



AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians
TEACHER – Lesson 13

GENERAL OUTLINE

1 Corinthians 7:1-11:16, Questions asked about marriage, idols & head coverings

OUTLINE: Lesson 13

1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Liberty & Conscience

- 8:1-3 Knowledge and love
- 8:4-6 The truth about gods and God
- 8:7-8 Point conceded: Idols are nothing and food is neutral
- 8:9-13 But: Freedom that destroys vs. love that builds up

Having dealt with a few of the problems that had been reported to him, Paul turned at the beginning of chapter 7 to topics requested by the Corinthians in a letter to him. The first question was about marriage and celibacy (chap. 7), and the second concerned foods offered to idols. At first glance Paul seems to start addressing this second question before getting off track and then returning to the topic late in chapter 10. In fact, once introduced, Paul never leaves the topic. He just doesn't approach in the way his readers expected.

Paul begins by laying significant groundwork prior to giving a straight answer to their question. Realizing that the context of chapters 8 & 9 is foundational rather than providing a simple answer to a question is essential for our understanding of what really concerned Paul. Contrary to what is sometimes thought, Paul does not give one answer about eating foods in chapter 8, only to contradict that answer in chapter 10. The discussion of 1 Cor 8:1-10:13 is not only of greater importance than the simple matter of eating certain foods, but it is central to the entire troubled atmosphere in the Corinthian church.

DISCUSSION

1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Liberty & Conscience

The Corinthians, or some of them, wanted to know if they could eat foods offered to idols whether in the pagan temples or purchased in the market to be eaten in private homes. Paul used this question as an opportunity to discuss something much more important and of wider application. He seems to agree with those who maintained that since idols were just statues, foods offered to those idols would not be defiled in any spiritual way. But Paul is more concerned with why they would want to eat these foods when they knew that to do so would cause great distress, and possibly needless temptations, for some of their brethren.

1. What does Paul teach in verses 1-3 about a Christian eating things offered to idols?

Nothing. Even though he introduces that subject in the first phrase and then reintroduces it in verse 4, he doesn't really deal with it directly anywhere in this chapter. This chapter lays groundwork for addressing the subject of eating foods offered to idols, but in this section he is more concerned with something more fundamental and necessary for the Corinthian problem. We'll identify that priority topic as we go through the chapter.

2. What are the benefits of knowledge and what are the dangers of it?

Paul doesn't really identify the benefits of knowledge in these verses, but we have a good idea from other passages such as Ephesians 4:11-14 and 2 Timothy 3:14-17. It is important, both for faith and obedience, that we have accurate knowledge of God's word.

Paul is more concerned here with the dangers and misuse of knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, meaning it can produce arrogance. There is also the danger of not knowing as much as we think we know. But whatever knowledge we have, it is to be used with love for God, our brothers in Christ, and our fellow man. Being puffed up suggests that we are concerned with demonstrating our knowledge without concern for how it helps or hurts the faith of others.

3. What has Paul written previously in 1 Corinthians about being puffed up?

Being "puffed up" is a major idea in chapter 4 where the first use concerns the role it plays in dividing brethren: *"that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other"* (1 Cor 4:6; cf. 4:18, 19; 5:2).

Paul mentions it again in 1 Cor 13:4 as something that love is not. This is entirely in sync with his point here in chapter 8 where, "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies." This is our first indication that Paul wants to talk about something more fundamental before dealing directly with the question about whether they could eat sacrificed foods.

4. On what topic was it claimed that "we all have knowledge" and was it a true statement that all the Corinthian Christians shared this knowledge?

The idea that "we all have knowledge" seems to be another statement made in the Corinthian letter to Paul (cf. 7:1) that Paul quotes to begin his discussion of their concerns. The members who had no objection to eating "things offered to idols" apparently made the claim that everyone understood that idols were not real gods, and in fact, were not real beings. They claimed, correctly, that only God was a real, living God. On this basis they concluded that every Christian should know that eating foods offered to nonentities was not sinful.

In some sense, all Christians shared that knowledge – sort of – but in another sense, not everyone understood it or applied it the same way (see next question). For this reason, Paul says in verse 7 that, “*there is not in everyone that knowledge.*” Intellectually, they all knew that God was the only real God, but emotionally, many still feared the power or influence of pagan gods.

- 5. What fundamental Christian doctrine is summarized in vv. 4-6? Do you agree or not (and why) that as a general rule all Christians endorse the doctrine of monotheism? What qualifiers or limits would you or Paul place on the idea that all Christians know this as demonstrated in the Corinthian situation?**

Conversion to the gospel of Christ implies that a person abandons polytheism and embraces monotheism. Paul and his readers would have agreed that all Christians believe that there is only one real God. A polytheistic Christian is an oxymoron.

Intellectually, they all knew that God was the only real God, but emotionally many still feared the power or influence of pagan gods, and this created a serious problem for some of them.

- 6. Itemize the facts about God and Christ that Paul presents in verse 6.**

1. Only 1 true God; 2. Father; 3. Source of all things; 4. We belong to him; 5. Christ is the one Lord; 6. He is the agent of God’s creation; 7. He sustains life.

Note that Paul had no trouble claiming a singular God while mentioning Christ as the one true Lord (a term also applied to God the Father).

