

Study 11: 1st Corinthians Chapter 8

Introduction

In this chapter, Paul continues answering the specific questions the Corinthians had asked. This chapter begins answering the fourth – concerning the eating of meat offered to idols. This was a really practical problem to the Corinthians, and one which must have caused them a great deal of angst.

Body of the Study

Background to the chapter

Why the discussion on knowledge?

Is there anything fundamentally wrong with the meat?

If there is nothing wrong with the meat, why shouldn't we eat it?

What should we do in such circumstances?

What are the consequences of this stumbling?

Applications to our situation today

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *Think through some examples and applications of what Paul said here, that apply in our society today.*
- *In what ways does our pride hinder us from influencing others for Christ? Think through some personal examples, pray about it, and ask God to help you work at self-improvement.*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read Chapter 9 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 11: Chapter 8

Introduction

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Body of the Study

Background to the chapter

Corinth was filled with temples to pagan gods, and it was inevitable that the meat that had been offered as a sacrifice to these idols would enter the market place. McGarvey says:

“... the sacrifices were daily and abundant. Part of the meat of these sacrifices went to the priests, part was burnt on the altar, and part was returned to the worshiper. The priests’ and the worshiper’s parts were frequently sold to the butchers, who in turn vended the same in the public markets. Such sacrificial meat was so plentiful, and was so indistinguishably mingled with other meats, that a Christian could hardly avoid using it altogether. He could not attend any of the public banquets, nor dine with his pagan friends or relatives, without being almost sure to eat such meat...”¹

This background is further expounded by Ramsay:

“...The ordinary sacrifice among the Greeks was not burned: only the inedible parts of the animal were given to the gods, while the useful meat was eaten. Much of the flesh that was set on the table in private houses, or that was exposed for sale in the market, had been cut from the sacrificial victims...”²

So, the Corinthians are presented with a practical problem, and one which is compounded by the decree sent out from the apostles in Jerusalem that they should “...*abstain from things offered to idols...*” (Acts 15:29; 21:25). We will discuss the decree later in the lesson. What are the Corinthians to do? And how scrupulous should they be in addressing the problem? What if the butcher tells them that the meat is OK, but it isn’t?

The Jews had developed a system to ensure that all of the meat that they ate was OK. It was certified by the Jewish butchers, and labelled as *Kosher*. The Jews would only eat such meat, and all other meat was regarded as unclean.

Why the discussion on knowledge?

Before addressing the answer to the question of the Corinthians, Paul puts them back in their box. They had (apparently) correctly asserted that their knowledge of God and the gospel meant that idols are nothing, and therefore the meat offered to idols was nothing. Their line of argument was carefully constructed so that they might obtain a positive answer from Paul.

Instead of building them up, their knowledge was puffing them up.

“In v. 1 Paul concedes that all Christians know--at least theoretically--the real meaning about the meat sacrificed to idols. But, he implies, there is something more--some may really feel that there is something wrong with that meat (v. 7). So he adds that the mere knowledge that there is nothing wrong with it inflates one to a level of false security and indifference. As a result, in dealing with this issue, love is necessary. Love takes one beyond himself to aid another; it builds up.

¹ McGarvey, JW “Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans” Gospel Light Publishing Co, Delight Arkansas; p 86-87.

² Ramsay, William “Historical Commentary on First Corinthians” ISBN 0-8254-3637-0 p. 89.

2 Paul warns against dependence on simply knowing something, since a person never knows all that ought to be known about a subject. Such an attitude exhibits a complete dependence on one's own self-sufficient knowledge and illustrates what Paul means by saying, "Knowledge puffs up [GK G5881]."

3 With the essential ingredient of love, knowledge is tempered and made the right kind of discerning and compassionate knowledge exhibited when one loves God. In loving God, a person shows that he is known by God--that God recognizes him as his own and that he had the right kind of knowledge, because he is exercising it in love to his fellow Christians and to God." (NIVBC)

The Corinthians needed to learn to temper their attitude towards others who might not have as strong an understanding as some of them. Paul will deal with this a bit later in the chapter.

Is there anything fundamentally wrong with the meat?

No! But Paul leads them on a journey to answer this question. The first part of the journey concerns the nature of the idols. Idols are nothing. They are not real – even though men may perceive them as such, and worship them as if they were real.

In the world there are many man-made gods – *so-called gods* and some of these supposedly live in the heavens, and some just live on the earth. In Corinth itself, there were at least 16 temples and shrines, whilst the wider Greek and Roman cultures had literally hundreds of gods.

In contrast, as Christians, we know that there is only one real God – the true and living God – the God of Abraham – Jehovah.

So, the idols can't do anything to the food that has been offered to them, and consequently there is absolutely nothing wrong with the meat. But that isn't the end of the problem, as Paul is about to show.

