

# On Idolatry and Loving Others (1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

Expository Lessons from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

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## I. Review from the Prior Lessons and Introduction to the Topic

- a. After addressing the subject of division in the church, Paul tackled issues related to a specific problem with sexual immorality.
- b. After that, he looked more broadly at issues pertaining to married and single life as a Christian.
- c. In **1 Corinthians chapter 8**, Paul now turns his attention to another problem in the church: eating meat sacrificed to idols.
  - i. Idolatry had been a major stumbling block to the Jews from the time they left Egypt, until their captivity in Babylon.
    1. They spent hundreds of years in Egypt, a land given over to worshiping other gods and to pagan idolatry.
    2. Shortly after departing Egypt, Aaron and the Israelites get involved in idolatry, making the golden calf while Moses is up on Mount Sinai. (**Exodus 32**)
  - ii. Idolatry remained a widespread problem in the pagan, Gentile world, including in Corinth.
- d. While you may be tempted to think this topic has little relevance to your life, if you put in the effort to understand this issue around idolatry, you might be surprised by some very practical applications for Christians today!

## II. Overview of the Problem

- a. Read **1 Corinthians 8:1-13**.
- b. **Question:** What is the specific problem that Paul was addressing here?
  - i. Some of the members of the church had no problem with eating "things offered to idols". (**1 Corinthians 8:4**) They were even eating these meals "in an idol's temple" (**1 Corinthians 8:10**)
  - ii. This was bothering the consciences of those who were "weak", leading them to go against their own consciences and to sin, potentially to their destruction.

- i. It appears that the food sacrificed to idols was (or included) meat, based on Paul's concluding remark, "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." (**1 Corinthians 8:13**)
- c. John Chrysostom (lived 347-407 AD; bishop of Constantinople) gave a series of expository sermons on **1 Corinthians**. He discussed this text in his *Homily No. 20 on 1 Corinthians*.
  - i. Chrysostom understood Paul's statement that *some "had knowledge"* to mean that some understood from Jesus' teaching (such as in **Matthew 15**) that eating food does not defile a person.
    - 1. When challenged about his disciples eating with unwashed hands, Jesus replied:
      - a. "Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." (**Matthew 15:11**, NKJV)
      - b. "And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.)" (**Mark 7:18-19**, ESV)
  - ii. Apparently, there were some in the church who had this knowledge that food we eat does not contaminate us spiritually (and also perhaps understanding that other 'gods' don't really exist). They had no problem eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. However, that was causing their weaker brothers, who did not have that level of spiritual knowledge (or perhaps had been involved in related pagan practices before becoming Christians) to violate their consciences and thereby sin.
    - 1. These Christians Paul was referring to may have had spiritual knowledge (which is not a bad thing!), however, they lacked love for their weaker brothers.
    - 2. We will return to the significance of this statement by Paul later in this message.
- d. In the first message in this expository series on **1 Corinthians**, we considered some primary source material from ancient Corinth, including information cited in Bruce Terry's doctoral dissertation on a linguistic and cultural analysis of **1 Corinthians**. Excerpts from that dissertation follow.

- i. "It was common in worshipping certain Greek gods for the devotee to share the sacrifice with the god and invite his or her friends to eat the worshiper's portion at a banquet, often in the temple of the god.
- ii. "The orator Aristides relates a dream that he had in which the god Asclepius commanded, 'After this to go to the Temple and make a full sacrifice to Asclepius, and to have sacred bowls set up, and to distribute the sacred portions of the sacrifice to all my fellow pilgrims' (Sacred Tales 2.27).
- iii. "There was a temple of Asclepius near the gymnasium in Corinth (Pausanias Description of Greece, Corinth 4.5).
- iv. "In addition, on the road to the Acrocorinthus were temples to Isis and Sarapis (Pausanias Description of Greece, Corinth 4.6), who also were worshiped with meals in their temples.
- v. "Fee (1987, 361) notes that there survive today at least thirteen papyrus invitations to cult meals. Papyrus invitations that have survived, to dine at such temple banquets, include:
  1. "...(4) Chaeremon asks you to dine at a table of the lord Sarapis in the Sarapian [temple] tomorrow, which is the 15th, from the 9th hour (P. Oxy. 110).
  2. "(5) Apollonius asks you to dine at a table of the lord Sarapis on the occasion of the coming of age of his brothers in the Thoerian [temple] (P. Oxy. 1484).
  3. "(6) Apion asks you to dine in the house of Sarapis at a table of the lord Sarapis on the 13th from the 9th hour (P. Oxy. 1755).
  4. "(7) Diogenes asks you to dine at the first birthday of his daughter in the Sarapian [temple] tomorrow, which is well-spread [pacwn, a variant (?) of pacewn 'thick'; cf. Liddell-Scott 1968, 1351], from the 9th hour (P. Oxy. 2791).
  5. "(8) The god invites you to a table in the Thoerian [temple] tomorrow from the 9th hour (P. Colon 2555).
  6. "(9) Sarapis asks you to dine at the sacred offering for the lady Isis in her [or, his] house tomorrow, which is the 29th, from the 9th hour (P. Fouad 76)."
    - a. (Source: *An Analysis of Certain Features of Discourse in the New Testament Book of 1 Corinthians*, chapter 2.4; PhD dissertation of Ralph Bruce Terry, University of Texas at Arlington, May 1993)

