

WHERE WE ARE HEADED

Ultimately, when learning to dance, the goal is not to merely “count steps.” What a good dancer does—having learned the steps—is to interpret the music through the dance. That is a good metaphor for the Christian life. We are not to simply learn “the steps”—learning a set of rules to follow. We want to dance to the music—understanding the kind of life that Jesus wants to reproduce in us through the Spirit.

As we work our way through 1 Corinthians 8, we will have to pay close attention to not reducing Paul’s words to a few specific steps. He is writing about “food offered to idols”—something most of us will never have to encounter. And he explains how the Corinthians will have to live in a loving way with fellow Christians even when others don’t “know” everything they think they know. Loving others in the midst of knowing truths—that is what is in view in this chapter.

WALKING THROUGH THE DISCUSSION

The opening questions are intended to help us realize that we all “do life” as Christians to some degree because of the influence and modeling of others. We learn how to live out our lives in Christ because of what we see in others. And that is the background for Paul’s concerns in chapter 8. Some “super spiritual” Christians were apparently living out their personal perceived “freedom” without any attentiveness to the impact their living had on others.

In Corinth, in Paul’s days, meals would often be taken in temple areas. The idea is not so much a “worship service,” but part of normal social life. Life revolved around the temples and food was part of that life. An animal would have been prepared as a sacrifice to a particular idol, part of it would be burned before that particular god, and the rest of the animal that had been sacrificed was put out to eat at the “table of the god” where people could come and share in the meal.

As Gordon Fee wrote:

For the most part the Gentiles who had become believers in Corinth had probably attended such meals all their lives; this was the basic ‘restaurant’ in antiquity, and every kind of occasion was celebrated in this fashion (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987], 361).

What was happening in Corinth is that some of the followers of Jesus who had come out of this pagan lifestyle came to understand that those “gods” were not gods at all. That being the case, offerings made to such “gods” were not really worship and, thus, were not considered an offense to the worship of the true God. Thus, these “spiritually minded” people thought it was perfectly appropriate to eat the meat laid out for the public in the idol’s temple (8:10). But Paul raises a question about whether such thinking is, in fact, really the way followers of Jesus should live.

Where Paul anchors his argument is in verse 7: Not every believer grasps this reality. That is, some who are either new in the faith or not yet mature enough don’t quite know how to think about the food offered to idols that had been such a big part of their lives prior to conversion. Paul is clear that eating or not

eating will not change *one’s own spirituality* (8:8). But Paul does want these “super spiritual” Corinthians to realize what happens to others when those others see them partake.

Seeing as some have not come to the place where they fully understand the “unreality” of the idols, when those who don’t understand see some brother or sister eating in an idol’s temple, they are inclined *against their own conscience* to partake. And Paul’s point is that to not see that is to not walk in love but only to rest in one’s spiritual “knowledge”—a knowledge that might leave the “super spiritual” merely puffed up (8:1).

In other words, Paul is quite clear about some of the basics:

- Idols are not “gods.”
- There is only one true God; one Lord alone.
- Neither eating nor abstaining from food sacrificed to idols will necessarily put us in good standing with God.

But even given these core truths—which those who thought themselves to be “super spiritual” agreed with—what should a follower of Jesus do when given the opportunity to stop for a bite with those he or she knows at the local pagan temple where the food is served?

Paul is clarifying that *knowing such things* is not the sole basis upon which a decision should be made about whether to eat or not. Although having such knowledge is important, Paul wants the Corinthians to understand that *loving others* and caring about them is a foundational guideline for living out what one knows.

Although I might truly have the right (that is, fully realize my freedom) to eat (8:9), if in so doing one who doesn’t fully realize the truth that grants such freedom ends up acting the way he or she sees me act, his or her conscience is wounded. And, Paul insists, that would not be loving. Paul is calling the Corinthians’ (and our) attention to what we do and how we act in our knowledge. Merely “knowing” isn’t enough to determine the right course of action; knowing must be shaped by loving consideration.

Now because of the way this passage is sometimes misapplied, a word of clarification might be appropriate. Note carefully what Paul is, and is not, saying:

It is right to restrain your own freedom in consideration of those who have not yet resolved in their own minds and hearts what Jesus would want for them.

It is not appropriate to use this passage to insist that others should do life the way you want them to because you are offended by what they do.

It is wrong to think that you are “the weaker brother” simply because you don’t agree with another in what he or she feels free to do in Christ.

So what is the bottom line? It would seem that Paul would call us to dance to a particular song—music that sounds like:

Live out freely what you know to be true, but realize that living out what you think you know without loving consideration of those around you only shows you don’t really understand what life with God is all about!

We will be looking at 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

INITIAL THOUGHTS

No one lives the Christian life “originally.” What that means is that we are all learning by example; we model after others. What is the benefit of having others that you can learn from about how to live out life with Jesus?

What kinds of challenges arise when trying to learn from the examples of others?

REFLECTING ON THE TEXT

It would probably be hard to find a place that served “food offered to idols” on restaurant row in your neighborhood, but that doesn’t mean that the idea behind Paul’s words to the Corinthians in chapter 8 has no value to us. As you read, don’t get too caught up in the “idols” issue; listen for the bigger idea.

What attitude did some have toward “food offered to idols”?

How did those who had such an attitude approach eating meals in pagans temples?

Do you think Paul agreed with those who felt themselves free to eat or not eat “food offered to idols”? Why or why not?

What was Paul’s concern about those who felt free to eat?

What does Paul insist is of greater value than having the knowledge and the personal freedom to eat “food offered to idols”?

BUILDING BRIDGES INTO LIFE

We don’t want to reduce Paul’s words here to a series of rules. So, can you put into words *a way of thinking about life* that avoids making 1 Corinthians into some kind of rule-based system?

If you came to value loving others over living free in your own understanding of what is right and wrong, what might change in the way you did life?

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