

First Corinthians

March 16, 2025

Chapter 8

The Matters of Idolatry

“Saints, Be Careful!”

To this point in the letter, Paul has dealt with division, immorality, and marriage matters in the Church. Now, it is time for Paul to deal with idolatry matters.

C. Idolatry Matters (8:1-13)

1. Knowledge vs Love (8:1-2)

Paul tells us that idolatry matters, but he also tells us how we must react to it. He does this by comparing knowledge to love, Chapter 8, verse 1.

¹Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. ²If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; ³but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.

What does Paul mean when he says, “*we know that we all have knowledge*” concerning things sacrificed to idols? Paul will explain what he means in verses 4 and 5 below. However, he introduces the thought by comparing knowledge vs love in the Church. Let us remember that Paul is directing this letter to the saints in Corinth, a terribly troubled Church with many disturbing matters going on. Here is just another one of those disturbing matters. Evidently, Chloe’s communication had indicated that division over “*things sacrificed to idols*” is a major point of contention in the Church. Evidently, those who knew the truth about idols were, in some way, harshly speaking towards the saints who did not completely understand the knowledge. Paul does not say it directly, but with his words, he implies that those saints who knew the truth about idols were harming, maybe even sinning, with how they responded to the “*things sacrificed to idols*” issue. How can it be a sin?

There are about two dozen words translated in English as “sin” in the Bible, depending on how you count. Each underscores a different aspect of sin—sin as wandering away from the straight path, sin as rebellion, and sin as a distortion of our nature, to name a few. We ought to contemplate these words—not to wallow in despair—but so that we might especially guard ourselves against the many ways we can stray from God and the good life He intends for us. He wants us to be as far away from sin as possible.

The Hebrew word *asham* and the Greek word *parabaino* indicate it can be a sin to *overstep the intended mark*. We all have heard that sin is *missing the mark*, but that is just one aspect of sin. In this case, these two words can refer to what happens after hitting the mark. In this example, *hitting the mark* is not a sin. But what happens after we *hit the mark* may be a sin. Here is an example of how this sin occurs. You have your bow and arrow and a red and white target set up in your backyard. You aim. You let the arrow fly. It hits dead center of the target. You have hit the target with a perfect, sinless shot. No sin has occurred to this point. But now we will tell how this single sinless shot can become a sin. When the arrow pierced the target, it continued to fly into the yard behind yours and killed the neighbor’s dog. With the sling of your arrow, you have trespassed your neighbor’s yard and destroyed your innocent neighbor’s property. You have sinned. You have flown past the intended mark. This explanation will become extremely important as we move

through this chapter and clarify why Paul considers the *knowledge concerning idols* can result in sinful behavior against those who do not know the *knowledge concerning idols*.

When Paul says, “*Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies*,” he is concerned that knowing the truth can harm others if that truth is not delivered lovingly. Proverbs 10:12 tells us that *love covers all sins*. 1 Peter 4:8 repeats that thought, saying that *love covers a multitude of sins*. Therefore, Paul wants all truth to be delivered in *love*, not in an arrogant way: *I am better than you and know more than you do*. With that, Paul says, “*Knowledge makes arrogant*.” Of all people, Paul would know from personal experience that “*Knowledge makes arrogant*.” He had all the knowledge of truth when he was a Pharisee, yet he was one of the most arrogant persons in the Bible, proclaiming and pursuing that truth in hate, not love. In addition, the truth of Paul’s knowledge was misused against the saints while he was a Pharisee. As he wrote this letter to Corinth, his feathers had been singed, his presentation of his knowledge had been tested by fire, his own words had burned him, and he had learned that speaking truth in a real loving way was the way to bring down the innocent and ignorant barriers to build up the immature saints to maturity.

Then Paul said, “*If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him*.” Paul means that knowing without love is only partial knowledge. It may be the whole knowledge on a subject, but how you use it depends on how you dispense it to others. It may fail if it is not used in a Godly, loving way. But if it is used in a loving, Godly way, not only will it be accepted as coming from God, but you, as the messenger, will also be accepted as a saint of God.

Paul will now speak of the knowledge of truth concerning things sacrificed to idols.

a) Knowledge of Truth (8:4-6)

⁴ *Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.* ⁵ *For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords,* ⁶ *yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.*

Paul makes three points in this passage. Point 1: idols are not gods; only God is God. Point 2: men have made up so-called gods living in heaven and on earth, but they are fabricated. Point 3: men have carved, cast, or molded the idols they have fabricated to worship them, but they are no gods at all. With these points, Paul is simply informing the saints in Corinth of the state of religious beliefs in the world at the time of his life. Nothing has changed since Noah and his descendants were separated at the tower of Babel, and nothing will change in the world after Paul dies.

Point 1: Idols are not gods; only God is God. Here, Paul is acknowledging what the mature saints already know. They know *no other real gods exist* except the one true God. All other fabricated gods do not exist. Therefore, any meat sacrificed to some fabricated idol of a non-existent god means absolutely nothing. A fabricated idol cannot accept, bless, or approve of the meat offered. The offering of the meat to that fabricated idol does not spoil the meat. It is still meat that all can eat.

