

DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20 (p. 154)

JANUARY 31, 2021

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13 (p. 928)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

O Holy God, grant us wisdom, and knowledge, and understanding this morning, as we study your Word. Open our hearts and minds to the things that you would have us know. And teach us, please, through the Power and Guidance of your Holy Spirit. We ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

“A PROPHET WHO SPEAKS IN MY NAME”

Should we eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols, or not? That's the question before Paul. So, what do you think? How would you answer it? Bear in mind that “a prophet who presumes to speak in My Name anything I have not commanded, is to be put to death”! So, how would you answer now? This Witnessing thing is serious, isn't it, even when we don't think we are! Maybe, especially when we don't think we are?

Way back in the “Dark Ages”, when I was young, great big TV antennas were the rage! We didn't have Cable back then, or Satellite Dishes. The Internet hadn't even been invented yet! So, for anyone to get more than a channel or two on the television, they had to be creative, usually up on the roof!

And it just so happens that a Professional Antenna Installer lived down the street. He was a busy guy. Gone all the time. And when he got home at night, he was so sick of working on other people's equipment, that his own antenna was in a constant state of disrepair!

It was completely out of alignment! It faced in the wrong direction entirely! The cables that ran to the house were loose, and flopped around in the wind! There were several bolts missing on the upright pole! And one entire arm of the mammoth thing, was completely gone! It had broken off in a windstorm long ago! The Installer was fine with all this! I'm not sure how his family felt, but he was okay! That is, until a new family moved in right next door!

Somehow, they heard what their new neighbor did for a living. So, when it came time to install their new antenna, they wanted to do it just like the expert. They turned the antenna so that it faced in the exact same direction as the Professional's. They tipped it down a bit, so that it was almost touching the roof. They hung the cables loose, so that they flopped in the wind, just like the example in front of them! They even intentionally left out several bolts on the upright pole, because obviously that's the way it's done! And then, just before climbing down from the roof, the new neighbor studied the expert's antenna one last time. Then he reached up and broke off an arm on his brand-new purchase!

People watch us, don't they? Our neighbors watch! Our family and friends watch! And as Christians, Non-Believers watch, as do "Wannabe Believers"! People watch what we do! They hear what we say! They notice how we act, in both good times and bad! And they measure these things against our Values, or what we say are our Values! Like it or not, we are witnesses!

And “a prophet, who presumes to speak in My Name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death!” So, be honest. Are you intimidated? Because I am! People watch us, like a student watches a teacher, like children watch grownups! My grandkids watch, and often mimic what they see! I remember Hudson, at the age of about two, holding his lower back as he went down the stairs! I know where he got that! If I pick up a hammer, they want to pick up a hammer! If I hit a nail, they want to hit a nail! And if I hit my thumb, and verbally respond...!

You and I are examples, role models, mentors even! And as a Christian, that takes on a whole new set of responsibility, doesn't it? What we say matters! And what we do matters! If we claim to follow Jesus, then we are living, breathing examples of “What Would Jesus Do”! How is that for pressure? Especially in light of Deuteronomy? So, when someone looks at you, is Jesus who they see?

And if any of you aren't squirming yet, consider Galatians 5 as a yardstick! It says that the Fruit of the Spirit is Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self-Control! When the Holy Spirit is living in our heart, these are some of the things that people should see! So, is it? Is that what people notice? Is that what your fellow Believers notice? More to the point, is that what “Potential-Believers” see?

And it's too late to just run out into the parking lot after worship and scratch the “Jesus” bumper sticker off of your car! It's too late to simply stop carrying your Bible around, or take off your cross necklace and leave it at home! You're a Believer! And people know!

Or at least they should! You and I are called to be a witness to the Gospel, the Good News, to the love of our Heavenly Father—like a witness in a Court of Law, or at a Crime scene! And witnesses are crucial! Because that’s how people discover the Truth!

I read a wonderful explanation of the difference between Morals and Ethics recently. It said Morals and Values are based on something bigger than ourself, bigger than what we think, or feel! Morals should therefore be absolute, unchanging! Ethics, on the other hand, have to do with how we apply those Morals and Values to everyday life! In other words, Truth doesn’t change! How we live it out might! So, the question before us, on an on-going, daily basis is, what do people see when they look at us?

That’s the issue facing the First Century Church in the great city of Corinth. They are wrestling with being faithful witnesses to The Lord! And right now, as often happens, there appears to be two different sides on a particular issue! Both camps are completely convinced that they know what’s right! Which is also pretty common! Each side truly believes that they know the truth! Maybe you can picture something like that? So, Paul, in addressing the issue, starts off by acknowledges that fact right up front!

“We know that we all possess knowledge,” he says. You on that side, have your facts. And you on the other do as well. You’ve both done your research. You’ve both studied the data. You are both convinced that you know the truth. You have the knowledge!

