

# CHOPPED IN CORINTH

## 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13

*Rachel Ray and Bobby Flay - Drive-ins, Diners, and Dives - Meat Men, Cupcake Wars, and Iron Chef...*

And my favorite, *The Great Food Truck Race...*

I'm talking *The Food Network...* started in 1993, today it's available in 96 million American households.

When the network first aired, I thought, *"No way! An entire channel of cooking shows."* But I was wrong. Food Network has had amazing staying power, which proves what a huge impact food has on our daily lives.

*And the same was true in the church at Corinth.* In fact, issues involving food had invaded their worship.

A major debate had erupted among Christians over food and eats. I have no doubt if the Food Network had been around at the time, the Corinthian controversy would've become primetime programming.

Imagine, *"Tailgate Warriors"* live from Corinth. Or *"Cutthroat Kitchen."* A messy food fight had started in the church. Paul steps in to make sure it gets *chopped!*

Chapter 8 begins, *"Now concerning things offered to idols..."* From Chapter 6 onward Paul is answering questions the Corinthians had asked him in a previous letter. One of the questions involved eats and meats.

In the ancient world there were two places to purchase a hamburger... You could go to the local meat market and pay

premium prices, or you could buy your meat from the pagan temples at a discount.

Usually, when an animal was sacrificed to an idol in a pagan temple, the meat was carved into sections...

The **fat** was offered to the idol. Burning fat on the fire created the most smoke. And the smoke was a symbol of the worshipper's praise, and prayers, and petitions...

The **choicest cuts** were then given to the priest...

The **prime cuts** went to the worshipper himself...

But a 1000 pound steer nets 430 pounds of retail beef. Out of a single cow a butcher gets 38 pounds of sirloin, 38 pounds of ribs, 25 pounds of brisket, and 210 pounds of ground round and ground chuck.

That's a lot of beef, and we're talking about ancient times before the days of refrigeration. Rather than let the leftovers go to waste, the priests raised money for the temple by selling the meat wholesale in the market, or directly to the public in the temple deli. Much of the meat sold in Corinth came from its pagan temples.

A Christian never knew if what he was eating had been a *sacrifice* before it was a *sandwich* or a *steak*.

The Corinthian Christians weren't idolaters, they were just shrewd shoppers, coupon clippers.

They hated the city's idols, and the pagan practices that went with them, but they also hated paying too much for ground round. Why not buy it on the cheap?

*But was this right?* How can a Christian eat meat he or she knew was sacrificed to an idol - used in idolatry?

For many of the Christians the idea of guilt-by-association was firmly etched in their minds. *If it was on the devil's platter, could it now be put it on the grill for God?* They didn't want to *a miscue with barbecue.*

And this isn't just an issue for the ancients. Several years ago, I read an article in World Net Daily, "[Has Your Thanksgiving Turkey Been Sacrificed to Idols?](#)"

The author reported that America's most popular turkey brand, *Butterball*, was processing their turkeys according to "[Halal](#)" or Islam's Sharia Law standards.

Millions of Americans were eating a Thanksgiving turkey that had been blessed in the name of "[Allah.](#)"

The article was dated 2011. I'm not sure if Butterball has continued the practice, but I wouldn't be surprised. There are other companies - KFC, McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Subway - marketing Halal to Muslims in the US.

So what if you're shopping for a Thanksgiving turkey, and *the best buy is a Butterball?* Allah is the false god of Islam. His character, nature, actions, and promises differ from the God of the Bible... *Would it matter if your turkey had been blessed in the name of Allah?*

On Thanksgiving Day you're going to fellowship with other believers in Jesus. You're eating together in gratitude for your many blessings in Christ. The money you save on the turkey you'll even give to the church!

Is it okay to buy the Butterball, or would such a purchase make you *a turkey* in the eyes of God?

This was an issue that had divided the church at Corinth. Some Christians said “yes” - while others said “no” - *but everyone was adamant that they were right.*

Perhaps more important than the debate itself, was the haughtiness of their attitude. *They were all proud.*

Paul will deal with their beef, but he first addresses their arrogance. He says in verse 1, “We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know.” Notice, this... **Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.**

It’s interesting, there was knowledge on both sides of this issue... Christians in the **“don't do it”** camp realized the dangers of idolatry. Demonic forces were behind the worship of false gods. *Why should a child of God get tangled up in practices of questionable origin?*

Whereas, the folks on the **“go to it”** side of the argument knew that idols were nothing but sticks of wood and hunks of stone. The only God is the one true God. False gods don't exist, and meat sacrificed on their altars, is just that, a piece of meat. *Why not eat?*

The **“don't do it's** and **“go to it's** each had validity.

The problem though was that both groups failed to recognize the legitimacy of each other's concerns.

The Church in Corinth was full of proud people!

Everyone had the notion, *"I'm right and everyone who disagrees with me is wrong."* There was no middle ground - no room for *shared truths* or *common concerns they could learn from each other*. Their knowledge had gone to *their heads* - not *their hearts*.

The Little League football helmet my son use to wear had a rubber bladder in it that you inflated with air. It provided his head extra protection. There was a nozzle where you inserted the needle, and pumped it up...

Well, I'm afraid most people have a similar nozzle somewhere on top of their scalp. *Go ahead and see if you can find yours!* We learn a little truth and it goes to our heads - *we're right and everybody else is wrong*.

In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul referred to *"leaven"* - which is *yeast* - as a type of sin. *And why?* Because yeast *"corrupts by puffing up."* And sin inflates our pride.

Realize, *the most dangerous person in the church is the one who knows just enough to think he knows it all!*

Be leery of the self-proclaimed expert who feels it's his duty to roam the church and police the saints. He's looking for the fellow Christian who's doing 37 in a 35. He's writing his own tickets for the smallest infractions.

He's all about getting the speck from his brother's eye, while he has a 2-by-4 protruding from his own.

I love the quote, *"Some people drink at the fountain of knowledge, others just gargle."* Beware of those who just

gargle... Paul says to both camps *let some air out of your head, and pump some love into your heart.*

The Corinthians had *big-heads*, but *small-hearts*.

Recall John introduced his Gospel, “The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” And followers of Jesus should be distinguished by the same traits - grace and truth.

It’s been said, “Love without truth is hypocrisy, but truth without love is brutality.” We won’t always agree with each other, but we can always love each other.

I love Paul’s conclusion in verse 3, “But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him.” The key to a relationship with God - both *knowing God*, and more importantly, *being known by God* - is ultimately what goes on in *the heart*, not *the head*. It’s all about love.

It was scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal who wrote, “Man's wisdom must be understood to be loved, but God's wisdom must be loved to be understood.”

Head knowledge has a place. Facts and beliefs are vital to our faith. But academic knowledge alone is not enough to save us. Saving faith has to be heart-felt.

As Philip told the Ethiopian, “If you believe (in Jesus) with all your heart...” Faith involves love, not just logic.

Paul returns to his discussion of the immediate problem in verse 4, “Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol *is nothing* in the world, and that *there is no other God but one.*”

Understand this observation from the Corinthians' perspective... A few weeks ago we were in the ruins of Corinth, and much of the rubble we saw were the posts and columns and walls of various pagan temples.

The ancient Greeks were polytheistic. They believed in multiple gods. Corinth even had a temple dedicated to "all the gods" - *a catch-all for the Greek pantheon*.

In other words, Corinthian society was inundated with idolatry. It colored all of life. Whenever Corinthians gathered - *from family get-togethers, to civic functions, to sporting events* - respect was paid to some idol.

And before we act smug in our knowledge, and dismiss the whole notion of any modern-day idolatry...

Imagine, putting a Corinthian in a time machine and transporting them to 2015, to a southern town, on a fall Saturday, on game day... They would immediately conclude that we are the strangest kind of idolaters...