- b. Link: [https://bterry.com/dissertation/2\\_4-aspects.htm](https://bterry.com/dissertation/2_4-aspects.htm)
- e. Therefore, we can see from these ancient records that it was popular to have feasts and social gatherings (birthday parties, etc.) at various pagan temples.
- f. We see that Paul ran into problems with idolatry in his travels to spread the gospel into pagan lands. He and the other apostles addressed it many times in their letters to the churches.
  - i. Paul in Athens.
    1. “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.” (**Acts 17:16**, NKJV)
    2. “Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: *God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.*
    3. “And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’
    4. “Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the *Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent*, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.” (**Acts 17:22–31**, NKJV)
  - ii. Paul in Ephesus.
    1. “And about that time there arose a great commotion about the Way. For a certain man named *Demetrius, a silversmith, who*

*made silver shrines of Diana*, brought no small profit to the craftsmen. He called them together with the workers of similar occupation, and said: 'Men, you know that we have our prosperity by this trade. Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this *Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands*. So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship.' Now when they heard this, they were full of wrath and cried out, saying, 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians!' So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theater with one accord, having seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians, Paul's travel companions." (**Acts 19:23–29**, NKJV)

iii. Paul to the church in Rome.

1. He pointed to idolatry as the first step of mankind rejecting God and sinking into all kinds of depravity.
2. Read **Romans 1:18-27**.
3. Many early Christian writers, including Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian, saw idolatry as a major 'gateway sin' closely associated with and leading to sexual depravity, lying, and all sorts of other degrading sins.

iv. Various other letters from Paul, Peter and John.

1. Paul, to the Thessalonians: "For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." (**1 Thessalonians 1:9**, NKJV)
2. Peter: "For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, *and abominable idolatries*. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you." (**1 Peter 4:3–4**, NKJV)
3. The final charge in John's first letter: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen." (**1 John 5:21**, NKJV)

### III. Memorable Words from Clement of Alexandria Regarding Idolatry

- a. Clement was bold and direct in addressing the subject of idolatry with the pagans. His logic and sarcasm come through as he exposes their foolishness and superstitious ways. The following quotes are taken from his *Exhortation to the Heathen*, chapter 4; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, pp. 184-189:
  - i. “If, in addition, I take and set before you for inspection these very images, you will, as you go over them, find how truly silly is the custom in which you have been reared, of worshipping the senseless works of men’s hands...” (He then goes on to discuss various ancient customs of idolatry and worshiping other gods, in various nations) (p. 184)
  - ii. “...hear at least your own philosopher, the Ephesian Heraclitus, upbraiding images with their senselessness: ‘And to these images they pray, with the same result as if one were to talk to the walls of his house.’...”
  - iii. “...But images, being motionless, inert, and senseless, are bound, nailed, glued, - are melted, filed, sawed, polished, carved. The senseless earth is dishonored by the makers of images, who change it by their art from its proper nature, and induce men to worship it; and the makers of gods worship not gods and demons, but in my view earth and art, which go to make up images. For, in sooth, the image is only dead matter shaped by the craftsman’s hand. But we have no sensible image of sensible matter, but an image that is perceived by the mind alone, - God, who alone is truly God.
  - iv. “And again, when involved in calamities, the superstitious worshippers of stones, though they have learned by the event that senseless matter is not to be worshipped, yet, yielding to the pressure of misfortune, become the victims of their superstition; and though despising the images, yet not wishing to appear wholly to neglect them, are found fault with by those gods by whose names the images are called.
  - v. “For Dionysius the tyrant, the younger, having stripped off the golden mantle from the statue of Jupiter in Sicily, ordered him to be clothed in a woolen one, remarking facetiously that the latter was better than the golden one, being lighter in summer and warmer in winter.
  - vi. “And Antiochus of Cyzicus, being in difficulties for money, ordered the golden statue of Zeus, fifteen cubits in height, to be melted; and one like it, of less valuable material, plated with gold, to be erected in place of it.

