Sermon Series: Corinthian Collisions (When Relationships Collide)
To be used with: Session Three: Stand Down
Sermon Title Possibilities:
My Way or the Highway?
When to Give Ground
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Connection to Unit Theme: The small group study “When Relationships Collide” covers several different character vignettes from throughout the Old and New Testament to show positive ways of dealing with conflict. This sermon series focuses on one church to teach on the same principles. The church in Corinth was arguably the most dysfunctional church of all time (if you wanted to be really bold, you could title this series, “You Think We’ve Got Problems?”). Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul is the voice of the impassioned church planter, patiently (for the most part) addressing the specific conflicts that were dividing this young church.

The small group session this week is called “Stand Down” and the main point is, “I don’t have to get my way to solve a conflict.” In Paul’s advice to the Corinthians in how to handle the controversy of eating meat sacrificed to idols, emphasize that Paul had his own opinion on whether or not eating meat sacrificed to idols was acceptable. But for the sake of unity of the body, Paul didn’t push his own opinion. He was willing to compromise for the sake of resolution.

Note: One of the most helpful resources for preparing these outlines was The Smart Guide to the Bible: 1 and 2 Corinthians, by Dewey Bertolini and Larry Richards. If you aren’t familiar with this series, it deserves a place on your bookshelf. They provide a very accessible yet thorough introduction to the books of the Bible, and are intentionally written in the style of the “…For Dummies” books.

Introduction: Bloomberg’s Big Gulp Ban Plan
In 2012, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced a plan to ban sales of sugary beverages larger than 16 ounces. He believed it would be a step toward reducing the rate of obesity in his fair city, as well as improve overall health. The ban would apply to both bottled soda and fountain drinks containing more than 25 calories per eight ounces. That means that the city’s 20,000 restaurants, coffee shops, food carts, movie theaters, and stadiums would no longer be able to sell empty calories in supersize portions.

Read more: http://ideas.time.com/2012/06/04/why-americans-need-bloomberg-big-gulp-ban/#ixzz2WD4dh6Np

Ultimately, the New York Supreme Court struck down the Mayor’s plan, calling it “arbitrary and capricious.” [http://townhall.com/tipsheet/katiepavlich/2013/03/11/breaking-judge-slaps-down-bloomberg-big-gulp-ban-n1531236], but not before Bloomberg’s “Big Gulp Ban Plan” became a punchline for late night talk shows, and Bloomberg himself the object of ridicule.

Bloomberg identified a problem, had a strong conviction about how to solve it, and believed he had the authority to make his opinion law. He may have been right about the problem. And his proposed solution might have made a difference. But just because you are “right”, and just because you are in authority, that doesn’t mean that you are going to win. Or even that you should. In 1 Corinthians chapter 8, Paul faced an issue that he was right about. And he probably could have used his authority as an apostle to make the believers in the Corinthian church act the way he did. But Paul knew something that Michael Bloomberg apparently did not: Our
knowledge about what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior is interpreted by our love for the people we influence. Let’s see how this plays out.

1. Love or Knowledge? (8:1-3)

- Much of 1 Corinthians is a response to specific controversies the believers in Corinth had written about in an earlier letter to Paul (7:1). One of those concerned whether or not it was okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols. No surprise, the Corinthians were divided on this issue. One group believed the spirits of pagan gods were absorbed into the meat that had been sacrificed to an idol, and that Christians could be possessed by demons if they ate it (Bertolini and Richards, 135). Others who had formerly been involved in pagan worship didn’t believe you could actually be possessed, but still didn’t want to do anything that reminded them of their lives before Christ. A third group understood that an idol was just a block of wood or stone and had no power over (and therefore couldn’t contaminate) the meat that had been sacrificed to it.

- Of these three opinions, Paul undoubtedly belonged to the third group. As a Jew, he didn’t have a pagan past to be reminded of if he ate “idolized” meat. As a worshiper of the one true God, he knew that “an idol is nothing” (v. 4). So he could have pressed the point and told those who had a problem with eating meat sacrificed to idols to get over themselves. He might have even argued that they should eat the meat as a sign to the world that the pagan gods had no power over the believers.

