

“Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ This ‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’—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. However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Perhaps you’ve seen the poster that says, “Be patient. God isn’t finished with me yet”. I’ve seen three variations of this. One has a caterpillar, and the idea is that this caterpillar will be a butterfly when God is finished with it. I’ve seen it with pictures of children, with the idea that there is still a great deal they have to do as they grow and develop. And I’ve seen a version that shows a house under renovation with the dust and dirt and unfinished walls, where the expectation is that the final result will be something much more glorious.

Most people attach this saying to the words of Paul in Philippians 1:6: **“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”** (Philippians 1:6, ESV) The whole idea is that when God is finally finished His good work in us, then we are something wonderful, glorious and precious in His sight and before the world.

Ah, but that’s the struggle, isn’t it? While we are truly blessed to be free and forgiven; the children of God by His grace to us in Jesus Christ, we aren’t always the people we should be. We speak of the fact that we are *simil justus et peccator*—that we are at the same time both justified saints and sinners. We are saints through faith in Jesus Christ. Trusting in the Saviour who died and rose for us we are *justified*—we are just as if we never sinned. Yet we are also a work in progress. As we struggle against our sinful hearts, we are being *sanctified*; being made holy, that we may live in the new life that is ours in Christ.

The problem is that sometimes we are so sure that God is finished with us that we develop a misguided confidence, knowledge, and morality that causes us to boast in who we are. That boasting leads us to look down on others who don’t seem to be where we are in our faith life. We can’t see how our actions and attitudes, even though they may flow from our faith, can be a stumbling block for others. As the forgiven people of God, we do all we can to build up and support others, especially those who may be weaker in faith. We want to be patient with one another as we all grow together in faith.

Our text today is part of troubling issue that St. Paul is addressing for the people of Corinth. (You can look at the whole discussion in 1 Corinthians 8-10) The particular hot-button issue had to do with meat that was offered to idols. Corinth was a major city and it had many pagan temple. Everything from temple rituals, to various social festivals, to personal events in the lives of families and individuals involved sacrifices to the gods. In these sacrifices the meat of the animals would be split three ways. Some would be left at the altar for the false god. Some would be taken home and used in a special meal, perhaps celebrating a birthday or anniversary, or some other family event. The rest would be taken to the marketplace and sold. In fact, most people, if they were going to eat meat, would most likely have eaten meat that had been sacrificed to an idol before it reached the marketplace.

There were those who wondered, “should we eat this meat that had been offered to an idol?” What about attending a celebration with your unbelieving neighbours? You go to a birthday party, but the meat that is served had been offered by that family as

a sacrifice earlier in the day. Was it right to attend? Were you then participating in worship of a false god?

There were those who were so sure of the answer. They knew an idol was nothing. Buying meat in the market that had been offered to an idol didn't affect the meat, so who cares? It's just meat. It won't have any impact on our faith or our relationship with the only True God.

Others were troubled by the fact that the meat had been offered in honour of a false god. Many of these people had, at one time, offered these very sacrifices. They couldn't forget that past connection. They saw this as a stumbling block to their faith. Eating meat offered to an idol hurt their conscience. It made them feel they were sinning. They were bothered that their brothers and sisters in the faith didn't see this as dangerous. On the other hand, those who were convinced it didn't matter where the meat came from were offended that others doubted their sincere faith—or even that they were making this an issue.

Theologians use a \$10.00 word in this discussion. The word is *adiaphora*, which refers to things that are neither commanded nor forbidden. Paul notes that Scripture doesn't say we have to be sure that the meat we are eating wasn't used in a pagan ritual. He acknowledges that *although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—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.* An idol is nothing, Paul says. God alone is God and Lord, and so *Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.*

But the freedom to eat did have limitations. Paul says it is one thing to eat meat in your home that you just bought in the market. It is another to attend a festival or celebration that involves the worship of an idol and think that this will have no impact on you. Later in this discussion he will make it clear: *“You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.”* (1 Corinthians 10:21, ESV)

But the chief limit involved the way that we treat others: *But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.*

Paul knew that the love of Christ living in us must lead us to love and care about our brothers and sisters in Christ, even if that means surrender of what we see as our freedom. We are to think of the ways our actions, our attitudes, our words affect others. What Paul says about meat offered to idols applies in many other ways. I grew up in a strong Lutheran home with a life-long Lutheran father, but with a mother who grew up as a Baptist. My parents would enjoy a social drink. There was nothing wrong with alcohol—at least for us Lutherans. But dad would never offer, serve or have alcohol when my maternal grandparents were over at our house. He knew it would offend them. He would never do it if someone was visiting who was struggling with alcohol. While he knew there was nothing wrong with a drink (although it is wrong to get drunk) he would not allow his freedom in Christ and his knowledge create a problem for others.

The same concern could be related to the way we see the management of the church. It may be related to views of stewardship, budgeting and the way the church spends its money. It may come out of theological issues. I think of the weak brother, who grew up being taught that the world began with the big bang, and that evolution has led to the development of the human race. As they are learning the biblical truth, they may still question what the bible says. There is a difference between stating that the bible is wrong and the evolutionists are correct. We don't accept the error as if it's okay, but we deal patiently with others as they struggle and as they grow in faith. Food, diet, life-issues: all these things can be sore points for those whose conscience is weak. Paul told Timothy *“preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”* (2 Timothy 4:2, ESV) It is that phrase, *with complete patience and teaching* that is so important. Paul knows that there will be those who trust in Jesus as their Saviour who may be struggling, even with thing of the faith. They will see attitudes and actions that hurt them and create a stumbling block to their faith. We want to be patient with those who are still growing in the faith and knowledge of our Lord. We don't want to do anything that will hurt their walk with the Lord.

Yet the sad truth is that we do hurt others. We can lord it over others, claiming our own perfect faith. Paul says in doing so we *sin against Christ*. Thankfully, Paul reminds us that Christ died for those weak brothers. He died for all of us who don't always see our weakness. He gave Himself in our place on the cross, to take away our guilt and shame. He was—and is—patient with us. He could leave us to our fate, but He chose to be one with us, to suffer, to die, and thankfully to rise again that we

live in Him. It is in His setting aside of Himself for us that we learn to be patient and sacrificial for others, too.

It can be so easy to stand on what we see as our rights and privileges that we lose sight of the love Christ calls us to have for others. I think God is teaching us this lesson very vividly in these COVID days. We are having to do things that involve sacrifice out of love for others. Forgiven and free in the dying and rising Saviour, we are patient with others, as Christ is with us. Paul said: *if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble*. God grant that we, too, may be patient with the needs of others, knowing that Christ is patient with us, too. Amen.