- vii. “And the swallows and most birds fly to these statues, and void their excrement on them, paying no respect either to Olympian Zeus, or Epidaurian Asclepius, or even to Athene Polias, or the Egyptian Serapis; but not even from them have you learned the senselessness of images.”
  - viii. “...Why, I pray you, have you assigned the prerogatives of God to what are no gods? Why, let me ask, have you forsaken heaven to pay divine honour to earth? What else is gold, or silver, or steel, or iron, or brass, or ivory, or precious stones? Are they not earth, and of the earth?”
  - ix. “Are not all these things which you look on the progeny of one mother—the earth?”
  - x. “Why, then, foolish and silly men (for I will repeat it), have you, defaming the super-celestial region, dragged religion to the ground, by fashioning to yourselves gods of earth, and by going after those created objects, instead of the uncreated Deity, have sunk into deepest darkness?”
  - xi. “The Parian stone is beautiful, but it is not yet Poseidon. The ivory is beautiful, but it is not yet the Olympian Zeus. Matter always needs art to fashion it, but the deity needs nothing. Art has come forward to do its work, and the matter is clothed with its shape; and while the preciousness of the material makes it capable of being turned to profitable account, it is only on account of its form that it comes to be deemed worthy of veneration.
  - xii. “Your image, if considered as to its origin, is gold, it is wood, it is stone, it is earth, which has received shape from the artist’s hand. But I have been in the habit of walking on the earth, not of worshipping it. For I hold it wrong to entrust my spirit’s hopes to things destitute of the breath of life.”
- b. Finally, Clement attacks what he sees as the heart of the problem that led people to idolatry. It was more than simply ignorance.
- i. “Your ears are debauched, your eyes commit fornication, your looks commit adultery before you embrace. O ye that have done violence to man, and have devoted to shame what is divine in this handiwork of God, you disbelieve everything that you may indulge your passions, and *that you may believe in idols, because you have a craving after their licentiousness, but disbelieve God, because you cannot bear a life of self-restraint.* You have hated what was better, and valued what was worse, having been spectators indeed of virtue, but actors of vice.”

#### IV. Why Should the Subject of Idolatry Matter *to Us*?

- a. **Question:** Most of us today do not live in a world consumed by idolatry, where people worship 'gods' crafted by artists from gold, silver, stones, wood, fabric, etc. So, what does this have to do with our lives?
- b. Whether we realize it or not, the problem of idolatry is very much present in our own age!
  - i. **First:** There are about 1.2 billion Hindus in the world.
    1. Even here in North America, we are seeing a significant influx of people from South Asia. Many from India have relocated to the U.S. and Canada, seeking better-paying jobs, more opportunities, etc. They bring their religious beliefs and practices with them.
  - ii. **Second:** Idolatry and superstition are still rampant in many places in Africa, as well as in other less developed parts of the world.
  - iii. **Third:** The practice of giving extraordinary veneration to statues and images is carried to an extreme even in some 'mainstream' Christian churches.
    1. In some parts of Roman Catholic and similar churches, the use of statues of people or angels, and veneration of images certainly raises questions in the minds of some.
      - a. **Question:** Where does one 'cross the line' between respecting heroes of the faith that have gone before, versus engaging in some form of idolatry?
      - b. *Precisely where* that line is crossed is not always clear or universally agreed upon. However, a number of practices I have seen certainly strike me, personally, as approaching that serious sin!
    2. This practice often creates a stumbling block for the approximately 2 billion Muslims of the world.
      - a. They consider these religious practices engaged in by many Christians to be a form of idolatry.
      - b. In contrast, Muslim houses of worship are empty of any statues or images.
  - iv. **Fourth:** Presenting God, the Father, in the form of an image was expressly forbidden in the Ten Commandments. Yet we are plagued



by the images of artists who have replaced the unseen and unseeable God with an image.

