

For the Love of Christ

In the name of him who teaches the truth of God's Word with all authority, dear friends in Christ: I'd like to begin by setting a question before you. It's this: if you had to answer with just one word, what would you say is the goal of your life? Specifically, what quality or attribute or virtue would you most like to attain? Think about that.

I put the question to the 7th and 8th grade students at the Lutheran school the other day and got several different answers. Some said *happiness*, others *wisdom*; a few said *perfection* (about which I can only say they've got a *long* way to go). One said *fame*. I was surprised that none of them said *wealth* because in a recent survey of American high school students something like 80 percent said they believed they would be millionaires before age 30. And wealth is pretty much the American dream, isn't it? We perceive that money is the way to get everything we want in life. We think that with money we can buy happiness and power and fame and even love.

The ancient Greeks had a different answer to the question. Almost universally they considered the greatest virtue and goal to be *knowledge*. They firmly believed that more you know, the better you are. In the Book of Acts St. Luke tells us that the people of Athens were always hungering to learn, to hear some new thing, to be taught something they didn't know before. And the same was true of the citizens of nearby Corinth. For them nothing in life could be sweeter than the thrill of knowing that I know more than you. And yes, it very definitely was a source of pride – which ought to raise some red flags.

It's this very issue that St. Paul is addressing in today's Epistle, which is a portion of his first letter to the Christian church at Corinth. This was a congregation with a lot of problems, one of which is that it was divided into a several factions that were competing with each other for bragging rights: which group was the best, the most spiritual, the most gifted, the most *Christian*. And one of the most important standards of comparison was Christian knowledge, that is, how much one knew about the Christian faith, its teachings, its doctrines, and just general knowledge of the biblical storyline. Again, since they thought like Greeks, they thought the more you know the better you are. So obviously the best Christians are the ones who know the most.

Paul wants to change their thinking about this because they could not be more mistaken. Knowledge of the Christian faith is good and necessary, but it is not the goal of the Christian life. The goal of the Christian, the virtue we are called to strive for, is not knowledge, but love. And when I say love here I don't mean the love that most people seek. When we say we want love, we usually mean "I want someone to love me". That's not Christian love. Christian love is love directed outward toward others. It's the kind of love Paul describes later in this same letter where he writes, "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It keeps no record of wrongs. ... Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." It's the kind of love Christ displays by giving himself on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. It's love that's not about my good, but yours; love that asks, "How can I serve you?" and does whatever it is without thinking about the cost to self. For every Christian attaining such love must be the goal.

This is why Paul writes, “All of us possess knowledge. This knowledge puffs up”, that is, by it you think you’re better than others. “But love builds up.” Love, which is the goal, is aimed at helping others. It’s concerned with protecting and caring for them.

The issue at hand has to do with food that was offered to idols as a sacrifice. Corinth, like all Greek cities, was filled with idols of the Greek gods and their temples. And almost all of the members of the Corinthian church used to worship these idols, offering sacrifices to them to earn the favor of the gods. But when Paul showed up just a few years ago, they heard for the first time the amazing truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They learned that there is one God over all, that the way to him was through faith in Jesus, and that all their idols were useless images of gods that don’t exist. They turned their backs on their false religion and embraced the truth of Christ.

But they still lived in a very pagan culture. The vast majority of their relatives, friends, and neighbors continued to worship at the idol temples. And it turns out that these temples were the major supplier of the city’s meat markets. If you bought lamb chops from your local butcher, the chances were extremely high that the animal from which they were cut had first been presented on the altar of Zeus or some other mythical member of the Greek pantheon. So, a question the Christians in Corinth had to confront was this: Does buying and eating this meat make a person a participant in the worship of false gods? If I eat it, am I guilty of idolatry?

The short answer is no. Meat is meat. It comes from animals – animals that have to be slaughtered. And if this slaughtering took place in a pagan temple by wrong-minded, superstitious people who offered the carcass to gods that don’t exist, it doesn’t change the fact that the meat is simply meat. Buy it. Cook it. Eat it. Enjoy it. Give thanks to the One True God for it. And don’t worry about where it came from.

But let’s take it up a notch. Like I said, these Christians lived in a very pagan culture. And like every culture, they had their share of holidays – holidays that almost always recognized some event in the lives of their mythological gods. So, along comes a holiday; let’s say it’s Zeus’ birthday. Part of the celebration would include offering a dozen or so bulls on the altar of Zeus, and then there would be a big barbeque and feast held in his temple, in sort of the same way that a church might hold a potluck in the social hall. Big party, free food – or to be more precise, food that was paid for with our taxes; part of our cultural tradition, all of our friends and neighbors are going to be there ... can a Christian participate in that? You know, in sort of the same way that non-Christians celebrate Christmas without believing in Christ or recognizing that the holiday is held in honor of his birth. They just like the trees and decorations, Santa Claus and the gifts, the cookies and treats, and all the rest of it. To them there’s nothing religious about it. Can a Christian with that same mind set participate in a feast in a pagan temple?

