

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

I COR. 8:1 Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.

2 And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.

3 But if any man love God, the same is known of him.

4 As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol *is* nothing in the world, and that *there is* none other God but one.

5 For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,)

6 But to us *there is but one* God, the Father, of whom *are all things*, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom *are all things*, and we by him.

7 Howbeit *there is* not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat *it* as a thing offered unto an idol;

and their conscience being weak is defiled.

8 But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse.

9 But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak.

10 For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols;

11 And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?

12 But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.

13 Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.

NOTES

Concern for a Weaker Brother

Lesson Text: I Corinthians 8:1-13

Related Scriptures: Matthew 25:31-46; Romans 14:1-23;
I Corinthians 10:23-33; Galatians 5:1-15

TIME: A.D. 55

PLACE: from Ephesus

GOLDEN TEXT—"Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend" (I Corinthians 8:13).

Lesson Exposition

LOVE IS GREATER THAN KNOWLEDGE—I Cor. 8:1-3

The issue of food (I Cor. 8:1). This letter from Paul to the Corinthians is actually a continuation of correspondence that had already been taking place between himself and some of the leaders of the church.

The eighth chapter begins with Paul considering a question raised concerning food, particularly meat, that had been offered to idols.

Meat that was sold in the marketplace and served at feasts and other social gatherings bore a strong likelihood of having been sacrificed in the temples to various pagan gods. This raised a serious question in the minds of some of the Christians in Corinth, who considered it a sin against God to eat food that had been offered to a false god. Not knowing how to handle this situation, they turned to Paul for guidance.

Paul points out that knowledge by itself "puffeth up." It can lead to arrogance and selfishness. Love, on the other hand, builds up and seeks the benefit of others. Knowledge without

love looks impressive at first, but it quickly becomes unattractive as the one who is puffed up uses his knowledge to tear down other believers rather than encourage them. Knowledge without love creates pride in a person, causing him to look down on those he considers ignorant.

The issue of knowledge (I Cor. 8:2-3). Have you ever thought you knew something, only to find out later that you were wrong? That has probably happened to everyone at some time or another, and it is never a good feeling. In fact, it is downright humbling.

The greatest knowledge is the knowledge of God. This is not just knowing about God but knowing Him personally. The greatest blessing of loving God is the fact that those who love Him are known by Him. The intellects of the world are sure to think we are foolish, but as we have already learned, the wisdom of the world is foolishness to God. It is much better to love God and be known by Him than to appeal to the ever-shifting theories and opinions of man.

LOVE IS GREATER THAN IDOLATRY—I Cor. 8:4-6

The emptiness of idols (I Cor. 8:4). Paul now turns his attention back to the issue of food offered to idols, but only after having established love as the proper context for the question.

Paul's knowledge that came from knowing God told him that idols were simply man-made objects with no authority. Christians agree that idols have no substance. Pagans, however, do not possess this knowledge, not because they are stupid, but because they do not love God. They are wrapped up in worship of false deities, which leads them away from the truth. Idols and false gods were merely figments of man's imagination.

There is only one God, and He has no rival or equal. Man has created a multitude of gods in his own image, but the one and only true God has made man in His image. A god made in the image of man is no god at all. It has no power, no authority, and no voice. It can do nothing. Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, has all power, all authority, and a voice that is heard through all places in all times by those who love Him.

The sovereignty of God (I Cor. 8:5-6). False claims of deity do not supplant God. There are many forms of gods and idols in the world today. The fact that other religions have their own gods or reject the existence of any god does not change the fact that there is only one true God.

Our Father God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe and all life, even those who reject Him. Everything and everyone owe their existence to Jesus, and all humans are accountable to God the Father and God the Son. God is sovereign over all things, even those who reject and hate Him.

LOVE IS GREATER THAN LIBERTY—I Cor. 8:7-13

Understanding fellow believers (I Cor. 8:7). Because not everyone loves God, not everyone possesses the knowledge that Paul has just described. Until Paul came along and planted the church in Corinth, paganism was the only thing they knew.

But the people Paul had in mind were Christians, so he knew they loved God. There was a subconscious issue at play here. Paul never condemned any of them for their hesitation. He was simply trying to teach the church the truth about their Christian freedoms in love.

It is easy to see how the Corinthians' past belief in the power of idols could still affect their consciences. They had genuinely trusted in Christ, but for many of them, eating food that had been offered to idols still felt like idolatry and was a great stumbling block to their newfound faith.

Many in the church today who have been strongly influenced by bad philosophy and wrong teaching struggle to walk away from what they have believed their whole lives. It takes time for the truth of the gospel to sink in and transform all areas of life.

Loving fellow believers (I Cor. 8:8-11). The most important thing here to Paul is not food. In fact, food was of little consequence to him. We are not more spiritual because we abstain from certain foods or less spiritual because we eat certain foods. Our diet does not bring us closer to God. To Paul, food—and the question that had been raised about it—was not the actual issue. He knew well enough that the people who ate the food in question were no worse off than those who abstained—and vice versa.

