

# 1 CORINTHIANS 8:5–6A

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 8. In chapters 8–10 Paul was dealing with the subject of food sacrificed to idols. He was responding to a letter from the Corinthian believers, and this was one of the topics that they asked him about. But Paul did not focus on food right away in his response. Instead he focused on the issue of knowledge. In verses 1–3 he focused on a danger that comes with having spiritual knowledge. It has the potential to lead to being puffed up if we're not careful. And knowledge that's accompanied by arrogance is lacking because it's not going to be used properly. We'll end up using it to hurt others. So we need to make sure that our knowledge is paired with love so that we can build them up. And we should focus on loving God, because that will naturally lead to loving others.

Then in verse 4 Paul returned to the theme of eating food sacrificed to idols. This issue was a huge deal for the Corinthian believers, because there was a lot of idol worship going on in their city. Food was sacrificed to idols, and then the leftovers were sold in the markets. And the big question was whether Christians could buy that food and eat it. But Paul wasn't going to give a short and simple answer to this question. First he wanted to address a variety of related issues. We already saw that he started by focusing on the theme of knowledge in verses 1–3. But he didn't give any details about what kind of knowledge he was talking about. All we knew was that he was talking about some spiritual knowledge that every believer has.

But in verse 4 he was ready to discuss some specific areas of knowledge. He said, "We know that 'an idol is nothing in the world,' and that 'there is no God but one.'" Now in the Christian Standard Bible there are two sets of quotation marks here. Most likely Paul was quoting the letter that the Corinthian believers wrote to him. And he introduced these quotations with the phrase "we know." So Paul was agreeing with them about these two statements. Now the first statement is that "an idol is nothing in the world." In other words, an idol has no real existence. It can't speak, see, hear, smell, or walk. It's completely helpless because it represents something that doesn't exist. So idols are absolutely worthless. There is no place on the planet or in the universe where an idol has any power to do anything.

Then in the second statement Paul said that "there is no God but one." This statement flows naturally from the first one. If an idol is nothing in the world, then it follows that no idol represents a real divine being. Now most religions during ancient times were polytheistic. That word just refers to a belief in many gods. People would worship gods associated with almost anything. But Christianity flies directly in the face of polytheism, because it proclaims the view of monotheism. That word just refers to a belief in one God. This view was the foundation of Old Testament theology. Deuteronomy 6:4 says, "Listen, Israel:

The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” The word “LORD” is in all caps there to indicate that the Hebrew word is God’s name, Yahweh. The Israelites were to hear and understand that Yahweh alone is God.

But monotheism is the foundation of New Testament theology as well. Listen to James 2:19: “You believe that God is one. Good! Even the demons believe—and they shudder.” So even demons believe that Yahweh is the only true God, and they actually shudder at that idea. They understand the truthfulness of this fact even though they don’t submit to him and obey him. So it’s certainly not enough to believe that Yahweh is the only true God. There’s more to being a Christian than just affirming this fact about God. But that’s where saving faith begins. This truth is something that every Christian believes. And we need to make sure that we’re constantly guarding ourselves from anything that might pull us away from worshipping God alone.

Now let’s look at the next two verses in 1 Corinthians 8. We’re ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in verses 5–6: “For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth—as there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’—yet for us there is one God, the Father. All things are from him, and we exist for him. And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ. All things are through him, and we exist through him.” Notice that verse 5 starts with the word “for.” This word introduces an explanation of what Paul was just talking about in verse 4. He quoted two statements from the Corinthian believers, and here in verses 5–6 he explained those statements in more detail. And he was especially focused on explaining the second statement about there being one God.

