

It's Super Bowl Sunday, which in our culture is becoming a great feast day of consumption, including lots of meat. And yet Paul says in our Epistle that he will never eat meat? Is he a vegetarian? Hardly. But then he goes on and on with what seems to be an irrelevant question: can Christians eat meat, meat that has been sacrificed in a pagan temple?

You may think, who cares?—the context is so different from ours there's no connection to the 21st century. But I would ask you to stick with me—while it seems esoteric and irrelevant, there's an important lesson here for us. But we'll need to tease it out of a very different cultural context. So here goes.

Paul writes to the Corinthians. Corinth was a very pagan city, with an enormous number of pagan temples. Worship in these pagan temples centered around sacrificing animals.

But the use of animals in pagan worship didn't stop with the sacrifice itself. Worshippers would usually take a part of the sacrificed animal and eat it as a religious meal. And the meal would have lots of religious trappings. The soft glow of olive oil lamps. Lots of wine. Not all that different from a modern, romantic Mediterranean restaurant.

But one byproduct of this temple system was extra meat. Suppose you sacrificed an ox. The priests would carve up some t-bone steaks and serve them to you and your friends. The priests would also take a rump roast home to feed their families. But there would still be a lot of ox left over. So the temples would do two things. One, they would operate a sort of restaurant. Pay some money and come join the worshippers by dining in a romantic atmosphere. Two, the temples would operate a sort of butcher shop. By Paul's time, most, if not all, the meat available for sale in Corinth was from temple meat markets, selling the leftover meat from pagan sacrifices.

So the early Christians in Corinth had a dilemma. Was it permissible for Christians to eat meat that at one point had been sacrificed to a pagan god in a pagan temple? And if so, could they eat in the temple "restaurant" or only should they only buy meat from the "meat market?"

There were two basic answers to this question. And they divided Corinthian Christians into two camps. And religious people have followed this basic pattern of division down through the centuries.

Option 1--everything is black and white. Either it's of God or it's not. So you have to draw tight boundaries. You have to have strict rules. There are some Christian groups that forbid dancing, or alcohol or tobacco. At the extreme end there are Amish Christians who avoid things like electricity or internal combustion engines. If it's not of God, avoid it.

In Corinth, the Christians who followed Option 1 would say, idols are evil, maybe even demonic. Some of us are recovering pagans. We don't want to fall back into that lifestyle. So we have to keep a strict separation. Don't touch meat from a pagan temple with a 10 foot pole. Draw the line. Make a firm boundary. Everything is black or white.

But there is Option 2. Option 2 is currently very popular in our culture and in our modern American churches.

Option 2 says, 'Wait a minute. Life is complex. Everything is a shade of gray. Different strokes for different folks. Everything is relative.'

So the Corinthian Christians who followed Option 2 said this: We worship God through Jesus Christ. They're worshipping god by calling him Zeus, or Apollo, or whatever. It doesn't matter. It's all spiritual. I don't choose to worship Zeus. But if I eat some of the meat from his temple, no big deal. Besides, Christ has freed me from picky rules and regulations. I can do whatever I want. That's what freedom is all about.

And in response to these 2 options, Paul writes 1Corinthians chapter 8. He is writing to a divided church. And yet, he doesn't take one side or the other.

Paul starts by saying we know that there is only one God. Pagan idols are not really gods. They're just statues. There's only one real God. OK, there are many things that get worshipped in the world. But there's only one real God.

That means everyone's view of god or the gods is not equally valid. Thus Paul makes a very explicit claim: "For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist."

Paul is being very clear. You can't eliminate some absolutes. The God of Israel is our Father. And Jesus Christ is Lord. Saying God is one in a Jewish and Christian setting means all other so-called gods are nothing.

So Paul is saying you can't be so gray, you can't be so relative that you eliminate these absolutes. You can't be wishy-washy and just say that all spiritual paths are equal. Option 2 doesn't work.

But then Paul takes on Option 1. He says basically, on the other hand, you can't be so rigid, you can't be so black and white that you don't realistically enter the struggle of living as a Christian in a complex world. You have to allow for some ambiguity, some gray in your daily living.

You've got to live in the real world, and you've got to be pragmatic. Ultimately, Paul will say it's ok for Christians to eat temple meat if they so choose. "We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do."

But, for Paul, eating meat is not the real question. The real question is, "What are the affects of me eating meat? Will my eating pagan meat have an adverse impact on someone else?"

He's basically saying, 'I have the right to eat meat. It's ok for me to do so.'

But... BUT, I have to pay attention to something even more important. Love.' I've got to pay attention to my brothers and sisters who might be affected by what I do. There were plenty of Christian converts in Corinth who had just escaped from the temple. They were recovering pagans.

So if you eat pagan temple meat in front of recovering pagan, what will that do to them? Will it trigger unhealthy things in them, and make them want to slide back into a destructive lifestyle? Will they be seduced by the demonic forces they've escaped from?

The best modern parallel would be dealing with recovering alcoholics. If I go to the AA meeting, should I bring a keg of beer with me? Probably not.

There's nothing wrong with Christians drinking alcohol. But you have to be careful, out of love, not to let your behavior drag your fellow Christians down.

So Paul says that out of love, I want to make sure that my knowledge and my liberty do not become a "stumbling block to the weak."

It's not a problem of eating meat. It's a problem of unintentionally pushing recovering pagans back onto the slippery slope that they've gotten off of. "Therefore," Paul says, "if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall."

Paul is saying that the most important thing in this gray world is not whether I'm allowed to do something. It's whether I'm acting in love.

The basic message is that love trumps rights. Love trumps freedom. I have the right to happiness. But I have to sometimes sacrifice some of my right to happiness out of love for others. I can't just go off and do whatever I want to, because there may be consequences for my spouse, my kids, my friends, or even my society or my world.

Our culture is so concerned about rights. We fought hard to win those rights. We try to see that basic human rights are given to all people in the world. That's a wonderful thing.

But having the right to do something does not necessarily make it the right thing to do. Thus, we need to also look at what is best for others. And if it comes down to a question of my freedom versus love for others, Paul says, choose love.

Can I eat meat that has been sacrificed to an idol? In the 21st century, that's not a question we have to worry about. What is God's place in my life? And how does my life and my behavior affect others? Those are questions we do need to worry about.

1 Corinthians 8 tells us that we need crystal black and white clarity. God is the only God. Jesus Christ is our only Lord. But in the grayness of day to day living, the knowledge that God is one, the knowledge that Jesus is Lord, the rights I have as a child of God are not enough.

Because I am a child of God, because Jesus is my Lord, I am called to love. Not to necessarily do whatever I want whenever I want to do it.

I have to ask, what is the most loving thing for my family? For my friends? For those I meet? How can I be more loving?

Paul tells us, "One day we shall see God face to face." But in the meantime, in the grayness of everyday living, let us be guided by love.