Intro: Paul in 1 Cor. 8-10 introduces yet another response to things the Corinthians had written. This time he addresses a matter that is quite foreign to our culture. Ancient Corinth had many temples to various gods. When the people gathered together for worship, offerings were slain and offered to the gods. However a portion of the meat was allocated for the worshippers to eat there in the temple in a sacred meal. In a sense, the temples of ancient Corinth were almost like restaurants and people often went to them to celebrate important occasions. Archaeologists have found ancient invitations for people to come to the temple to celebrate a birthday or other important occasions. Culturally they were also the center of social activities that were conducted in connection with important cultural events like such as the ancient Isthmian games and political events.

So this custom presented a special challenge to Christians. Should they go to these places? Should they join in the celebrations that often took there? Again the Corinthian church appears to have been divided. Some appear to have found the practice harmless; however others felt such a thing to be wrong. Paul spends three chapters discussing the issue. But in our lesson tonight we'll see Paul's initial response to the problem. Let's hear what he said to the Corinthians. (Read chapter)

The Corinthian justification for eating idol food at the temples

You've become accustomed I hope to Paul use of diatribe to address the Corinthians' thinking. He often incorporates what appear to be their ideas and then response to them. We may have another case here. The Corinthian argument appears to be two-pronged: "We all have knowledge."

This may be shorthand for a more lengthy argument something like this: "Everybody knows that idols are not real; an idol temple then is just a building where people gather and eat food offered to what no god at all. If idol is not real, then the food sacrificed is not defiled at all. So what harm could come from going there?"

The second argument seems to be expressed in the statement of v. 8:

But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. (1 Cor. 8:8)

On this point they may have tried to use Paul's teaching against him. Have you not also taught us that food does not determine our status with God?

However some in Corinth may have taken the other view: "But it's idolatry and we must not go where idols are worshipped."

Which side would Paul take?
Paul's initial response to the Corinthians' practice

At first it might appear that Paul would side with those who went to the temple. He agrees with them on at least one point: It is true that the gods honored in the temples are not real gods.

Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him. (1 Cor. 8:4-6)

However Paul will not agree with the Corinthian affirmation that "everybody knows." All may "know" in a theoretical sense (they have been exposed to the idea); but in another sense they do not know. However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. (1 Cor. 8:7)

The point here is that some of the Gentiles had become so accustomed to worshipping idols through the temple meals that they could not yet that food without also thinking of the idol. The result was a defiled conscience, i.e. the believer acts contrary to what his heart tells him is the right thing to do.

And Paul also agree in principle with the idea that food does not condemn or commend one to God. But Paul will add an important addition. Because this is true, food should never be used as an occasion to destroy the spiritual life of another!

But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble. (1 Cor. 8:9-13)

When a brother uses his liberty in a way to destroy the conscience of another he is sinning against not only weaker brother, but also the Lord who said that whatever we do to our brethren we do to him.

But what principle grounds Paul's teaching?

Over and over we see that Paul's teaching is grounded in the message of the cross. God gave His Son as an act of love for all sinners. He made the ultimate sacrifice to show His love for us and redeem us from sin. Now love must be the principle that governs all our actions toward others. Would the Corinthians watch Jesus give up His life for their redemption and then not themselves be willing to give up a night at a temple party for the sake of their brethren? Thus Paul begins the chapter with a profound statement of the impact of this truth upon believers:
Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him. (1 Cor. 8:1-3)

**Paul's arguments are so important to grasp.**
No one would have commended knowledge of God and His truth more than Paul; but for him, knowledge was never an end in and of itself. In fact, the goal of knowledge is to teach us how to love others. Thus knowledge "puffs up:" but love "builds up."

If one does not love his brother--no matter what he knows--his knowledge is inadequate. He doesn't yet know as he ought to know.

So Paul formulates his response based on the selfless love of Jesus and the obligation to follow His example. Of course, this is the first plank in Paul's lengthy discourse.

**How can we apply Paul's message?**
Though Paul's teaching is quite understandable in its setting, it is manifestly difficult to find modern applications of Paul's teaching.

First we must carefully distinguish between those who have weak faith and those who have strong convictions about a matter. Someone may disagree with my practice and not like it; but not feel the slightest inclination of doing that thing. Paul is not speaking about such people; but rather those who are weak in conscience.

It would be good to examine our personal associations and practices and ask, "Do I do things that cross the boundaries of God's moral teaching?"

Do I do things that might be questionable to others? It would be helpful to think more correctly about what "everybody knows." People do have questions of conscience that have to be acknowledged.

How do I treat those who have such weaknesses? We cannot simply treat those who are weak with arrogant scorn or make fun of their ignorance.

We have to try to teach them patiently.
Am I willing to give us what I don't have to do for the sake of others? Whatever freedoms we may feel the gospel gives us must always yield to the salvation of all. To sacrifice for another is highest expression of Christ-like love.

Conclusion: Let us let our "knowledge" not get in the way of loving others and seeking what is best for them.