

How To Live In An Idolatrous City

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[0 : 00] If we turn to your word, you will indeed feed them, and that we might be nourished in the faith of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, amen.

If you turn in your Bibles to page 161 in the New Testament section, you'll see the passage which I want to deal with this morning, and it's chapter 8, really verse 4 to the end.

I guess we have to deal with the whole chapter, really, but it concerns idolatry. And idolatry was present in this super-sophisticated city of Corinth.

Sophisticated, I think, is a good word for it. Certainly by our standards, it was extremely sophisticated, but it was shot through with idolatry so that everything had its sort of representation in one idol or another.

Now, in our modern secular society, we fall short of doing that, and I think that's probably the impact of 2,000 years of scripture, that we, even the most secular-minded among us, tends not to do it.

[1 : 34] But a place like Oak Ridge's shopping center can barely restrain themselves from the terrible temptation to set up an idol in the midst of the whole concourse as a kind of focus for the whole thing.

But it's almost there, but not quite. There's just sort of subtle ways of it representing that consumerism is the ultimate value, and that's where we go to pay our respect.

If you go to a football game or a hockey game, the ritual and the organ playing and the crowd singing in their funny way, and all that is just barely short of a form of idolatry.

And certainly the Olympic Games bring us very close to idolatry, both of great athletes. I think that's partly why we were so desperately disappointed when the whole idealism of the Olympic Games was in one way shattered for us by drugs.

So that all those things surround our secular society, and they represent, in a sense, what this passage calls, if you look at it in verse 5, there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods, in quotation marks, many lords.

[3 : 10] So that's the practical reality of our life. But there is something more profound than that, and that is that there is something different.

Now what was happening in this idolatrous city was that there was a small band of Christians called together to live in the faith of Jesus Christ.

And their problem was, how were they to remain Christians? How were they to identify themselves in this secular society, this idolatrous society in which they lived?

And so they wrote to Paul, and they stated the problem to him, and Paul is here writing back to tell them what the answer is.

The problem was around food. You know that a lot of our problems are around food, too much of it, or too great a variety, or junk food, or health food, or something like that.

[4 : 17] Somehow we have a very close affinity to food. And so the difficulty with Corinth was that most of the social activity of the city was built around great festivals or great feasts where some god or other was being worshipped.

And the food which was served at the festival was first offered as a sacrifice to god. And religion was such a big business in that town that most of the food that you would buy in the shops on the street had first been offered to a god, and so it was food used in idolatry.

So it was impossible to escape from it. It's like trying to go to the Safeways without buying craft foods. It's everywhere and in every conceivable form.

And if you come from the cheese factories of eastern Ontario that were all bought up and closed by crafts, and if you have a deep antipathy for that particular firm because of what they did to the cheese factories in eastern Ontario, and you want to avoid crafts, it's very difficult to do.

I mean, you might as well almost give up living. But that was the pervasive way that this food offered to idols was everywhere and available to everybody, and you could hardly live through a day without in some way becoming involved in it.

[6 : 00] And they wrote to Paul and said, how are we going to handle this? And it was, of course, reinforced because if there was a good Jew, he would come along and tell the Christians that they had to behave in the way the Jews had always behaved, and that is that they wouldn't eat anything which had been offered to idols.

They wouldn't eat anything, any food on which the tithe hadn't been paid. You know, to carry that into our own situation, it means that if you're not giving your tithe, then don't eat your food.

But that's a little hard line for a good stewardship campaign, I'm sure, Mr. Eldridge. We won't take that one up. But that was their understanding.

The third thing was that it wasn't kosher. It wasn't butchered in the proper way. When Jimmy Pattison used to have his big dinner for Jews and Christians, he always sent to Montreal to get kosher-killed beef so that the Jews wouldn't mind eating with the Gentiles.

Well, that kind of restriction was very much more apparent in this society among Jews, that they wouldn't eat anything like that. So the Christians had them on the one hand. On the other hand, they had what you might call the liberal Gnostic rationalists.

[7 : 25] And the rationalists said, we know God. And these idols count for nothing. And all food is given by God.

