



1 Corinthians 8

TITLE
FOOTBALL 1
FOOTBALL 2
TITLE
RESPECT 1
RESPECT 2
RESPECT PARTY
TITLE
BOTTLE
CLASSROOM
EARN RESPECT
TITLE
IDOLS AND TEMPLES

Corinth was a very pluralistic city. It was a major Greek city but it was the main Roman capital and administration centre for Greece. It was cosmopolitan with many races living there. It was a mixed Greco-Roman culture and central to it was the worship of idols. Temples weren't just worship centres, but also social centres and cultural centres.

An advantage of the temple system in Corinth was that the animal remains from sacrifices – a considerable amount - in the temple were sold in the market. It was usually cheap meat so people went to the market to grab a bargain.

And there was the problem. To many of the more established Christians – there was no problem in buying and eating the food offered to idols. After all, they are just lumps of wood and stone. They weren't real deities. They didn't exist so it was irrelevant if the meat had been offered to them. So why not take the advantage of cheap meat? And if they were invited to a social occasion at a temple – no problem as idols were only lumps of wood and stone, weren't they? As they weren't worshipping the idols, they weren't idolaters. It was a no-brainer.

But on the other hand there were other, newer Christians – Gentiles - who looked at these established Christians with horror. They had served these idols all their lives. Now they had become Christians and had rejected their old ways and that meant rejecting their former lifestyle of going to the temple, socialising at the temple and not being bothered about where their meat came from. The religion they had served was false and they wanted nothing to do with it.

So there were the battle lines in the church, those who saw no theological or practical difficulties in eating food offered to idols or visiting temples for social occasions, and those who were horrified that one could even entertain the idea who were being discouraged as a result.

Paul uses the terms strong and weak to describe the two sides, although, Paul had a touch of tongue in cheek about him as he describes these people. At least one side in the dispute used these terms to describe one another. But in this passage and a follow up passage in chapter 10, he shows the strong to be pretty dumb, and the weak to be justifiably principled.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM A 2000 YEAR ARGUMENT ABOUT IDOLS?

Let's start by saying what it's not about. What his passage isn't about issues of sin and morality – well, not to start with. Paul deals with more substantial moral issues in other parts of 1 Corinthians. This is more about differences of opinion – although each group dressed their side of the story in moral, theological or biblical arguments – but as we'll see in a moment it did end up with moral issues? The passage is really about Christians who are part of a church showing one another the love and respect that being part of the

body of Christ should entail. It also isn't about relationships between churches and the doctrinal tolerance that may be involved although there may be some insights for that. It's about respect that loving relationships should bring in the context of the local church.

In Corinth, one group of people were not respecting the opinion of others because they considered that they were right and the others were wrong. And they let them know about it!

Paul's opening words really sum up the issue well. *Now, concerning what you wrote about food offered to idols. It is true, of course, that "all of us have knowledge," as they say. Such knowledge, however, puffs a person up with pride; but love builds up. 2 Those who think they know something really don't know as they ought to know. 3 But the person who loves God is known by him.*

It's good to have knowledge – I encourage you frequently to get to know God's word. But most important is that we need to use what knowledge we have in a responsible and loving way. Just because we perceive that we have freedom to do certain things doesn't mean that we do them because we can. Just because I am free to drive 70mph along the A14 doesn't mean I always should. I need to drive in a way that is considerate to other road users and is safe. We have many freedoms in Christ but we should not use our freedom in a way that damages other people. If we do then there's something wrong and it probably goes down to respect in the kind of way it happened in Corinth.

Knowledge is a good thing. I like knowledge. But knowledge in relation to the church can be a disaster when people with a little knowledge start to lord it over others. Puffed up is the word Paul uses. The Christian faith is about relationships, love relationships – putting the needs of others and the worship and service of God before our own needs. So what's important isn't knowing but being known by God: *the person who loves God is known by him.* In God's universe, human knowledge gets turned on its head.

There was a lack of respect by some of the more established Christians in Corinth for those they saw as weak. And what was the consequence? The weak believers were being stumbled and in the end being coaxed and cajoled by the "strong" to do something against their conscience was leading them into sin, and the lack of respect shown by the strong Christians was just as bad.

And there's the issue for us. I said last time that we come from a diverse set of backgrounds. Not just gift and talent-wise but in terms of background, culture, learning, life experience, Christian tradition, generation. The trouble is that all those have rough edges to them.

So what can we learn about the loving way to respect others who are different to us in the fellowship.

