

Sermon 27: 1 Corinthians 8:1-6: Food Offered to Idols

OUTLINE

Knowledge and love
Knowledge and worship

INTRODUCTION

You have probably all heard the question, 'Why can't a Christian ...?' Fill in the blank. Why can't Christians drink alcohol, vape, get tattoos, smoke weed? And so on. Some ask these questions out of a genuine desire to get the answer, but some are trying to rationalize their sins. This is what is going on in Corinth. We come to a new section where Paul for the next three chapters is going to deal with the question of food offered to idols. You can see as you look down that there is a subject change in v1, 'Now concerning food offered to idols.' Paul is probably answering questions about this matter that have been put to him by the Corinthians. A little context from the ancient world would be helpful to show why this was a pressing matter of concern.

The ancient world unlike our own was not a neat division of secular and sacred. Religion was woven into every part of a person's life both public and private. This meant that having occasion to eat foods that had been offered to idols was something very common. The Jews would have avoided these things by insulating themselves from the surrounding societies, not even eating with Gentiles. Likewise they would have their own butchers and would never be near anything even associated with idolatry. Think Daniel who would rather eat vegetables than meat that had been offered to idols. But the average Gentile convert who unlike the Jew living in Corinth would not have a kosher butcher, and would have all sorts of obligations which would make them have to engage in social settings where the food was inevitably offered to idols. One commentator helps us get the picture, 'The celebrations of many cults were closely bound up with civic and social life because religion and politics were indivisible in ancient Hellenistic city life. If Christians took part in civic life, they would have been expected to participate in a festival's sacrificial meals in some form or another (Smit 1996: 582). The imperial cult, which frequently combined statecraft with stagecraft, was especially important to Corinthian citizens; and sacrifices were part of the Isthmian games (Broneer 1971; Engels 1990: 102; Winter 1995; 2001: 269-86).'¹ 'Individuals who shared the same trades (cf. Acts 19:24-25) or a desire to worship specific gods banded together in voluntary associations (clubs, guilds), which were very popular in the Greek world. Many joined them for social reasons: "a sacrifice to a god, an occasional meal, a drinking party, an exchange of different political views or a confirmation of shared ones" (Stambaugh and Balch 1986: 124).⁵ In the Latin West, the poor formed funeral societies to celebrate a patron's memory and contributed to a common fund to insure that they would receive a proper burial (Fox 1986: 84). These associations "served religious, social and commercial ends" (Stambaugh and Balch 1986: 125), and some met in the dining rooms attached to major civic temples, or "their clubhouse ... might bear the name of a divinity" (Fox 1986: 88; Stevenson and Lintott, *OCD* 352).'²

1 David E. Garland, [*1 Corinthians*](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 347-348.

Generally speaking at an event like a birthday, a coming of age, a funeral, a wedding, a betrothal, etc. You would offer meat on the menu. The ancient temples like many churches today had a hall attached that was used for this purpose. You would go to the temple, make an offering to the god of that temple, certain parts of the animal would be offered in worship, and the rest of the meat would then be cooked up and served in the temple hall for your social occasion. Extra meat would be sold to local butchers who would then sell it in the markets. So the three main ways you would encounter meat offered to idols was when attending these regular social settings in temple halls; in private settings where an unbeliever had invited you to their home and was offering meat offered to idols; or if you went to the butcher to buy meat to cook at home which may or may not have been offered to an idol. What do you do? Do you practice the Daniel diet to be sure? Do you join in with the Jewish community and follow their practices? Paul shows that there are other options for these Gentile Christians.

Now it seems that behind the questions Paul is being asked is some resistance. There can be no doubt that Paul would have already taught the Corinthians on these matters, he stayed and taught there for 18 months after all. Paul would have very clearly spoken about not having any associations with idolatry. It seems that he is getting some push back as there are those who are insisting that they can eat meat offered to idols in certain situations. It appears that there was a group in Corinth who were justifying their eating idol foods even in temple halls because they had knowledge that idols weren't real. It is likely that there are other social factors in play here. The Jews were viewed in a negative light because they cut themselves off from society and thought of everyone as unclean and unworthy. To begin to exclude themselves from certain social settings would no doubt bring the ire that was against the Jews upon the heads of these new converts. There may have been a very real peer pressure to want to continue to be involved in these social events around idol foods. Paul is now going to address this matter dealing with the attitudes and thinking that were driving this practice of continuing to eat meat offered to idols.

The next three chapters deal with this topic and we will see that Paul has two driving concerns. Firstly, he is concerned about those who practice knowledge without love and consideration of those weak Christians who would imitate them and as a result fall back into idolatry. Secondly, Paul is concerned that the Christian who worships the only true God should have nothing to do with the worship of idols. As we go through these chapters we will see that Paul will deal with the three scenarios mentioned regarding eating meat in association with temples; eating with an unbeliever; and buying meat in the market. We will begin looking at 8:1-6 where we will see Paul talking about their so called knowledge and laying out his lines of attack concerning knowledge and love; and knowledge and worship. The rest of chapter 8 will look at not insisting on our rights but giving up our rights so as not to be a stumbling block to our brethren. Chapter 9 is a big long look at Paul giving an example of giving up his rights on behalf of others to underline what sacrificial love for the church looks like. Chapter 10 has a big focus on idolatry with v1-13 a warning against idolatry; v14-22, looks at how involvement with idols is involvement with the demonic and should not be done; v23-11:1 deals with the matters of buying meat; and eating

in an unbeliever's home with some concluding and guiding principles on the matter.

Knowledge and love

V1, 'Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up.' Paul begins with the subject at hand. However, the Greek literally reads, 'now concerning idolatrous sacrifices'. The word food is not present and is only mentioned in v4. I think this is important because for Paul the priority is not about food but about idolatry, and he puts the matter bluntly right up front to get to the heart of the matter. You will notice in the ESV that there are quotation marks around the words, 'all of us possess knowledge,' and 'knowledge'. This is indicating that these are phrases that the Corinthians likely used in their letter to Paul that Paul is now engaging with. It appears that Paul quotes more of their words again in v4. As we take these quotes and piece them together we begin to get an impression of what is going on.

There is a group of people who claim to have knowledge, a knowledge which they think every Christian should have. Paul does mention that the Corinthians have been gifted with speech and 'all knowledge' in 1:5. Paul will not dispute the basic facts that they believe, but he will add to them and push back at the attitudes with which they hold them and the wrong actions that justify by them. 'This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up.' Before Paul gets to the facts that we are supposed to know he talks about knowledge in general. Knowledge without love, even if it is a spiritual gift of knowledge puffs up. This is a sad reality of our fallen condition. God's truth which is a wonderful gift put into the hands of a sinner becomes a weapon of self-harm and harm to others. Like all of God's gifts this does not mean that knowledge is evil, but we are. Paul is not an anti-intellectual who despises knowledge; he prays that we would grow in knowledge. No he knows that sinners often can't handle God's good gifts. He says that it puffs us up. Knowledge can lead to pride. How? Sometimes we think that because we know something we are better than others; that we have permission to disregard others and mistreat others because they are not as educated as we are. How often have we confused knowledge for experience; or knowledge for competence? Someone who has read a book on preaching might think that he has the same understanding as someone with 20 years of experience as a preacher. Or someone who has googled something about medicine is now suddenly as qualified as a doctor to speak on medical matters. We are by nature self-deceiving. In the case of the Corinthians some Corinthians think that because they know certain theological facts about idols that they can eat meat offered to idols. Firstly, they shouldn't, but secondly, one can know true facts but hold them in a loveless way. In this instance the Corinthians were eating before those whose consciences were weak and as a result drawing them back into idolatry by their example.

Paul stresses the danger of knowledge but also the necessity of love, 'love builds up.' Love which is selfless and focused on benefitting others not ourselves is the thing that should be included in our thinking not only whether we have got the facts right or wrong. Truth matters but truth held lovelessly is a sin. Truth and love are necessary to each other aren't they? Truth without love can be weaponized and be used as the Corinthians are doing, at the expense of the weak and to justify giving into peer pressure and not having to take a stand for Jesus. But love without truth is just as dangerous. Today we are seeing the

impact of this problem where many are talking about love but apart from truth. Today many are governed by feelings not recognizing how sin is shaping those feelings. Many today claim to be living in loving relationships with others but are in fact living a lie because they are denying their biological sex. Which sort of person are you? Are you a truth person or a love person? Are you someone who is right in a wrong way or who loves in a wrong way? Are you weak in standing up for the truth because you are trying to please people; or are you weak in loving people as you stand for the truth? We all have one weakness or the other.

V2, 'If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.' There is no greater way to humble a know it but to tell him he does not know it all. And this is exactly what Paul says next. We can see that the Corinthians think they know everything because they know that idols aren't real and there is only one God. This is true, Paul will not deny it, but he will add some salient facts, show some glaring holes in what they should be thinking about and demonstrate how knowledge must be applied in love. V3 is the first example, of something they weren't featuring into their thinking, 'But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.'

Sometimes on the fog of war when in a debate we can fixate upon whose facts are right. Paul brings in gospel realities to sober up those who are caught up in data. A few key ideas should come crashing into us as we consider this verse. Firstly, salvation is characterized as those who love God, not those who have a theological degree. It is true that there is a basic set of facts that make up saving faith. We all have to accept what the Bible says about the fact that we are sinners, that we are under God's judgement and that God has given Christ to pay the price for our sins so that we can be freely forgiven. But here Paul casts the Christian faith not in intellectual terms but in terms of the heart. There can be many who have true facts in their heads but who are not saved and have no love for God. The demons know the facts better than we do.

Secondly, Paul reminds those who have knowledge that more importantly their brethren who are weak in conscience are known by God. This is going to be a major point Paul is going to lean into as he continues. Those who you think are stupid, whose reputation you are willing to sully to make yourself look clever, who you disrespect as less than you. These are loved by God. How do you react towards those who disrespect your loved ones? We dare not treat as rubbish that God considers His treasure.