That’s a little more doubtful, isn’t it? The short answer, however, is the same: it’s just food. You believe in Christ, not the false gods. The food is not contaminated by its association with idolatry. And you’re there to eat and socialize with your friends and neighbors, not to worship nonexistent gods.

That’s the short answer. And a mature Christian would understand that. But there’s the rub: not all Christians have mature faith. Indeed, the Corinthian congregation was adding new members all the time, people who before their conversion believed in the Greek gods and goddesses. They worshipped the idols and offered sacrifices to them. Now they see how foolish and blind they were. They hate all that idol stuff and they want nothing more to do with it. And to many of them it just doesn’t feel right to eat meat that was offered to idols or

participate in the temple feasts. They're very sensitive about it. They feel that if they were to do so, they would be betraying Christ and returning to their former idolatry.

And here's the thing: if you believe an act is sinful, then for you it is. You have to violate your conscience to do it, and that itself is a sin. This is what Paul means when he writes about those who are still new in the faith, "Not all possess this knowledge. Some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled."

This is where Christian knowledge and Christian love come into conflict. The mature Christian has no problem with feasting in a pagan temple. He knows there's nothing to it. But the immature Christian does see it as a problem. And what if he now sees you with your more mature understanding partying away with the pagans? Won't he be encouraged to do the same? It seems to him that's what mature Christians do. And he wants to be a mature Christian. But inside his conscience is screaming at him no, this is wrong. This is why Paul writes "And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ."

Christian love takes precedence over Christian knowledge. Do what is right for your weak brother, not what's best for yourself. A truly mature Christian would understand that. So it is that Paul writes, "If food makes my brother stumble [into sin], I will never eat meat [offered to idols], least I make my brother stumble." In everything we do or refrain from doing, we should do it for the love of Christ and those who are his.

Now, on the surface, none of this may seem to have immediate application to us. To the best of my knowledge none of the meat for sale at the local Fareway or HyVee has spent any time on the altar of an idol. Nor are any pagan temples holding feasts on special days. So it's not likely that you are going to lead anyone into sin by what or where you eat.

The principle, however, remains the same. We must not allow our Christian knowledge and the exercise of our Christian freedoms to lead our less knowledgeable brothers and sisters in Christ into what for them is sin. Sadly, the source of much "lack of knowledge" comes from erring churches and their teachers. Some churches teach that the use of alcohol in any form is sinful. And those who believe that sin if they take a drink. You know better. You know you can enjoy drinking in moderation. But don't let your knowledge lead others into sin.

Or take Halloween: some churches teach that to observe it in any way is a participation in satanic worship. It's not. The American tradition of its observance comes from many different sources, and none of them have anything to do with worshipping the devil. And children dressing up like make-believe ghosts, ghouls, and goblins going around the neighborhood trick or treating are just having fun and collecting candy. But not everyone knows that. Know who you're dealing with. And don't let your knowledge lead others into sin.

Other examples are certain kinds of role playing games in which players pretend to be mythical characters with magic powers. And certain genres of literature like the once popular *Harry Potter* series that presented a fantasy world in which children with magic powers studied sorcery and witchcraft. It's all the stuff of imagination; but some churches teach that such topics are inherently evil and that no true Christian should participate in them. And for those who believe that, it is wrong to do so. Love your weaker brothers and sisters in Christ, and don't let your knowledge lead them into sin.

One more: some weaker Christians may stumble over objects of art that portray characters or scenes from false religions. Or it could be an item actually used in false worship. You might visit the Orient and purchase a little statue of the Buddha, say. To you it's nothing more than a reminder of your trip. To someone else, especially someone who converted from Buddhism to Christianity, it wouldn't seem quite right. If such a person is stopping by your house for a visit, in love, you best stash that thing away in the closet out of sight.

I could cite other examples, but by now I'm sure you have got the gist of it. Christian knowledge is good and useful, but not when it brings spiritual harm to others. Our goal, our motivation, must always be shine forth with the love of Christ and protect those who have less understanding from doing what for them because of their lack of knowledge is sin – sin that may ultimately ruin their faith and destroy their bodies and souls in hell. In love, let's not do that.

Before I close I must add that there is a flip side to this issue. For the love of Christ we must avoid leading our weaker brothers into sin. We must be patient with them. But we also want to teach them so that they do not remain immature Christians. Nor do we want to submit to the unbiblical legalism of the churches that teach against the sorts of things I've mentioned. Theirs is the claim that they are better and more knowledgeable Christians than we are because they condemn these things and don't participate in them. If someone who believes that tries to force their legalistic views on you and prevent you from doing what you know to be perfectly acceptable, then you are duty bound to exercise your knowledge and freedom in the Gospel to do the very thing they say you can't. Then you must tell them, "For the love of Christ and for you, I will not submit to your manmade rules."

The love of Christ is our goal. Therefore let us submit ourselves to the authority of his teaching that we learn Christian knowledge; but even more, by his Word and his Holy Spirit and the cleansing of his blood-bought forgiveness, that we learn to love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!