

We Are Stronger When We Bow Before God

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[0 : 01] My middle name is Gilbert, but this story is not about me. Gilbert, you're pregnant. This is something that was said quite a few years ago to a man by the name of G.K. Chesterton, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, and it was said to him by one of his best friends, George Bernard Shaw.

And those of you who are English majors will know who these people are. The rest of us might be a little bit confused, but for the first third of the last century, they were two towering figures in English literature.

And George Bernard Shaw was an atheist and a socialist and everything that was considered to be very, very modern and with it back then and cutting edge. And G.K. Chesterton had become a Christian as an adult.

And George Bernard Shaw was rake thin and very healthy. And G.K. Chesterton, well, let's put it this way.

He loved a good cigar. He loved good food with lots of fat. And he loved to pray and follow Jesus. And he, as he got older, became larger and larger and larger.

[1 : 17] And one day, George Bernard Shaw, as I said, is rake thin, came up to G.K. Chesterton and poked him in the stomach and said, Gilbert, you're pregnant.

And G.K. Chesterton, without missing a beat, said, you know, George, I do think you are correct. And if it is a boy, I'm going to call it Johnny.

If it is a girl, I think I'll call it Susie. And if, as I suspect, I'm just full of, if, as I suspect, it's just a lot of hot air and gas, I will call it George Bernard Shaw.

Don't you all wish you have at least one moment of witticism like that once in your life, especially both of those were men who never had an unpublished thought, so it got written up somehow or another.

In the epistle that we looked at today, there's, in fact, that exact type of image. One of the things which Paul is dealing with in Corinth, which is a problem, is that there's a group of super-spiritual Christians in Corinth, and they think they're just getting really, really, really big and strong.

[2 : 31] And Paul says, you're not getting bigger, you're just getting puffed up. And it's a polite Greek way of saying you're just getting filled with hot air and gas.

And that's exactly, let's look and see why Paul would say this and what exactly he says. Turn in your Bibles to page 992. Page 992.

And if you're using, for all of us, whether you're using the Pew Bible or the ones that you've brought from home, it's 1 Corinthians 8. And 1 Corinthians 8. And over the first three verses here, Paul is going to try to communicate to the church in Corinth and to us a really important spiritual principle. That is, that in regards to God, we are taller when we bow. That in regards to God, we are taller, we are bigger, we are stronger when we bow.

And Paul is going to try to communicate this to them as he launches into a major problem which the church in Corinth is facing. Now, just listen.

[3 : 41] We'll read the first three verses. Now, concerning things offered to idols. Over the next three weeks, this week and the next two, Paul is going to be dealing with the problem of idolatry in the culture.

And he says, we know that we all have knowledge. That's actually quoting from their letter. And then this is where he begins. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. And that puffs up is an image of just like getting bloated with gas and hot air, not getting stronger, bigger at all.

Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. And if anyone thinks and he knows anything, he knows nothing, yet as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, this one is known by God.

Now, I said, Paul here isn't being sort of postmodern. He's not telling us that we should sort of despair of knowledge. He's not sort of warning us against grand narratives, metanarratives. He's not teaching us that we should be doubters and skeptics and give up on the possibility of knowing things. He's not saying anything like that at all. He's not denying that there's true truth. [4 : 56] In fact, in a moment, he's going to try to tell them that they have to act in a particular way in light of the fact that there really is stuff that you can know. But what Paul is trying to say is this, that it's very easy for us as Christians, and even though it's very easy for us as Christians, it's always wrong, it's very easy for us to become smug, to become presumptuous, to sort of somehow or another think that we have this knowledge or this relationship with God, and that once we have it, we've arrived.

And we can walk around this planet as the arrived ones. There is the non-arrived ones, and then there are the arrived ones. And the arrived ones are ones who just know the right things and have the right type of knowledge and are the right type of person, and we are able to look down our noses at everyone else.

Paul says this is completely and utterly wrong spiritually. What matters most of all is not knowledge per se, but being known and loved by God.

And how do we get known and loved by God? That comes by, in a sense, spiritually, so to speak, bowing. It comes from a humble acknowledgement of our need to come to God and to receive that which only God can give.

That's the whole point of that third verse. But if anyone loves God, this one is known by him. It doesn't matter so much whether we love God or whether we know things about God.

[6 : 38] What really matters is that we're known by God, and how do we become known by God? And the word known here is referring to us having a particular status before God.