And we're free to eat anything we want. There is no restriction whatever. We can eat anywhere and anything at any time. Simply because they said, we know God.

We understand. Our knowledge is superior. We're not subject to those superstitions. We're not subject to the... Sorry about this.

We're not subject to the things that hamper our free enjoyment of all that God has given us. And so we eat with abandon.

Anywhere, anytime, anything. And that was the picture you get of them. And Paul has to write to these people and say to them, okay, there's something, though, that you're missing.

[8 : 29] He doesn't give a lot of time to the Jewish scruples. They were no longer important to him, even though he had once been a Jew. But he does give a lot of time to trying to deal with the liberal Gnostic rationalists who had it all figured out.

And so that's why he tells them that knowledge is not the whole answer. The Gnostics, for their part, said, there is knowledge and we have it.

There is no idol in the world but one single God. And eating meat offered to idols is a matter of total indifference to us.

And some were Christians in the church who thought that way. Now, if you look at the text, you can see the argument of the Gnostics simply by watching the quotation marks.

You see them in verse 4. An idol has no real existence. So-called, and then later on when it talks about gods and lords.

[9 : 44] And then it talks later that eating meat doesn't matter to us. Well, those were the things that they were saying.

And Paul was caught because here was this Christian community, on the one hand, with the Jewish element saying, we want you to observe dietary laws. On the other hand, the liberals were saying, we don't care.

We can do anything we like because we have that freedom in Christ to do anything we like. And so, what was Paul to do? How was he to answer this question?

Well, now, this was a very practical problem for them. We have practical problems in our society. Questions the church is facing. The place of women in the church.

The ordination of homosexuals in the church. The place of the prayer book. And the book of alternative services. We have a whole lot of questions that churn away in the life of any congregation as to how we should deal with them.

[10 : 52] And what happens here is, here is another practical problem dealt with by St. Paul and dealt with in a very profound way indeed.

Now, watch how Paul deals with it. Look, will you, first to verse 3 of chapter 8. If one loves God, one is known by him.

Now, Paul takes the position that God knows what we don't know. And so, when it comes to knowing, it's God who knows, not us.

He said, our responsibility is to love. God's responsibility is to know. And so, we say that we know in part. But we don't know all there is to know.

Our responsibility is primarily to love God. And he points that out because a lot of people think that they know God.

[11 : 53] And they can't possibly know him in the way that they pretend to. And so, what he does is he says to them, if you love God, then the reason that you love God is because God has made himself known to you.

God has called you. God has elected you. And the appropriate response to God is not to say, oh, I know all about him and have dismissed him largely.

No. That God has made himself known to me in a way that my whole response is one of love towards him. So, Paul says, it's not the scruples of the Jew nor the liberty of the liberal rationalists. It's someone who has a love relationship to God. Then he goes on and says this about it, which I think is important for us to understand. He says, remember, he's dealing with one particular problem.

And that particular problem comes to a particular sort of juncture in verse 6. You see, in order to deal with the smallest problem, you've got to consider the ultimate theological issue.

[13 : 21] And that is who God is. Chapter 8, verse 6. For us, there is one God, the Father, from whom all things, from whom are all things, and for whom we exist.

So, that's who we're dealing with. We're dealing with the God from whom are all things, and the God for whom we exist.

He's saying, in effect, our existence is without meaning unless there is God. We don't have an existence apart from him. We exist for him.

And then he says, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we exist. So that everything that is, is through Jesus Christ.

And our existence is through Jesus Christ. Now, you can say on the basis of this, that apart from Jesus Christ, God doesn't know you exist.

[14 : 30] That's the statement that Paul's making. That's the foundation he's putting down for the argument. Apart from Jesus Christ, God doesn't know you exist.

You may think the great question is whether you know he exists. But here, Paul says the great question is quite different. Apart from Jesus Christ, God doesn't even know you exist.

Through him, we exist. We have existence before God. And so, Paul lays that down. But then he goes on in the next section to talk about how the problem in Corinth comes into focus.

And how you translate the knowledge of God and the love of God and the revelation of God to us, how you translate that into the practical reality of human experience.

