Is It an Icon or an Idol?

1 Corinthians 8

Many of you know that I met my natural father for the first time when I was thirty-five years old. He lives in Reno.

I remember thinking that I wanted to have some fun, so I told a friend from church that I was going to be out of town for the weekend. “Where are you going?” They asked.

“Reno.” I said.

There was a bit of a pause and with a slight hesitation they said to me.

“Oh…I will pray for you.”

But when I explained the purpose of my trip they were relieved.

Is it wrong to go into a casino?

What if you are just going in to eat?

How many of you have said or heard someone say…I just go to the casinos for the good food and for the cheap shows?

Mind you I’m not here to condemn you saying that gambling is a sin. Gambling, to many, is a leisure activity that they enjoy in moderation. But to others, it is a sinfully addicting hook that ruins their lives and possibly the lives of their families.

I’m simply asking, is it ok to enjoy the benefits of inexpensive buffets and cheap entertainment? Knowing that the odds are that my cheap dinner plate may have come (in part) through taking advantage of some poor addicted gambler.

This idea is, in principle, closely related to today’s passage in 1 Corinthians chapter 8.

The Apostle Paul writes:

8 Now regarding your question about food that has been offered to idols. Yes, we know that “we all have knowledge” about this issue. But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church. 2 Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn’t really know very much. 3 But the person who loves God is the one whom God recognizes.[a]

4 So, what about eating meat that has been offered to idols? Well, we all know that an idol is not really a god and that there is only one God. 5 There may be so-called gods both in heaven and on earth, and some people actually worship many gods and many lords. 6 But for us,

There is one God, the Father,

 by whom all things were created,

 and for whom we live.

And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ,

 through whom all things were created,

 and through whom we live.

7 However, not all believers know this. Some are accustomed to thinking of idols as being real, so when they eat food that has been offered to idols, they think of it as the worship of real gods, and their weak consciences are violated. 8 It’s true that we can’t win God’s approval by what we eat. We don’t lose anything if we don’t eat it, and we don’t gain anything if we do.

9 But you must be careful so that your freedom does not cause others with a weaker conscience to stumble. 10 For if others see you—with your “superior knowledge”—eating in the temple of an idol, won’t they be encouraged to violate their conscience by eating food that has been offered to an idol? 11 So because of your superior knowledge, a weak believer[b] for whom Christ died will be destroyed. 12 And when you sin against other believers[c] by encouraging them to do something they believe is wrong, you are sinning against Christ. 13 So if what I eat causes another believer to sin, I will never eat meat again as long as I live—for I don’t want to cause another believer to stumble.

There were sects of Jews who held to the sacred writings of their elders. One of which came from a work of a sect called Karaites. It said:

“It is unlawful to receive any benefit from any kind of heathen worship, or from anything that has been offered to an idol.”-“It is unlawful to buy or sell an idol, and if, by accident, any such thing shall come into thy power, thou shalt derive no emolument (profit) from it.”

The other issue here was that some Gentile believers who had come to faith in Jesus, seemed to have no problem eating the meat. They just didn’t eat it with the intention of communing with the idol. While others had a hard time separating the enjoyment of the food and the worship of the false-god.

If you remember our study of the book of Acts you will remember what we read in Acts 15. Paul had said:

28 “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements: 29 You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell.”

Acts 15:28-29 NLT

So it seems that some in Corinth were trying to follow the letter of the law instructions from the Jews and even Paul’s previous instructions in Jerusalem. While others were boasting about their knowledge of the freedom they had in Christ. Freedom to benefit from some inexpensive meat prices.

This is the reason that Paul wrote to them:

2 Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn’t really know very much. 3 But the person who loves God is the one whom God recognizes.[a]

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7 However, not all believers know this. Some are accustomed to thinking of idols as being real, so when they eat food that has been offered to idols, they think of it as the worship of real gods, and their weak consciences are violated.

Understand this. This passage is not so much about eating meat or not eating meat, it is more about doing what is best to keep easily swayed Christians from buying into idolatrous practices…

And when I say Idolatrous practices, I mean acts that people carry out that they falsely believe are increasing their spiritual connection with a false God.

