

Series on First Corinthians

By Doug Hamilton

1 Corinthians 8: The Big Stumbling Block

Acts 19:23–27 About that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way.²⁴ For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, was bringing no little business to the craftsmen;²⁵ these he gathered together with the workmen of similar *trades*, and said, “Men, you know that our prosperity depends upon this business.²⁶ “You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods *at all*.²⁷ “Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence.”

- Paul preached the message that the Ephesian idols made with their own hands were really no gods at all. They were only relics representing a cult following. In contrast was the gospel of salvation that could free them from idolatry and into submission of the one true God. As people were being converted, it threatened to shut down the idol-making business of the silversmiths. This led to an all-out multi-hour riot in defense of their old time religion and business of idol production.
- Near this time and location (1 Cor 16:8), Paul penned this letter to the Corinthians. Idolatry was heavy on his heart and he needed to address the same in Corinth before it became a bigger problem.

1 Corinthians 8:1–3 Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.² If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know;³ but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.

- He had received a letter from the Corinthians that there were members of the church that were eating meat from sacrificial animals of the pagan temple. Those who were engaged in this behavior were not participating in the sacrifice, for they were strictly forbidden to do so according to the Jerusalem Conference many years prior (*Acts 15:29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well*).
- They reasoned that it was okay because they were not actually partaking in the pagan rituals, but only in the eating of the meat at the pagan feasts that followed after. It was the culmination of the fact that these gods were really not gods, but only a figment in the mind of the pagan culture.
- This was the “knowledge” that justified their behavior. The problem was they could be 100% right in their reasoning and still be in 100% wrong in their love toward their fellow saints in the church. Their behavior was causing many to stumble in their faith.

1 Corinthians 8:4-6 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.

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- Paul readily admits they are correct in their position concerning the Roman and Greek gods are really not gods. Knowledge of idol futility was something that was commonly taught by Paul.
 - Lystra: Acts 14:15 “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM.
 - Galatia: Gal 4:8 However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods.
 - Thessalonica: 1Thes 1:9 “...how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God”
 - Athens: Acts 17:23 “For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.
 - Corinthians: 1Cor 12:2 You know that when you were pagans, *you were* led astray to the mute idols, however you were led.
- Paul taught the same things in every church (1 Cor 4:17). He knew in the heart of man was placed a need to worship someone or something (Romans 1:19). What or whom we choose to worship, if it is not Jehovah God, then it is tantamount to idolatry. These “so-called” gods, whether they be the false gods taught to be in the heavens or earth-dwelling gods on earth in the form of the Imperial Roman family, it is IDOLATRY. To the pagan there are many gods and many lords, but to the Christian there is only one God (Dt 6:4) and one Lord, Jesus the Christ.
- Those who were eating meat sacrificed to idols were absolutely right in their belief that it was meat offered to “false-gods”. Those doing so were celebrating the fact that they could have their meat and eat it too. There was however another side to the argument that was being overlooked.

1 Corinthians 8:7-8 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.

- Nearly all the converts at Corinth came out of the paganism of Greece. Because of this, they also were deeply indoctrinated with certain beliefs. One particular belief was of the cult statues. To the pagan, the statues of the gods actually contained the presence of the deity. They were taught from a young age that to participate in a pagan feast in front of a cult statue in the temple was equivalent to honoring that god.
- This was a belief that could not be tolerated by the newer, less mature converts. The more mature-thinking meat eaters were becoming a stumbling block for the newer, immature converts. Instead of caring for their souls, they defended their rights with their logic. In this way “knowledge makes arrogant,



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but love edifies (1 Cor 8:1). The meat-eaters thought they knew it all, but had forgotten the simple knowledge that all Christians are not on the same level of maturity.

1 Corinthians 8:9-13 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 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? ¹¹ For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. 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.