And so, if you look at verse 7, you see not all possess this knowledge. In other words, not all Christian people are completely competent in Christian theology.

[15 : 40] They haven't all got it together. Some, through being hitherto accustomed to idols, eat food as really offered to an idol.

That's been their culture. It's been ingrained in them. They've had it ever since they were a child. It's there. And they recognize that all this food is offered to idols.

And if for that reason they can't take it, you can't come along and say to them, that's all right. It's kind of, I think, and I hope I won't offend anybody by saying this, but if you were brought up a black Protestant like I was in Toronto, the city of the Orange Order, and you were told all the terrible things about the Catholics, you know, you grow up finding that it's very difficult to relate to them because of that preconditioning.

And you have to have somebody very loving and very careful to carry you through that particular reality in our modern world. Well, it's exactly the same here, that they were brought up in a totally idolatrous city, and they had been very abstemious about their involvement in it, and somebody says it doesn't matter.

And so one of the liberal, rationalist agnostics goes into a heathen temple, and if you look in verse 7, what he does is he eats.

[17 : 12] In verse, I'm sorry, verse 9. I've got to find the right passage, and I can't.

Wait for me just a minute. Yeah, here it is, verse 10. If anyone sees you, a man of knowledge, at table in an idol's temple, then he might have his sort of scruples overcome, and he might find that he can do what you do.

And so he goes with a weak conscience and participates in such a festival, and then his conscience destroys him because he feels he's been asked to do something which is totally alien to all that has been built into him through the whole of his life.

And so he's made to feel guilty and discouraged and weak and a failure because he wasn't able to stand up to that. Well, Paul doesn't say, Well, get with it, man.

And realize that this is the 20th century, and you've got to live the way people live today. Paul doesn't say that. He says something quite radically different.

[18 : 25] He says to him, By your knowledge, that is, your freedom to do this, you have destroyed this man.

And this man is a brother for whom Christ died. And in wounding him, you have sinned against Christ.

Do you see what happens here? It's not a kind of upward mobility in which we all try to be better than the people that are better than us, but somehow the whole process is reversed, and we've got to live, not out of the superior knowledge which we have and superior sophistication which we have, but we've got to live out of regard for the weaker brother.

We've got to learn to love him and to live our life in such a way as gives expression to our love for him. And that's why it says, as the passage concludes, I will never eat meat lest I cause my brother to fall.

The food is a cause of my brother's falling. I will never eat it. In other words, that's what conditions my life. Not the knowledge which makes me superior to other people, but the love which binds me to my brother.

[19 : 55] And that's how society is to be ordered in this secular city of Corinth. And that's how our society is to be ordered. Out of a relationship to our brother.

Paul deals with the same problem in chapter 10. And I want just to read to you some verses from chapter 10, with which I want to conclude.

And then we'll ask Sharon to pray for us. Chapter 10 says, verse 23, he deals with the problem a little bit more extensively.

And he says, all things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.

Eat whatever's sold in the meat market without raising any questions on the ground of conscience. For the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. But if one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever's set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.

[21 : 05] But, if someone says to you, this has been offered in a sacrifice, then out of consideration for the man who informed you and for conscience' sake, I mean his conscience, not yours, do not eat it.

For why should my liberty be determined by another man's scruples? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced? Because of that for which I give thanks.

So whether you eat or drink, whatever you do, do all to the glory of God and give no offense to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God.

Well, that's how Paul resolves the problem of how or tries to deal with a major issue that is raised by Christians trying to live out their life in an idolatrous city.

And it gives us the guiding principle by which we are to live out our lives in this city. And that our place, our relationship to God and to one another is determined by our love for God, not our knowledge and sophistication of things.

[22 : 24] And you ask Sharon now to lead us in prayer. Let us pray. We begin with prayer for the nation of Canada.

Lord, we do ask that you would break the grip of idolatry upon any aspect of this nation's life.

In this political season, prevent any in this nation from seeing politics as greater than you. In this harvest season, break the grip that seems to surround us of food, something which can nourish the body but not the soul.

Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen.