



# Pastor Ken's Sermon

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**4TH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY**

**1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13**

**JANUARY 31, 2021**

**"WHO YOU INTO THESE DAYS?"**

What is a Christian? The short answer comes from a two-word phrase frequently used in letters of Paul the Apostle - "in Christ." It appears around 150 times in his letters and has probably been used a bazillion times as a salutation in letters from pastors. But what does it mean? Chiefly it means that we have salvation, the forgiveness of sins "in Christ" as when Paul says, in Romans 6:23 *"the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life" in Christ.* Or as he says in Romans 8:1, *"therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* It means you, a Christian *"have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God"* as Colossians 3:3 says.

In another sense, it means our lives are profoundly impacted by Jesus. We have encouragement "in Him" (Philippians 2:1) and are to have *"the same attitude that was in Him"* (Philippians 2:5). We have peace *"in him"*, (Philippians 4:7) all our needs are fulfilled "in him" (Philippians 4:19).

Regarding one another, we are called *"one body in Him"* (Romans 12:5) and are to subject ourselves to one another *"in Christ"* (Ephesians 5:21). Our Baptism rite says, *"as we live with him and with his people, we grow in faith, love and obedience to the will of God."* Ah, but there's the rub isn't it? Of the two miracles of Baptism - forgiveness of sins and eternal life being the first and being made members of the church which is the body of Christ in order to live "in Christ" with one another - I rather think the latter is the harder of the two for God to manage!

I Corinthians 8 takes up *"living in communion with the church"* by way of a question about whether a Christian should eat meat that has been sacrificed to an idol. In ancient Corinth this happened all the time. Non-Jews and non-Christians, often called "pagans", offered sacrifices to fertility gods, weather gods, gods that protected sailors, and so on. Some of the meat was left at the altar, some consumed at a banquet at which the deity in question was the honored guest, and the rest was gathered for sale to the general public. Christians could be invited to neighbor's houses for 1<sup>st</sup> century backyard barbeques that might very well include such meat. Believers of a Jewish background would avoid it altogether thinking it idolatrous not to mention unkosher, but non-Jewish (or Gentile) Christians would have it put before them all the time. Should they eat it?

Paul's answer is yes...and no. Christians can eat anything they want he said. "Idol burgers" are just meat.. if it's cooked to your liking, bon appetite! He may even have invited them to remember Jesus said, *"it's not what goes into a man's stomach that makes him a sinner, but what comes out of his heart"*. BUT! And if you'll pardon me, that was no small "but" that Paul was talking about!

He makes it clear that if anything they did caused a non-believer to question what the gospel taught, or a "weak" believer to stumble in their faith or life ... don't do it. That is how

to live *"in Christ"* and use your freedom in Jesus responsibly. Paul says that he would forgo eating ANY meat at all, if his eating might cause someone to wonder about its origin and thereby his faith.

So, how do we apply this lesson to our lives? The word translated for us as "freedom" in this lesson derives from a Greek word which can mean authority or right. And few things get Americans worked up more than our freedom and our rights! *Don't tread on me, indeed!* But the operative words in this lesson are the ones translated as "knowledge" from the Greek "gnosis" and "love", in this case from the most common New Testament version of that word "agape" - self-giving love.

One must find a way to strike a balance between them. Love-struck people can do the most foolish things - and folks with facts on their side can ignore all appeals to compromise. Guidance comes through I Corinthians 6:12, where Paul said; *"everything is permissible for me, but not everything is beneficial"*, adding *"I will not be mastered by anything."* And what's "beneficial" is resolved by the proper use of "knowledge" and "love." Any knowledgeable Christian in ancient Corinth would know that there is no such thing as idols, so meat sacrificed to them was just a protein for dinner.

But... knowledge can "puff a person up." The Greek word translated as "puffs up" suggests the swelling action of billows of smoke - and too much knowledge by folks with facts and not love can ignite a congregation, trust me! Sophisticated folks in Corinth likely looked with contempt on believers who were apprehensive and who knows, may have even brought idol meat hotdishes to potlucks! How utterly human to realize, with pride, that we know things others don't. But to be "in Christ" is to learn how to "love more" - not simply "know more." In fact, Paul says, love is the corrective to knowledge - keeping it from getting carried away with itself. Anything other than love is either condescension or pity - and pity the body of Christ that tries to live on that!

A couple of final thoughts. Nothing in this passage should indicate that the faith of the church, the faith in which we baptize is up for grabs. That is not a question of knowledge but of revealed truth. Beyond that however, this passage could be used to guide a whole host of matters that pertain to being "in Christ". Should you attend a party or hang with people you know will be doing something illegal or against your morals? Should we worship in some other way than we currently are? If the mask mandate is lifted, what should we do? The list could go on.

Paul in Romans 5:8 which says, *"God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* Truth be told - that's all the church really needs to know about ourselves! From the child born with Down's Syndrome to the PhD working on virus vaccines, once we acknowledge that truth, it lets the air out of our pride and replaces pity with love! Only Christian love looks at another person no matter what as an equal. So perhaps we ought to try to export that kind of church culture to the wider culture - one quite fixated on liberty I might add - to which the church can offer love's indispensable gifts - responsibility and sacrifice.

What is a Christian? What does it mean to be "in Christ?" In the dictionary if you go to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4th definition offered, you might find Christian defined as *"someone who shows kindness"* or *"an honest or generous human being."* Well, we could do worse! Being "in Christ" means more though than being kind to our grandparents or forthright with the IRS. It means you do everything out of the love that God first showed you. .. in Creation ... in your redemption from sin ... by filling you with a Holy wind - the Spirit of truth. It means to live with no higher aspiration but that others grow in faith, love and obedience to the will of God alongside side of you and yes, even, because of you. Imagine being in a congregation like that! AMEN