

## **FAITH REFRACTED: 3. EDIFY**

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1 Corinthians 8:1-13

I want to invite you to use your imaginations. Not your normal imagination, but your theological imagination. And I want you to imagine that here in town there is a new restaurant. That's not much of a stretch because new restaurants seem to open up around here almost every day. But this new restaurant—this imaginary one—has quickly developed an outstanding reputation. The reviews are off the charts. The food is absolutely delicious. It is locally sourced mostly from farms right here in Wilson County. The service is excellent, and everyone raves about how the waiters seem to know what you want before you do. Now, prices at a restaurant like this should be astronomical, but no, they're extraordinarily reasonable. In fact, a family can eat out without mortgaging their home.

But there is a catch to this seemingly perfect dining experience. And it might not even bother most people. But this (imaginary) restaurant is an outreach of the Luciferian Church. The Luciferian Church is made up of people who worship Lucifer.

At the restaurant, they don't make a big deal out of it. They aren't proselytizing or preaching. But you should know that all the food that is served is first offered as a sacrifice to Lucifer on an altar in the kitchen.

So, the question I have for you is this: knowing all that you do about this (imaginary) restaurant, would you, as a Christian, choose to eat there?

Now, while this seems far-fetched to us, this is exactly the conundrum facing the members of the church in ancient Corinth. And they have written to the Apostle Paul asking for guidance.

Paul founded the Christian church in the city of Corinth around the year 50 AD. He stayed in that city for eighteen months teaching people about Christ and gathering the converted believers into a worshiping community. When the congregation was on its feet, Paul moved on to Ephesus, where he started another church.

Although he was no longer in Corinth, he maintained contact with the people, and he learned that some members of the church were starting to falter in their faith. The church was having problems putting Paul's teachings into practice. As newer members lapsed back into their old ways, tensions developed within the community. One of the issues revolved around eating food that had been sacrificed to idols.

A group within the church had sent Paul a letter detailing their dilemma. Paul responded with this letter—the epistle known as First Corinthians. Through this letter Paul offers his opinion, as well as theological teaching, inspiration, encouragement, and prayer. The whole of the eighth chapter (as well as chapters nine and ten) is devoted to the issue of food—specifically the question of whether or not a Christian could eat food that had been sacrificed to pagan idols.

In that day, the fledgling Christian church in Corinth was dwarfed by numerous cults to the various pagan gods. Corinth was a cosmopolitan trading port with residents from across the Mediterranean world. These people brought their religions with them. Temples were part of the fabric of the city and many of them acted like social clubs and served meals.

The Corinthian Christians turned to Paul with the question of was it allowable for them to dine at these temples knowing that they would be consuming meat that had been sacrificed to idols?

Paul's initial response invokes unassailable logic. What he tells them is this: Eating food sacrificed to idols is acceptable because those gods do not exist. There is no Zeus; there is no Apollo; there is no Jupiter, Hermes, or Aphrodite. There is only the one God, YHWH. As Paul points out, if someone wants to buy a steak that's been grilled over an altar dedicated to Mithras, that's fine. It is a non-issue.

But Paul does not leave it there. Logic is one answer, but there is also the reality of the situation. And Paul recognizes that there are strong Christians and weak Christians. And the reality is that they are living in community, as a community of Christ. They need to be aware of one another and support one another. They need to love one another. Remember, he says, *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.*

There is one God and no others. It doesn't matter to whom the meat was sacrificed. They don't exist. But there is also On Lord, Jesus Christ, who gave his life for us. Through him we do exist. While many of you are strong in your faith, many are not. and we should demonstrate to them the same love that Christ showed us.

You've got to figure that many of these converts were Jews. But many also had been pagans and members of the various cults around Corinth. They were comfortable eating this sacrificial meat.

But now, as Christians, could they continue to dine at the temples? And while they may be immune to their old beliefs, what affect does their presence at the temple have on those newer Christians who are less secure in their faith? Dining at the temple could send the wrong message to them. It could confuse the weaker Christians into believe that one can worship both God and the pagan gods.

So, this is where Paul steps in. He tells the strong believers that while they are free to eat that pagan meat, they should make sure that in so doing it does not become “a stumbling block” to the weak. In other words, if an elder of this church were to eat at the imaginary Luciferian restaurant, would that create confusion for a new member of the church who has just opened their heart to Christ?

Think of it this way: You drive a car. You are an excellent driver with a spotless record. You pay attention and are never distracted. However, you have a propensity to run yellow lights. When you see yellow, instead of slowing, you punch the gas to beat the red. Normally, that is not a problem. You always scan the intersection to make sure it is safe.

But what if you have a 15-year-old child who will be getting their license soon? As an experienced driver, you can run those yellows, but is this something you want to teach your child who lacks driving experience and is prone to distraction? By running those yellow lights are you modeling the behavior that is best for them?

The answer is no. How would you feel if your child was in an accident because they were trying to do what you showed them? Wouldn't it be better if, for the sake of your child, you changed your behavior and stopped at each yellow?

This is what Paul is telling the believers in Corinth. There is no sin in eating meat sacrificed to idols because those gods don't exist. However, if doing so causes a less experienced believer to backslide, then maybe it is best to change your behavior. Being a faithful follower of Christ is not just about ourselves; it is about our community. As Paul writes, *To wound the conscience of the weak is to sin against Christ.*

Paul concludes by telling the Corinthians that if food is going to be an issue for the weak, then he, himself, out of respect for others, will simply choose not to eat meat at all.

As Paul states so clearly, it is not about what you know, it is about how you love. If you have to choose between being loving and being right, choose to be loving.

Yes, this seems like an odd passage because there is no restaurant in town serving food sacrificed to pagan gods. This has not been an issue for Christians for 2000 years. But we do need to be aware of how we treat one another. We need to always act in the manner that builds up all people of faith and to avoid any actions that pull people down or causes them to stumble.

This is the lesson we can carry into the world—a reminder to be respectful of all people. Jesus called us to love our neighbor. I think that this is what he had in mind.