What was important to Paul was the way those with strong faith treated those with weaker faith. Some of the Corinthian Christians really

struggled with food offered to idols. Instead of pushing them to act on their liberties, Paul sternly instructed those who felt free to eat this meat not to become a stumbling block for a brother or sister whose faith was not as strong. We may exercise our Christian liberty, but what good is it if it damages another person's faith?

The knowledge we have in Christ should never be used as a weapon against weaker brothers or sisters. It is important to be patient with them, not denying the freedom we have in Jesus but not pushing them to violate their consciences, either.

I once knew a young man who had struggled with drugs and alcohol since he was a boy. He later became a Christian. Our group of friends took him in and invited him to every get-together we had. One of our favorite things was to meet and play games on Friday and Saturday nights. One game in particular, though, brought his thoughts and emotions back to his partying days, and he began to struggle with old habits.

There was nothing immoral or inappropriate about this game. It just brought back bad memories for him. Instead of telling him to get over it and that there was no need for him to feel that way, we put the game away and did not play it again. His faith was more important than the freedom we felt in playing it.

Caring for fellow believers (I Cor. 12-13). There is never an excuse to neglect loving another person. There is no question that we have freedom in Christ, but we must understand that everyone has a different level of maturity and understanding of spiritual things.

The world has influenced each of us in different ways, and we will not be free of the effects of sin on our minds and hearts until we reach heaven. Just because a brother may be "weak" in

one area never merits disrespect. In fact, if we judge them, it shows that we are weak in Christian love, which is even worse. People are all at different places in their walk with Christ.

Jesus does not love those who are mature more than others who seem to be lagging behind. This is not to say that God does not expect us to grow and mature, but He sets the pace for each of us, and we need to trust Him in that.

Preferring personal liberty over another person's soul is sin. Christian liberty should never be used in a selfish way. We should always be willing to help a weaker brother or sister.

—Robert Ferguson, Jr.

QUESTIONS

1. What was the main consideration Paul deals with in this chapter?
2. What is the main difference between knowledge and love?
3. What is the problem with having knowledge without love?
4. What is the greatest blessing of loving God?
5. What did Paul understand about idols that the pagans did not?
6. What is the main difference between the pagan "gods" and the one true God?
7. To whom do we owe our existence?
8. Why was eating food offered to idols such a stumbling block for some Christians in Corinth?
9. How do other people's weaknesses often show us our own weaknesses?
10. What does it sometimes cost us as Christians to help a brother or sister mature in faith?

—Robert Ferguson, Jr.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Unity in God's kingdom is built on love, not on pride in knowledge (I Cor 8:1).
2. God honors those whose lives are shaped by love for Him and His people (vss. 2-3).
3. The false gods of this world have only the power that men give them (vss. 4-5).
4. Believers find value and purpose in living for the one true God (vs. 6).
5. Mature believers help others grow in faith by choosing love over liberty (vss. 7-9).
6. Be aware that young Christians look to mature Christians for their examples (vss. 10-13).

—Cheryl Y. Powell.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. What risks do believers take when they rely on knowledge above other considerations?
2. How does a believer's love for God impact his or her approach to conflict with others? Discuss.
3. What Bible passages are often misinterpreted to suggest that there are other gods?
4. What responsibility do mature believers, who are more knowledgeable about Christian liberty, have toward those who are weaker in faith and knowledge? Discuss.
5. How can Christians avoid legalism (cf. Gal. 2:1-21; 5:1-14)? Why should we avoid legalism?

—Cheryl Y. Powell.

Golden Text Illuminated

“Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend” (I Corinthians 8:13).

The ancient Greeks and Romans worshipped a pantheon of gods, which included regular sacrifices to their patron deities.

Pagans who had converted to Christianity knew all about these heathen practices, rejecting anything to do with idols. Jews who had become believers also eschewed meat that had been sacrificed to pagan gods. This, of course, was deeply ingrained in their collective conscience.

Though Paul believed that an idol is not really any deity at all, he cautioned those who would violate the conscience of another for the sake of liberty.

Paul repeats this principle in Romans 14:1-4, warning Christians not to judge others over their eating preferences. In Galatians 5:13, the apostle writes that freedom in Christ is no excuse for provoking doubt or temptation in fellow believers.

Though Paul admits that he finds no food unclean, this does not mean he or anyone else has the right to violate someone else's conscience over such a matter.

Spiritual knowledge and Christian liberty are good things, but they should not be used to place a stumbling block in the path of a brother or sister in Christ. Paul admonished that such action is to sin against Christ Himself (I Cor. 8:12). We must be careful to temper our knowledge and liberty with the love of God.

—Mark Winter.