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Sermon Notes

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The Limits of Christian Freedom

1 Corinthians 8:1-7

I. Gray Area Battle Zone

A. Bible Gives Absolutes... Unequivocal Do's and Don't

1. Ten Commandments forbids certain things with no questions at all

Worshiping other gods...Worshiping idols... Taking the name of the Lord in vain... Murder... Adultery... Theft... Lying... Coveting

2. Other things forbidden... fornication, drunkenness, materialism, laziness, carnal anger, arguing, complaining... etc.

3. The Word of God also commands certain things clearly

Love God with all your heart... Love your neighbor as yourself... read the Bible... pray continually... Care for the poor and needy and the weak... Share the gospel with the lost

4. What is clearly forbidden and what is clearly commanded... there's NO DOUBT about those things... just need to obey by the Spirit

5. HOWEVER... not everything is like that; there are some GRAY AREAS in daily life practice; there are some debatable issues in the Christian life that people have different convictions over

6. And these GRAY AREAS can become a battle zone between Christians

B. Existence of Debatable Issues

One pastor I have heard of tends to see everything BLACK AND WHITE... not really any GRAY AREAS for him

There is a famous slogan from church history:

"In essentials, unity... In non-essentials, liberty... In all things, charity."

That saying was painted on the side of the church bus.

When that pastor started at that church, he had the slogan painted over, saying
 “THERE ARE NO NON-ESSENTIALS!”

But the Bible does not agree... there are some things that are “debatable
 issues...”

Romans 14:1 Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.

Romans 14 is a whole chapter devoted to the proper resolution of gray areas that
 will come up in the Christian life... “disputable matters” ... “doubtful
 issues”

Romans 14 addresses issues that would have divided Jewish Christians from
 Gentile Christians... certain types of foods, Sabbath days, other Jewish
 ceremonial regulations

As the gospel was spreading rapidly throughout the Gentile world there started
 to be more and more conflicts between Jewish Christians and Gentile
 Christians on these types of religious and practical issues

The most important issue that had to be solved was circumcision, and whether or
 not the Gentile converts had to become Jews in order to be saved... but
 beyond that, there was how the two could coexist in daily life without
 driving each other crazy

C. Present-Day Examples of Debatable Issues

1. Sabbath/Lord’s Day practices

- a. Many Christians have debated on what is permissible on the Lord’s Day...
 is it okay to go to a restaurant on Sunday or to go shopping, or can we do
 whatever we want on a Sunday

2. Alcohol: lots of debates over this!! All Christians agree that drunkenness is sinful, but many Christians prefer to completely abstain from all alcohol whatsoever, and might be tempted to judge others who partake in a glass of wine or beer

3. Popular culture: like movies, music...

- a. Early in my Christian life, I remember that some of my Christian friends
 thought Christian rock music was sinful... now, it’s more a debate over
 Christian rap

- b. So also Christians have struggled with each other over what movies they will watch or allow their children to watch; and sometimes parents can butt heads over those matters when their kids get together
- 4. Clothing... especially for women... is it okay to wear make-up, jewelry; what kinds of styles are acceptable for a godly woman
- 5. Education for children... government schools vs. homeschool vs. private schools
- 6. Even politics... voting... Presidential candidates... “Lesser of two evils” ... “holding your nose and voting” vs. other strategies

Charles Spurgeon was found of smoking cigars... numbers of Christians in his day felt it was clearly sinful and chided him

In a Sunday evening service, Spurgeon had preached a sermon on the danger of “little sins” which he called “The Little Foxes” that ruin the vineyard...

After he was done, Dr. George Pentecost, a famous American minister was introduced to the congregation, who said he had a few words to say; then he launched in vigorously on the sin of smoking tobacco, especially cigars. He said he was glad the Lord had delivered him from that wretched habit. When he got done, Spurgeon got back up and said that he could not allow the congregation to leave before telling them that he did not consider smoking tobacco to be a sin, and that he intended that very night to “enjoy a good cigar to the glory of God” before he retired to bed.

When another person asked him “How will you know you’re smoking too much?” He said “When I am smoking two at the same time!”

Of course, in Spurgeon’s day, there was not the same understanding of the dangers of tobacco on the health of the body; in fact, many London doctors prescribed smoking tobacco as a benefit to the health

So, there are DEBATABLE ISSUES that cause people to stumble

II. Corinthian Context: Meat Sacrificed to Idols

A. Paul is Addressing Issues They Brought Up with Him

1 Corinthians 8:1 Now about food sacrificed to idols

- 1. For the next three chapters, Paul is going to be addressing this issue
- 2. the general principle: **love limits our freedoms**