Jono's song, it wasn't Jono's song, but the one we just sang a few moments ago, touches on it, Now That We Are Your Daughters and Sons. It's referring to how do we enter into this particular special status as God's adopted children.

And we don't enter into the status of being God's adopted children by superior theology, by superior intellect, by superior spiritual experiences, by superior ethnic background or cultural background. It has nothing to do with anything at all which is superior in us at all. That to become the adopted children of God is always an act of grace by God. Not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offenses.

And that in a very, very real and important spiritual sense, that we enter with open arms because we have nothing to bring. And if we can sort of manage two images at the same time with open arms and literally bowing before God, acknowledging that he is great and that we are dependent upon him for grace and mercy.

[7 : 56] And the wonderful thing is that God is rich and deep in kindness and grace and mercy and only desires to show mercy to us.

So Paul here begins by saying, it's not a matter of knowledge that makes us superior. It's always a matter of remembering that we are taller when we bow.

That it's a matter of being known by God and remembering all the way throughout our Christian life how it is that we enter into the Christian life. We enter by bowing.

How do we grow as Christians? We grow by bowing. Bowing before his word. Bowing, acknowledging our need for grace. Bowing because we acknowledge our need for mercy. Bowing because we acknowledge that God is greater and that he is the giver and that we need to receive. And that the entire Christian life is one of being characterized by learning how to bow before our gracious, kind, almighty, heavenly Father who desires to give us grace and desires to pour out love upon us.

[9 : 02] Now, why is Paul talking about all of this? In chapters 8, 9, and 10, Paul is going to be trying to deal with a particular problem that's going on at Corinth.

And it's a feature of the ancient world which is not a common feature today in postmodern Canada. And that is, in a sense, there weren't any restaurants in Corinth.

That if you wanted to go and have a meal out, you went to a temple. You went to a place where food was sacrificed to an idol. The entire culture was completely and utterly pagan.

And so temples were, you know, I don't know if it's still the case, but you hear stories about English people going to their local, you know.

And that's where a lot of their social life is. They go to a particular bar, you know, a particular pub, I should say. And at the pub, you know, they have their pints and they know all the people there and they all have their friendship and their camaraderie.

[10:05] And it's just a huge, important part of the communal life. And in a sense, temples in the ancient world, temples in Greece, temples in Corinth, that was the place, that was your local.

That was your place where you'd go to have your meal. That's the place where your friends were. And so for these people in Corinth, they'd spent their entire life surrounded by idols, surrounded by all that that meant.

And the way they would meet their friends and any important social event would all be connected with going to a temple where food would be sacrificed and then you would eat it.

It would be prepared for you and you would eat it. And so there were these super spiritual people in Corinth who were saying, it's just a rock. Okay?

Just like, okay, guys, you know, tone down all of the rhetoric about this stuff. You can't be saying that to become a Christian means that I don't have any time with my friends anymore. Like, that can't be what Christianity means.

[11:06] That I come to Jesus, I lose all of my friends and I can't eat out. But I have to just eat at home all the time by myself all alone. You know, listen, you can go to a temple.

It's just a rock. Okay? That's all it is. It doesn't correspond to anything. There's no Aphrodite. There's no Apollo. You know, they don't exist. Okay? It's just a rock.

So if these guys think that it's something else, well, that's their problem. But I just want to be able to have a nice meal out with my friend, my friends. And I'd like to mark important social things.

And if you folks were just a little bit more intelligent and a little bit more spiritual, you'd understand this. So that's, in a sense, the type of conversation that's going on in Corinth.

And Paul is going to give two reasons why Christians shouldn't be going to temples to have the meat slaughtered and to eat it in such a context.

[12:01] He's going to give them two reasons. The first reason is this week. And in chapter 10, he's going to give the second reason. And the first reason, so the first thing before Paul gets into this issue, that's why he teaches them, reminds them of this important spiritual principle.

That, okay, you know, listen, even the whole tone of your conversation is wrong. Okay, how is it that you grow as a Christian? By bowing. How did you become a Christian? By bowing.

What makes you taller? Not superior knowledge. Not having good friends. Not having money. What makes you taller spiritually? Bowing. Bowing to the one God that really does exist.

So now he's going to say a little bit about the fact of whether they're just stones or not. And he's going to sort of agree with them. And in agreeing with them, they'll give a very important meditation upon what it means to be a Christian.

