

Challenges Christians Face

Food Offered to Idols

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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September 18, 2011

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Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of Christian liberty. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Food Offered to Idols."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 8:1-13:

¹ Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up. ² If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

⁴ Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one." ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷ However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹ But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ 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? ¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat

meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

Introduction

I have led two short-term missions trips to South Africa. On both trips we were involved in evangelism to students at three different college campuses in the city of Cape Town. And on both trips we spent the first weekend in Cape Town learning about ministry in South Africa and, specifically, in Cape Town.

We learned that one of the most difficult issues facing the Christian church is the issue of syncretism, which is “the combination of different forms of belief or practice.”¹ Many black South Africans who come to faith in Jesus Christ come out of an African Tribal Religion background. One feature of African Tribal Religion is the way in which the gods are appeased, which is by offering animal sacrifices to the gods. So, it is not uncommon for new Christians to continue practicing animal sacrifices to the gods, while at the same time going to worship, reading the Bible, praying, and trying to grow as a new Christian.

In the city of Corinth Jews and Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Gentiles who came to faith in Jesus Christ were coming out of a pagan, idol-worshipping background. Prior to their conversion to Christ they worshipped many gods. One of the ways in which they worshipped their gods was by offering food sacrifices, usually of meat, to the gods.

This meat offered to the gods was divided into three parts. One part was burned on an altar as a sacrifice. A second part was given to the priest, who would either eat it or, more likely, sell it at the meat market. And a third part was eaten by the worshipper, usually in the temple precinct. In fact, one commentator says that “this was the basic ‘restaurant’ in antiquity.”²

These pagan temple “restaurants” had not only social signi-

¹ Inc Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Eleventh ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 361.

ficance but religious significance as well. The gods were thought to be present since the meals were held in their honor and sacrifices had been made.

What took place in Corinth almost two millennia ago still takes place in many parts of the world today. People offer foods to idols in South Africa and in many other parts of the world as well.

So, how would the Apostle Paul respond to food offered to idols? How did he respond to the Christians at Corinth?

Lesson³

Paul teaches Christians how to exercise Christian liberty. He sets forth the principle that in areas not forbidden by Scripture, Christians should consider how their actions will affect others.

In addressing the principle, Paul responded to three reasons the Christians in Corinth gave for feeling free to act as they pleased regarding areas not specifically forbidden by Scripture. Paul agrees that each reason is basically valid, but then shows how none of these reasons should be used to cause others to stumble spiritually. The reasons given were:

1. We Know That We All Have Knowledge (8:1-3).
2. We Know That an Idol Is Nothing (8:4-7).
3. We Know That Food Is Not an Issue with God (8:8-12).

I. We Know That We All Have Knowledge (8:1-3)

First, we know that we all have knowledge.

Paul began in verse 1a by saying: **“Now concerning. . . .”**

This is now the third time in his letter that Paul used that phrase. In fact, Paul used it a total of six times in his letter (7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; and 16:12). Each time Paul used it to answer a question or an issue raised in the letter he had received from the Corinthians.

³ The outline for this lesson is from John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 187-197.

Paul now addressed the issue of **food offered to idols**. I mentioned earlier that this was not only a sacrifice of **food**, but it also involved eating the food (cf. 8:10). It was done in a “restaurant” at some pagan temple. People would gather for social as well as religious reasons.

Some Christians from pagan backgrounds were once again going back and eating at the pagan temple restaurants. But they now understood that meat was meat. They knew that the pagan gods were false gods. They knew that God was the only true God. And so they said, “**We know that ‘all of us possess knowledge’**” (8:1b).

That was their first reason for exercising their Christian liberty: *we know that we all have knowledge*. That statement was true but egotistical. They felt superior in their knowledge. They had an accurate understanding of food and false gods and the true God.

But they apparently had a serious deficiency. So Paul said in verse 1c: “**This ‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up.**” The Corinthian Christians had knowledge, but they did not have love. They were solid in doctrine, but they were weak in love. They did not understand the necessity of love, a **love that builds up**.

