

Called to Help the Weak

Printed Text: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Background Scripture: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Devotional Reading: Mark 9:42-48

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up.² Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know.³ But whoever loves God is known by God.

⁴ So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.”⁵ For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”),⁶ yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

⁷ But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.⁸ But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

⁹ Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.¹⁰ For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols?¹¹ So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.¹² When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.¹³ Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.

INTRODUCTION

There are doctrinal essentials in the Christian faith. The inspiration and authority of Scripture, Jesus' virgin birth, His vicarious death, His glorious resurrection, and His second coming are non-negotiables. To this list could be added a number of other Bible doctrines.

On the other hand, there are a variety of opinions held by both individual believers and various Christian groups that do not relate to matters of faith. The problem is that we sometimes elevate opinions to the status of essential doctrine. The Pharisees did this with their traditions and were condemned by Christ for doing so (Mark 7:5- 7). Lest we fall into the same trap, we must always be careful to distinguish between nonessentials and essentials.

All should be done in love. If an individual has trusted in Christ as Savior, that person is my brother or sister in Christ. We may not agree on everything, but we must treat each other with courtesy, kindness, and love.

LESSON BACKGROUND

During these times, the Greeks and Romans were polytheistic (worshiping many gods) and poly demonistic (believing in many evil spirits). They believed that evil spirits would try to invade human beings by attaching themselves to food before it was eaten, and that the spirits could be removed only by the food being sacrificed to a god. The sacrifice was meant not only to gain favor with the god, but also to

cleanse the meat from demonic contamination. Such decontaminated meat was offered to the gods as a sacrifice. That which was not burned on the altar was served at wicked pagan feasts. What was left was sold in the market.

After conversion, believers resented eating such food bought out of idol markets, because it reminded sensitive Gentile believers of their previous pagan lives and the demonic worship. Paul and mature believers knew better than to be bothered by such food offered once to idols and then sold in the marketplace. They knew the deities didn't exist and that evil spirits did not contaminate the food. But some of the weaker believers struggled with this and brought it to Paul's attention and he addressed the issue.

LESSON AIMS

- **Facts:** to examine 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, in which Paul dealt with the issue of Christians eating meat that had been offered to idols.
- **Principle:** to emphasize the need to support our weaker brothers and sisters in matters of conscience.
- **Application:** to help Christians understand how to deal with debatable issues with love and responsibility.

Possessing Knowledge

In last week's lesson, Paul had begun to answer practical questions written to him by the Corinthians with the first question referencing marriage. In this week's lesson, Paul deals with another concern raised by the Corinthians which centered around eating meats that had been dedicated to pagan gods. Two issues that the Corinthians struggled with were: First, since most meat sold in the market would have been sacrificed to a pagan god, was it permissible to purchase such meat? Second, was a Christian permitted to attend the activities of the pagan temple, where various social functions were held?

In today's time, we, as believers, have concerns as well. Similar modern questions which may be of concern to us would be: Can we purchase products from a company that also makes things that promote sinful lifestyles? Can we attend social events where things will be done that we consider wrong?

Here, in this lesson on idols, Paul laid down some important principles that are relevant to a number of practical concerns believers still face today.

1. What questions did the church have concerning "things offered unto idols" (1 Cor. 8:1)?

The person who thinks he knows all about the issues under consideration does not really know all he needs to know. In their letter to Paul, the Corinthians may have indicated that they knew the answer to the question before they asked it. If so, they were, in fact, revealing that they did not know as much as they thought they did!

As Proverbs 16:18 says, *"Pride goes before destruction."* The persons who are proud of their knowledge *"do not yet know as they ought to know"* (1 Cor. 8:2). Conversely, the person who truly loves God wants to please Him and do what is best for his neighbor. *"Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."* (Rom. 13:10). Proceeding on the basis of knowledge alone leads to pride; proceeding on the basis of love with knowledge leads to the edification of the body of Christ.

2. What kind of "knowledge" was Paul dealing with? What does knowledge tend to lead to? (vs. 2)

Love for God is shown through obedience (John 14:15; 15:10). The love principle would lead the Corinthians to choose the most loving response when facing such debatable issues as eating meats offered to idols.

3. How is love for God shown? (vs. 3)

The Knowledge Principle

As we look at this verse, and the question which was raised regarding the eating of those things that were offered in sacrifice unto idols, Paul stated "*we know that an idol is nothing*". Here Paul was demonstrating that he along with those believers strong in the faith knew that "idols" had no power. They were just merely images made from wood or stone unable to bring about an effect one way or the other. They had no power to bring about good or evil. Paul even went on to say that a lot of the images were called "gods" and were outright fakes and/or manifestations of demons, but none were truly gods.

4. As far as Paul was concerned, what was an idol? (vs. 4)

For the Christian, there is only "one God, the Father" (1 Cor. 8:6), and one Lord (Eph. 4:5), Jesus Christ, "the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). Paul was presenting the Father and the Son as equal in substance (cf. John 14:7-9) and power (cf. John 1:1-3).

Those who reject the knowledge of the true God quickly turn to idolatry (Rom. 1:20-23). Many missionaries testify that idolatry is alive and well in today's world. Millions still bow before gods made of "gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device" (Acts 17:29).

5. For Christians, how is Christ viewed compared to idols? (vs. 6)

As believers, we must remember that not everyone in Christ are at the same level when it comes to faith. Some believers are strong in the faith while others are just learning how to walk by faith. Here in this passage, some of the believers had come to the conclusion that idols were not real however, there were still some who had not yet made it to this realization.