We worship animals and insects, and sacrifice our meat on the tailgates of a thousand pick-up trucks, all gathered around the temple to *the elephant god*.

Our preoccupation with sports, or entertainment, or career and affluence - anything, can be turned into an idol. **Whenever a person gives a peripheral issue primary importance they border on being idolatrous...**

If the transported person from ancient Corinth saw only how **you** lived your life - what conclusions would they draw about *the* God, or gods, that you worship?

Yet the believers in Corinth had been liberated by the Holy Spirit from the shackles of the city's idolatry.

God had opened their eyes. They now saw the idols they once worshipped as *“nothing”* - just man-made statues - inanimate objects. They realized the system of idolatry, that once enslaved them, was a total sham.

Paul takes it one step further, verse 5, *“For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.”*

He's saying, other deities don't exist, but if they did, our Father God and our Lord Jesus Christ would still reign supreme!... *God the Father created all things. God the Son, our Lord Jesus, sustains all things.*

We know idols are *“nothing,”* but if pagan gods were real they'd obey and bow down to the Christian God.

And I love what Paul says of us, as he talks about God... *“we exist for Him”* and *“we live through Christ.”*

God created us for Himself. This is why your life is like a leaf on an autumn day... aimlessly falling, randomly blowing in the wind. A person has no rudder, no purpose - until they anchor themselves to God.

And we connect to the life that is in the one true God by bowing to the one Lord in all the universe, Jesus!



Then verse 7, “However, *there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.*” The problem was two-fold - *their consciousness and their conscience.*

Some of the Corinthian believers couldn't get beyond deeply-held and deeply-rooted associations. Their own past made them conscious of the dangers of idolatry.

Think of the man or woman who'd been immersed in the cult of Aphrodite. Either they played the prostitute, or betrayed their wife by taking a prostitute. They were now ashamed. Their former life had left serious scars.

They were so conscious of the dangers idolatry posed, it was hard to now view the idol as “*nothing.*”

And this is how I feel about drinking alcohol. *Is a Christian free to drink a glass of wine on occasion?* The biblical answer is “yes.” Moderation is the *key.*

Yet what's a liberty *for some*, is not *for me.*

I've also read the Bible's numerous warnings on the subject. Throughout Scripture we're cautioned about its destructive possibilities... The Bible is also clear that we should never, ever get drunk... As a pastor I've counseled too many people who were ruined by booze.

I'm too *conscious* of the damage it can cause to want to participate myself. To me, it's wise to steer clear.

I remember going to the hospital once to see a man dying of liver disease. It was awful. He was a yellow bag of bones just clinging on to life. He was miserable.

In my 35 years of ministry I've seen countless lives and families destroyed by alcohol. Now when I see an open container I see evil. *Moderation isn't always easy.*

And for me, *I know my tendencies.* I'm impulsive. I'm afraid if I ever start drinking I might not be able to stop.

*So why even start? Besides, what can alcohol do for me that Jesus can't?* If I'm looking for a buzz, or a way to unwind, I go to the *Holy Spirit not distilled spirits.* I've personally decided the rewards aren't worth the risks.

But that's not everyone's position and that I accept...

When it comes to alcohol consumption I'm in the "don't do it" camp, whereas you might be of the "go to it" persuasion. And you have that freedom. It's not for me to judge you, and it's not for you to judge me.

I admit you're within biblical parameters - and I hope you see my position as full of biblical wisdom. But despite our approaches, **we need to love each other!**

For Paul tells us in verse 8, **"But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse."** In other words, **we're right with God through faith not food.**

The act of eating and drinking - or the decision to refrain - has zero bearing on our relationship with God.

I know Christians who're proud of their liberties. They think it's cool to drink a beer or a glass of wine. They see themselves as more enlightened than a teetotaler.