Verse 4. 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.

[13:06] 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.

Now, Paul begins by saying that, in fact, you're completely correct, there is only one God. There is nothing objectively that corresponds to Aphrodite.

There is nothing objectively that corresponds to Zeus. And on one level, it's just a stone. It's just a pile of rocks. It's just a tree. It's just a grove.

It's just a building. But, and Paul is going to acknowledge that. He goes into this profound meditation upon the fact that there is only one God and what it means and how it goes right.

The knowledge that there is only one God goes right down into the very, very fabric of creation and that there is only one way to this God, and that is through the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the only source of divine life.

[14:18] Now, here's where this meditation becomes very, very un-Canadian. Very, very, very un-Canadian. You know, it's talked about sometimes in Canada as if it's a brand new discovery to think that there is more than one religion or more than one conception of God.

If we went back in time and tried to lecture Paul on this, that there's more than one, he would just look at us with the most puzzled and bemused expression. Because you couldn't walk a block in any major city that he traveled in without seeing God after God after God.

And Paul's home church, Antioch, was one of the most cosmopolitan cities that have ever existed. There were even people in Antioch from China and from India.

So Paul would have been familiar with things which, like the earliest, earliest forms of, in fact, Buddhism wouldn't even have been around, earliest, earliest forms of Hindu religions.

And he would have been familiar, there were people there from Africa. And all of these were in this unbelievably cosmopolitan, multicultural city of Antioch.

[15:33] And it was in that context that that was Paul's sending church. So if there was anybody who knew about how big the world is and how many gods there were, it was Paul.

He was not at all confused about that. And yet in the face of many people who believed in many gods, Paul unequivocally says, there is but one God.

And gods other than the one God correspond to nothing. And there is but one way to that true God. And that is through the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is very, very, very contrary to Canadian public opinion. Some of you might have heard the story about, maybe you've been badgered by it.

You know, it's sort of really arrogant to think that your way is the only way. And that's true. It's not my way. It's a matter of finding out whether God has made a way. But, you know, and then they give you the example of the blind men with the elephant.

[16:31] And, you know, and some people touch the trunk and some the leg and some this. And they say, this is what God is like. And this is what God is like. And this is what God is like. And they all say very different things, but it's just one elephant.

And so, therefore, there's just one God. But there's all these different ways. We're all like blind people, et cetera, et cetera, blah, blah, woof, woof. And it can be a very, very...

I have to show my... That line, blah, blah, woof, woof. It's Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock. If you listen to the... Back in my wayward youth, when I listened...

Anyway, you don't want to hear about my wayward youth. And the problem with that analogy is that the person telling you the story knows that there's only one elephant.

The person telling the story doesn't say that they're blind, because all the blind people think that their views of God is correct. The person telling the story, in effect, knows that there is only one elephant.

[17:33] They are, in fact, acting from a privileged position in telling that story and telling that analogy. And in response to that story, we can say, listen, it's not a matter of my way to God.

In fact, the worst thing you could ever do is follow my way to God, because George is a pillar of dust. And George will die. What we need to discover is if the one God has sent a way by which we can come to know him and become his children.

And the Christian gospel is that there is but one God, not many gods, and that that one God has made the way. And that way is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Listen to verse 6. Yet for us, and here he's not being postmodern as if for us there's only one God, but for somebody else there's a different God. And for somebody else there's a different God. He's, that's not, we can't read the text like that, we'd be misreading us, misreading it.

He's saying, in a sense, we have come to know that there is only one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for him.

[18:39] And by saying this, Paul is saying there's only one God, that he's not known as the tyrant or as the dictator. I know for many of us we've had bad fathers, and it's a hard type of image, but if we were to think of the best possible image of Father, it's that this one God is one who expresses his life towards us in terms of tender care, of us being his children, of us, of him protecting us, caring for us, desiring our good, that he is responsible for all things, that we come from him, and that we are made for him.

That coming to know God is not like coming to know an alien from outer space that might come to invade this planet. And, you know, they're obviously alien, they're obviously different, they're obviously completely and utterly opposed to us.

They just desire to belittle us, to destroy us, to make us their slaves, or to make us their food, or whatever type of horrible science fiction movie you've seen lately about those types of creatures.

And the true God is not like that at all. He's Father, and not only is he Father, but even the way that the created order has been made, even though George is but a pillar of dust that is animated by a soul, even though that is who I am, I as a pillar of dust animated by a soul have been created by

God, and I have been made for God.

