

God's people, then and now

Part 2

1 Corinthians 8: Concerning Food Sacrificed to Idols

¹ 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.

In Corinth one of the big cultural problems for the church was idolatry. The idolatry is visible and powerful in this town. There are temples to Aphrodite, Apollo, worship of Isis, Egyptian Gods. There has been archaeological digs finding temples and shrine to Poseidon, Apollo, Hermes, Venus, Isis, Demeter, Asklepios, Aphrodite. There are Greek Gods, Roman Gods, Egyptian Gods, miscellaneous Gods with temples and shrines set up to them all around the city.

Idolatry not a part of our culture today. With people in a Hindu culture, idols are common place but in our western culture this is not a problem we bump into, a bit foreign to us. But commandment number 2 is about idols, because in the ancient world this was a big thing – happened everywhere, was an ingrained part of the culture, so ingrained that Israel kept accidentally slipping back into idolatry by habit.

There is story in the Bible that I think perfectly explains this problem and why God hates it.

Ex 32, there at Mt Sinai Moses is up the mountain talking to God, just been saved from Egypt.

Ex 32:2 Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me."

Ex 32:3 So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron.

Ex 32:4 He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

If you're God you might be a bit confused at this point. After all they saw, 10 plagues, column of fire n smoke, parting red sea. "You think it was the Cow that saved you!?"

You told the Israelites not to worship idols, or any other God, God is one. Then they make some golden statues then worship them saying, these are the gods that brought you out of Egypt. It's like the very first thing they do is give the credit God is due to something else. That is what lies at the core of idolatry – giving the credit God is due to something else.

But let's jump into the text.

V1-3 We notice again that Paul mentions knowledge to the Corinthians. Last Sunday we talked about the knowledge of the spirit vs knowledge of the world. Here Paul brings up the topic of Knowledge again, this will be a theme in 1 Corinthians because wisdom and knowledge is such a big part of the Greek culture.

And in talking about idols and meat, Paul needs to address the issue of knowledge and he does it by painting a picture of 2 images. Knowledge puffing up and love building up. He will return to this theme in more detail in 1 Cor 13.

Knowledge puffs up like a balloon, filled with air ... a balloon looks big... but there is no substance to it, no weight – a gentle breeze can blow it away.

While love builds up like a wall – brick on brick a solid structure than can be leaned on pushed against and it's not going anywhere.

To this Greek culture Paul was to change their value system. He is building this argument that Love is greater than Knowledge.

With knowledge you can impress or teach someone, but that relationship will have no strength, gone in an instant. With Love you build a relationship that can withstand anything. And your opportunities to teach, grow and strengthen will multiply.

Now to the issue at hand, Paul turns, in V4, to food sacrificed to idols. There are many gods in Corinth, from all over the empire that are worshiped in the city, and the problem is, the temple culture has become connected with their economy.

Meat sacrificed at these temples, to all the other pagan gods gets divided up, some is burnt, some is eaten and some is given to the priest. The meat given to the priests is like a payment, and it ends up in the market place. There you often have no idea where it has come from. Could have been sacrificed to Apollo or Isis, or whoever. And for some Christians this was a problem. Should we eat meat at all?

If we are eating with our neighbours their meat could be straight from the temple. Are we opening ourselves up to evil spirits or will we anger the gods.

It seems there was 2 camps some that thought it was dangerous to eat this meat. And some who thought there was nothing to worry about.

Paul says, in V4, we know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.”

Intellectually, with the might of our knowledge we know an idol is nothing. There is no power there, nothing to fear, the one true God is supreme. The wise/mature Christian knows this. Again Paul comment of the Greek love of Knowledge. But Paul goes on to make the point that this is not just an issue of knowledge.

V7, the issue at hand is not just about knowledge because there are some Christians that struggle with the power of the idol culture. So ingrained in them is the power of idol worship that even though they have given up their idols to follow Jesus Christ, they still can't shake the fear or worry that eating this meat will cause spiritual problems.

Here is the kicker for this passage V9-11. Again Paul sets up this contrast, Knowledge Vs Love – one puffs and one builds and he says don't let your Knowledge, your freedom in Christ come before loving your brothers and sisters.

Responsibility over Freedom

So here's the take home lesson from this passage:

Christianity is set apart from other religions through its freedom. We are free from Law, free from rituals, free from meeting a standard to earn God's favour. But our actions have consequences, for those around us – other Christians as well as other non-Christians.

Paul could have just said to Corinth, no meat, you're all vegetarians, problem solved. But he chose a harder path, keeping individual freedoms, while being considerate. You can exercise your rights, your right to eat the idol meat but not at the expense of other's faith or their walk with God. Not doing things that might confuse or upset other Christians, make them doubt. This is why we are free to have a drink to enjoy lifestyle and pass times, not to have to worry about the church police to knocking your door down, free to celebrate and have parties, and go surfing or to the night clubs but also knowing that these things are secondary to other people's walk with God. If what we are doing causes another brother or sister to stumble then our love for them outweighs our personal freedom. With our great personal freedom found in Christ Jesus we should serve those around us that all may come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ, not just exercise them because we know we can.

Idolatry explained

Let me step back to where we started:

The Corinthians lived with an ingrained culture of idolatry in their world but of course so do we – the idolatry of our age is much more subtle but just as real. It happens whenever we put some other thing in God place in our lives. It's like if you are at school and you do a project, pour your heart into it and it looks great. Then they teacher sits the class down holds your project up. Look how great this one is, all the work when into it, amazing. So well done little Billy, Billy gets up and takes a bow, all the kids clap. And you're like, that was my work, I did that, I poured myself into it.

This is what God hates so much about idolatry, when we give the credit which is his, to someone else, something else, when we put something else in the position of God.

If that is our working definition then we can see how idolatry is more than idols – it's career, possessions, individualism, consumerism, even intelligence and knowledge. These are the places in our lives where we look to something else for fulfilment when we should be looking to God.

Let me talk about sport for a moment because as I reflect on my life I can see how sport was an idol for me.

I used to be a pretty good soccer player. I played into my late 20s, played futsal in summer. It took up a lot of my time and my mind space.

But here's the thing, when we were losing a lot, sometime I would lose on Sunday and at futsal as well, it would often just get me down, for days. Not just after the match, but I would just feel in a slump. And the question is why? Why would losing a match or a few matches make me feel like this all week?

Because deep in my psyche, being a good soccer player was where I found my worth. It was something that defined me ... and when I was getting beat, I would be confronted with the fact that maybe I wasn't that good a soccer player and that would completely rock my self-image.

A friend of mine years ago got hit by a car and lost the use of his legs and one of the big thoughts I had was, he won't be able to play soccer again. And that thought filled me with dread. That was probably the last thing he was worried about.

And I came to a realisation only recently, probably from becoming a dad that sport is for fun... nothing more, good to keep your health, great fun - that's it. And I want to do my best to sow that narrative into Wesley's world view. Sport is good and great and we do it for fun, so he doesn't fall into that trap.

Here is the other part of Paul's message to the Corinthian church.

In Christ we are free, free to love sport, or love our lifestyles or love having a nice house or car or whatever it is. But we also have to never lose sight of most important things.

V13, Paul is free to eat whatever he likes but there is a higher value at play here. There is something more important, where he would happily not eat meat at all that others might grow and flourish in their faith.

Do we need to re-order our priorities? Do we need to sit back and look and see if there is anything we are putting in God's place? Anything we elevate too high in our lives, or use to derive our self-worth from?

See if our freedoms are becoming an obstacle to our faith or another person's faith.