Other Christians are proud of their abstinence. They label people who have the freedom to drink on occasion as sell-outs... *But neither attitude is right!*

*Eaters and non-eaters, drinkers or non-drinkers* have the same status before God, **if their faith is in Jesus!**

It is true that just because Satan can use an item - a piece of meat, or a glass of wine, or something else for that matter - it doesn't make the object intrinsically evil.

Jesus said, "It's not what goes in a man's mouth that defiles him, but it's what comes out of his heart."

God cares more about what's in a person's heart, than He does what's in a person's mouth or stomach!

Music is such an example. Satan can inspire songs that promote evil and lead people astray. But the chords and instruments that make the music, are the same notes that other people play to praise God.

A musical score isn't evil in and of itself. It's the motive behind the music that matters. An "A Chord" is amoral. Whether it's used for God's glory, or to incite rebellion is determined by the intent of the musician.

The same is true of dancing, or tobacco, or fashion, or gambling, or movies - or a thousand other issues that can cause controversy within the church. Just because Satan *used it on you*, doesn't *defile it for me*.

Here's another example. Both Easter and Christmas have pagan origins. The Roman Church incorporated Christian elements into what were pagan festivals.

*But does that impact our celebrations today? Not mine.* Unless you were once in a Celtic nature cult and worshipped evergreen trees as fertility symbols, I doubt if that's how you'll interpret my Christmas tree...

Jesus is the light of the world. His love is everlasting. That's what the lights and limbs on my tree convey.

Some matters aren't *black or white*, they're just *gray*. It's up to each Christian to decide for themselves - *in accordance with their own conscience, and sense of right and wrong* - what their involvement should be.

In 1928, famous pastor Donald Barnhouse spoke at a Bible conference attended by 200 young people, *and some prudish counselors*. One afternoon some older women approached Barnhouse about an "**appalling, sinful, wicked**" practice going on among the girls.

You won't believe this, but the young girls were walking around the camp *with no stockings*. These petty old ladies wanted the good preacher to rebuke this supposed "*spirit of compromise*" in the church.

Dr. Barnhouse writes about the incident, "**Looking them straight in the eye, I said, 'The Virgin Mary never wore stockings.'** They gasped and said, '*She didn't?*' I answered, 'In Mary's time, stockings were unknown. So far as we know, they were first worn by prostitutes in Italy in the 15th century...' Obviously, his answer stifled their protest, and made them rethink the issue.

A Christian from America may take offense when his German brother downs a beer. While the German believer is appalled when an American sister wears a two-piece swimsuit to the beach... Both are offended...

I know Christians who would never feel right about wearing shorts into a church building, but they don't mind lighting up a cigarette outside on the porch...

Like meat sacrificed to idols, cultural taboos are a moving target - they alter from place to place, and from tribe to tribe, and from generation to generation. *We need to remember that meat is nothing but meat.*

It's the attitude behind the use of it that varies from conscience to conscience - and from consciousness to consciousness. My past associations and my current conscience is not your master - nor is your experience and conscience my master. Jesus is the only Master, and in these gray matters we should follow His Spirit.

I like what Mark Twain once said, "[The trouble with the world is not that people know too little, but they know so many things that ain't so.](#)" And this applies to church people. Many of us have been trained by the wrong teachers - by legalism, or tradition, or rebellion, or just ignorance. *What informs your conscience?*

The Pharisees were enamored about concerns that were a blip on God's radar - *tithing spices, washing hands, counting the exact number of steps they walked on the Sabbath Day* - as if God cared about these issues more than *integrity, and purity, and compassion.*

As Christians we're called to love God and love people - to walk by faith and be led by the Spirit - to do all we that we do to the glory of God. Certainly, it's easier to just follow some rules. We don't have to think, or make choices, or discern - but God expects more!

Paul taught the Corinthians to never violate their conscience, but at the same time they should restrain their conscience according to truth, not just tradition.

Verse 9 tells us, “But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?”

