

FOOD FOR OTHER GODS?

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13

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After addressing marriage, Paul addressed another controversial question: Should Christians eat meat that has been offered to idols? Paul dealt with this matter forthrightly; eating such meat was acceptable because pagan gods actually amount to nothing. But in what sense are these pagan gods “nothing”? Are they nonexistent, or unimportant?

LOVE, NOT KNOWLEDGE (8:1-3)

Before directly dealing with the question of food sacrificed to idols, Paul commented on a related matter: the danger of knowledge about such things, and the primacy of love over knowledge as the guiding principle of Christian behavior. Paul repeated the topic of meat sacrificed to idols in 8:4, and at that point entered the main discussion.

8:1. Paul began by plainly stating another topic about which the Corinthians had questioned him (the formula “**now about**” indicates a response; see also 7:1,25; 12:1; 16:1,12): **food sacrificed to idols**. In the Greek culture of Paul’s day, families often involved themselves in religious sacrifices, bringing sacrificial animals to the pagan temple to offer them to their gods. In many rituals only part of the meat was burned. The priest and the family making the sacrifice took the rest. This consecrated meat was either taken home and eaten, or sold in the marketplace.

The Jerusalem council had forbidden Christians to eat these foods (Acts 15:29; 21:25). Yet, controversy still existed in the Corinthian church over whether or not believers could participate in these meals or eat the consecrated meat sold in the market. This particular chapter deals primarily with meals actually eaten in idols’ temples (8:10). Given the famines in Greece at the time, the Corinthians’ interest was probably more than a casual inquiry.

It is very likely that Paul first quoted the Corinthians themselves, perhaps from their earlier letter to him (the NIV marginal note reads, “‘We all possess knowledge,’ as you say”). “**We all possess knowledge**,” they have said to Paul. At this point in the letter, it has not become clear what knowledge they claimed to have, but the rest of the chapter makes the content of their knowledge evident. Verse 4 indicates that they knew idols were nothing and that God was one, but later Paul explained that not everyone

understood these truths. Therefore, Paul warned the knowledgeable ones that **knowledge puffs up, but love builds up**. Paul forbade arrogance in his other writings (Rom. 1:30; 11:18; 2 Cor. 12:20; 2 Tim. 3:2) and in this letter (4:6,18,19; 5:2; 13:4), and set up edification of the church as a high goal (Rom. 15:2; 1 Cor. 10:23; 14:3-5,12,26; Eph. 4:29). In effect, the apostle asserted the superiority of love over knowledge because the latter so often leads to sin if not handled carefully.

In making this comment the apostle did not reject the importance of sound doctrine and knowledge of the things of Christ. He merely asserted that knowledge is not a good thing in and of itself. Knowledge can result in humility and love, but often it produces unsympathetic arrogance. In a word, knowledge — even of holy things — is not all that Christians must pursue.

8:2. Paul countered the tendency toward pride through knowledge by revealing the true nature of the person **who thinks that he knows something**. His did not oppose people thinking themselves to have a measure of knowledge or insight. Rather, he warned that those who believe they have mastered a subject might become prideful. Paul said that such people do **not yet know as they ought to know**. They have not realized that all human knowledge is faint and fragmentary, hardly the sort from which they should take arrogance and pride. Paul urged the Corinthians to temper their confidence with the recognition that they did not understand as much as they thought they did.

8:3. Paul wanted the Corinthians to place a premium on **love**, not on knowledge (8:1-2). He indicated the superiority of love by reminding them that the one **who loves God** (i.e. God himself and the kingdom of God) **is known by God**. The expression “known by God” appears elsewhere in Paul’s writings (Gal. 4:9) as a description of redemption. Paul meant that, unlike the prideful people who center their religious lives on knowledge, those who focus on love demonstrate that they have been redeemed. This warning against prideful knowledge and this encouragement to love undergird Paul’s entire discussion of food offered to idols.

BELIEVERS’ KNOWLEDGE (8:4-6)

Paul continued by preliminarily affirming the Corinthians’ position that food sacrificed to idols was not somehow corrupted by the act of sacrifice. He agreed that such meat escaped corruption because the idols to which it was offered were really no gods at all. Only the God of the Christians really exists.

8:4. In this verse Paul returned to the main topic of concern: **eating food sacrificed to idols**. He began by acknowledging what he and the informed ones at Corinth understood about the matter (“**we know**”). What did they know? First, idols are **nothing at all**; and second, there is **no God but one**. With these statements he resolved the issue of meat dedicated to idols on a technical, factual level. There could be no problem with eating this meat since in fact it had been offered to nothing.

8:5-6. Of course, it would have been easy for Paul's opponents to argue that there was a sense in which other gods exist. Paul admitted this himself in 8:5 where he said that there **are so-called gods. Indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"** which people all over the world worship. Even so, for Christians **there is but one God.** This **one God** is **the Father** who is the source and goal of all things. Moreover, **there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ.** These verses take the form of an early catechism or hymn of praise to the Father and Christ. To stress the singularity of the true God, this hymn of praise attributes very similar qualities to both the Father and the Son: all things have their origin in them, and we live in and through them. Simply put, the God of Christianity so overshadows all others who may be called "gods" or "lords" that those others are entirely insignificant.

