Let me tell you about two fishes in the deep blue sea: the puffer and cleaner fishes. We’re familiar with the puffer fish. It is a small spikey fish that blows itself up whenever it gets scared so that it can appear larger and more dangerous than it really is. In contrast, cleaner fish are small, thin, bluish fish that eat parasites and dead skin off of larger fish. Large predatory fish allow the cleaners to go inside their gills and mouths in order to clean them. The larger fish could easily eat the cleaners, but don’t because they need them. Puffer fish puff themselves up to make themselves look bigger; cleaner fish clean other fish. Puffer fish are afraid of other fish; cleaner fish are not.

These two fish illustrate the two different types of people Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 8: those who use knowledge to puff themselves up, and those who use love to build others up. Puffer people use their knowledge for themselves to make others admire them and think they are important. They belittle and ridicule others and push people away. Puffer people are the know-it-alls who love to spout out random facts, argue, call attention to themselves, and monopolize conversations. They also enjoy pointing out enunciation and grammar mistakes. Puffer people are controlled by pride and fear, not by love.

Instead of spouting off how much knowledge they have, cleaner people use their knowledge to help others. They think about the needs of others more than their own. They speak up when their knowledge is needed or when a certain perspective hasn’t been properly understood. They are don’t exist just to hear themselves speak, and are motivated by love, not fear or pride.

In chapter eight of 1 Corinthians, Paul writes knowledge has to be connected to love; otherwise, relationships break down and people do not mature in their faith. Christians in ancient Corinth were arguing about meat that had been sacrificed to idols and then sent to the market for people to buy and cook at home. At that time, most meat was butchered and consumed at a worship service inside a temple. Eating the temple’s sacrificial meat was a form of fellowship between the worshippers and their deity, and also a way people could enjoy each other’s company. Since some temples were dedicated to the goddess Roma or to the emperor, eating at the temple also expressed one’s dedication and loyalty to the Roman Empire. And since people enjoyed eating meat, important people ate there, and that was where deals were made and contracts were signed.

Pagans had no concern about eating in a temple, much less about buying the temple’s left-over meat in the market. Such things were the normal, expected part of life. In contrast, Jews refused to eat such meat because it had not been slain according to kosher regulations. Some Christians avoided eating sacrificial meat because they did not want to give any support to idolatrous worship or become contaminated by demons. They worried meat, which had been dedicated to a false god or goddess, would bring the idol’s evil spirit into their life. They were not going to let a demon influence them and they were not going to support pagan temples.
Most Christians agreed it was wrong to eat in a pagan temple, but it was okay to buy the temple’s leftover meat sold in the market. Their theology established: idols were just pieces of stone, metal, and wood; meat is a gift from God to be eaten with gratitude; demons did not inhabited meat; and demonic influence did not come from eating any food.

Yet, a minority, the “scrupulous, or “the weak in faith,” thought the meat had been contaminated by demons, and to eat such meat not only supported false religion but also brought demonic influence into one’s life. They agreed cooked meat was extremely tasty and beneficial, but how and where the meat was butchered mattered. God required them to be holy, to have nothing to do with demons, and to demonstrate their faith to their neighbors by not eating any meat that had been sacrificed in a temple.

Christians were divided into two different camps: on the one hand, there were the so-called strong in faith who exalted in their freedom to eat everything; and the other hand, there were the so-called weak in faith, who were scrupulous about what they ate. They argued against one another, and accused each other of not having a well-thought-out faith. The strong tried to make the weak go against their conscience and eat the sacrificial meat. They pressured the weak to act just like them.

Conflicting perspectives were ripping the church apart. Everyone had lots of knowledge and faith and good intentions. All were expressing their love and commitment to God, but in drastically different ways. What was lacking was love and respect for one another. So Paul wrote, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

Having accurate knowledge is extremely important, after all Jesus said we must worship in spirit and truth.¹ We must worship God with our feelings and intellect, not merely with outward rituals. We must worship according to the direction of scripture, and the example of Jesus, according to our understanding of it. That means we must follow our current understanding and not go against our consciences. We must act according to our convictions and values, while at the same time, let others act according to theirs. That means we are to stay connected to one another, without ridiculing, condemning, or pressuring others to conform to our understandings of things. We stick together and help one another despite our disagreements because we know the Holy Spirit has brought us together.

According to this text, our knowledge, perspectives, personal preferences, and our interpretations and applications of scripture are not as important as showing respect, honor, care, and love to fellow believers in Christ. Our personal freedom is not as important as caring for others, and respecting their current way of demonstrating their faith in Christ.

Jesus says, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,”² and Paul says here, “Knowledge puffs up; “love builds up.” Love is to rule over our lives. That means we serve others, and respectfully listen and consider what others have to say. Being people of love means we care for the other more than our own opinions, preferences, and knowledge. It means giving

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¹ John 4:23f
² John 13:35
practical help and encouragement, protecting others from harm, shame, or ridicule, and patiently and gently helping them mature in their faith. Love means we do not try to get someone to do something they think is wrong, and love stays connected to the other, despite disagreements and disappointments.

There is no pagan temple selling meat in our markets; so we do not argue about buying sacrificial meat. We find other things to argue, ridicule, and condemn one another. We fight over such things as: the proper mode of baptism; the most biblical way to organize and run a church; dancing; playing cards; and watching television on Sundays. We fight over political ideologies; homosexual marriages; vegetarianism; and wearing face masks.

A person who exalts in knowledge and freedom boasts to the vegan, “I love animals. They’re delicious!” In contrast, the person who exalts in love would say to the vegan, “I’ve prepared food just for you. We can eat and enjoy each other’s company around food we both enjoy.”

The person who exalts in personal freedom refuses to wear a face mask, declaring it is unconstitutional and uncomfortable. In contrast, those who exalt in love wear a mask to help protect themselves and others from the coronavirus.

Those who place knowledge over and above love divide people into “us” versus “them.” “You’re part of my political party or you’re my enemy;” “You follow my theological system or you’re anti-scriptural;” “If you don’t live in the country and work with animals, then you don’t know what real life is all about;” or conversely, “If you don’t live in the city, you’re an ignorant country bumpkin.” In contrast, love respects different perspectives and ways of living, and magnifies what we share in common, not how we are different.

Finally, let me point out that placing love over knowledge does not mean we never confront error, never engage in spirited debate, or never insist upon moral behavior. No, we do not sacrifice our beliefs on the altar of love, and allow falsehood, slander, gossip, and dishonorable behavior be propagated and promoted in our communities. Instead, we speak truth with patience and respect. We debate principles and programs, making sure we understand one another, never resorting to name calling or questioning motives, and always seeking to do what honors Jesus and builds one another up.

We interact with one another as fellow citizens of the kingdom of God, as members of the same church, acknowledging all of us have faith, and truly love and are committed to Jesus. We voice our preferences, convictions, and understandings, but we do not break off fellowship and communication with those who disagree with us, and we do not insist upon getting everything we want.

Puffer people use their knowledge to make themselves admired, and to ridicule and condemn others. Cleaner people use their knowledge to help others stay in the community, build up their faith, and give practical help.

We will not let our knowledge puff ourselves up, push people away, or hurt others. We will be like the cleaner fish, and live on the basis of love, patience, truth, and respect.