

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: miracles

Pray to the Lord your God and seek His love and His power to save. Focus on Christ's compassion for the sick, the poor, the lost, and all who needed Him most. Call on Him to show His miraculous power to heal and save.

For myself

Ask the Lord to bless your work this day. It may be straightforward or mundane, but that does not matter to the Lord as long as you are doing what He requires of you. Pray and reflect on these things.

For others

Lord God; the world is full of Your glory yet we do not see it, the world is full of potential but we do not use it, and the world is full of people who say they do not want you. Have mercy on us, and inspire us to do the work You have commissioned us to do, so that Your glory may be made known, the world's potential fulfilled and people be saved for all eternity. Thank You Lord God: AMEN

Meditation

I glory in everything You do for me, Lord Jesus
I find my true purpose in Your life.

You give me courage to endure life's struggles,
To refuse to be conquered by trouble.

You give me a heart to watch out for the needy,
Despite my more selfish inclinations.

You give me strength to stand firm in faith,
And apply my beliefs to what I do.

You give me love when heart and will are tested;
The ability to forgive when offended:

You give me the power to rise above the ordinary;
To do what is greater, for Your glory.

You give me real hope and vision for the future
I welcome Your return - Your Kingdom come!

I glory in everything about You, Lord Jesus,
For You do Your will through me!

Bible Passage

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

¹ Now, about the matter of food offered to idols: we know that 'all possess knowledge'; but where knowledge puffs up, instead, love builds up. ² Anyone who thinks he knows something does not yet know as much as he ought to know, ³ but if someone loves God then he will be known by Him.

⁴ So, about the eating of food sacrificed to idols; we know that there is no idol in the world that truly exists, and there is no God except one. ⁵ Even if there are so-called 'gods' in heaven or on earth like the many 'gods' and 'lords' there are, ⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things exist and in whom we exist, and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things exist and through whom we exist.

⁷ However, not everyone knows this. Some, until now, are so accustomed to idols that they eat assuming the food has been offered to idols, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸ Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.

⁹ Take care, however, lest this liberty of yours somehow becomes a stumbling block to those who are weak. ¹⁰ If anyone sees you who have this knowledge eating in the temple of an idol, will not he whose conscience is weak be emboldened to eat what has been offered to idols? ¹¹ So through your knowledge, this weak fellow believer is destroyed! A person for whom Christ has died! ¹² When you sin in this way against your fellow believers and wound their weakened consciences, you sin against Christ!

¹³ So if food is a reason for my fellow believer to stumble, I will never eat meat in this age, lest I make my fellow believer stumble.

Review

This is not a passage from which people readily quote! Discussions of meat offered to idols seem rather arcane, even if we can find a few purple passages. Two of the best texts are, 'knowledge puffs up, instead, love builds up' (8:1), and the classic; 'yet for us there is one God, the Father ... and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things exist ...' (8:6). There is obvious teaching here, mainly about the supremacy of love over knowledge, and the uniqueness of Christ in God. But we cannot understand this passage without looking at why Paul says these things in a discussion about eating meat! This means delving into first century culture again, and the difficult Christians experienced in getting hold of meat to eat!

The meat supply chain

The issue is simple. In those days, everyone regarded the taking of life as sacred; this was true of Jew, Christian and nearly all others, and all available meat had been slaughtered in sacrifice to one or other god, mostly to the Roman gods, of whom there were many. Jews had rules for doing this by which meat was both offered to God but also made available for people to eat (see Leviticus 1-4), and while first century pagan worship made similar provisions, the Roman gods to which most animals were dedicated when slaughtered were all very different to the God of the Jews! A man named Pausanias who travelled across Greece in the first century describes the square in Corinth as a meat market surrounded by temples! The gods worshipped were Dionysius, Artemis, Bacchus, Zeus and at least seven others, all involving rituals by which animals were slaughter and then supplied to the meat trade!

So then, where could a Christian get hold of acceptable meat when everything available had been sacrificed to foreign gods? There were no Christian butchers, and many centuries would pass before Paul's teaching took hold within the Roman Empire, and the connection between ritual sacrifice and meat supply was broken! First century Christians had the option of either getting their meat from Jewish butchers, where they were often not welcomed, of not eating meat at all, or of ignoring their scruples and getting it as supplied by the pagan temples! For early Christians this was a very real problem, and Paul grapples with it not just here, but elsewhere (Romans 14).

How Christians dealt with the problem

Significantly, you may recall that when Paul gained permission from the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) for his mission to the Gentiles, the apostles famously wrote a letter to all Gentiles granting them freedom to live

outside of the ritual laws of Judaism. It was a landmark ruling which defined the church; but attached to this was a requirement that they refrain from eating meat offered to idols (Acts 15:29)! The phrase was probably added to appease Jewish Christians who were suspicious of Paul's Gentile mission.

Many years later, as churches grew across the Roman world and their connections with Judaism were thin, the issue was still alive. How could Christians get meat? It was a hot potato issue, and Paul now famously offers advice that shows he is ready to ignore the earlier rules of the Jerusalem declaration! Today's passage is the first of a series of issues to do with Christian living in a pagan world, and this is the first issue on his list! We must now extract the principles he advocates, do our best to understand why he gives this advice, and then see if we can apply these principles to the 'hot potato' issues of our day.

What gods? Do they really exist for someone who believes in Jesus?