1. **Be prepared to take "grace responsibility".** Act graciously even if you are sure you are right. Paul's advice to the strong Christians was to respect the weak and not eat food sacrificed to idols. Grace meant that these weak believers should be loved and nurtured and that should take whatever was needed? *So then, if food makes a believer sin, I will never eat meat again, so as not to make a believer fall into sin.* In the end, what was truly important? Paul says: *Food, however, will not improve our relation with God; we shall not lose anything if we do not eat, nor shall we gain anything if we do eat.* To give you a modern example of this: in some ministries grace responsibility is an imperative. As anyone ministering to alcoholics and they'll tell you that it's essential not to drink yourself even though you have the freedom to.

For us, grace responsibility makes us think carefully about how we deal with one another. If we disagree, then we should do so respecting one another as people known by God and seeking His mind and will. More flies are caught by honey than a swatter!

2. **Respect where the other person is coming from.** If our faith is about putting the needs of others before ours, then we need to always see the world as others do. The strong Corinthians simply had no time for the weak people. The result was a major problem in the church. There's always a danger in writing someone off too hastily because they are too much of a challenge, or too demanding. We've all done it at some point. But they are loved of Jesus and have been made part of the church. Respect, love, persevere with them.
3. **Check the facts.** The worse thing about the strong Christians was that they had knowledge: they were right! Or were they? Paul looks as though he agrees with them in chapter 8. Yes, they are lumps of wood and stone. There was no Jupiter, Mars or whatever. But their knowledge was incomplete and Paul goes on to torpedo them in chapter 10. It was hinted at the beginning of chapter 8 but if we look at chapter 10:18-22 (VERSE) *18 Consider the people of Israel; those who*

eat what is offered in sacrifice share in the altar's service to God. 19 Do I imply, then, that an idol or the food offered to it really amounts to anything? 20 No! What I am saying is that what is sacrificed on pagan altars is offered to demons, not to God. And I do not want you to be partners with demons. 21 You cannot drink from the Lord's cup and also from the cup of demons; you cannot eat at the Lord's table and also at the table of demons. 22 Or do we want to make the Lord jealous? Do we think that we are stronger than he?

Bang! Sunk in one shot. They didn't know their stuff after all. Their meat had been dedicated to demons – the ones behind false religion. There was no Jupiter or whatever but there was the demonic behind it that caused the grand deception and that's who the meat was really dedicated to.

Whenever you come across someone who has different ideas from you, make sure you know your facts. In fact, why not explore the Word of God together. One of the biggest problems I find with older Christians is that we've all been taught the scriptures in different ways. Often what we believe as scriptural is because someone said so years ago. And they were good Bible teachers. But they are people. So when you come across something you're not familiar with, look carefully again at what scripture *actually* says. Over the last few years, I've found that quite a number of things I learned years ago from esteemed Bible teachers don't stack up with the Word of God. I don't find that surprising because it takes more than a lifetime to learn the things of God, so always be prepared to learn something new.

Know the other facts too. In my position I get to hear a lot of stuff. Sometimes it's about people and often the facts just aren't there. If your brother or sister seems to be struggling or having problems with their faith, then don't gossip it around or complain to the Pastor. The response should be get the facts and help and encourage them because there's probably much more to their story. That's what love and respect is all about.

To conclude, always be prepared to allow the Lord to challenge your knowledge and learn something new. Where is Jesus in all this? Because where Jesus is, is where we should be.

I was brought up in a church that was dogmatic about faith. We followed scripture. We were the only ones who did – as far as we were concerned! There were Christians in the denominations, but they weren't in obedience to the Word of God as we were. How arrogant! One of my steepest learning curves was going to University to find Christians like me but with different styles of worship, different ways of thinking but each with a desire to explore the Word of God and where the truth of God lay in things. It was a good lesson learned.

Perhaps one of our strengths as a church right now is our ability to respect one another because by and large we do. We are a diverse fellowship. Our challenge is from this story about respect this morning is to use our diversity to extend our knowledge of God, our knowledge of His Word, but most of all that we may love Him - *the person who loves God is known by him*.

Prayer

- confession for times we have not respected others
- for grace to deal with those believers who are different to us by virtue of age, background, etc
- for the desire to recognise that being known by God is more important than just having knowledge
- for the desire to always seek the truth rather than think we know it all.

Preached by Mark Reid, MRBC Felixstowe 12/8/12, (c) Mark Reid 2012 cc-by-nc-sa

Paul has to use skill to wend his way through this local controversy. But he has come to a conclusion; eating such food or not is a matter of indifference. However, those who agree with him are to use their "liberty" in a way that does not cause "the weak" to stumble (8:9). In other words, eating this food could cause a misunderstanding. Those who are weak might think Christians can worship both God and idols, and thus, revert to pagan rituals. Therefore, it is better to refrain from eating food that has been offered to idols.