“However,” he says, “knowledge puffs up, whereas love builds up”!

What's correct though, he continued, may not always be what's right! Being able to do something, may not mean that you should actually do it! And I wonder if there might be a lesson here?

Again, the folks in Corinth are wrestling with being faithful Followers of Jesus. So, they write to Paul with some questions on Faith. And the current question in today's text is, should we eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols or not, you know, meat sacrificed to other so-called gods?

Their dilemma could have just as easily been over something else. Playing cards, for instance. That was big in the sixties. Or Dancing. Drinking. Skipping Church. Getting a Vaccine. Wearing masks, or not wearing masks! It could have been about living together before marriage, or after the death of a spouse. The use of foul language, or any other question we might face today! The issue isn't really the issue though! The question is actually far bigger than any particular issue! The question is, as it always is, is; as a witness to The Lord, should we participate in this particular behavior, or not? What do our actions say to those around us? Are we pointing to Jesus, or not?

Hey Paul, Scripture tells us that we are to be Salt and Light in the world. That we are the "Bride of Christ", the "Body of Christ" here on earth, in this particular place and time. So, in light of that, should we refrain from partaking of this, "religiously suspicious" food, or not?

It's a pretty cosmopolitan world, you know. Multi-National Paul. And there are all kinds of different opinions, on all kinds of different subjects, religious and otherwise! We're in a huge melting pot of ideas here, in a contemporary and progressive city. And the Law of the Land, at least as it pertains to butchers, is "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"!

It's really not politically correct to ask a Canaanite meat cutter if he sacrificed this particular goat on an altar at home before he brought it into town to be sold. We have the whole "Freedom of Religion thing" these days. Etiquette simply doesn't allow for us to question a herdsman on whether he is a Hittite or an Amorite by birth, let alone if he blessed his sheep as he they walked past a pagan shrine on the way to market! If our fruits and vegetables, or the grain sold in the Town Square was brought by a Philistine farmer, who happened to pray over it with thanksgiving because of a bountiful harvest, well, is that any of our concern?

Our food labels don't require a "Religion of Origin" sticker printed on the front! There is no way for us to tell where any particular product actually came from for sure, or what process it went through to get here! We simply don't know! So as Faithful Believers, Paul, as Witnesses to Jesus Christ, should we eat meat sacrifice to idols or not?

And maybe that seems silly to you? My guess is, that's probably not our most controversial issue in the Church today. Oh, someone may worry about Salmonella in the Communion Bread, or Bacteria in the Grape Juice! But I doubt if anyone really questions if it's been prayed over in front of idols!

We might go out of our way to make sure that everything is cooked thoroughly at the Wild Game Dinner, or that the dough is handled right on Pie Day, or that the meat is at the proper temperature at the Chicken Barbeque! We certainly don't want Trichinosis! But I don't think we ever questioned the religious affiliation of the Farmers who raised it, do we? Or the Merchants who sold it? Or for that matter, the Cooks who prepared it?

If you knew, that the guy behind the meat counter at Family Fare wasn't a Christian, would you still buy the meat? If you found out that the carrots and peas at Shop-n-Save were grown in a Buddhist Zen garden, would you even care? What possible difference could it make in the big scheme of things? God is bigger than all that, right! And we are all smarter than all that, aren't we? We're enlightened! We get it! We know! But knowledge "puffs up", says Paul! Whereas Love "builds up"! So, should we eat meat sacrificed to idols or not?

You can see the dilemma, can't you? Like I said, our issues may be different today, but the controversies remain. Masks, Social Distancing, or Going to Restaurants come to mind! Social Issues or Politics! Spending money on this versus that! We are a very divided Country right now! And a very divided World! And in many ways, throughout that World, we are a very divided Church! We are the fragmented and fractured "Body of Christ"!

Oh, our conflicts come in different packages! And we all bring knowledge to the table, facts and information that we just need to share! We all have opinions! And from where we stand, we all see clearly what's right and what's wrong! Right? But what does the way in which we discern these things, and process these things, say to those who look on? That's the question! What, or who, does our Freedom in Christ really point to?

Should Communion happen every week or not? Do we Baptize infants or adults, by sprinkling or immersion? Is it really that important to Worship each and every week? Are we required to Tithe? Do we participate in Halloween? Is divorce okay? How about living together before marriage, or after? What do we say about Pro-Life versus Pro-Choice, using "male language" to describe God? Homosexuality! Gambling! Drinking! Recreational Marijuana? Are we really supposed to abstain from shellfish and pork? You can pick your Issue De Jour! We often do! And you can bring all the facts to the table! Only the question is not really the question either, is it? ...Or maybe the question is the question, but witnessing to Jesus matters more than that! "Be careful," says Paul, "that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak"!