The implication of this discussion is readily apparent. With this kind of knowledge in hand, it is easily seen why some believers at Corinth did not hesitate to eat food that had been dedicated to idols. As far as they were concerned, these religious ceremonies were entirely insignificant. Paul affirmed this theology and conclusion to a degree. The Corinthians correctly surmised that Christianity's monotheism precluded the existence of other gods, and thus nullified the significance of the pagan sacrifices.

DEALING WITH OTHERS' IGNORANCE (8:7-13)

As much as Paul agreed with those who were knowledgeable on this issue, he had another concern. Their correct theological conclusions did not necessarily justify their practices. Specifically, insofar as their practices did violence to the consciences of others, they sinned by eating meat sacrificed to idols — not because of the idols, but because of the damage done to their fellow believers.

8:7. While Paul agreed that idols are nothing, he pointed out that the Corinthians had wrongly analyzed their own church. They thought that **all** possessed the **knowledge** that idols were nothing (8:1), but they were wrong. **Not everyone** knew the insignificance of idols. Apparently, a number of believers in Corinth were **still so accustomed to idols** that they had a hard time thinking in new ways about food offered to idols. Old superstitions died slowly. So, when these people ate, they still believed that the food had been devoted to a significant power or god, and may have expected to benefit from the sacrifice as a result (see 8:8). Thus, when they ate, **their conscience**, being **weak** in this area, was **defiled**. They violated their sense of loyalty and devotion to Christ.

8:8. Verse 8 is difficult to understand, unless it is another quote from the knowledgeable believers in Corinth. Neither the knowledgeable Corinthians nor the unknowledgeable Corinthians would have thought that eating meat sacrificed to idols somehow brought them closer to, commended them to, or dedicated them to the real God. While the NIV translates the first part of the verse, "**But food does not bring us near to God,**" it is also possible (and more literal) to translate, "food does not bring us

near to the god” (i.e. the idol to which the food in question was offered). In light of the preceding context, this seems to be the better option. This verse probably represents the opinions of the knowledgeable ones in Corinth, whether actually expressed in their letter or anticipated by Paul as their response to his teaching that the weaker brothers’ consciences were defiled.

The phrase “**we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do**” probably expands the meaning of “**draw near**.” Most likely, it refers to the lack of prosperity an idol worshiper might anticipate if he failed to eat of the sacrifice, and to the abundance he would expect to receive if he did eat. Those of weak conscience in Corinth may have sinned partly by thinking that eating the food sacrificed to idols would give them a better chance for the material prosperity they greatly needed to see them through the current famines (see 7:26). The knowledgeable Corinthians who realized that idols were no gods at all and that idols did not control one’s prosperity would have found the weaker Christians’ consciences downright culpable for their superstitions. As a result, they probably would have dismissed those of weak conscience as foolish and ridiculous.

8:9. Paul responded strongly to this imagined objection, warning them to **be careful**. He did not dispute the facts; he did not object to the theological perspectives of the knowledgeable ones. Rather, his pastoral concern for those with weak consciences led him to restrain the knowledgeable Corinthians’ behavior. He warned that the **freedom** enjoyed by those who understood the situation might **become a stumbling block to the weak**. Those who understand have freedom, but they also have the responsibility to use that freedom in service to others (Gal. 5:13) and to restrain that freedom when it threatens to damage others. Those who understand sound doctrine must also take into account the weaknesses of others around them. Their knowledge must not overshadow their love for the brethren.

8:10-11. Paul presented a potential scenario to illustrate his concern. If a knowledgeable Christian eats **in an idol’s temple** and one with **a weak conscience** (i.e. misinformed) sees him eating there, then the misinformed one will be **emboldened to eat**. He will think that the knowledgeable one believes that eating the idol’s sacrifice offers a real benefit, and that idolatry is compatible with Christianity. Thus, the brother with the weak conscience will be emboldened to engage in idolatry himself. Whereas the knowledgeable Christian would not eat with idolatrous intent, the weaker one would, thereby being drawn into syncretism through the observation of his brother. As a result, the **weak brother** would be **destroyed by the knowledge** of his brother, that is, by the act of freedom based on knowledge.

Paul did not explain in what sense this destruction would take place. He may have had in mind something as simple as discouragement and confusion, or something worse such as death, or even apostasy and judgment by God — the word translated “**is destroyed**” generally refers to death or absolute destruction. It is probably wise, however, to temper this passage with Paul’s parallel statements in 8:7,12,13, where he spoke of a defiled conscience (8:7), a wounded conscience (8:12), and falling into sin (8:13).