- 7. On the basic idea of eating things offered to idols, who was right and who was wrong in the Corinthian congregation: those who ate such things or those who did not? Limit your answer – for now – to the information Paul gives in this chapter. Which group do you think was more bothered by Paul’s position, particularly in verse 8? Why?**

Paul doesn’t really settle the matter in this chapter. For the moment, he seems to take an ambiguous position by saying that idols are nothing and that food is, in itself, a neutral thing. The only negative comes in verses 9-13 when dealing with the stumbling block that a person eating in a temple might create for a weaker brother. For the moment, verses 4-8 could have caused the “eaters” to think Paul was on their side, and that the weaker ones should shape up.

- 8. In what ways do pagan gods (idols) actually exist and assert power?**

Evil spirits or demons exist, as does Satan, but that isn't the direction that Paul goes here. That reality may be implied in chapter 10, but not yet. Essentially, Paul agrees with those who maintained that idols were the creations of man's imagination, an idea presented often by the Old Testament prophets who spoke of men cutting trees, burning some of the wood and making a god (idol) of the rest (e.g., Isaiah 44:9-20).

So the idols worshiped in the temples of Corinth were not real gods. That doesn't mean that they didn't touch the lives of people who worshiped or feared them. The more deeply involved in a pagan religious system a person had been prior to conversion to Christ, the more difficult it would have been to put those beliefs totally behind him. Imagine someone today, in a third world country, who has grown up with animistic beliefs, who, after conversion, still harbors some fear of the village witch doctor. Though not real gods, they exert real power over the emotions and thoughts of people who fear or have served them.

9. Does a food, eaten for physical nourishment, have any positive or negative spiritual value? Is there a spiritual advantage in eating or not eating a particular food, including foods offered to idols? If so, what is the source of that spiritual meaning or impact?

Food is a material substance, and eating a particular food is neither more nor less spiritual than any other food (cf. Colossians 2:16-23; Romans 14:3). The spiritual advantage would be only in the mind of the person who made some connection between the food and ungodly practices. But to think that something was wrong, or in violation of one's relationship with God, and go ahead and do that which he felt was wrong would be wrong for him. We should always stay in what we believe is the safest spiritual territory.

10. Can a Christian be a vegan or vegetarian? Should a Christian be a vegan or vegetarian? Should Christian vegans make such dietary restrictions a test of Christian fellowship?

Yes, a Christian can eat certain foods or abstain from them, but there is no biblical obligation. Eating the flesh of animals is not presented in Scripture as wrong. A person can prefer this diet, but it has no inherent spiritual advantages and should not be imposed on others. Neither those who do nor those who don't should be "puffed up."

11. Thinking of the physical logistics involved, how could the weak brother in verse 10 have seen the "liberated" brother eating (lit., "reclining at table") in a temple, and how would the sight have encouraged (ESV: emboldened) the weak brother to join in and do the same? NOTE: "Encouraged" or "emboldened" is the same Greek word as "edify" or "build up" in 8:1.

The description given in verse 11 raises the clear possibility that not only did some Christians attend meals in idols' temples, but were pressuring those who were uncomfortable with that practice to accompany them. Being in the very setting they were trying to avoid could have not only troubled them, but enticed them once again to

participate in practices they were trying to put behind them. The Christian who thought it permissible to attend those meals was possibly trying to “build up” (embolden, encourage) the weaker brother to overcome his inhibitions.

For example, it would be a bad idea to tell a recovering alcoholic that he shouldn’t be afraid of taking a drink now and then. It would be much more dangerous to take that alcoholic to an event or tavern where the temptation would be much more real than a mere conversation on the subject.

12. Is there more involved in “perishing” (v. 11) and “stumbling” (vv. 9 & 13) than disagreeing with or being offended by the “eating” brother’s behavior?

This seems to be much more serious than merely doing something over the objection of someone else. The actions of the “puffed up” brother could actually cause the “weaker” brother to lose his salvation. Whether this came from being offended and leaving the church, or by relapsing into idolatry may not be clear (I think the latter), but should be avoided. This is not dealing with feelings and opinions, but with eternal salvation.

13. What is the only reason given in this chapter for avoiding temple meals? What does this suggest about Paul’s primary concern not only at this point, but indeed throughout the letter (cf. 1 Cor 12)? How does this section (vv. 9-13) relate to the statement of verse 1 that knowledge puffs up, but love edifies?

At this point in the letter, the only objection to eating in pagan temples that Paul states is the impact on the weaker brother (vv. 9-13). Later, in chapter 10, he will give additional reasons for avoiding the temples, but we must consider that his failure to do so at this point is intentional.

Paul is calling those who had “knowledge” about the reality of God and the nothingness of idols to be guided by love in their actions rather than by exercising the freedom from restrictions that they felt their knowledge gave them. They should act with love for the brother instead of being puffed up by what they considered to be greater knowledge.

14. Having looked at the whole chapter, let’s summarize by returning to verse 1. In verse 1, Paul makes three direct statements. What three subjects does he mention? Which one do you think, based on the rest of the chapter, was more important to Paul?

The 3 subjects are:

1. Things offered to idols.
2. Having knowledge.
3. Being puffed up about self vs. showing love (and concern) for the salvation of other members of the body of Christ.

This chapter is more focused on # 3 than either of the other topics. Avoiding self-interests and caring for each other in the church is the main problem in 1 Corinthians. Paul spends two entire chapters (8 & 9) and half of 10 on that topic before turning more directly to the question of eating foods offered to idols. Concern for one another was more important than eating or not eating.

Just as faith without works is dead, so knowledge without love is destructive.