B. Corinthian Context: Pagan Religion

1. The Greeks, like the Romans, were polytheistic
 - a. They believed in and worshipped MANY GODS and GODDESSES
 - b. These gods and goddesses covered different areas of jurisdiction... gods of love, war, wisdom, the harvest, the sea, the heavens... they even had patron gods who would adopt certain cities, like Athena the goddess of wisdom who protected Athens, her personal city
 - c. They worshiped these gods and goddesses at shrines and temples, and did so by making offerings... animal sacrifices
 - d. The meat from the animal was divided into three portions
 - i) One portion was burned up on the altar for the god or goddess
 - ii) One portion was for the priest; he usually didn't need any more meat, so he would sell it to the local marketplace
 - iii) One portion was for the worshiper himself; he would bring it home and his family would eat of it
2. Beyond their polytheism, the Greeks also believed in many demons—evil spirits—who could light on meat like spiritual flies; and the meat had to be cleansed from the evil spirits only by being offered to a god or goddess
3. Their paganism extended to every area of life; continual requirements for offerings, and the people lived in perpetual fear of offending one of the gods or goddesses
4. The Corinthian Gentile Christians had only been recently converted from this lifestyle; they had very fresh memories of their habits of worship; this included sexual immorality with temple prostitutes, as we've mentioned. The new Christians were just emerging from this overwhelmingly corrupt pagan lifestyle
5. Furthermore, this paganism was woven into all their social interactions with UNSAVED family members and neighbors; every festival would involve meat sacrificed to idols; every social encounter would include meat sacrificed to an idol; if a Christian wanted to befriend a non-Christian for the sake of the gospel, and that non-Christian invited the Christian over for a meal, they would inevitably serve meat sacrificed to some god or goddess
6. If Christians were to abstain entirely, their relationships with non-Christians would be severely jeopardized... imagine being invited over by some family, and the woman begins serving the food, and you say that you've brought your OWN DINNER, because you can't eat what she's cooked!!

C. Beyond this: Mature Christians Were Flaunting their FREEDOMS in this area... and they were hurting weaker, more immature Christians

D. SO... Paul HAS TO ADDRESS this issue; and he does so by addressing the so-called MORE MATURE Corinthians

III. "We All Possess Knowledge"

1 Corinthians 8:1 Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge.

A. He's Speaking to Christians Who Are Celebrating their RIGHT Theology in the WRONG WAY

1. What knowledge did they have?

1 Corinthians 8:4-6 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. 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 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.

B. Idols Don't Really Exist Spiritually

1 Corinthians 8:4-6 We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.

1. These Corinthian Christians have fully accepted Paul's doctrine that there is one and only one God

2. So the idols that craftsmen have made to worship them don't represent anything at all... they are merely blocks of wood, stone, or metal

Psalm 115:4-8 their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. ⁵ They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; ⁶ they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; ⁷ they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. ⁸ Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.

3. This is what Paul says "We know"... and I think he is quoting these so-called more mature Christians who have the theology right

4. These Christians can walk through the marketplace and see the idols and the shrines and the temples and know the whole thing is a lie and there's no spiritual reality behind it

C. There is One God and Only One God

1. Of far more importance is that there IS a God who DOES exist, and he is the ONLY God... all the other gods of the nations are false; they are lies
2. This ONE GOD is a JEALOUS God who will not allow us to worship other gods, and has forbidden all idolatry... all material representations that are the focus of worship

Deuteronomy 5:8-9 "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁹ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God

D. The Many Gods of the Gentiles are So-Called Gods... Not Real At All

1 Corinthians 8:5-6 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), ⁶ yet for us there is but one God

1. The various names of gods and goddesses represent spiritual fictions
2. Zeus, Hera, Hermes, Aphrodite, Apollo, Athena, Ares—don't really exist at all
3. Now, later Paul will make it clear that there IS a demonic activity behind these false gods and goddesses... and that is very real

1 Corinthians 10:20 the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.

E. The Physical World in Which We Live Was Created by God... Including the Food We Eat

1 Corinthians 8:6 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.

1. Paul takes this opportunity to teach basic theology again
2. There is one God, the Father, the Creator of the ends of the earth, of all things visible and invisible
3. FROM HIM all things derive their existence... as he said to the Athenians

Acts 17:28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'

4. And FOR HIM all things exist... for his pleasure and glory... including US... we exist by his creation and for his pleasure
5. And ONE LORD... Jesus Christ... the Son of the Creator... THROUGH WHOM all things exist, and through whom we live

John 1:3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

Hebrews 1:2 by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.

F. This Includes the MEAT... which is ONLY MEAT

1. Meat can never have a spiritual virus
2. The demons that exist do not attach themselves to the meat; meat is just meat

G. Jesus Declared All Foods Clean

Mark 7:19 Jesus declared all foods "clean."