You first need to understand, there's a difference between the “legalist” and the “*weaker brother...*”

A legalist is the person armed with a list of dos and don'ts. They've listened to tradition, or gleaned from rituals and religious laws, or taken cues from their own overworked conscience... and they've drawn up a game plan by which they and others can *earn* God's favor. It's all about *their grunt* and *their goodness*.

And the legalist isn't content to live in his own futility. He's determined to impose his standards on others.

This is not the person Paul is concerned about. In fact, this legalist needs to be confronted and rebuked.

True righteousness isn't self-righteousness. A person becomes right with God by faith and faith alone! You don't worry about stumbling the legalist, if he or she refuses to repent you toss them out on their ear.

Here though Paul is thinking of a different dude, "*the weaker brother...*" He has faith, but it's undeveloped. He hasn't muscled up his faith. It's still weak, tentative.

He's believes in God's grace! He's seen how serious God is in extending it - it cost Him His only Son. He's **tasted** grace, He just hasn't **tested** grace - not yet.

Imagine, an ice skater in Michigan. He's headed to the frozen pond for the first skate of the winter. He laces on his skates and steps onto the ice. But he's cautious. He skates around gingerly. He wants to be certain the ice is strong enough to support his weight.

Well, this is the weaker brother. He's trusted in God's grace - he's relying on the work of Christ, not his own.

*But then he recalls a sin he's yet to confess... or he's tempted by a weakness... or he's weighed down by a problem...* and he wonders if the ice can hold him!

His insecurity, and his tentativeness isn't a threat to anybody else. The weaker brother just has a weaker faith. He's the one who's vulnerable to doubt, and to a collapse of his faith, if he gets too scared of the ice.

The weaker Christian is learning that his faith in Jesus will hold him up. Christ is ice that won't crack.

*But what if he gets confused by a fellow believer who sends mixed signals that contradict his growing faith?*

Take for example the former pagan in Corinth. He's turned his back on idols and he's serving the Lord.

He use to absolve his conscience from sin by going to the Temple of Apollo and sacrificing a lamb or dove.

Now he's broken himself from that habit. He's free...

Rather than bring his sacrifice to the pagan Temple, he now goes to a house on Main Street where the church meets. Instead of sacrificing a dove, he sings a sacrifice of praise! Jesus is now the sacrifice he's trusting in... It's all true, *but it's still a big adjustment!*

But if in this process, he sees Dimitri, the Christian who led him to the Lord - the guy he looks up to - at the temple eating in the Apollo deli? *What will he assume?*

*Well, if Dimitri goes there, why can't I? I love their steaks sandwiches, and I wouldn't mind seeing my old friends. In fact, I'd be covering all my bases just in case there was still something to the worship of that idol...*

Sadly, because Dimitri felt at liberty to eat the tainted meat, a new Christian ended up right back in bondage!

And if you'd asked Dimitri what he was doing at the temple he would've assured you it had nothing to do with idolatry! It was his niece's wedding, or a business luncheon, or a friend's kid had a preschool program.

And while he was there, he just happened to pick-up a BBQ plate. It was convenient. It was on his way out.



But that's not the message he sent to his weaker brother. He gave him an excuse to doubt, and justified a compromise. He has to be more careful. What was *"nothing"* to Dimitri undermined a brother's faith!

And this needs to be every believer's consideration!

We're all free to exercise our liberty in these gray matters, but we're not free to cause another believer's faith to stumble. I have an obligation to support my brother's faith - not sabotage it and create confusion.

This is another reason I don't drink alcohol. In fact, when I go to a restaurant I try to avoid being seated in the bar area. I don't want anyone strolling into Longhorns and seeing Pastor Sandy near the bar, and assume, *"Wow, if Pastor Sandy needs happy hour to be happy; then maybe I do too..."* And just like that a person who escaped an addiction gets trapped again.

God forbid that a brother - *"for whom Christ died"* - ends up spiraling into sin and perishing due to me!

Certainly, don't remain weak in your faith. Retrain your conscience to live according to God's truth - not legalism or tradition. Live by faith and faith alone.