So let’s start with verse 5 and look at how Paul elaborated on these statements. He did that by using a conditional sentence, just like he did back in verses 2–3. The key word in a conditional sentence is the word “if,” and it’s normally near the beginning of the sentence. That word introduces the condition, and then there’s usually a second part of the sentence that tells us what’s true if the condition is met. But the condition here in verse 5 is more emphatic than usual. And this emphasis is communicated in two ways. The first one is through the word “even.” Normally the Greek word here just means “and.” It’s the same word that Paul used to join the two quotations together in verse 4. But in verse 5 the word “and” doesn’t fit, and so the Greek word has a different nuance here. It’s not adding but intensifying. It’s bringing emphasis to the condition.

But there’s a second way that Paul brought emphasis to this condition. And unfortunately I couldn’t find any Bible translations that convey this emphasis. The Greek word for if is not the normal word that has this meaning. It’s not the same word that Paul already used back in verses 2–3. This one comes from the same root is the other one, but it’s longer and much more rare. It’s used only six times in the New Testament compared to over 500 times for the shorter word. And the longer word is usually translated not just with the word “if” but with the phrase “if indeed.” That’s how this word is translated in Romans 8:9. Look at what Paul said in this verse: “You, however, are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him.”

So this verse actually has two occurrences of the word “if.” The second one is the normal Greek word for if. Paul said, “If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him.” So the idea is that

all believers have the Holy Spirit living inside them. That condition doesn't have any special emphasis. But the first condition uses the longer Greek word that's more emphatic. And in this verse the Christian Standard Bible conveys that emphasis. It says, "You, however, are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you." So here we have the phrase "if indeed" instead of just the word "if." Paul made this statement emphatic because he wanted to motivate the believers in Rome to examine themselves and see if the Holy Spirit really lived in them.

So in 1 Corinthians 8:5 the Greek word for if should really be translated with the phrase "if indeed." Paul was adding even more emphasis to the condition in this verse. And the condition was that "even if indeed there are so-called gods." The Greek word for gods is the same one that Paul just used at the end of verse 4. This time he just used the plural form of the word instead. So in verse 5 Paul was considering the possibility that he was wrong about there being only one God. He was just assuming that he was wrong for the sake of the argument. He was basically playing devil's advocate. But he added an important phrase to show us that he didn't really believe he was wrong. He didn't just say "gods" but "so-called gods."

The phrase "so-called" is very important. On the surface it shows that idols were called gods by some people. But the implication is that they weren't really gods and that it was inappropriate to use that term. Let me give you an illustration. Let's say that you're hanging out with some friends when you trip and hurt yourself. But your friends don't show concern for you or help you get up. Instead they laugh at you and make fun of you. Then they leave you on the ground to fend for yourself while they go somewhere else to do something fun. Now if you were describing that event to some other people later, you probably wouldn't say that your friends made fun of you and left you on the ground. Instead you would probably call them your so-called friends. You used to call them your friends, but then you realized that they didn't deserve that title.

So idols don't really deserve to be called "gods." But that's how many people refer to them. So Paul referred to them as "so-called gods." And then he described where they could be found: "Whether in heaven or on earth." So there are two possible locations where these so-called gods could be located. Every false god can be viewed as being either in heaven or on earth. During New Testament times the pagans would worship a god associated with the sun, a god associated with the moon, and gods associated with different planets. All those gods are viewed as being in heaven; they're above us in outer space. But the pagans would also worship a god of the sea, a god of the mountains, and a god of fertility. All those gods are viewed as being with us here on earth.

Then Paul ended verse 5 with the statement "as there are many 'gods' and many 'lords.'" This statement starts with the word "as," which introduces a statement that is similar to what Paul just said. He just brought up the possibility that there were so-called gods in heaven and on earth. And then he basically confirmed that this possibility was true. In fact, he made an even stronger statement, because he didn't just say that there are some gods. He said that there are many gods. And then he also said that there are many lords as well. This word "lords" is just another way of referring to the idols. They were called gods and lords, because both terms described how they were viewed. They were seen as deities who deserved our submission.

