

It Doesn't Matter If You're Right

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1 Corinthians 8:1-13 — Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by God. Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth--as in fact there are many gods and many masters--yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. "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. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

I imagine that most Christians, if they were to stumble upon this passage of Scripture on their own, they'd read this first line, "Now, concerning food sacrificed to idols..." and they'd pause and think, "Huh. That's weird. Well, guess that doesn't apply to me!" and then they'd move on and find another passage to read. But actually, if we're talking about the life of the church and how we as Christians should relate to each other, I don't think there's a more relevant passage in Scripture, or a more challenging message, than what we have here in 1 Corinthians 8.

Ever have one of those arguments where you realize, at the end, that you both lost? Ever get super annoyed by someone who just...doesn't...get it? Ever feel like you're being pressured to give up something, which you know that you have every right to have, for the sake of something that seems stupid? The Apostle Paul is speaking to all of this, and more, when he writes this passage to the ancient church in Corinth. But in order to understand what Paul is saying, we've got to talk a bit about the cultural context in which he is writing.

So, what's up with this food sacrificed to idols thing? Well, Corinth was a big city in ancient Greece, and in such cities there were temples, where Greek gods were celebrated like heroes, and Greek heroes were celebrated like gods, and Greek culture as a whole was essentially worshipped. Now, in these temples, animals were regularly sacrificed, and thus lots of meat was made. People could come to the temples and enjoy a meal of meat there, or they could buy the meat in the local markets. Because there was a lot of money behind these temples and their

rituals, the meat that came out of them was quite gourmet—maybe we could call it the Toscano’s of ancient Corinth.

Now, the church in this city was made up of both Jewish Christians and Greek Christians. Jewish Christians, like Paul, would not have spent too much time in those Greek temples, for Jews and Christians alike celebrated only one God, and the heroes of the ancient Greek and Roman empires were certainly not heroes to the Jewish minority population. Greek Christians, on the other hand, had joined Christianity after being fully immersed in Greek ways of life. They had worshipped in those temples, they had celebrated those gods and those heroes, they had been at home in the culture of the empire.

Now, both Greek Christians and Jewish Christians knew a good piece of meat when they saw one. All of them, whatever their cultural background, would enjoy eating the meat that was sold in the temples and in the markets. But the question arose: Can Christians, whether Jew or Greek, consume something that comes from a non-Christian ritual? Are we Christians violating our faith when we eat meat that has been dedicated to non-Christian gods, to idols? That’s the question Paul is addressing in our passage, and his answer comes in two parts.

Part one is, essentially, “It’s no big deal.” God is not offended, Paul says, when you eat meat that comes from these temples. Why? Because the Greek gods and heroes that these temples celebrate don’t actually have a hold on the lives of Christians. We profess allegiance to the one true God, Paul writes, and these other objects of adoration—whether they are gods, humans, or cultural values—aren’t significant for us. The one true God is our one object of true worship, and so long as that’s the case, Paul says, you’re free to eat the good meat. Go ahead—go to Toscano’s.

Sounds pretty simple—and reasonable enough, right? But part two of Paul’s answer complicates things. See, Paul knows that he, as a Jewish Christian, doesn’t have a lot of baggage when it comes to these temples. Again, he hasn’t spent much time in them, and so his faith is such that eating a meal in them, or eating a meal that comes from them, isn’t a big deal for him, or for other Jewish Christians. But Greek Christians, on the other hand, were accustomed to these spaces and had previously bought into their rituals and messages. For them, Paul knows, returning to those temples, even just for a meal, might tempt them to fall back into old habits. Even just eating meat that came from those temples could revive their old allegiances to things other than the one true God.

In light of this, although part one of Paul’s answer is “It’s not a big deal,” part two is “but don’t do it anyway.” Paul writes, “Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol.” Paul calls this a weakness among some Greek Christians, and so when other, more enlightened Christians, who are less susceptible to this temptation, when they eat meat in the temples, or eat meat that comes from the temples, they are acting as a stumbling block to the weak, Paul says. Listen again to the last two verses of the passage: “When you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when

it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.”

You can imagine the protests: “But you said it’s no big deal, Paul! God doesn’t actually care if I eat this meat! Why should I have to give up something that I enjoy, because these other people, who are *wrong*, have a hard time with it?” To which Paul responds: “It doesn’t matter if you’re right. What matters is that you care for your siblings in Christ—and particularly that you care for those who are weak, in various ways.” According to Paul, if you’re faced with a choice between being loving and being right, each of us should be loving.

Now, before we close, let me suggest a modern parallel by way of a personal confession. Growing up, my mom had a pretty strict list of words that we, her children, were not supposed to use. In fact, I’ve already used one of them this morning: “stupid.” So, sorry, Mom. You can imagine how she felt about “curse words.” And when I was growing up, the two churches that I attended felt similarly. I was taught that God commands us in the Bible not to curse, and sure, by the time you’re in high school, it seems like everyone is doing it, and it’s no big deal, but make no mistake, I learned: you speak this word or that word, and you are committing a serious sin.

I didn’t really think twice about that until I got to college and started taking classes in biblical studies. I learned there that when the Bible’s authors wrote things like, “Do not curse,” they actually meant don’t use hateful speech, don’t use words as weapons; they didn’t mean don’t ever utter this or that specific word. There is no list of banned words in the Bible—and even if there were, they’d be words in an ancient, dead language, with no easy one-to-one correspondence to modern English.

And speaking of modern English, it changes. You all know this: the meanings of words in our language (and in other languages) can change drastically and fairly quickly. There are words that, today, no one thinks of as being “bad” or “dirty,” but go back just 50 years, and you better believe they were. And conversely, there are words that lots of people find offensive today, for various reasons, but those words were perfectly normal a few decades ago. The meanings of words, and their effects on people, change. And thus, I concluded while in college, there is no such thing as an *inherently* bad or dirty word; there are just words that, at this particular time and in this particular place, society has deemed indecent to use. At the end of the day, then, “curse words” aren’t about what God wants. They’re about what society wants, about what social respectability demands. And to be frank, friends, as an openly gay man who grew up in the South, where it was not respectable, and it was even condemnable, to be who I am—I don’t necessarily have all that much respect for what people tell me is respectable.

At some point in college, then, I decided that, as far as I’m concerned, God simply doesn’t care about “curse words.” Now, God does care when we use words as weapons—even if that word is “stupid.” But I don’t believe that God is inherently offended by *any* particular word in your or my vocabulary.

All of that said, if I'm going to follow Paul's advice in this passage, then I'm going to respect the fact that many of my fellow Christians think differently. Many of them feel like their faith is offended or violated when they speak or even when they hear certain words, and my duty as a Christian is to not be a stumbling block for them. So, personally, my goal is to not use curse words, unless I know that those words aren't a stumbling block to those around me—because it's not about being right; it's about being loving.

Friends, none of us are eating food that's been sacrificed to idols anymore. But are we doing other things that may cause our siblings to stumble? Have we developed habits in speech or in action that may injure our fellow Christians? And are we clinging to those habits because we have a right to do so, without regard to the people who are habits might be hurting? When each of us is faced with a choice between being loving and being right, may the Spirit help us to be loving. Amen.