It goes right down to the very, very depths of the created order. And then one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we live, that Jesus is fully God, that he is the Lord, that he is the agent of creation, that God made all things through him.

[20 : 32] All things come from him, and we live and have our life and being in him, through whom are all things and through whom we live.

I am God's adopted son. Is that because I'm somehow special? Far from it. How did I become God's adopted son? By bowing to the Lord Jesus Christ, by acknowledging that he is the Savior, that he is the one who has opened the way to God.

I come to him bowing before him, saying that you have not weighed my merits, Jesus. You have come to pardon my offenses. You have not come to watch how high I can jump.

You know that I cannot possibly ever jump into the lap of my heavenly Father. Father, you have come to carry me there and make me fit and worthy to sit in his lap. So we are taller when we bow. There is only one God. And then Paul, getting to the issue at hand, wants to tell them there are no little people. There are no little people in Christ.

[21 : 39] Paul is going to say that the first reason why we should have nothing to do with idols and temples is because that Christians have a positive obligation to love those who are new and weak in the faith.

And we have a positive obligation to protect and make clear the way that one becomes the adopted child of God. That's a positive obligation.

That the Christian life is not a matter of, okay, now that you're superior, now that you're a super spiritual Christian, now that you're, you know, you're really, really great. God can set before us the 15 things we can't do or the 23 things we can't do or just pick a number, God.

Just give us the things that we can't do. And everything else which isn't limited by one of those things we can't do, we're free to do. And we just go through our life doing all that. Just make sure you avoid those 23 things or 10 things or 15 things.

Then just do whatever pops into your mind. And Paul is saying, no, no, no, no, no. We're always, it was always a matter of surrendering, acknowledging God. It's always a matter of understanding that we live in him and we have our being in him.

[22 : 51] And it's always a matter of us understanding that we have an obligation to make clear how one becomes an adopted child of God. And one has a continuing obligation to care for those who are weak, care for those who are young, that we have a positive obligation to think about these things and think of others and organize our lives so that we can make a positive difference in others' lives to bring them closer to God.

That's to be the motivating factor in our lives. Listen as Paul goes on in verse 7 and following.

However, remember he's just said how, you know, there's only one God and one Lord.

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.

I just want to pause there before I read the next verse. See, what Paul is saying here is this. There's intellectual knowledge and there's emotional knowledge. And intellectually, the person who's come to Christ might intellectually know that it's just a stone.

But emotionally, they don't know that. Existentially, they don't know that. And so if they were to see me going to a place where the food's being sacrificed to Aphrodite and then sitting there, I'm just there with, I'm lounging around, I'm really, really comfortable, I'm lounging around and the animal is sacrificed and Aphrodite is praised and then the meal begins.

[24 : 26] And for somebody, they intellectually might know that it's just a rock. But gosh, it sure looks like Aphrodite is just as important as Jesus. And so for that new Christian, there is the possibility that they will be led back into the worship of Aphrodite and they will be led away from Christ.

This is one of the reasons why we should not have yoga classes in this church and we shouldn't have labyrinths in this church. One of many reasons why no Anglican church should have either of those things connected to their worship.

You know, we might say, listen, okay, yoga, it's just stretching. Okay, that's all it is. It's just a way to get stretched and get a little bit of relaxation. And it's exactly the same type of argument that the super spiritual are using here about idol worship.

But here's the problem, amongst other things, is it obscures to a watching world the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. And it makes it possible that if people have come to faith in Jesus Christ after having been involved in these Hindu spiritual practices, that they will be led to think that they can go back into that pursuit of those spiritual practices.

Same thing with labyrinths. Oh, listen, okay, George, it's just a maze. It's just like a thing you walk along. And, you know, so what if you have some drumming to mark the seasons? You know, George, don't get so worked up about it.

[25 : 59] But the fact of the matter is, is that for those of us who have come to faith out of a New Age background, and churches should be evangelizing people who are in that quest, it obscures the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

And for those who have come out of that background, or those who are brand new Christians, it is easy for them to then think that this way is just as good as following Christ, and they can be led completely and utterly astray, and seriously, seriously astray.

And we as Christians, remember, we're taller when we bow. We're not a community association. We're not a club of the spiritual people or the Christian spiritual people.

