

Meats and Idols, Knowledge and Love – 1 Corinthians 8

Introduction – Just as there was a wisdom loved by the Corinthians which led to foolishness (1 Cor 1:18-25), so too there is a way of handling knowledge, true in and of itself, in such a manner that actually sins against the kingdom and community of God. The pagan-Greek culture loved winning an argument; Paul loves winning the man. Following Christ, Paul is willing to give up that which he would be free to partake, in order to win, protect, and keep new believers to Jesus. Paul’s sustained argument is through the end of chapter 10 and finishes in 11:1 – *“Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.”*

Knowledge about Knowledge (vv1-3) – The Corinthians wrote many questions in reply to a letter Paul had written them and now we come to the subject of meat sacrificed to idols. Paul will deal directly with the problem of sacrificial food consumed in the temple of pagan gods (8:10; 10:14, 21), but he sees a greater problem in the attitude of the ones asking the question. He probably quotes them, *“we all have knowledge”* (v1 – and from v4, the knowledge is something like, *“we know that an idol is nothing”*) and then replies, *“Knowledge (with that kind of attitude – my add) puffs up, but love edifies.”* That kind of “knowledge” proves the Christian really knows nothing (v2). He got the answer right on the test, but there is a greater right than being right. Anyone who understands that the knowledge of the gospel depends on God’s initiative will not become puffed up by the possession of such knowledge (v3, Gal 4:9a).

Knowledge that realizes one only “knows” because one has been “known” by God is a humbling knowledge, not knowledge that puffs up. Calvinists who believe in the doctrines of grace are far too often guilty of forgetting this. *“What do you have that you did not receive?”* (1 Cor 4:7). The problem is that in rightly affirming their knowledge that there is nothing in an idol and therefore nothing in the meat, but affirming with the wrong attitude, they have turned their knowledge into an idol. Knowledge without love is sin (1 Cor 13:4).

So-Called gods and their Idols (vv4-6) – The knowledge is this: *“we know that an idol is nothing in the world”* (v4). Every form of false religion is superstitious at some level – it makes something out of nothing. Compared to the true God, an idol is nothing in the world and so when it comes to eating meat that has been sacrificed to it, there is nothing to be found in the meat that would be a reason for abstaining from it. The meat is not demon possessed. There are “so-called gods” and “lords” in heaven and earth (v5), possibly referring to both the pagan gods of the temple and the Caesar-worship of Rome before whom every knee should bow. Paul agrees and even strengthens the argument, working from the Shema (Deut 6:4-5). This daily prayer of the Jew declared that the LORD God was One, which by the way is the opposite of the myth that all gods/religions are the same. Jesus taught us that we should call this one God, “Father,” and that Jesus was the Son. But He is also “Lord,” a title designated to the one God in the Old Testament. And so we see the subordination of the Son to the Father as well as His full deity with the Father. The end of v6 may be a confessional fragment and if translated literally reads –

*One God, the Father
From whom are all things and we for him,
And one Lord, Jesus Christ,
Through whom are all things, and we through him.*

This triune monotheism drives out all uncleanness. We come to the Father and receive all His blessings through the Son. We can love God and love our neighbor – and enjoy the things of the earth even if some try to make believe those things are tied up with demons. This is our Christian liberty.

Knowledge, Liberty, and Love (vv7-13) – But our liberty is to be lived out in community and in love towards one another, deferring to one another (Phil 2:1-4). And so, for the strong Christian, there is no idolatrous connection between the meat and the idol it was offered to and he can enjoy the meat with a good conscience. No problem. But the weaker brother, such an action could stumble him to believe he was returning to his pagan idol practices – and possibly lead him back into it. The strong brother should remember that partaking of the meat or not is nothing (v8) and so he needs to be careful not to make a big deal out of it. Instead, he should guard his liberty from being used to stumble his weaker brother (vv9-11). This issue is not a matter of meat and idols; it is first a matter of relationships. A stronger brother may be able to swim in that current, but he must be careful he does not lure in brothers who cannot swim in it.

Christ died for that weaker brother – and not so that some know-it-all Christian might come along and entice him back into idolatry. Christ died for us while we were still weak (Rom 5:6); are we not able to change our diet for the weak? Christ identifies with the weaker brother, the brother who in knowledge is wrong, because the stronger brother, while correct in knowledge, is wrong in principle (vv12-13). He does not have the knowledge of Christ because he does not have the love of Christ.

Liberty with Love – Love is sacrificial and moves in the direction of giving oneself up for the other person. In our community, we must always recognize that our brother or sister is someone “*for whom Christ died.*”

Takeaways – First, our liberty is to be practiced like Christ, a liberty to love others and not a liberty for an arrogant attitude and behavior. Love as you would be loved, and love as Christ loves you – with great patience.

Second, this weakness is not to be confused with legalism. We may not force the weak brother to betray his conscience. However, we are not to give deference to our legalist brother who is attempting to set up standards which are higher than God’s which leads to another arrogance (Col 2:20-23).

Third, we must live in community as God lives in community, the three in one. Your love for your brother is love for Christ and your sin against your brother is a sin against Christ (Matt 25:31-46).

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