

17 September 2023

Competing Moral Systems

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

We continue in 1 Corinthians, taking on the hot button issue of whether it's all right to eat meat that was butchered in a pagan temple. We read from chapter 8, verses 1-13:

8 Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that 'all of us possess knowledge.' Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 2 Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; 3 but anyone who loves God is known by him. 4 Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'no idol in the world really exists', and that 'there is no God but one.' 5 Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

7 It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8 'Food will not bring us close to God.' We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. 9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak. 10 For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? 11 So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. 12 But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

I feel as if I need to provide some background to this. In ancient Greece, as pretty much everywhere at that time, worship involved animal sacrifice. Lots of it. But it turns out that the Greek gods didn't actually eat the meat, so the priests ate it instead. Whatever was leftover, then, they could sell to the public at a steep discount. From the perspective of a worshiper of Zeus, it was a good system. You bought the god's favor with the original gift, supported the temple system, and then could buy inexpensive meat on the other end. Now of course, not everyone would buy the temple meat. The Jews who lived in Greek cities had a whole Bible warning them to have nothing to do with idolatry, and besides, they only ate kosher meat, anyway.

But the Christian church that Paul had begun in Corinth was made up of both Jewish and Greek followers of Christ. All agreed they were only to worship the God revealed through Jesus Christ, but they didn't all agree on what to do with that idol meat. Here are three perspectives:

1. From the Jewish Christians: Don't touch it. Any concession to idolatry is a slippery slope. Trust us; we know. Read Jeremiah.
2. Some Greek Christians: We have left the false gods to worship the true one. We should make a clean break.
3. Other Greeks: You remember that Zeus and Aphrodite aren't real, right? So the meat hasn't been offered to gods; it's been offered to a make-believe idea. It's just meat. Plus, it's 50% off this week.

So, if you were a member of the Corinthian church, where would you be? [Discuss]

Here's where Paul stands. Although he was raised a strict Jew, he basically sides with group number three. "Look," he says, "it's just food, and food doesn't bring us closer to God or separate us from God. So, no, I don't think it's a sin to eat the meat." But Paul doesn't stop there. He goes on to say, "*Nevertheless*, obviously some people feel differently. Those people think that it would be a sin to eat meat sacrificed to idols, and so, if they were to do it, *it would be a sin!* Do you see what I mean? If they intentionally do what their conscience tells them they should not do, then they *have* done wrong. And even if you think their conscience is mistaken, you need to respect it. What that means in practice is that if someone serves you mystery meat, don't ask: just eat it. It's fine. But if you are with a fellow believer who believes idol meat is sinful and you are served some, turn it down for his sake. If he sees you eating it, he might weaken and break his own rules. Yes, in theory you are free to eat what you want. But I don't care. Your freedom to do what you want is less important than your respect and care for your brother or sister."

Why is it, do you think, that people in the same church, following the same God, can come to opposite conclusions in some matters of conscience? I'm sure there are a lot of reasons, but one factor is that some people see morality as being about rules, and others see it as being about the principles behind the rules. In this case, there were those who said: Idolatry is bad. Have nothing to do with it. End of story. But there were others who said: Idolatry is worshiping other gods. I'm not doing that. I'm eating lunch. Now I incline toward that latter view, with Paul, but let me stress that both approaches to morality have their strengths and weaknesses. The great strength of rules-oriented morality is its clarity. When you know where the lines are, you aren't going to step over them accidentally. The disadvantage, however, is that rules-based morality easily devolves into legalism and judgmental attitudes. Think of the Pharisees in the stories of Jesus. On the other hand, the great strength of a principle-based morality is that it acknowledges the gray areas of life and gives you tools for how to live when there aren't any rules, or when the rules aren't working. The disadvantage of the principle-based morality is its fuzziness; where there aren't any clear lines, it's easy for human beings, with our unlimited powers of self-deception, to convince ourselves that whatever we do, we *meant* well and so we're fine.

It feels as if, in a healthy church, there should be people from both perspectives, right? But that's hard. People who approach morality differently are not famous for working together well. In fact, the only possible way that they can is if both groups acknowledge and respect the other, even if they don't agree with them, even if they don't understand them. And *that's* what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 8. We need to consider other people's consciences, too.

So let's practice this, with a couple of easy case studies. What sort of clothes are appropriate to wear in church? Some of you here are old enough to remember when every man in this service would have been wearing a white shirt and a skinny necktie, and every woman would have been in a dress and probably a hat. Most of us can remember a time when you at least had separate clothes, called your Sunday clothes, that were more formal and less comfortable than your regular clothes. Those were simply the rules. Well, for whatever reason, those rules have died. As far as I'm concerned, good riddance. In this instance, I care nothing for the rules but only for the principle. We're here to worship God. If that's why you're here, come in, and I don't care what you're wearing. Furthermore, I think most people here agree with me. And yet, I'm usually here in a suit and tie on Sunday. If I don't think clothing really matters, why do I do that? Because some people do still care about the old rules, and even if think I *do* have

the freedom to wear whatever I want, I don't want my freedom to be an obstacle to someone else's worship.

Here's another example. Those of you who are younger than forty, or who have children or grandchildren in that range, probably know that the old rules about appropriate language have . . . changed. And again, I'm mostly okay with that. There was a time when Christians acted as if using a vulgar word was a cardinal sin, and boy were we judgmental about *cussing*. Anyone here ever have your mouth washed out with soap? I often cringe at the language I hear around me now, but I don't want to go back to that time when Christians defined themselves as people who didn't cuss. That's not the gospel. Swearing or not swearing is no more essential to faith than not eating idol meat or not. But again, a lot of people feel more strongly than I do on this, and if our first concern is to respect the conscience of others, this is a no-brainer. Don't do it. And don't look down on those who seem all hung up on naughty words. None of us has achieved such a pinnacle of moral perfection that we can lightly condemn another's conscience.

In recent years, the Christian church has become obsessed with being *right*, and battle lines have been drawn, especially over moral issues like abortion, racism, and homosexuality. And because of our focus on being *right*, we have acted as if those who disagreed with us (and thus, by definition, are wrong) are evil and should be punished. But in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul reminds us that it's not about being right. To the "idol meat is just meat" people, Paul said. "Fine. I agree with you. You're right. It's just meat. But who cares? Love your neighbor." What matters in the church is not whether we are right. What matters is whether we love. It's not just about whether we can defend our position; it's about whether we can show respect to those who hold a different one.

Even if they wear sandals to church.

Or are wrong.