

## **“Food Offered to Idols”**

Liturgical Date: Epiphany 4 (B)

Primary Text: 1 Corinthians 8 (also 10:23-33)

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, is the Epistle Lesson-which is Chapter 8 of 1 Corinthians. The title of the sermon is “Food Offered to Idols”.

The believers in Corinth were very near and dear to St. Paul’s heart. He spent about a year and a half there preaching the Gospel and planting a church in the city. But as would often happen, after he left a place there were problems and false teachings that infiltrated the Body of Christ. In the first letter to the church at Corinth Paul lays out many of these and addresses them, offering the wisdom of God to solve them. It is clear from the letter that there were divisions and controversies among God’s people in Corinth. One of the issues that he takes on is the issue of food, or as the King James sometimes translates it, meat offered to idols.

What is the crux of the issue? It is can or should Christians eat food that was offered to idols. Some of the people were doing it and thought there was nothing wrong with it. Others said no, that since this food was connected to pagan deities then Christians should have not part in consuming it. And as the visible church often does on a point of controversy, there was debate and division that was taking in place. In his answer, the Apostle Paul gives us some important theological truths. It also lays out the issue in terms of a variety of situations as it is not a simple “yes” or “no” question.

At this point, you may be thinking, “this is kind of interesting, but what application does this really have for us today?” I mean, this is really not a “hot button” issue for us Christians in 21st Century America. Abortion, homosexuality, the role of women in the church, yes, but food offered to idols? Can we really think of any church splits or theological wrangling over this topic? We could be tempted to read this passage of Scripture and say “next” as this one really is not too relevant. True, this specific issue is not toward the top of most Christians’ concerns in a direct way. However, the teaching that Paul gives here has a *very* practical application for us. It is much more contemporary and touches many more areas than we may think when we first read or hear this text.

We need to understand the teaching in this text provides a framework for many issues. It deals with issues related to how we make decisions about what we should do or participate in. It concerns how we interact with our brothers and sisters who may approach the issue differently. It gives us the overarching principle in how we approach certain things.

In understanding this issue it is also helpful to take in the larger context of Chapters 8-10. While not part of our assigned text for today in the lectionary, to fully understand what St. Paul is talking about here we need to especially connect this to Chapter 10:23-33 where he also speaks about the eating of food offered to idols controversy in those verses. There are basically three main settings addressed in which a Christian may encounter the opportunity to eat food offered to idols.

The first one, which is the one specifically brought forth in Chapter 8, is eating such food in the pagan temple itself. As you are aware, traditional Greek religion-which we call “mythology” today, had many gods and goddesses. Before their conversion, many of the Corinthian Christians

would have worshipped one or more of these gods. Part of this religious system was that animals were sacrificed to these gods on the altars in the temples. Some parts were burned or remained as offerings for the gods, but other parts could be consumed. We see that in Old Testament Law as well, that oftentimes parts of the sacrificial animals were to be eaten. Greek cities had temples and Corinth being a very large population center, had a very big temple. I remember visiting the ruins of ancient Corinth in 2017 when my daughter Raegan and I went to Greece and it was a very large site. These temples also had areas for gatherings and banquets. Not only feasts for the gods and goddesses, but celebrations like weddings and birthdays took place there. The question is could Christians attend and eat at such events at the pagan temples?

In Chapter 10, two other situations that may be a little more tricky are brought forward. What if you, as a Christian, are invited to a non-believers home for a meal-as most people in Corinth were not Christians? Should you eat with them? Could you eat food that was sacrificed to idols at this meal? Let's make it even a little more complicated. When you went to the city market and bought food to eat at your home, what could you eat or not eat? Much of what was sold in the market had been offered to the idolatrous gods and goddesses at the temple before it was sold in the market. How could you even know what was or wasn't? The very essential act of eating is looking pretty "messy" is it not?

In answering these questions related to what the church at Corinth was going through as well as applying this to points of controversy today, the Bible gives us some important theological themes to remember. Take another look at verses 4-6 (read these again). What is the main point here? It can be summarized by "an idol has no real existence" and "there is no God

but one.” So this food/meat offered to “other gods” was not really offered to a god at all because the gods they were offered to do not exist. There is only one God that is real, the Triune God. So you could not really eat food offered to a different god, but because there are no “different” gods-they are all false idols created by people. The animals had been sacrificed to nothing real.

Furthermore, verse 8 reminds us that the foods that we eat do make us less or more holy. In the Old Testament there were very specific dietary laws of what could not be eaten by God’s people. However, these dietary measures were part of the Ceremonial Law, which pointed to the coming Messiah. Since Jesus has come, the ceremonial law is no longer needed or needs to be followed by Christians. As the vision given to St. Peter in Acts 10 confirms, no certain types of food are forbidden any longer. As a Christian, you have the liberty to eat any type of food you want. You can eat a bacon fried pork and shrimp sandwich on big fluffy bread on Passover if you want to!

OK. Based on all of this, it seems the answer is pretty easy. Since these idols are not real gods and you have the freedom to eat what you want, when you want then Christians can just go for it. Eat the food offered to idols in any setting and don’t worry about it.