If there is nothing wrong with the meat, why shouldn't we eat it?

The problem is that not everyone has such a fundamental understanding of the situation (1:8:7). Some people *think* that there is something wrong with eating the meat that has been offered to idols, even though there really is nothing wrong with it.

This comes to the heart of the problem – that even though eating meat is not wrong in and of itself, if we *think* it is wrong to do it then we offend our conscience by eating – and therefore that alone makes it wrong. Paul says that by eating under such circumstances, "...*their conscience, being weak, is defiled...*" (1:8:7).

Like Romans chapter 14, Paul contrasts those who are *weak*, against those who he implies are strong (although the word strong isn't actually used here). The problem was the way in which the "*strong*" behaved towards the "*weak*". Their behaviour was prideful, and this attitude was (apparently) brought out in the question that they had asked Paul in their letter. Rather than being motivated by pride, they needed to be motivated by love – particularly love shown towards their "*weak*" brethren. Such love would require that they did not offend the consciences of the "*weak*" brethren by their actions (in eating meat) and their attitude of *knowledge* and *pride*.

What should we do in such circumstances?

The very simple answer is that we should abstain from eating meat which would cause a weaker brother to stumble. Consider the alternatives:

We abstain from eating the meat. We know that there is nothing wrong with the meat, and nothing wrong with eating it (*per se*), and we set an example to others for which we cannot be condemned. The *weaker* brethren (and probably some who are not brethren) see our example and note that we have convictions and we are prepared to live by them. Whilst some people might see our example as un-necessarily restrictive (some *strong*

brethren, and some people from outside of the church), yet we cannot be condemned for what we have done, nor for the example that we have set for others.

We eat the meat. We know that there is nothing wrong with the meat, and nothing wrong with eating it. *Weaker* brethren see what we are doing, and think that what we are doing is wrong, but they are not sure about it. So, they go ahead and eat the meat themselves *when they think that it is wrong*. We have led and influenced them to violate their consciences, which is sin. Other people from outside the church see us eating the meat, and not knowing any better, they think that what we are doing is sinful. They get the impression that we are hypocrites, and condemn us and the church. Our example and influence has led to a position of condemnation.

So, Paul sums up the position by saying that eating the meat will not make us a better person, and not eating the meat will not leave us any worse off (1:8:8). The key thing is that we make sure that our actions do not lead *weaker* brethren to stumble (1:8:9).

What are the consequences of this stumbling?

Note the strength of the language that Paul uses here (1:8:11-12), “...*weak brother to perish...sin against the brethren...sin against Christ...*” If that isn’t bad enough (and it is!) Paul adds that we might cause to perish the weak brother “...*for whom Christ died...*”

We must not underestimate the power of our actions and of the examples that we set for others. Paul sums up the position that we should take in the closing verse “...*Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble...*” (1:8:13 NKJV)

Paul has more to say on this issue in chapter 10. The apparent change of direction that he makes in chapters 9 and 10 are not un-related to the issue of pride that is apparent amongst the Corinthians.

Applications to our situation today

In our society, the eating of meat offered to idols is hardly a problem. But there are some principles here that Paul has laid out for us that we need to bear in mind and apply as rigorously as Paul would have the Corinthians apply them.

So, what are the principles?³

1. The Corinthians had knowledge that idolatry was wrong. That knowledge was based on their former *teaching*, and their *reason* (thinking through) together with that knowledge. Some of that teaching would have come from the apostles’ decree.
2. Their knowledge had led them to a prideful behaviour. They had taken a view of their brethren who would not participate that they were something of a lesser person because of their lack of knowledge. They were puffed up with pride, rather than love.
3. Their knowledge allowed some personal liberty. But that liberty in some situations would cause others to fall.
4. They needed to be ruled by love in order to guide that liberty. If they had a proper perspective of their love for others, the situation would never have arisen, and they would have been driven by the overwhelming desire to bring about good.
5. Their abuse of liberty would lead to sin. Whilst the eating meat offered to idols was not sinful in and of itself, it could bring about sin in the lives of others.
6. Conversely, the sacrificing of that liberty may save others.

³ Adapted from Bob Dickey, “Personal Liberty and the Brethren”; Florida College Lectures “Christ and Culture at Corinth” 1996

Some examples of our behaviours in today's society could include:

- Doing secular work on Sundays,
- Serving in the armed forces,
- Social drinking,
- Dancing,
- Gambling,
- Going to the Movies
- (and there are many many others!!!)

The question is, if we do these things (which may not be wrong in and of themselves), what example are we setting to others – both in and outside of the church? Like the eating of meat, we need to be very mindful of others, and if there is any doubt, then determine to refrain from these things.