But also, don't live by some reckless version of liberty - where you do as you please with no regard to the people who know you're a Christian and watch you.

Don't take the attitude, *"I answer to God and God alone. I don't care what anybody else thinks."* **You should care!**

Remember verse 1, *“Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies...”*  
And a Christian is called to love.

Logically, you know that *meat is just meat - wine is just wine - music is just music - a game is just a game...* But to a younger Christian with a weaker faith what he eats, or drinks, or listens to, or plays may still be a deciding issue in *who he follows and how he lives.*

*Logic* shouldn't be your only guide. What about *love*?

Here's the greatest danger. A Christian who knows a lot, but has no love, can **be so right he becomes wrong**. Insist on your liberty knowing it'll lead a brother astray, and what was right for you, has become a sin.

It might be fine for **you** to drink a beer... or to go dancing... or to listen to certain types of music... you've grown in Christ. You're confident of where you stand. You've developed a strong discernment and restraint.

But if what you're doing might lead a weaker believer down the wrong path - then it's a sin to take that risk.

Here's the test: **You're free to pick it up, only if you're just as free to put it down.** If what you do harms a weaker brother - then love says *“Don't do it!”*

In 2005, Ben Roethlisberger was an emerging star in the NFL. The Steeler quarterback was showing big potential. In July of that year, an ESPN interviewer, asked Ben why he had been riding his motorcycle without a helmet? Why take such an enormous risk?

The young Pittsburg resident answered, "Because you don't have to. It's not the law. If it was the law, I'd definitely have one on every time I rode. You're just more free when you're out there with no helmet on."

Sadly, less than a year later, in June 06, Ben was in a serious motorcycle accident. Roethlisberger was hit in an intersection - thrown through a car's windshield.

Emergency surgeons spent more than seven hours repairing Ben's broken jaw, his fractured skull, some missing teeth, and several other facial injuries.

After his release from the hospital, Roethlisberger apologized to fans, family, and his team for risking his life unnecessarily. Ben was quoted as saying, "In the past few days, I've gained a new perspective on life. By the grace of God, I'm fortunate to be alive." Then he added, "If I ever do ride a motorcycle again it'll certainly be with a helmet." His focus was no longer on enjoying his individual freedom, but on the welfare of others!

And this was Paul's word to the Corinthians. It's not just about them. It's time they saw the bigger picture!

I have to admit, for years I also tried to make a point of my freedom in Christ. I loved to shock people.

I was raised in a tradition where Christians dressed up to go to church. The idea was to wear your best for God - but the notion was more *traditional*, than *biblical*.

And when we started CC I went to the opposite extreme. On Sundays I wore flip-flops and a black shirt with pink flamingos. It was me flaunting my freedom.

*I did it just because I could...* And I wonder now how many traditional-type people ended up not coming to Calvary, and getting the teaching, because of flip-flops.

Don't be a *Christian shock jock*. Yes, we have great freedom in Christ, but a mature believer uses his or her freedom for *the glory of God* and for *the love of people*.

Over the years I've learned *there's one thing more vital than making a point, and that's winning a brother.*

This is what Paul tells us in verse 12, "**But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.**" That's a serious sentence - a "*sin against Christ.*" *But think about it?*

If what you do causes a believer to stumble - *the believer Jesus died to save* - aren't you interfering with the work of Christ? Aren't you undermining the cross?

It is nothing less than a sin against Christ!

Paul concludes, "**Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.**" Note the extent to which Paul is willing to *love...*  
**He'll never eat meat again!**

Imagine, the meat-lovers in this church saying, we'll give up *barbecue brisket, pulled pork, juicy ribs, even spicy chili...* If this is what it takes to avoid stumbling a brother... we'll have *a Vegetarian One-derful Sunday!*

Now, that would be some serious commitment!

Let's not *stumble* people Jesus died to make *stand!* To sin against the weaker brother is to sin against Christ! So we *have knowledge, now let's walk in love!*