We are taller when we bow. We come to Christ by acknowledging Him and surrendering to Him and coming to Him for mercy. And that has to characterize all of our discussions and all of our decisions about everything that we do.

And on top of that, we have a positive obligation to care for young Christians and new Christians and weak Christians. And we should be thinking not what is going to benefit us, but always what can we do to add value to their lives and come alongside them and encourage them and do whatever we can to help them to grow.

[27 : 20] That should be one of the things which so powerfully motivates us. Let's listen as Paul continues. 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.

There's no such thing as a holy diet. But beware, you can be a vegetarian, you can be a non-vegetarian. There's nothing better or worse about our diet. 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?

And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish for whom Christ died. But when you thus sin against the brethren, the brothers and the sisters, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.

Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. I have to confess that I've been greatly, I really greatly benefited from this sermon.

[28 : 31] I don't know if this has ever been an issue for you. I just want to share it with you before I get to my final point to close. This passage has been used against me time and time again over the years.

And that's because, you know, there have been different changes that have happened in this church over the years. And I've been told, George, what you're doing is offending people. You're violating 1 Corinthians 9 and you shouldn't be doing it.

I've been told that many, many, many times. And I have to confess I've never studied the text. And I always partially believed it. Partially I didn't think that's what I was doing, but partially I believed it. And this text is not talking about offending people.

If offending people was a sin, Jesus was a sinner. He offended countless number of people. It's not a matter of causing offense.

The gospel causes offense. The text is talking about causing a stumbling block. It's talking about doing something that if other people emulate us, it will lead them away from Christ.

[29 : 36] Okay, it's a difference like this. If you know that you have a friend who's an alcoholic and you invite them over to your house and you encourage them to drink alcohol, you're being a stumbling block.

Okay. If you tell a group of people who have gone to church maybe for many, many, many, many, many years, but they've never understood why Jesus had to die on the cross.

And if you tell them why Jesus died on the cross and encourage them to come to faith in Jesus, if you offend them, you're not being a stumbling block. It's all the difference in the world.

Stumbling block here refers to doing a course of behavior that if people copy you, it will lead them away from Christ. But here, remember, just in closing about this text, that was just me sharing you a biographical thing, something which I've learned from the text.

But listen again to verses 11 to 12. Because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish for whom Christ died. But when you thus sin against the brothers and sisters and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.

[30 : 44] We are not to look upon people as, oh, you know, they're just really weak Christians and sort of look down their noses at them at all. In Christ, there are no little people.

Every person who has come to Christ is a temple of the Holy Spirit. And there are no small temples. Every person that has come to Christ, Christ now lives in them.

Look at verse 12. For me to do something, for me to ignore the people who are weaker in Christ, and for stronger people to ignore me or to look down on me or to belittle me, is to actually offend and hurt Jesus Christ.

And I am to understand everyone who comes to Christ, not as a weak or a strong, but I am to try to, I am to understand everyone as one for whom Christ died.

Are there weak Christians and strong Christians here? No, there are only temples of the Holy Spirit. Are there weak Christians and strong Christians here? No, there are only those for whom Christ died.

[31 : 48] Are there weak Christians and strong Christians here on one level? No, there isn't.

There's only those within whom Christ dwells. How am I to live amongst you folks, and how are you to live amongst you folks? We are to live in such a way that our goal in life is to build the people around us up so they become more and more like Jesus.

And whether we are correct in thinking they are not very like Christ or very, very much like Christ, the cry of our heart should be, God, loving Father, help me to live towards the people in St. Albans that my life and my prayers and everything about me helps them to grow and become more like Jesus.

Let's bow our heads in prayer. Father, we ask that you deliver us from all arrogance, all smugness, presumptuousness, from dogmatism, from glorifying in thinking that we are superior and having unquestioning and hard hearts.

Father, it is easy for us to fall into all of these things. Help us, Father, because it's so easy for us to slide into comparing how spiritually mature we are to others and look down our noses.

Father, in your mercy, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and deliver us from these paths. Father, teach us and help us to bow to your word and to bow to your Son and to bow to you and to bow to the Holy Spirit.

[33 : 18] Help us, Father, to have humble and pliable hearts before you and before your word and fan into flame within us, Father, not only an ever deeper desire to know you, but fan into flames within us, Father, a deep desire to make a positive, a great difference in the lives of our brothers and sisters in this place and around the world.

Father, fan into flame within us a deep longing and desire to build others up. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.