

A COMMENTARY ON THE APOSTLE PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

According to the Homilies of St. John Chrysostom and other Fathers of the Church

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Chapter Eight

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Take Care not to Mislead

BACKGROUND: The Christians of Corinth were living in the midst of the pagan world, where much of the meat offered for sale in public marketplaces had first been offered in sacrifice to an idol. This practice prompted questions: Was it fitting for Christians to buy and eat such meat? Was it appropriate for them to participate in the social functions of the city, many of which revolved around gathering for meals in a pagan temple?

8:1. Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. He who concentrates on gathering knowledge without growing in the practice of love becomes concerned only with himself and his importance. Such an isolated focus on facts can, therefore, be destructive. One who loves is aware of the needs of others and uses his knowledge on their behalf.

8:2. And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. The Christian life should include growth in knowledge of God but it is important to remember that no matter how much we know, God always has something more to teach us. If we think that we have perfect knowledge, we only advertise our ignorance and arrogance.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (a). What does this verse say to those who feel that since they have already “read” the Bible, there is no further need for them to study it?

8:3. But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him. The person who has attained knowledge of what really matters shows his love for God through his concern for others, which Jesus said is one of the two greatest commandments (Mk 12:30-31). All those who live by these commandments are known by God (Jn 14:21).

8:4-6. Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is only one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live. Idols have no spiritual reality. They are called gods only by the foolish. There are entities in the heavens that some have called gods (sun, moon, stars: which pagans worshiped), and there are those on earth to whom some look as gods and lords of a sort because they have much earthly power and authority. All these, however, are but creations of the one true God, Who alone is uncreated and eternal. We call His Son Lord because through Him, God created everything that exists in Heaven and on earth.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (b). Who are they who might be considered “gods” by some in the times in which we live? What is the danger in this?

8:7-10. However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse. But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will not the

conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? To a Christian who has knowledge of God's truths, it does not matter whether food he is about to eat has first been offered to an idol. To him, it is just food. A new Christian, however, might not yet have this proper understanding. He might be a former pagan, still not thoroughly convinced that an idol has no real existence. If such a person ate this type of food while thinking of it as something offered to an idol which had validity and power, and that this must be acceptable because he saw a knowledgeable Christian do it, his worship of idols could continue.

8:11-12. And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. The freedom of the knowledgeable Christian could be confusing to the new or less well-grounded Christian and cause him/her to go astray.

8:13. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. Paul's declaration that he would rather not eat meat again than do so under conditions that might lead another Christian to sin is the type of love Christ expects of all of His people.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (c). What are some modern examples of actions by which a knowledgeable Orthodox Christian may cause a new or newly-awakened Orthodox Christian to falter? What about converts to Orthodoxy from another faith? Might they hear or see certain things that might offend them or hamper their growth? What can more knowledgeable Orthodox Christians do to prevent such situations?

FOOD FOR THOUGHT COMMENTS

(a). Paul said, **"If anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know" (8:2).** What does this say to those who feel that since they have already "read" the Bible, there is no further need for them to study it? The Bible contains the word of God as given to man by inspiration, through prophecy, and through the coming to earth of the Son of God, the Logos, Word of God. It contains the fullness of the truth about God's divine plan for the salvation of man. As such it represents truth, beauty and mystery to such a degree that ordinary man, at whatever spiritual level he might be, can only begin to understand its magnitude and wonder. The Holy Spirit, however, blesses every effort at spiritual growth. So as we study Scripture with the guidance of the Church (through the writings of the Fathers), we receive enlightenment commensurate with our level of spiritual maturity. Each time we read God's word, if we continue at the same time to put what we learn into practice, we come to it at a new level, as a different person, and our progress continues from there. Thus, no matter how many times we have read the Bible, or to what degree we have studied it, through the grace of God it will always have something new and exciting to offer. We are taught and understand at our own level, grasping that for which we are ready. To say, at any juncture, that we "know" the Bible is to show the inadequacy of our knowledge. We should, therefore, consider ourselves, throughout our lives, to be students of the Bible and pilgrims on the road to holiness.

Sacred Scripture is our food and drink....We...open our mouths when we prepare our minds to understand His sacred word....But even this is not within our power, unless He feeds us Who has commanded us to eat (Ezek 3:1-3). For he is given food, who of himself is unable to eat. And since our human infirmity is unable to grasp heavenly words, He feeds us, Who in due season gives us our measure of wheat (Lk 12:42), in that while today we understand in the sacred word what yesterday we could not, and when tomorrow likewise we understand what today we cannot grasp,

we are through the grace of divine providence being nourished with daily bread. For as often as Almighty God opens our understanding and places in our minds the food of His sacred words, so often does He stretch forth His hand to the mouth of our heart. GREGORY THE GREAT¹

(b). Who are they who might be considered “gods” by some in the times in which we live? What is the danger in this? Rock (music) and movie stars, political and national leaders—even religious leaders—are looked upon as “gods” of a sort by some in our modern society. A Christian must remember always to put God first in his love and allegiance, and to follow no worldly leader in any manner that would hamper his endeavor to grow in holiness. We must pray for and use great discernment as to whom we (and especially our children) will follow. No-one can take God’s place.

(c). What are some modern examples of actions by which a knowledgeable Orthodox Christian may cause a new or newly-awakened Orthodox Christian to falter? What about converts to Orthodoxy from another faith? Might they hear or see certain things that might offend them or hamper their growth? What can more knowledgeable Orthodox Christians do to prevent such situations? Those who are knowledgeable about the teachings of Christ must be careful that their actions are not misunderstood by those around them who may still be struggling to understand how these truths affect their everyday lives. One example might be the knowledgeable Christian who tries to emulate Jesus’ habit of keeping company with “sinners” in order to teach them (Mt. 9:10-13). This is something that should be attempted only by those who are very strong in their faith. A new (or newly-awakened) Christian needs good examples to follow and might be pulled in the wrong direction by this practice. The more knowledgeable Christian also must be careful not to overestimate his/her strength.

The tendency, among Orthodox Christians, to sometimes lean toward ethnocentrism, produced by immigration to America from Greece, Russia, etc., with resettlement in groups according to these origins, presents another example. This ethnic atmosphere can have many positive aspects, but in the Church, it can also take the focus away from God and might leave those with different backgrounds feeling like outsiders. When that happens, the Church loses the force and all-inclusive dimension it is meant to have. In the fullness of the truth that Orthodoxy claims, it is important to reach out to and to welcome all of God’s people, taking care not to offend with thoughts or actions that could be construed as feelings of ethnic superiority. Most offenses in these areas are caused by a lack of awareness rather than a lack of love—but those looking on don’t necessarily know that.

¹ Toal, Vol. Four, p.18-19.