The consciences of some of the newer converts had them feeling spiritually corrupted and guilty. Although eating idol food had no spiritual power one way or the other, the newer converts were not strong enough in their faith walk to eat the food without feeling as though the idols were real and evil. This no doubt, caused them to feel as though their conscience had been defiled which made them feel violated, bringing fear, shame, and guilt.

6. How was the conscience of some of the Corinthians offended? (vs. 7)

The Freedom Principle

The newer converts, as seen in vs. 7, had a difficult time eating meat that was associated with idolatry. As mentioned previously, unable to separate the eating of meat from the false god it had been dedicated to, these weak brethren had a guilty conscience when they did eat. They had lived their entire lives as pagan worshipers and it was not easy for them to change their thinking about these things. Paul explains to them in verse 8 that the eating of meat does not add to or take away from our spiritual relationship with God. It doesn't bring us any closer to Him nor does it push us away from Him. It has no effect, no power. As far as Paul was concerned, meat was meat and the fact that it may have been burned on a pagan altar was nothing more than a meaningless ritual that had no power over him.

Similarly, early in our Christian lives, we may have been taught that certain forms of recreation, dress, or behavior were either acceptable or unacceptable. If at some point we discover that these were matters of opinion, we might still find it difficult to do what we previously believed to be wrong.

7. Was the eating of meat a sign of spiritual maturity or weakness? (vs. 8)

Mature believers might conclude that it was permissible for them to eat any kind of meat but this did not necessarily always make it right to do. They needed to be sensitive to the needs of the weaker brethren. Some stronger Christians may have felt they could eat whatever they wanted to without giving any consideration to those who were weak in their faith.

However, Paul had a strong word of caution about this approach. The freedom enjoyed by the spiritually strong might actually become a hindrance to the weak. Although the mature Christian knows eating of the meat is meaningless and continues to indulge with a clear conscience, the same cannot be said for the weaker brethren. The action of the stronger brother might cause the weaker brethren to participate in the same manner but unable to do so with a clear conscience therefore, causing him/her much guilt and damage to their faith.

"²² So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin." (see Romans 14:22-23). The strongest Christian can bring harm to himself in the area of Christian liberty by denouncing or belittling the freedom God has given him, or by carelessly flaunting his liberty without regard for how that might affect others.

8. How could the liberty of some become a stumbling block to others? Why was this an important issue?

Paul provides us with a very strong warning that causing a brother or sister in Christ to stumble is more than simply an offense against that person; it is a serious offense against the Lord Himself. Our choices in debatable matters can do irreparable damage to the faith of others. We must weigh carefully such decisions, for they can have eternal consequences. If Christ had such compassion as to die for them, we being "imitators of Christ" should be compassionate as well and deny ourselves for their sakes.

Paul himself was unwilling to do damage to the faith of others, and he laid down an important principle in dealing with such issues. If his eating of meats was in any way offensive to weak Christians, he would make the conscious choice not to eat meat at all. Paul was prepared to give up any exercise of Christian freedom that injures the spiritual pilgrimage of a weak Christian. Christian love is mature enough in its exercise of freedom to find a satisfying expression in restraining for the welfare of the brother, rather than indulgence of self. We as believers must remember that in all we do, we must exercise "love" as Christ did. Love, not freedom, is the highest principle of the Christian moral life. Faith gives freedom; love governs freedom" (Allen).

9. Who do we also sin against if we sin against our brethren? (vs. 12)

When we look at our churches today, we can see that there are things present in the body of believers which can cause division such as the big "I's" and the little "u's". We must be careful how we treat one another and realize that Christ died and paid the price for all of our sins and that no one is greater than the other through the eyes of Christ. We are all the same and all have sinned and fallen short of His glory.

Sometimes, when we come unto the knowledge of Christ, we become so "Holy" and so critical of those who are in need of a Savior, that our "holier than thou attitude" drives those who are seeking away from Christ. Unfortunately, some of us have established our own standards for being saved, or we hold to traditional values that we were brought up with that have no significance in our spiritual growth whatsoever. Or, we may have even added in our own personal values such as "my gift in service (whether you are a choir member, usher, church clerk, etc...), more valuable than yours" - Whatever the case, let us remember that we must exercise that which is good for the soul, and the edification of our brethren. Let us set aside our preferences and opinions for the sake of Christ's kingdom, God's glory, and the benefit of weak Christians, for whom Christ died? As Paul wrote, *"All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not"* (10:23).

10. What are some current debatable matters that might be similar to those facing the Corinthians?

Conclusion:

In applying this passage to our lives, it is important to stress the type of situation that Paul has in mind. He is not thinking of differences of opinion over comparatively minor issues between two mature Christians. Paul's extreme statement in verse 13 pertains to situations where a person's conscience is jeopardized by our actions, leading him or her to question personal faith and possibly abandon it in confusion.

Therefore, we must remember that love for others and considering the results of our behavior are our responsibilities (compare Luke 17:1). The key issue is not whether we are "right" in questions of Christian liberty; the key issue, rather, is the attitude we exhibit toward others who do not share our views.

Prayer: Lord thank you for this lesson. Let us as true Christians be mindful of the sensitivity of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Give us the true spirit of compassion driven and guided by your Holy Spirit. For you had much compassion for us when you realized we needed a Savior. You looked down upon this sinful world and were moved off of your holy throne with compassion to save a dying world. Thank you Lord for paying the price for our sins. Instruct us on being good stewards over our spiritual walk so that we are a help to others and not a hindrance. As you did the will of your Father, condition our minds and our hearts so that we may do that which is pleasing in thy sight. Amen.

Thought to Remember: Believers are to be a help and not a hindrance.