Thirdly, if a Christian is someone who loves God; and who is loved by God; what is the implication that should follow? A Christian is someone who loves, 1 John 3:14-15 puts it starkly, 'We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.'

¹⁵ Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.'

Do we hold the truths we believe in love? I think as Reformed believers this is an important moment for self-reflection. We hold to the traditional creeds and confessions of the church, standing in the long line of faithful men and women who have stood upon the Bible. There are many churches that have left the path and it is easy for us to congratulate ourselves for our doctrine; to easily criticize others; to run other Christians down in public because they have not crossed all their tees and dotted all their I's. We can feel self-content that we are singing right words without actually meeting with God in our worship. We can appreciate the form of a prayer without putting our hearts into praying. We can listen to a sermon and enjoy it as a kiss on the lips because it is correct without applying to

our own hearts. We can listen to a sermon that rebukes sin and think to ourselves about how so and so needs to hear this. Do we hold the truth in a way that puffs up, or in a way that imitates God's own love for His people?

Knowledge and worship

V4, '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." Here are the truths that Corinthians know, we have them in quotation marks, they know that 'an idol has no real existence;' and they know 'there is no God but one.' Once again, Paul does not say that these facts are incorrect. No he will highlight that they are incomplete without other facts; and incomplete if not properly applied by loving their brethren and avoiding idolatry. Now regarding idolatry Paul correctly draws on his OT theology at this point. The idea that idols have no real existence was a regular part of God calling His people away from following idols and to put their faith in Him. Isaiah 42:19 describing idols writes, 'Behold, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their metal images are empty wind.' Is. 44:9-20 has a famous mockery of those who make idols as God point out the contradiction of cutting down a tree that needed the rain to grow; a man to cut down; half of which is used to warm him up and cook his food and the other half is used to make an idol that he had to set up. And then the folly of him falling down before it in prayer. Idolatry makes no sense, because there is no God but God. Paul draws this conclusion paraphrasing the OT teaching, 'there is no God but one.' The bible teaches monotheism. Polytheism is false; henotheism is false; monotheism is the teaching of the bible. The Corinthians we abusing this truth to disregard any restrictions around idol temples and eating meat that was openly offered as part of worshipping idols. Instead of living in light of this truth and steering clear; instead of taking to heart how the OT applied this teaching to God's people so that they had no dealing with idolatry, these Corinthians have used this truth as cover to attend these feasts to partake of the meat. Paul will go on to show that this is not a right application of this truth. What this means for us is that we must not participate in the worship services of other religions. If there is an interfaith service do not join in. If you are invited to worship in a cult, do not go along. If there are idolatrous activities that involves praying to or worshipping anything other than God; or in any way other than He has appointed, stay away.

V5-6, '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.' In v5 Paul alludes to some of the truths they are leaving out. Paul speaks about 'so called gods in heaven or on earth'; he talks about the many 'gods' and 'lords' of these other religions of which there were many in Corinth. And he strangely says 'there may be' these things. What does he mean? Later on Paul will reveal that behind these idols are demons; there is not no reality but a deceptive reality. 1 Cor. 10:20, 'No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons.' Paul again is drawing on the OT for his teaching, Deut. 32:17, 'They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded.' Ps. 106:36-37, 'They served their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons.' Paul is hinting at this point here which he will open up more a little later. For now what he does is he doubles down on the OT teaching of God as

God drawing forward its implications for not getting involved in idolatry. He wants to bring in some of that OT ethos around idols that we might think more in terms of the first and second commandment and take less liberties around idolatry.

We must pay special attention to v6, it is a most important verse for proving the deity of Christ and instructive in how the bible sets forth this teaching, '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.' The OT background to Paul's monotheism is the famous confession of faith, the Shema in Deut. 6:4-5, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.' Christians have a continuity with this God, He is our God. Paul as an apostle of the New Covenant develops our understanding of this God. He affirms that we the NT people of God continue to be monotheists, 'yet for us there is one God.' But then things take a surprising turn. Paul while asserting that we believe in one God identifies two persons with this God. His assertion pressures us to rethink how God is one, He is one as two persons. Despite this emphasis that there are two persons who are one God and Lord, Paul is not falling into polytheism he contrasts this with the false notion of 'many gods and many lords' not intending the same plurality in these idols as there is a plurality in God. Paul is not making a logical misstep because he did not think long and hard enough. Paul further nuances the oneness of the two persons by distinguishing that we are 'from' and 'for' the Father 'through' the Son. The Father and the Son are the authors of Creation and Salvation but according to distinct operations. These are not contradictions but inspired revelation helping us to see one God in more than one person. It is this biblical teaching which will be developed into the Nicene Creed:

'We believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.
And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
begotten from the Father before all ages,
God from God,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made;
of the same essence as the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,
and was made human.
He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered and was buried.
The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again with glory
to judge the living and the dead.
His kingdom will never end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life.
He proceeds from the Father and the Son,
and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.
He spoke through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.
We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look forward to the resurrection of the dead,
and to life in the world to come. Amen.