Knowledge of God’s Word is extremely important. It is impossible for Christians to grow and to obey God if they do not know God’s Word. God offered a sober word to his people Israel in Hosea 4:6, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.”

But knowledge, even of God’s Word, is not enough. As John MacArthur says, “It is essential but not sufficient.”⁴ Knowledge, by itself, **puffs up**, or as the *New American Standard Bible* puts it, “Knowledge makes arrogant.” To have love without knowledge is sad; but to have knowledge without love is equally bad.

A mature Christian will be mature in two areas: knowledge

⁴ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 192.

and love. He will be mature *theologically* and also *relationally*. He has a growing understanding of Bible doctrine, and at the same time, he has a growing ability to relate those doctrines to himself and to others. He knows that love is the medium through which biblical truth is communicated. Paul said in Ephesians 4:15, “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”

A Christian who has a lot of head knowledge is not nearly as mature as he thinks he is. So, Paul said in verse 2, **“If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.”** The unloving theologian is puffed up. He has a great deal of knowledge but lacks real maturity.

Someone has defined knowledge as “the process of passing from the unconscious state of ignorance to the conscious state of ignorance.” Ignorance does not know that it does not know. True knowledge does not know and knows that it does not know.⁵

“But if anyone loves God, he is known by God” (8:3). It is impossible to know God and not love him. Loving God is not only the great and first commandment (Matthew 22:37-38), it is also the clearest evidence of our relationship to him. Without love for God, made possible by his prior love for us (1 John 4:19), we can have no right knowledge of him, because we will not have a right relationship to him.

So, knowledge is important but it is not enough for the Christian. We must have knowledge *plus* love. When each one of us looks “not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4), we are on the road to becoming mature Christians.

II. We Know That an Idol Is Nothing (8:4-7)

Second, we know that an idol is nothing.

Paul agreed that some of the Corinthian Christians had good

⁵ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 192.

knowledge. He said in verse 4: **“Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘an idol has no real existence’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’”**

Several years ago when I was a pastor in State College, I observed a Friday Prayer Service for Muslims. About 120 men crowded into a room and at the appointed time they begin their service. Each man had a small carpet on which he stood, kneeled, and prostrated himself throughout the 30 minutes or so of the service. They were saying their prayers to Allah. However, I kept thinking to myself that they were not worshipping the true God and that they were in fact worshipping an idol.

“For,” Paul continued in verses 5-6, **“although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”**

There is only one true and living God. That is the God of the Bible who has identified himself as Jehovah. We affirm what the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* says, “There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.”⁶

Apparently, some of the Corinthian Christians were very strong in their understanding of these statements. In fact, it is likely that they were quotations from their own letter to Paul that he was merely quoting back to them. They had an orthodox understanding of God and of idols. But, it appeared that they did not know how to carry that knowledge into daily living with others. They had the right knowledge, but they did not have the right relationships.

But, some in the church at Corinth did not have a right understanding of doctrine because Paul said in verse 7a: **“However, not all possess this knowledge.”** Perhaps some were new Christians,

⁶ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*, 3rd edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

fresh converts to Christ out of paganism. They may have imagined that the pagan gods were real. They may have understood that there is only one *right* God, but they had not yet fully understood that there is only one *real* God.

So, it seemed that some of Christians were eating at the pagan temple restaurants. They understood that meat is meat, that an idol has no real existence, and that there is only real God. They were eating there perhaps only for social reasons.

“But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled” (8:7b). Apparently, other Christians at the pagan temple restaurants were eating **food as really offered to an idol**. Their **conscience** was **weak**, meaning that it was not properly taught and informed. And so their eating **defiled** them.

Paul’s point is that we know that an idol is nothing. We know that there is only one true and living God. We know that we have freedom to eat any food because the food itself is not contaminated if it is offered to an idol. Nevertheless, we may cause others to defile their consciences if they eat and think that there is some magical power in the food because it was offered to an idol.