In any event, Paul reminded the knowledgeable ones that **Christ died** for those brothers and sisters of weak conscience. Therefore, knowledgeable believers should not be indifferent to weak ones. Weak Christians are so precious to Christ that he laid down his life for them. Therefore, they should be precious to other followers of Christ, as well.

8:12. To drive home his perspective, Paul intensified the connection between these actions and Christ. Christ did more than die for these people. He united them to himself in such a way that Paul could say, “**When you sin against your brothers in this way . . . you sin against Christ.**” Sinning against believers who are in Christ, who are part of his body, is effectively sinning against Christ himself (compare 11:27). Safeguarding the conscience of weaker brothers is no small matter; it is a service of honor to Christ himself.

8:13. For this reason (**therefore**), Paul drew a firm conclusion: out of love for fellow Christians and for Christ himself, he would **never eat meat again** if eating caused his **brother to fall into sin**. In Corinth at this time, most (if not all) butchered meat would have been dedicated to some idol. So Paul may not have been exaggerating when he said **never eat meat again**. The immediate context, however, refers more specifically to dining in idols’ temples (8:10). Further, Paul later wrote that believers should eat meat in certain circumstances (10:27). Still, his point should not be blunted. Paul insisted that even drastic self-denial of all meat is worthwhile if protects others from falling into sin. Protecting those in Christ takes precedence over exercising freedom.

DIGGING DEEPER

A. Worse, better (8:8)

In keeping with the rest of the New Testament, Paul often used the word translated “we are worse” (*hystereo*) to mean “to be lacking” or “to be in need” (compare 1 Cor. 1:7; 12:24; 2 Cor. 11:9; Phil. 4:12). The word translated “[we are] better” (*perisseuo*) appears to carry the meaning “abound, overflow” in every other Pauline usage (Rom. 3:7; 5:15; 15:13; 1 Cor. 14:12; 15:58; 2 Cor. 1:5; 3:9; 4:15; 8:2; 8:7; 9:8,12; Eph. 1:8; Phil. 1:9,26; 4:12,18; Col. 2:7; 1 Thess. 3:12; 1 Thess. 4:1,10). In 8:8 these words most probably refer not to moral or spiritual benefit or damage, but to the lack and presence of material prosperity. This corresponds well with the idea in the ancient world that sacrifices procured material blessings from the gods. This seems an even more likely reading in light of the famines current in Greece at the time of this letter.

B. Destroyed (8:11)

In the New Testament “destroyed” (*apollumi*) generally refers to physical death, or to final judgment. It is often also translated “perish” or “die.” Paul’s usage of the word generally reflects this same range of meaning. When speaking of people being destroyed, he sometimes used the word to refer to the perishing state of the unsaved (Rom. 2:12; 1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 2:15; 4:3; 2 Thess. 2:10), sometimes to physical death

(1 Cor. 10:9; 10:10; 2 Cor. 4:9), and once to an undeterminable, hypothetical, ultimate death (1 Cor. 15:18). In other instances, however, it commonly means “lost” (Mat. 10:6,39,42; 15:24; 16:25; Mark 9:41; Luke 15:4,6,8,9,24,32; 19:10; John 6:12,39; 18:9; 2 John 1:8), frequently in the context of stray sheep.

In light of the fact that Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:5 referred to the destruction of the “sinful nature” or “flesh” of the immoral man (perhaps referring to his physical death), in 8:11 he could have meant something as extreme as that God might physically kill the brother drawn into idolatrous eating. Like the immoral brother, if his spirit were truly saved, he would not perish eternally, but he would suffer the physical judgment of death (compare 11:30). On the other hand, in 8:11 *apollumi* might simply be a strong metaphoric parallel to the statements in 8:7,12,13 regarding defiled/wounded consciences and falling into sin, or a statement of lostness similar to the gospel writers’ depictions of those who go astray.

Issues for Discussion

1. How does knowledge “puff up”? Do you find that your natural tendency upon attaining new knowledge is to feel somewhat proud of your accomplishment? Is this wrong?
2. Who does love “build up”? How does love “build up”?
3. Is it more important to love or to know? Can we get by with only one or the other? Why or why not?
4. Should we expect other Christians to have the same knowledge we have? What should we do when we find that they don’t have the same knowledge we have? Does our response depend on the nature of the knowledge they lack? How so?
5. What is stumbling? How does it happen? How does it lead to destruction? Are there times when it is acceptable to stumble other believers?
6. Why is a sin against a brother or sister in Christ also a sin against Christ?
7. How far should we go in giving up our rights when it comes to stumbling others? At what point do we draw the line? How do we keep the weakest consciences from ruling the church?
8. What issues in your church are similar to the problem with food sacrificed to idols in Corinth? Are the principles that Paul taught here applicable to situations beyond matters of questionable practices? If so, to what other types of situations are they applicable?
9. In your experience, has it been easy or difficult to show love and humility toward those in church with whom you disagree? Has it been easy or difficult to demonstrate love and humility to those whom you do not respect? Why?