Now at first glance it seems like Paul was contradicting what he said in verse 4. He told us that an idol is nothing and that there's only one God. But in the beginning of verse 5 he raised the possibility that he was wrong, and then at the end of the verse he seemed to confirm that this possibility was true. He apparently said that there were many gods. But remember that Paul referred to these gods as "so-called gods" in the beginning of the verse. So he wasn't saying that there really were other gods. He was just saying that people referred to them as gods. And I think that's how he was talking about gods and lords at the end of the verse as well. The Christian Standard Bible confirms this interpretation by putting these two words in quotation marks. The English Standard Version has the same feature. Both of these translations are showing us that Paul didn't actually think these idols were really gods and lords. That's just how people talked about them.

Now let's move on to verse 6. At first glance we might think that Paul was finishing his conditional sentence here. He already gave us the condition in verse 5, and then he ended the verse with a sort of parenthetical statement. So we're waiting to see what's true if the condition is met. But Paul didn't actually finish the conditional sentence in verse 6. Instead he made a statement that's true regardless of whether the condition is met. And he introduced this statement with the word "yet." The Greek word here is a conjunction that's normally translated with the word "but." There are actually two major Greek conjunctions that can be translated in this way, and the one that Paul used here is the stronger term. So he wasn't finishing the conditional sentence; he jumped ship on that. Instead he was introducing a strong contrast.

And I think that the next phrase helps us to understand this contrast. Paul used the phrase "for us," and I think it's pretty clear that he was referring to believers. So the implication of this phrase is that Paul was talking about unbelievers in verse 5. They're the ones who think that there are many gods and many lords. But as Christians we think differently. We believe as Paul said in verse 6 that "there is one God." Paul was basically just repeating what he said at the end of verse 4. But then Paul expanded on that statement. He explained what he meant by the word "God." He referred to God as "the Father." Now it would be easy to jump right over this phrase. But we need to understand how powerful it is. In the Old Testament it was very rare to see a reference to God as the Father. One example is found in Deuteronomy 32. Look at what Moses said in verse 6: "Is this how you repay the LORD, you foolish and senseless people? Isn't he your Father and Creator? Didn't he make you and sustain you?"

In that verse Moses was talking to the Israelites right before they entered the promised land. They had rebelled against God in the wilderness even though he was good to them. He made them and sustained them, and Moses summarized these blessings by calling God their Father and Creator. So God was occasionally viewed as the Father of his people in the Old Testament. He took care of the Israelites and sustained them as a nation. But in the New Testament God is constantly called the Father. And Jesus was especially focused on this theme. Look at what he said in John 10:14–15: "I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. I lay down my life for the sheep." So Jesus had a special relationship with God and could refer to him as the Father.

But Jesus also made it possible for everyone who believed in him to have a special relationship with God. Look at what John wrote about Jesus in John 1:11–12: "He came to his own, and his own people did not

receive him. But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name.” So when we put our faith in Jesus and trust in him to save us from our sins, God adopts us into his family. Look at what Paul said about God in Ephesians 1:5–6: “He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One.” So our adoption was not something that we deserved. It was purely a gift of God’s grace.

And because we’ve received the privilege of being adopted into God’s family, we get to experience some amazing benefits. Look at what Paul wrote in Galatians 4:4–6: “When the time came to completion, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba, Father!’” Paul said something very similar in Romans 8:15: “You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Instead, you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father!’” So when we were adopted, the Holy Spirit came to live inside us. Now the Spirit does many things for us, but one of them is that he nudges us to call out to God as our Father.

And Jesus laid the foundation for this when he taught his disciples how to pray. In Matthew 6:9 he told them to say, “Our Father in heaven, your name be honored as holy.” So when we pray, we should make it our regular practice to refer to God as our Father. And when we call out to him, he will respond. Look at what Jesus said in Matthew 7:11: “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.” Our heavenly Father longs to hear from us and respond to our requests! Jesus didn’t promise that God will always give us exactly what we ask for. But he will give us good things. Romans 8:28 says that “all things work together for the good of those who love God.”