1. The most famous example of this is Michaelangelo's famous painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, where God is depicted in the form of an old man touching Adam.
  - a. Several years ago, I visited the Vatican in Italy, which is the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church. On a tour of the museum, it was explained to me that the famous artist Michaelangelo admired classical Greek and Roman artists. Apparently, he had copied the image he used for the face of God (painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel) from the image of the bearded face of a statue of the Greek 'god' Zeus.
  - b. Unfortunately, that famous fresco painting, '*God and Adam*' has imprinted on the minds of many the image of God as an old man with white hair and a beard.
  - c. That image can be hard for people to shake and has created a stumbling block for many over the ages, since it was created in the early 1500s. People have a hard time believing in a God who is portrayed to look like that (*an old white man*)!
2. Recall that God had said, through Moses:
  - a. "Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth or the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air...." (**Deuteronomy 4:15-17**, NKJV)
  - b. In the Second Commandment: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth...." (**Exodus 20:4**, NKJV)
3. Paul reminded us that it is impossible to see God (the Father).
  - a. "[*referring to God*] who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see...." (**1 Timothy 6:16**, NKJV)

- v. **Fifth:** Greed and coveting (worship of money and wealth) are referred to as “idolatry” by Paul.
  - 1. “For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, *nor covetous man, who is an idolater*, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” (**Ephesians 5:5**, NKJV)
  - 2. “Therefore, put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and *covetousness, which is idolatry.*” (**Colossians 3:5**, NKJV)
  - 3. Greed is a form of idolatry because it results in *worshiping and serving created things*, rather than the Creator. (Consider **Romans 1:25**.)
    - a. It degrades us and leads us into all kinds of other sins.
- vi. **Sixth:** Although we here in the West have not seen open, old-fashioned idolatry (bowing down to statues of pagan ‘gods’) for many centuries, we may yet see it again in our lifetimes. If so, let us be prepared!
  - 1. The Gentile world around us is reverting to many of its old pagan ways, with general morality declining at an alarming pace.
  - 2. While the progressive narrative is that the world is progressing to a higher level, Christians see the world as regressing to its old pagan roots.
  - 3. With that pattern unfolding, should we be surprised to see the re-emergence of pagan idolatry in the West as well?

## V. Knowledge Puffs Up, but Love Edifies (or Builds Up)

- a. Love versus knowledge.
  - i. “Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him.” (**1 Corinthians 8:1–3**, NKJV)
  - ii. “Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ This ‘*knowledge*’ puffs up, but love builds up.” (**1 Corinthians 8:1**, ESV)
- b. This introduces the subject of the primary importance of love, which Paul famously develops further in **1 Corinthians 13**.

- c. John Chrysostom explained this in his *Homily No. 20 on 1 Corinthians*:
  - i. Paul here is speaking about *spiritual knowledge that is without love*.
    - 1. It puffs up a person, tending to make them arrogant.
  - ii. On the other hand, if we have love but lack knowledge (which Chrysostom admits Paul *did not* address), then the Lord can bring knowledge to us, as He did to Cornelius in **Acts 10**.
- d. One of my greatest concerns for the spiritual life of this church, and those in it, is the danger of focusing too much on knowledge.
  - i. We have highly educated people in our group, some of whom are particularly academically oriented.
  - ii. In a zeal to capture and restore the historic faith, there can be a great focus on gaining knowledge and striving for perfect theology and practices.
  - iii. Beware that knowledge (if the love is not there first) will lead to arrogance and can destroy others as well as ourselves.
  - iv. Knowledgeable Christians in Corinth understood that idols are nothing, and that eating food is not what contaminates us spiritually.
    - 1. However, they lacked love toward those who may not have had that knowledge. Their example risked leading others to eat in the temples as well, others whose consciences would have been violated (leading to serious sin).
    - 2. Paul was more concerned *about loving and looking out for the weaker brothers* than standing on his rights based on knowledge alone.
    - 3. May we all learn from his example!