- Instead, Paul introduces an important principle before he ever deals with the topic. Notice how he interrupts himself. In verse 1, he is about to introduce the topic: “Now about food sacrificed to idols…” Then he takes a turn: “We all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” How true is this? Think about an issue or topic you know a lot about. Maybe it’s cooking. Or politics. Or money management. Or Star Trek. Do you look down on people who aren’t as well informed as you? Has your knowledge puffed you up? Apply this spiritually. Think about those in Corinth who “knew” that these idols had no power. Do you think they looked scornfully at those who were bothered by the idea of eating idol barbecue? Apply some of the things you “know” today:
  - Do you “know” that there’s nothing wrong with letting your kids go trick or treating? How do you feel toward parents who have strong convictions against it?
  - Do you “know” that playing Texas Hold ‘Em with your family members on your annual camping trip is innocent fun? How do you respond to the wife of your uncle who’s battled a gambling addiction, and asks that you skip that particular family tradition this year?
  - What do you “know” about social drinking? Washing your car on Sundays? Watching R rated movies? And how do you respond to a Christian brother or sister who has different convictions?

*Application Points:* There are behaviors the Bible explicitly condemns: Homosexuality, extra-marital sex, murder, theft, and so on. These are not areas in which we get to exercise our freedom in Christ. But the Bible does not address every area on which sincere Christians are divided. In those areas, we have to repeatedly ask ourselves the question: *am I responding with what I know, or am I responding with love?*
2. Propositions and People (8:4-8) So with that overarching principle in mind, let’s look at six propositional truths Paul lays out in the next section:

1. An idol is nothing (v. 4)
2. There is only one God (vv. 4-5)
3. God and Jesus are one (notice the repetition of phrases in verse 6)
4. Christ is the source of all things and we live our lives through Him (v. 6)
5. Not everyone knows this (v. 7). “This” refers to both the nothingness of idols and the everythingness of Christ.
6. Since we live our lives through Christ, what we eat won’t bring us any closer to Him, or pull us any further away from Him (v. 8)

It isn’t that these propositions are not important. In fact, they are of crucial importance. But Paul puts one truth about people (“not everyone knows this”) right smack in the middle of these foundational truths about the nature of God, Christ, and our position in Christ. Why?

What happens when someone doesn’t know Christ is the source of all things and that we live through Him? A faulty understanding of our secure position in Christ can lead to legalism, because they look to proper behavior or rigid rule following as a source of approval from God. And a faulty understanding of Christ as the source of all things can lead to hedonism because they are looking to things of this world as a source of satisfaction.

What does this have to do with how we treat people with whom we disagree? Richard Pratt, in the Holman New Testament Commentary on 1 Corinthians, says this:

Believers are in Christ. Because of Christ’s mystical union with all believers, Christ is one recipient of every action we take toward one another. When we hurt one another, we hurt Christ Himself… we need to gain a greater respect for our fellow Christians, even for those who are foolish in their beliefs and prone to stumble into sin. We also need to love them more, just as we love Christ (Pratt, HNTC, 139-140)

[I originally titled this outline point “Propositions or People” because it had a nice parallel to the other two points. But we aren’t choosing one or the other. It is propositions and people. Our love for people helps us understand the propositions, and our commitment to the propositional truth of Scripture compels us to love the people.]

3. Make a Point, or Make a Difference? (8:9-13)

So Paul concludes this chapter with practical application of how we are to both exercise and restrain the freedom we have in Christ. He doesn’t argue that believers are not free to eat meat sacrificed to idols. And notice that he isn’t talking about our freedom offending a weaker brother or sister. The issue is whether exercising our freedom causes a weaker brother or sister to sin. It isn’t about someone thinking less of you because of what they see you doing. It’s about someone thinking less of Christ because they follow your example. Let’s go back to one of our earlier examples. You are free to play Texas Hold ‘Em. But you willingly restrain that freedom if it will lead your uncle with a gambling addiction back into a self destructive pattern.
Pratt brings out a great point in the Holman Commentary: don’t interpret Paul’s teaching to mean that those weaker brothers and sisters should be left alone in their weakness:

[Paul] obviously considered the properly informed position superior (though he did not say the knowledgable people were superior). If Paul believed that knowledge was insignificant, he would not have wasted time trying to correct the fundamental understandings of the Corinthians on such areas as divisions and the resurrection of the body (Pratt, 139).

Paul knew he was right about the insignificance of idols and the fact that there was nothing sinful about eating meat sacrificed to them. But rather than trying to make a point, he wanted to make a difference. He didn’t want to lose the right to disciple a weaker believer by leading him into sin. He didn’t push for his point of view. Instead, he willingly limited his freedom for the sake of weaker brothers and sisters who were still trying to figure out what that freedom was all about.

Application Point: Pay attention to how your behavior is interpreted, not for the sake of your reputation, but for the sake of the other person’s spiritual development. Remember to build up with love, rather than puff up with your knowledge about what you are free to do. And keep in mind that building up the other person will involve helping them understand their secure position in the all-sufficient Christ.

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