Some people in Corinth, when eating meat that was sacrificed to an idol, were liable to believe that they were sinning against God, because they couldn’t help but believe that they were worshipping another God.

So how does this apply today?

Does it mean that if someone else is trying to lose weight, then you are sinning if you eat ice cream in front of them?

No.

When I was in Bible college I had a fellow student who was Native American. One of her relatives had died and she asked the other class members if we thought she should go to the funeral. She explained that at the funeral there would be all sorts of spiritual animism, totems, and ritualistic practices. Practices that she used to believe in as powerful ways into the spiritual world.

I could tell her that there really wasn’t anything to it. I could have said what Paul said “5 There may be so-called gods both in heaven and on earth, and some people actually worship many gods and many lords. 6 But for us,

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7 However, **not all believers know this.** Some are accustomed to thinking of idols as being real, so when they eat food that has been offered to idols, they think of it as the worship of real gods, and their weak consciences are violated.

Notice it says not all **BELIEVERS** know this.

Some believers can buy into superstitions and false idols.

That brings me to a question. What is the difference between how we view the cross and how someone might view a totem for example?

It is the difference between an icon and an idol.

According to DiffSense an online source an icon is…

An image, symbol, picture, or other representation usually as an object of religious devotion.

And an idol is defined as…

A graven image or representation of anything that is revered, or believed to convey spiritual power.

For example:

If you look to the cross and are reminded of God’s power and Christ’s forgiveness, the cross is an icon that leads you to worship Him.

If you look to the cross and think that walking up and touching it will give you some type of power, then it is an idol.

Anointing oil is another example. The smells and feel of anointing oil can be a great means to help remember something (like the Holy Spirit’s presence) but believing the oil has power in itself is a false form of worship.

So Paul was writing to help relations between believers who had a tendency to put their faith in superstition, idols, and false gods. This text is not about someone who drinks a glass of wine in front of another believer and offends them, because their brother was an alcoholic.

If by doing something, you know that you might cause another believer to put their faith in some type of false power then you shouldn’t do it.

I believe these scriptures get misused by religious people to enforce their preferences.

Can’t drink, because you might lead someone to be an alcoholic.

Can’t play a slot machine, because someone else might decide to go with you and get into debt.

You can’t eat meat in front of a vegetarian, because they may give in and eat meat and feel bad about themselves.

These kinds of things have nothing to do with these verses.

If, however, you want do these kinds of things simply as a kindness that is one thing. But it is not what Paul is commanding here.

This is about helping people who are prone to worship falsely to worship in truth.

Many times people try to apply a mishmash of 1 Corinthians 8 and Matthew 18 where which says:

18 About that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?”

2 Jesus called a little child to him and put the child among them. 3 Then he said, “I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven. 4 So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

5 “And anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me. 6 But **if you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin**, it would be better for you to have a large millstone tied around your neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea.”

This scripture is about causing those who do not know better to sin. In other words you are teaching them or training their conscience (wrongly). If I drive 10 miles an hour over the speed limit every where I go and tell my kids that it is right and good, then I might be causing them to sin. However, after they are stopped by a police officer one time and told that it is wrong, they can no longer use me as the reason for their sin.

Causing a child, or a weak believer, to sin is about training their conscience. Once they know it is wrong and still do it, it’s not on you anymore.

I hope you are following me here. With this understanding, if someone comes into my office and says, I really need you to put some anointing oil on me so I can get some power from the Holy Spirit and I do it.

I would actually be teaching or helping them with an idolatrous practice.

On the other hand if I explain to them the symbolism and explain to them that the oil itself has no power, then God can be the one we are worshipping, not the oil.

But, if they keep coming back and they keep stressing the need for the oil, then I might suggest that we skip the oil, just to be sure that it’s God and not the oil that is the center of their worship.

The longer we have been believer’s the more we should be helping those younger in the faith to rely on their trust in God alone.

What do you need to have faith and to worship God?

Is it an icon or is it an idol?