Point 2: Men have made up so-called gods living in heaven and on earth, but they are fabricated. The creation of so-called gods is purely the fabricated creation of created beings, not God. These so-called gods are strictly imaginary, fabricated in the minds of men, but they do not exist anywhere in the universe. Because they do not exist, they have no power, authority, right, or influence.

Point 3: Men have carved, cast, or molded the idols they have fabricated to worship them, but they are no gods at all. When Paul says, “*For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords,*” he is only admitting that across the world, man-made idols have been carved, cast or molded, and are on view for all to see. However, they are not real gods. They have no power.

Now, Paul will explain that there is a knowledge of ignorance among many people who do not know the truth.

b) Knowledge of Ignorance (8:7-8)

7 However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. 8 But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.

The key phrase in Paul’s sentence is “*but some, being accustomed to the idol until now.*” With this, Paul addresses three classifications of new saints in the Church. The first class consists of those who have emerged from the practice of eating food sacrificed to idols, as this was part of the idol worship process. The second class includes new Jewish saints who reject anything associated with idols. The third class comprises mature saints who understand that meat offered to idols holds no significance; it is merely food, sufficient for sustaining the body. A review of the commentaries reveals that the differences between these three classes in the Corinthian Church are frequently overlooked; they often neglect to mention these distinctions. Newly converted Gentile saints, particularly in Greece and Rome, were idol worshippers who participated in eating meat sacrificed in the worship of man-made gods. Upon interacting with mature saints, they recognized the errors of their previous actions. Therefore, they believed it was wrong to purchase meat sacrificed to idols in the godless temples, which was subsequently sold in the markets for temple income. They feared that consuming such meat would be equivalent to continuing the worship of those false gods. This concern is evident as Paul states, “*and their conscience being weak is defiled.*” Additionally, new Jewish saints were completely opposed to any contact with idol meat. Both groups needed education in the truth to grow as saints in the Church and to alleviate their self-condemnation regarding the purchase of meat in the market to support their families. While idol worship is wrong and sinful, buying meat in a market that may have been offered to an idol is not sinful. Paul underscores this point by stating, “*But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.*”

However, with that understanding, all mature saints must be cautious not to flaunt their knowledge inappropriately in front of newly converted saints who may still have concerns about aspects of their previous religious life or beliefs. Paul will now encourage the knowledgeable, mature saints in Corinth to be mindful of their liberty as saints of God so they do not become stumbling blocks for new, unknowing saints.

(1) Careful in Your Liberty (8:9-11)

9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

When Paul refers to the “*weak*” affectionately, he is not labeling the new saints as ignorant; he is simply recognizing that they are just lacking in their understanding of the truth. To illustrate this, Paul discusses what the weak might believe.

(a) What the Weak May Think (8:10)

10 For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?

Mature saints must be cautious about their actions, locations, and visibility to the lost and new converts to the LORD. New converts, who were once habitual idol worshippers, might assume that locations where they see saints are not sinful. Furthermore, former Jews observing mature saints in the same places may perceive them as insincere, sinful individuals. When Paul asks, “*if he is weak, should he be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?*” he points out that eating such things is not inherently sinful. The sin lies in participating in the worship associated with the meat. Gentile saints would soon face this reality after joining the Church, while Jews were aware of it beforehand. Paul is concerned that a *weak* saint might see mature saints consuming meat sacrificed to idols and encourage new Gentile saints to revert to idol worship, thinking there is nothing wrong with the practice since eating the meat seems permissible. This situation would scandalize new Jewish saints and raise questions about the integrity of the mature saints.

With that, Paul warns of what the weak may become.

(b) What the Weak May Become (8:11)

“¹¹ For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died.

In this context, Paul is not worried about the mature saints instructing the new saints of either class in true knowledge, but he is concerned about the new saints of either class witnessing the actions of the mature saints without receiving instruction in the truth. Without guidance, the new saints' maturity will suffer, regardless of which class they entered in the Church. The text uses the word “*brother*” instead of “*brethren*” in this verse, indicating that Paul’s concern was primarily for the new Gentile converts in this passage. However, Paul will address his concern about the Jewish “*brethren*” next in a similar manner.

With that, Paul reaches out to the saints to tell them to be careful in their witness to all new converts.

(2) Careful in Your Witness (8:12-13)

“¹² And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.

This brings us to why I addressed the issue of how we can align ourselves with the truth of Godly knowledge, ensuring we do not sin by misrepresenting that knowledge due to a lack of love in our presentation. (See 8:1). Paul explicitly mentions that the saints can also be “*sinning against the [Jewish] brethren.*” His concern extends to the Gentile “*brothers*” in verse 11, while in verse 12, he focuses on the Jewish “*brethren*.” The perspectives of the two groups are starkly opposed. Mature saints find themselves in a difficult position; it’s a no-win scenario for them. If they partake in meat sacrificed to idols, both the weak Gentile saints and the weak Jewish saints are offended for entirely different reasons. What should a mature saint do? Paul provides an answer when he states,

“Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.”

Clearly, Paul is going to eat meat again. With this statement, Paul implies that he will never eat meat unless he is certain it has had no contact with idols whatsoever.

With this conversation, Paul must have realized that those in Corinth might think he had crossed a theological boundary with God. The Gentiles would not be concerned about this, but the Jews would be. Consequently, the Holy Spirit guided Paul to address matters of Apostleship in the Church, specifically his own seal of Apostleship.