Not so fast, my friend! There are some other things to be considered. As Paul writes in 10:23, “*All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.*” And in 8:9-10, “*But take care that this right (or liberty) of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?*”

Let's take these situations on one by one. First, let's go to the most obviously problematic case where one would be eating food offered to idols, in the pagan temple itself. Obviously, eating food that is directly part of a false religion's ceremony is wrong. We are not to worship false gods in any way, even though they don't actually exist. This would be a violation of the First Commandment, "*Thou shalt have no other gods before me*". We Christians should not join in worship or religious rituals of other religions. This is a clear biblical principle.

But what about the celebrations held on the temple grounds that would not involve the direct participation in the false religious act but eating the food sacrificed to idols? "I don't believe any of this stuff, I'm just here for the food, baby! And the band they have for the reception is pretty good too." You can probably think of some situations today where this could happen in terms of certain venues and types of celebrations. Again, we must consider the setting and the message this sends. By attending certain functions those who see us attend could make the assumption that we agree with the activity, even if we do not. If you saw me entering a mosque that had a marquee out front that said "Fundraiser tonight to raise money to distribute Korans", what would you assume? These are some of the things that the last few verses of Chapter 8 bring forward.

Now let's discuss the other two situations brought forward in Chapter 10. What if you are invited to dinner at the home of an unbeliever? Needless to say this is something you probably have experienced and will experience. Should you go? Should you eat the food? The answer the Bible gives us is that if you want to go, go. You can eat the food that they offer you. In fact, it tells us that this is an opportunity to witness to the unbelievers. It does give one exception to eating the food though. If your

hosts specifically tell you that something they give you is offered to idols, and thus it has a special religious significance to eating it, then you should abstain. Again, this is an opportunity to witness as to why you could not partake.

What about buying the food in the market, because some of it may be offered to idols? Verse 25 of Chapter 10, *“Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience.”* This one seems pretty clear. You are not in the temple. You are not participating in any religious ritual. You are not even in someone else’s home. You are just buying food and you need to eat.

So this gives us a brief summary of how God spoke through St. Paul in addressing these issues relating to food offered to idols. It should also show us that the application of this teaching is certainly pertinent to our 21st American setting. The Bible, as always, gives us some good teaching here. At the same time, we realize that this is not an exhaustive manual of what to do in the literally thousands of situations that could come up and one Christian may decide to do one thing and another something different. Some decisions are obvious. A Christian should not open a so-called “Adult Book Store” that sells dirty movies, books, etc. But what about if a Christian works in a convenience store that sells some of these materials? This is not quite a cut and dry decision that not all Christians would come to the same conclusion on.

Here is an example: When I was in Morocco in the late 1990s I was walking through the market and went up to a vendor who was selling watermelons. Now I like watermelons and I thought my host family would appreciate this gift, so I used my limited Arabic skills and purchased one. After I paid the man selling them, he lifted the watermelon above his head

and said, “Humdallah”-literally “God be praised”. He was offering a blessing for this food to god, but I know that was not the Triune God, but Allah. What should I have done, eat the watermelon or not? Well, I took the watermelon to my host family and we ate it. Maybe you would have not made the same decision.

As I said we could spend a whole lot of time working through a bunch of scenarios. But as usual, the Bible gives us some principles that can be applied in a whole range of situations. For starters, as I quoted earlier, 10:23 tells us that just because we *can* do something does not mean we *should*-this is good advice in the left hand civic realm too. And 8:9 reminds us that our “rights” or “liberties” should not be used in a way that could be a stumbling block to other believers.

So as with many things in the Christian faith this comes down to love. The general principle in this is loving our Christian brothers and sisters as we love ourself. It is putting the concern of the other above our own preferences and desires. Verse 1 of Chapter 8 frames this whole discussion well when it says “*knowledge puffs up, but love builds up*”. Stay humble as verse 2 said, “*If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.*” Be very careful before you start casting stones and insisting that every Christian must come to the same conclusion that you do on every issue or else their faith is suspect. Again, I am not talking about things that are crystal clear essential doctrines, but other areas.

But St. Paul makes the “other side of the coin” very clear and plain in our text as well. Even when we believe that we are acting or making a decision that is not sinful and within our Christian liberty, we always act concerning the other. We are not to do anything that would cause our brother or sister to stumble. See the last verse of Chapter 8, verse 13, where

the Apostle Paul even goes as far as to say that he would never eat food again if doing so would cause his brother to stumble. Now this is obviously hyperbole as Paul is not advocating starving himself, but the point is clear. For example, many Christians-especially in our part of the country-believe that Christians should not drink alcohol. So if I am in the presence of one who takes that view, does it really hurt me from refraining from drinking alcohol in front of them? One thing I don't do is purchase alcohol in my clericals. Do I have the liberty to do so? Sure. However, I can see how this could be perceived by some so I don't do it.

And in conclusion, verse 11 brings all this down to why this matters. *And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.* All of those who share our confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord are our brothers and sisters. Jesus died for them, just as He died for us. In non-essential issues where two different Christians come to different conclusions we do not want to needlessly bring offense, or worse yet, do anything that would damage their faith. *Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor* (10:24).

Amen.