

1 Corinthians 8: 1-13
Session 10– Study Notes
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1. In Chapter 8, Paul addressed the question that the Corinthians had put to him: Should Christians eat meat that has been offered to idols?
2. One key to following Paul’s argument is to recognize that he is primarily addressing the problem of sacrificial food consumed in the temple of the pagan god. That must have been the primary issue raised by the Corinthian’s letter.
3. It’s not until chapter ten that Paul discusses other situations, such as meat sold in the market and served in private homes.
4. There are four movements in Paul’s treatment of the idol meat problem. Our text today deals with the first movement.
 - First movement: Knowledge puffs up; love builds up (8:1-13)
 - Second Movement: the apostolic example of renouncing rights (9:1-27)
 - Third movement: Warning against idolatry (10:1-22)
 - Fourth movement: Use your freedom for the glory of God. (10:23-11:1)

Even though this may appear to be an obscure problem from our point of view, we should take this section of the letter seriously and try to understand what’s at stake.

5. Idol meat was a hot-button issue in Corinth because it dramatized three larger concerns;
 - The problem of boundaries between the church and pagan culture.
 - The strained relationship between different social classes in the community.
 - The relation between knowledge and love as the foundation of the church’s life.
6. As in chapter 7, Paul introduces the topic with a brief quotation recapping the content of what the Corinthians had written, followed by his own pithy corrective response.

Corinthians: *“All of possess knowledge”*
Paul: *“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up”*
7. Paul’s discussion of the problem suggests that the issue had arisen particularly because some Corinthian Christians were attending feasts held in pagan temples, where meat was served to all present.
8. Their justification for this practice may be reconstructed from Paul’s remarks here.
 - Those Christians who fear defilement from idol meat are simply ignorant and superstitious.
 - The strong Christian, armed with the appropriate gnosis, can go without guilt or shame to the pagan temple and eat whatever is offered there:
9. There may have also been socio-economic aspects to the argument about idol food.
 - The wealthier Corinthians would have been invited to meals in such places as a regular part of their social life to celebrate birthdays, weddings, healings attributed to the god, or other important occasions. It was a venue. On the other hand, such meat-eating would not have been commonplace within the social circle of the poorer Corinthians. Meat was not an ordinary part of their diet: it may

have been accessible only at specific public religious festivals where there was a general distribution of meat.

10. Rather than taking sides in the dispute, Paul seizes the occasion to challenge those with “knowledge” to reconsider their actions based on very different standards.
11. Paul provisionally accepts the slogan that all have knowledge (v. 1: but see v. 7), but he immediately suggests that knowledge is defective if it fails to build up the community in love. Knowledge “puffs up.”
12. Here in 8:1, the cause of this prideful puffing up is stated explicitly for the first time: gnosis/knowledge can lead to arrogance.
13. Paul insists that what really matters is love, which builds up the community. The initiative in salvation comes from God, not from us. It is God who loves first—God who elects us and delivers us from the power of sin and death. Therefore, what counts is not so much our knowledge of God as God’s knowledge of us.
14. The first three verses of chapter 8 establish Paul’s primary critique of the Corinthian knowledge boasters who think their knowledge permits them to eat idol meat. They have misconstrued the faith by interpreting it as a special sort of knowledge that elevates them above others. Paul insists on the priority of love over knowledge.
15. The church isn’t a place where we know all the right answers and insist that others do, too. Our task as we live together as a community of faith is not to make everyone think alike or act alike but to see one another as brothers and sisters for whom Christ died,
16. Paul quotes the slogans from the Corinthian letter, “No idol in the world really exists. ”There is no God but one.” Both slogans are consistent with the standard preaching of Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity; Paul agrees with this theology. His quarrel is with the Corinthians’ application of the slogans.
17. Paul presses the question of how the actions of the knowledge/advocates will affect other members of the community. That is the burden of the remainder of the chapter (vv 7-13)
18. Those who say “we all possess knowledge” ignore or exclude those in the community who do not share their opinion.
19. Paul continues with a warning: Take care that your liberty does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak (young in faith). Reflecting Matthew 18 when Jesus issues the stern warning against “*placing a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me*”
20. Verses 10-12 offer a specific description of how Paul imagines the possible damage inflicted on the community by those who want to eat the idol meat.

The weak will see the gnosis/knowledge boasters eating in the temple of an idol and be influenced, contrary to their own consciences, to participate in the same practice (v. 10). Paul’s primary concern here is not the consumption of meat sold in the marketplace; instead, he is worried about having young Christians drawn back into the temple, into the powerful world of the pagan cult,

21. In verse 11, Paul states the dire consequences of such cultural compromise. The weak or “infant” Christians will be “destroyed.” The concern is not that the weak will be offended by the actions of those “puffed up by knowledge”: Paul’s concern is rather that they will become alienated from Christ and fall away from the sphere of God’s saving power, being sucked back into their former way of life.

22. Paul concludes this unit by declaring his own resolution in this matter. “Therefore, if food causes my brother or sister to fall, I will never eat meat so that I may not cause my brother or sister to fall.” The effect of this policy, of course, is that it places Paul himself, de facto among the ranks of the weak.
23. 1 Corinthians 8 must be read as a compelling invitation to the “strong” Corinthians to come over and join Paul at table with the weak.

This invitation is far more urgent than any invitation to savor meat with their rich friends in the respectable world of Corinthian society.

Reflections

1. What controversial concerns are you wrestling with? Think of them in terms of the conflict they create in your own conscience, in your relationships, and in your church.
2. What principles have you arrived at that have helped you become a person of conviction and, at the same time, a person who strives to live at peace within the various communities that you’re a part of (such as school, your small group, your community, your family, your church?)
3. Can Christians fit into the social world of their surrounding culture? Or do they have to withdraw completely from “normal” social practices representing participation in activities (even symbolic) alien to the Gospel? What sort of activity comes to mind?
4. According to this text, “love trumps knowledge.” Paul admonishes the ones who boast of their knowledge with the stern warning that we should not sacrifice relationships to be right. In what ways does the church fail or succeed in taking Paul’s warning seriously? In what ways do you defer to relationships over being right? If you are comfortable, share a personal experience when you or someone else chose right over a relationship and how that worked out.

Resources

1. First Corinthians, Interpretation, Richard B. Hays
2. First Corinthians, New Covenant Commentary, B. J. Oropeza
3. First Letter to the Corinthians, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, Roy E. Ciampa and Brian Rosner
4. Feasting on the Word, David Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor Editors