Now, obviously we do not have food offered to idols in our local community. But the principle that arises out of this is that we are to limit our Christian liberty for the sake of another Christian who has not yet matured in his or her understanding of certain matters that are not clearly forbidden in Scripture.

I believe we will see this more clearly in the next point.

III. We Know That Food Is Not an Issue with God (8:8-12)

And third, we know that food is not an issue with God.

Paul said in verse 8: **“Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.”**

The point is that doing things not forbidden by God has no significance in our relationship to him. They are spiritually neutral.

Food is an excellent illustration of that fact.

Common sense and a concern for our bodies should make us careful about what we eat. Food is amoral; that is, food by itself is not evil. Jesus made it plain that “there is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him” (Mark 7:15).

Nevertheless, what would be wrong is when eating becomes a stumbling block to others. Paul said to the Corinthian Christians in verses 9-10: **“But take care that this right 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?”**

Some Christians ate in the pagan temple restaurants with the understanding that eating such food was fine. They no longer associated eating the food with any pagan gods.

But, Paul was concerned that other Christians, perhaps still new to the faith, and not yet properly taught might think that it is okay to eat food that they believed were sacrificed to idols, and thus had some magical, mystical power or influence.

“And so,” Paul warned in verse 11, **“by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.”**

Paul’s point here is that Christians are called to live in community with one another. We do not put our faith in Jesus Christ and then go on living by ourselves without any relationship to others in the body of Christ.

That is why it is important for all Christians to be in some kind of small group. It might be a Growth Group, Men’s Bible Study, Women’s Bible Study, Youth Bible Study, or so on. The reason is that Christians grow best in community. And Christians are called to love others and limit the exercise of their Christian liberty—for the sake of others.

Ultimately, we not only sin against brothers when we do not love them, we sin against Christ. Paul said in verse 12: **“Thus,**

sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.”

And so, as John MacArthur says, “We should be eager to limit our liberty at any time and to any degree in order to help a fellow believer—a brother whom we should love, and a precious soul for whom Christ died.”⁷

Conclusion

Paul concludes with his overarching principle in verse 13: **“Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”**

His point is that he would not do anything to cause his brother to stumble. He was willing to limit his Christian freedom in order to love his brother in Christ.

Well, then, how do we in our particular context exercise our Christian liberty? How do we make decisions about what to do or what not to do?

I want to close with a checklist that John MacArthur suggests to guide us in deciding whether or not to participate in any behavior that is doubtful.

- *Excess*. Is the activity or habit necessary, or is it merely an extra that is not really important? Is it perhaps only an encumbrance that we should willingly give up (Hebrews 12:1)?
- *Expediency*. “All things are lawful for me,” Paul says, “but not all things are profitable,” or expedient (1 Corinthians 6:12). Is what I want to do helpful and useful, or only desirable?
- *Emulation*. “The one who says he abides in him ought himself to walk in the same manner as he walked” (1 John 2:6). If we are doing what Christ would do, our action not only is permissible but good and right.

⁷ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 196.

- *Example.* Are we setting the right example for others, especially for weaker brothers and sisters? If we emulate Christ, others will be able to emulate us, to follow our example (1 Timothy 4:12).
- *Evangelism.* Is my testimony going to be helped or hindered? Will unbelievers be drawn to Christ or turned away from him by what I am doing? Will it help me conduct myself “with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity” (Colossians 4:5)?
- *Edification.* Will I be built up and matured in Christ? Will I become spiritually stronger? “All things are lawful, but not all things edify” (1 Corinthians 10:23).
- *Exaltation.* Will the Lord be lifted up and glorified in what I do? God’s glory and exaltation should be the supreme purpose behind everything we do. “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).⁸

⁸ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 197.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Lord Jesus, we are delighted that you were so principled that you cared about the lost, the weak, and the weary. We are so grateful for your tender mercy. Now, O Lord, grant us the same concern for others, that we may honor both you and them.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and grow in knowledge and love as you live out your Christian lives.