Acts 10:11-15 [Peter] saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." ¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." ¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

H. So... This is the KNOWLEDGE these experts in the Corinthian church have

I. But their KNOWLEDGE was not enough

IV. Loveless Knowledge Puffs Up

1 Corinthians 8:1 Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

A. Paul is Not Against Knowledge... NOT AT ALL

1. Paul spent most of his life pouring out the true knowledge of God by his faithful teaching and preaching ministry of the Word
2. Knowledge is VITAL to their salvation

1 Timothy 2:3-4 God our Savior ... wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

3. So... knowledge is NECESSARY, but it is not SUFFICIENT

B. Knowledge MUST Be Supplemented by LOVE

1. Knowledge that does move out into love for others is a DEAD-END

2. It is self-centered, and it tends to make the person ARROGANT... “puffed up” with pride
3. Paul will specifically convict the Corinthians about their loveless knowledge that had made them ARROGANT

1 Corinthians 13:2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge... but have not love, I am nothing.

4. These Corinthians were flaunting their freedoms based on their accurate doctrinal knowledge... and they were forgetting the effect it was having on others... weaker Christians who were not ready to handle their freedoms

C. Their Knowledge was WOEFULLY INADQUATE

1 Corinthians 8:2 The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.

1. The more you know, the more you know that you don't know
2. The more educated you are, your horizons of knowledge keep expanding until you realize you really don't know very much at all

I remember coming home one day years ago, and one of my kids had just finished his first unit in Mathematics... and he said proudly “Daddy, I know everything about Math!” I had no way of letting him know that math is an infinite topic, like a railway line of unending length that everyone gets off at some point... but his world was so small, he thought he had mastered math!

M.I.T. job inspecting fire extinguishers; down in the basement of the humanities library; DISCARDED BOOKS... no longer in circulation; there were bookshelves so tall you needed a ladder to get to the top, packed with obsolete books... I pulled one out and it was a 500-page book on some obscure topic I didn't even know existed... and here was an expert who had written 500 pages on it, and now it was superseded by some more recent study which made it obsolete... I began to realize how incredibly ignorant I was

John MacArthur: “Education is moving from an unconscious state of ignorance to the conscious state of ignorance.”

If you think you know a SUBJECT completely, you really don't know anything at all...

But that's not the real point

D. Far More Significantly, If you are impressed with your own knowledge, you really don't know GOD like you should

1. God's knowledge is infinite, ours is finite

Job 38:1-5 Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: ² "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? ³ Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. ⁴ "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. ⁵ Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it?

2. The better we know God, the more that knowledge will HUMBLE us

Proverbs 9:10 "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

3. So Job is deeply humbled by God

Job 42:3-6 You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. ⁴ "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' ⁵ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. ⁶ Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

It's all about knowing God... or rather, BEING KNOWN BY GOD:

1 Corinthians 8:3 But the man who loves God is known by God.

V. Loving Knowledge Builds Up

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

A. What Was Missing in their Accurate Theology: LOVE

1. They were forgetting their fellow brothers and sisters
2. They were forgetting that the real goal of their knowledge of doctrine was HORIZONTAL... building up... edifying... the rising structure that is the church of Jesus Christ, the TEMPLE of the LIVING GOD

B. Other Christians Recently Converted Out of Paganism Could NOT Handle the Mature Christians FLAUNTING THEIR FREEDOMS

1. The new converts had overpowering memories of their recent lives as pagans
2. They remembered all the times of worshiping gods and goddesses and feeding on the meat and even indulging in the sexual immorality

3. Their guilty consciences had only recently been cleansed by faith in the blood of Christ
4. They resolved never again to go to the fleshpots of paganism... to walk through the courtyards of the temples and see the priests and priestesses offering animals to the gods and to see the temple prostitutes taking people in with them... their memories were fresh and their consciences recently healed
5. They resolved NEVER AGAIN to follow those ways
6. But now they see their mentors and leaders flaunting their freedoms... and they partake as well, but their consciences torment them

1 Corinthians 8:7 But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.

C. In this Way... the Weaker Brother is Destroyed by Your Freedom

1 Corinthians 8:11 So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.

1. So your knowledge MUST be tempered by LOVE

D. Next Week... more details about this issue

VI. Applications

A. Reminder of Present-Day Issues

1. Alcohol: many people feel freedom in areas that cause other people to stumble
2. Movies you watch... some people are stricter than others
3. Music you listen to... secular, classical, Christian... etc.
4. Whatever... ask yourselves these questions

B. Some Basic Rules of the Road: Questions to Ask Yourself About Any Habit (from John MacArthur)

1. Excess: Is this habit hurting my walk with Christ? Is it BAGGAGE that's dragging me down?

Hebrews 12:1 ... let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

2. Expedience: Is it USEFUL for me, helpful to my walk? Does this habit have a positive effect on my walk with Christ?

1 Corinthians 10:23 All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient

3. Emulation: Is this habit pattern something Christ would do? By doing it, am I emulating Christ?

1 John 2:6 Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

4. Evangelism: Will this practice enhance my witness to onlooking non-Christians? Will it help my testimony? Will it help me lead people to Christ?

Colossians 4:5 Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

5. Edification: Will this action or habit BUILD UP other Christians who might see me do it? Will they be made stronger by watching me, by imitating my lifestyle?

1 Corinthians 10:23 All things are lawful, but not all things edify.

6. Exaltation: Does this action glorify God? Can I do this as an act of holy worship to God?

1 Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

7. Example: Will this action or habit pattern serve as a good example to other Christians? Would I be happy if my children or a new Christian I am discipling started to follow my example in this matter?

C. Come to Christ

1. There is ONE GOD and only one God... through him everything exists... including you!! And you exist to have a relationship with him!
2. AND there is ONE LORD... Jesus Christ... and by his blood all our guilt can be cleansed away... trust in him!