Paul begins the passage powerfully by attacking those who deal with the difficult moral issues of Christian life with arrogant insensitivity; he says, *'where knowledge puffs up, instead, love builds up'* (8:1). This is easily said, but what does it mean, and does Paul himself have a more tolerant and understanding approach? We will perhaps remember from earlier studies that Paul is not merely anti-intellectual (1 Cor 1,2), for he often urges God's people to use their minds (Romans 12:1, 1 Cor 14:14), and later on, he calls for God's people to show love in handling all things (1 Cor 13). Here, he warns the Corinthians against those who claim to have the right answers to difficult problems and look down on those who disagree; he accuses them of being *'puffed up'*, using a word which comes from the Greek for *'arrogance'*. Paul will not have people who claim superior knowledge harming the church by arrogance, and offers God's love as a better guide to the complexities of everyday life.

Paul then agrees with the Corinthians that no other 'gods' exist; *'there is no idol in the world that truly exists'* (8:4), so then logically, eating animals sacrificed to them is of no particular consequence! He might also add that if they do not exist then he is not exactly contravening the Jerusalem declaration (see above)! To support what he says here, he refers to a classic statement of faith used by the early church to proclaim the unique authority of God as Creator, and the lordship of Christ, *'yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things exist and in whom we exist, and there is one Lord Jesus Christ ...'* (8:6).

Take care

The problem, as he then says, is that people had come to faith from a pagan world in which they previously believed in all manner of gods, and some had not yet grasped the true magnitude of God's unique status in Jesus Christ; he says, *'not everyone knows this'* (8:7). Being socially accustomed to the idea of 'gods', some Corinthian Christians felt that eating food offered in sacrifice was like defiling their new-found faith, and we can imagine that this would be a great problem for them!

What then should be done? To begin with we should not fall into the trap of intellectualism and presume that every Christian must surely and automatically 'get' the whole truth about God and live by it, as Paul has already pointed out (8:1,2 - see above). He suggests caution; *'take care, lest this liberty of yours somehow becomes a stumbling block to those who are weak'* (8:9). This itself is a pastoral word calling on all God's people to care for one another wherever our walk of faith has taken us.

Handling fellow believers of 'weaker faith'

Paul then makes an interesting point that he will eventually use in even more circumstances than the one we are considering here. His final argument is essentially that the serious and fully informed believer who has no surplus about eating meat should not use the liberty so possessed to offend other believers, even though technically, their faith is indeed *'weak'* (8:10-12). He then pictures a scenario in which a believer, weakened by inadequate belief in the uniqueness of God, sees another Christian eating meat offered to idols and does the same out of a misplaced sense of needing to fit in rather than a full appreciation of the nature of God (8:11). In this way, the weaker believer 'is destroyed' through being led astray rather than being blessed through liberation into the truth; Paul says, *'so through your knowledge (about the uniqueness of God), this weak fellow believer is destroyed!'* (8:11). Paul will not have anyone in the church either saying or doing anything that is a *'stumbling block'* (8:13) to other believers. He condemns such arrogance with damning words similar to those said by Jesus (Matt 18:6,7). Altogether, this is a complex argument and one that many find debatable.

It is surely a supreme spiritual gift on the one hand to hold and treasure the supreme truths of the Gospel of God, and on the other hand to be open-hearted towards those who have yet not grasped these things or

applied them in their lives. But as Paul says, the church must never be a place where those who are blessed with knowledge rule with arrogance, whether this is deliberately or perceived. There are no easy answers to the 'hot potato' issues of our day, but Paul offers us good guidance about how to deal with them, and the clue is found at the beginning of this passage, where he says '*love builds up*' (8:1). He will say more about this at the climax of this letter in chapter 13!

Discipleship

Application

Where knowledge fails ...

To begin with we should not fall into the trap of intellectualism and presume that every Christian must surely 'get' the entire truth about God all in one and live by it. To think this makes us like those puffed up with knowledge, who do not understand that all Christians, once saved, journey towards God's deeper truths. For example, there are Christians today who live together before marriage because they do not know Biblical teaching on marriage. Others will not use the name 'Father' when speaking of God because it raises terrible memories of their own fathers, and they have yet to be helped to find their true Father in the God they already believe in. You may think of other examples; but be careful not to condemn others!

Some of the greatest preachers know very well that to proclaim the truth will make some people in the church rejoice, but will feel deeply threatening to those who are seeking. Those who are wise will pray, and measure to whom they speak, knowing that truth can make some walk away who might with an appropriate and godly word be drawn towards the light of the Gospel. For this reason, I believe passionately that there are deep connections between the preaching of the Gospel and pastoral care in the church. The pastor who preaches also counsels people towards the light.

Is it right to ignore the truth?

Some might read this passage and my assessment, and protest that the truth is becoming buried in sensitivity! Not so. By His Holy Spirit, God's way has always been to convict and draw people to the truth. Even when people respond to the Gospel and are saved in a moment, a pathway of discipleship and sanctification (becoming more like Jesus) awaits them, and we are ALL on that pathway until the Lord comes, make no mistake. Paul wanted the Corinthian 'weak' Christians to be accepted by the church, not led astray or condemned by those who knew better. He assumed they would be accepted and led in discipleship to discover the life changing truths of the Faith, guarded and passed on through the generations by the church. The same is true today.

Ideas for what to do

- *Examine yourself as to whether your own fervour for the truth has become a stumbling block to others. Pray for God's wisdom.*
- *Write down a list of hot potato issues that cause difficulties within the church, and cause many to be somewhat arrogant about the truths of the Gospel, to the detriment of the church*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *Discuss some hot potato issues such as those mentioned in this study. See if you can come to agree on godly advice about them.*
2. *What does this passage teach us about the church and our sensitivity to one another?*
3. *In what ways do we put stumbling blocks in front of potential believers today?*

Final Prayer

Lord God, You know our weaknesses. You can lead us out of them to places of greater safety where our trust in You is rewarded. Lead us on, dear Father, and bring us into the safety of Your Kingdom, we pray. **AMEN**