-it-alls who treat others as know-nothings. Real knowledge isn't that insensitive.

We need to be sensitive to the fact that we're not all at the same level of understanding in this. Some of you have spent your entire lives eating "idol meat," and are sure that there's something bad in the meat that then becomes something bad inside of you. An imagination and conscience shaped under those conditions isn't going to change overnight.

But fortunately God doesn't grade us on our diet. We're neither commended when we clean our plate nor reprimanded when we just can't

stomach it. But God does care when you use your freedom carelessly in a way that leads a fellow believer still vulnerable to those old associations to be thrown off track.

For instance, say you flaunt your freedom by going to a banquet thrown in honor of idols, where the main course is meat sacrificed to idols. Isn't there great danger if someone still struggling over this issue, someone who looks up to you as knowledgeable and mature, sees you go into that banquet? The danger is that he will become terribly confused—maybe even to the point of getting mixed up himself in what his conscience tells him is wrong.

Christ gave up his life for that person. Wouldn't you at least be willing to give up going to dinner for him—because, as you say, it doesn't really make any difference? But it does make a difference if you hurt your friend terribly, risking his eternal ruin! When you hurt your friend, you hurt Christ. A free meal here and there isn't worth it at the cost of even one of these "weak ones." So, never go to these idol-tainted meals if there's any chance it will trip up one of your brothers or sisters.

These people are trying to feed themselves with long-handled spoons inlaid with pride and knowledge.

Paul's suggestion is pretty simple: Why not try feeding each other, and while you're at it, season the food with love.

Last summer, archaeologists found the wreck of a ship, that went down off the coast of Corinth that is dated to about the time Paul would have been writing this letter.

The two jars were found intact in the wreckage, and though they were empty after sitting at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea for the last 2,000 years, scientists could figure out what had been stored in them.

The foods kept in the jars had absorbed into the porous containers enough that DNA extraction revealed the jars' contents. The DNA signatures showed that one jar held olive oil infused with fragrant herbs. It was a seasoning used to amplify flavor in foods.

The other jar held the world's oldest Retsina-style wine. This Greek wine varietal would have traveled in jars sealed with a tree resin known as mastic. Mastic both preserved and flavored the wine, a style which is duplicated in modern-day Retsinas.

I mention this story because, which we have found proof that the ancients like to flavor their foods — Paul in his letter to the church at Corinth seems concerned that there is no flavoring in the church found there.

What Paul fears he is going to find is the strong residue of pride and arrogance, knowledge that gives birth to pride, and little wisdom, little tolerance, little love.

Paul tries to help them see some of the gray area that they were living with.

First, there is only one God, and therefore idols of gods are actually powerless pieces of stone (vv. 4–6).

Some people know this truth, and so if temple–sold meat was previously sacrificed to an idol, it is meaningless to them. Other “weak believers” don’t understand the powerlessness of idols, and therefore eating meat sacrificed to one would be a sin for them (v. 7). Thus, the same action can be a sin for one person and not for another.

So do I eat meat or not?

The truth is their were plenty of Gray areas even then

What gray areas do you see in life?

- Lottery tickets

- Listening to non-Christian music

- Watching R-rated movies

- Swearing

- Wrestling with our questions and doubts about our faith

The list can go on and on

But the truth is, we may even disagree that some of the above are gray areas. Many might believe there’s no grayness whatsoever.

Certain actions have great power and impact on some people’s lives and faith while they don’t on others. The point is not to get lost in how to handle each of the gray areas, but to identify them as opportunities to demonstrate an important Christlike virtue.

Eating temple meat might be a sin for one person and a freedom for another.

But there’s another sin mentioned in this passage:

putting personal freedom above communal deference.

Verse 1: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Paul values a demonstration of love over a demonstration of knowledge and the insistence on personal freedoms.

The “knowledge–puffs–up” issue was a huge problem in Corinth. These gifted and knowledgeable Christians knew it all and didn’t hesitate to let their Christian brothers and sisters who were struggling with some moral and ethical issues, know it. They were puffed up, snobby, stuffy and smug Christians.

I don’t know if you have ever seen the politically incorrect series South Park. A couple of years ago they addressed this very issue.

Gerald buys a hybrid and moves his family out of South Park after finding that he just can’t live with non–hybrid people. They end up in San Francisco, where he and his family find a lot of other smug people, and as the association grows, the smugness grows to such an extent that soon there is a smug problem, which leads inevitably to periodic “smug alerts.”

To live and breathe as a Christian in a community of faith where smug alerts must be routinely issued can be hazardous to your spiritual health.

Paul essentially is issuing a smug alert here.

So what do we love more?

The beer or the alcoholic?

The shorts or the person who can’t worship because we are wearing them?

Our rights or our peers?

While all things might be lawful (as Paul might put it), our respect and love for each other may in some cases limit our freedom. He says later in this letter: “‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other” (1 Corinthians 10:23–24).

In other words we have to understand that life is lived in the gray.

But the bigger question that I think Paul is challenging us with is:

What does the church have to say when there are no good choices?

Where is the church when there are no good choices?”

I think we need to realize a few things.

First, gray areas can exist within a community, but should not exist within an individual.

Implicit in this text is the idea that people have developed convictions on the meat issue. In discussing unclean foods in Romans 14, Paul says, “But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (v. 23).

We have to come to a conviction on what is right or not right for us. Because only then can we disagree across a community.

Second, gray areas we struggle with do not necessarily apply to those who don't believe.

We're all bound to the ethical standards of law, but does it make sense to hold someone who doesn't know Jesus to an ethic derived from following him?

If the nonbeliever snuffs out his cigarette on the bottom of his flip-flops before heading into church, what do we say?

What we should say is, “Welcome!”.

Finally, we need to remember that deference — the respect and love we show — in a gray area is not a concession of what we believe.

We have to wrestle with the gray in the world around us, and grow in our relationship with God so that we might live with integrity in that gray.