We all have knowledge! We all know that in Christ we have freedom! We all clearly understand that we are no longer slaves to the Law! "Everything is permissible" for Christians, the Apostle Paul says a little later in this same letter! But "not everything is beneficial, or constructive", he adds! The freedom to do something doesn't always mean you should do it! Right, may not always be correct! Sometimes, for the Glory of the Lord, you may need to abstain!

Notice that Paul never says that eating such foods is against the Teaching of Jesus. Nor does he bring up the fact that the Law of Moses expressly prohibits the creating of Idols in the first place! He doesn't even refer to the Church's "official stance" on the subject of eating meat Sacrificed to Idols, which is clearly stated in Acts 15:29! No! What Paul does here is make this lesson a lot tougher than all that, and quite a bit more personal! He says, "Even those things that might be okay to do, are really NOT okay to do, if doing them will cause someone else to stumble!" That's the yardstick here! That's the issue that settles all issues!

I've decided that I am a Dialectic Theologian. I made that term up, because I often see both sides of a Theological issue! Or more accurately, I often see the fallacies on both sides of a particular issue! Let's just call it discernment! But what trumps my knowledge, my learned or not-so-learned opinion, is this whole "Witnessing to The Lord" thing, the entire point of Scripture, the very Purpose of the Church!

Eating meat bought into the marketplace by a Babylonian Butcher is probably fine! There is no such thing, as other "gods"! But if someone sees you do it, and they don't understand that "other gods" do not exist, then it is no longer fine! That's the Answer! It would be good to remember it! And it would be wise to apply it to everyday situations!

There is nothing wrong with having a glass of wine from time to time. But if it trips someone up who is wrestling with such things, then you need to rethink your position! Skipping Church every once-in-while, for a good reason, may not be that big of a deal! But if it looks like a lack of faithfulness, or commitment, to your neighbor, or even to a fellow Believer, then you need to get up and go, each and every week! To have a strong opinion on Politics may be wonderful, passionate even! But when it causes division, especially in the “Body of Christ”, you just may need to “tone it down”!

Your meat that has been sacrificed to idols, your broken antennas, your less than Christian actions, may not be that bad! But they may not be as acceptable as you think either! Not if they get in the way of bringing others to Christ! And as for discerning that, deciding where that “Line in the Sand” really lays, well, Paul has put that “ball of responsibility” squarely in our court!

So, in other words, in the words of Will Rogers actually, “Live in such a way that you wouldn’t mind selling the Family Parrot to the Town Gossip”! After all, it’s all about Jesus, isn’t it! Not you and me at all! And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, God of justice and God of love, we praise you and the Mighty Works of your Hand. We honor your Creation, for you have made it good. We respect your environment and your world, for you have created these things for us to live in. And we glorify you in each person we meet, for you have created each and all of us in your own image. We are so thankful to be placed into such a beautiful garden, Lord, created by your Hand—and thankful for your guidance as we journey through.

But Lord, we are also aware that what you have created, has rebelled against you. Your world is no longer pure, and your people are no longer faithful. The good that you have made has soured, and spoiled along the edges. The things that you have given as perfect gifts have fallen short of your design. So, this morning Lord, we repent, and ask for forgiveness. We ask for the strength to repair this broken world. We ask for the power to heal the hurts and the heart aches. And we ask for wisdom and discernment, so that we might do all things under your guidance and care, and with the Presence of your Holy Spirit! In short Lord, we ask for you! For you to be in our hearts, and in our minds, in our Church, and in our world—healing us, and others through us, in the Name of your Son Jesus Christ!

It is in His Name Father, and with the great capacity to love that you have blessed us with, that we lift up before you now some precious loved ones. Please be with.....
Please pour out your Grace Father, on each of these folks, and on all of those who are hurting and in pain. Please send your Spirit to sweep through this world, Lord, bringing Salvation to all in Jesus' Name. And please, Father, receive these prayers, from both our hearts and our mouths, as we pray together now in Jesus' Name saying, Our Father...

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Communion:**1 Corinthians 11:23-26**

First Corinthians 11:23-26 is often used as Words of Institution at Communion. (read the text). I notice three powerful affirmations in this text.

1. It was on the night on which we betrayed Him, that Jesus broke bread and gave it to us. God's Grace is expressed in the midst of our Sin. God comes to us even in the midst of our betrayal.
2. This was our night, the night the Church was conceived. And we were all there, all twelve of us, seated about the table. So, I know for sure that because Judas was there, that I am invited also. If he wasn't, this Bread would not be for me.
3. No excuse, no situation or context could possibly increase the love which surrounds us at this Table, or the Forgiveness which indicts us here. At this Table we realize that Salvation is also Judgment—Judgment couched in Grace. God loves us, still! All we have to do is accept it with open arms!