- Paul would later say in *1 Corinthians 10:20* *No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons.* Even though the gods to whom the pagans sacrifice were false deities, it was by the power of Satan that they carried it out. Whenever men do things that are contrary to the teachings of God, it is through the power and backing of the devil.
 - 1 Tim 4:1 But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons,
 - James 3:15 This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.
- Ignoring stumbling blocks could lead others into sin by two ways:
 1. It could lead someone to misjudge a fellow brother. Often the weaker brother will judge the stronger by insinuating the opposite standing. The weaker (the non-meat eater) perceives themselves to be the stronger. They accuse the stronger (the meat eater) that they are the weaker
 2. It could lead someone into the path of sin. Who can say whether or not that your actions would be misinterpreted? Who can say that your love for meat might be the one image that the formerly pagan Christian would need to go back down that path?
- In the church family there is to be a natural balance between the mature and immature Christians. Who was right, the meat-eaters who could eat without a pricked conscience or the immature Christians who could not dismiss the pagan connections to the meat? The answer is YES. They were both right! How the mature in knowledge should have handled it was by saying, "It does not matter that we eat the meat sacrificed to idols since these idols are not real, but because of your sensitivity to the topic, I will not eat of it because I love you and do not want you to stumble."
- How many tensions within the church would be diminished if only we would take this approach to each other? How far could we go in our unity if only we would be able address our differences in such a way?

How does this apply to us today?

- Paul writes in *1 Cor 10:14* *Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.* This is the same language that was used concerning immorality in 6:18. In the like way we are to run for our spiritual lives from immorality, we also do the same concerning idolatry.

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- One might say that we do not really have sacrifices to idols in our culture and time. IDOLATRY is not just that, but anything we put before loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind. ANYTHING in our lives can be IDOLATRY.
- Paul confirms this in *Colossians 3:5* *Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.*

Our lusts of the flesh can be idolatry.

- Romans 8:13 "...for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live."
- 1 John 2:15–17 Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. ¹⁷ The world is passing away, and *also* its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.
- When we put our lust for the porn ahead of our love for God, THAT IS IDOLATRY.
- When we place our love for partying ahead of our love of God, THAT IS IDOLATRY.
- When we place our need for hate ahead of our love of Christ, THAT IS IDOLATRY.



Our family and friends can become idolatry.

- Matthew 10:37 "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me."
- When a man or woman forsakes the truth in pursuit of a mate, then THAT IS IDOLATRY.
- When someone forsakes God in pursuit of the social experience for their children to be in everything but Christ, then THAT IS IDOLATRY.
- When fear living our faith before our family, friends and co-workers, THAT IS IDOLATRY.



Our food and drink can become idolatry.

- Philippians 3:18–19 For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* enemies of the cross of Christ, ¹⁹ whose end is destruction, whose god is *their* appetite, and *whose* glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.
- Numbers 11:33–34 While the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very severe plague. ³⁴ So the name of that place was called Kibroth-



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hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had been greedy.

- Proverbs 23:2 And put a knife to your throat if you are a man of *great* appetite.
- When we habitually eat more than our body is calling for, **THAT IS IDOLATRY.**
- When the food has us instead of us having the food, **THAT IS IDOLATRY.**
- When we drink past the point of drunkenness, **THAT IS IDOLATRY.**

Our wealth can become idolatry.

- Matthew 6:19–21 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ “But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; ²¹ for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
- Matthew 19:21–22 Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be complete, go *and* sell your possessions and give to *the* poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” ²² But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.
- 1 Timothy 6:10 For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.
- When we trust in our riches more than our heavenly riches, **THAT IS IDOLATRY.**
- When we make our home our castle rather than a tool for the furtherance of the kingdom of God, **THAT IS IDOLATRY.**
- When we are not thanking God for the blessings in our lives, **THAT IS IDOLATRY.**



Conclusion:

We must strive to love God with all of our being. Even though nobody on the earth will ever attain such, we must fight our earthly tendencies, live the best life for God and trust that Christ will cleanse us of all the rest.