But there are many more benefits of having God as our Father. One of them is that our salvation is secure. Look at what Jesus said in John 10:27–29: “My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all. No one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.” So when Jesus gives us eternal life, he puts us figuratively in his hand. And he has a strong grip, because no one can snatch us out of his hand. No one can pry his fingers open and take us away from him. But we’re not just in the hand of Jesus; we’re in the hand of the Father as well. And Jesus said that the Father is greater than all. So if no one can snatch us out of the hand of Jesus, then it’s no surprise to hear that no one can snatch us out of the Father’s hand either. Our salvation is secure.

Let me cover one more benefit of having God as our Father. Look at what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:3–4: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. He comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction, through the comfort we ourselves receive from God.” I love how Paul described God here. He said that God is “the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort.” When we’re going through hard times, we don’t have to worry or get discouraged. We can have confidence that our Father will show us compassion and give us comfort. And then God can use us to bring comfort to others who are suffering.

By the way, this would have been a good opportunity for Paul to refer to God as our mother. After all, most children usually go to their mom and not their dad when they need to be comforted. That's certainly true in my family. Whenever our little kids wake up and get scared in the middle of the night, they always go to my wife's side of the bed! But it's important to observe that the Bible never calls God our mother. And the point isn't that God has masculine gender instead of feminine gender. After all, he's not a human being or any other created being. The point is that God's nature corresponds more closely to the masculine gender than the feminine gender. It's certainly true that God is like a mother in some ways. But he is more like a father, because he provides for us, and he's in authority over us.

So it's a wonderful privilege to have God as our Father. Unfortunately many people grow up these days without a father in the home. Or if they do have a father in their lives, he's cruel and abusive. Many fathers have not fulfilled their God-given responsibilities very well. So it's understandable that many people struggle with the idea of God as heavenly Father. But the solution is not to abandon this important truth. Instead we need to understand all the wonderful ways that Scripture describes the Father. We should get to know him for who he really is instead of thinking of him as flawed like a human father. God is the perfect picture of fatherhood and the preeminent example for every human father to imitate.

Now before we finish, let's look at what Paul said about the Father in 1 Corinthians 8:6. Here's what he wrote: "All things are from him, and we exist for him." The Christian Standard Bible has a new sentence here, but in the original Greek we have a relative clause. The Legacy Standard Bible has a more literal translation. It says that "there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for him." So Paul was just continuing the sentence that he started in verse 5. But this sentence is starting to get pretty long at this point, and so it's understandable that some Bible translators would want to make their translation more readable at this point. And the way to do that is by starting a new sentence. The Christian Standard Bible follows this approach, and I think it works well.

So Paul said two things about the Father here in verse 6. First he said that all things are from him. There's actually no verb here in the original Greek. But that's not unusual, and when that happens we should normally just add the verb of being in English. That's what the Christian Standard Bible and most other translations do here. But we could put the word "came" here instead. That's what the New International Version does, and I think it communicates the right idea. So Paul was basically saying that all things came into existence because of God. He's the source of all things. In other words, he created everything. Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." And the rest of that chapter tells us that God spoke everything into existence in six days. In other words, he didn't use a long process of evolution. He just created everything directly in a short time.

Then Paul said in 1 Corinthians 8:6 that "we exist for him." Once again there's no verb here in the original Greek. So we could add the verb of being and say that "we are for him." But the Christian Standard Bible and most other translations have the word "exist," and I think that's the best choice. So this statement is telling us why God created the universe. The reason all things exist is for him and for his glory. Listen to Revelation 4:11: "Our Lord and God, you are worthy to receive glory and honor and power, because you have created all things, and by your will they exist and were created." So God didn't have to create the

universe. It's not like he needed to do it because he was inadequate or lonely. He just wanted to show how great he is.

So we need to understand that God didn't make us so that we could live for our own purpose and pleasure. He made us to glorify him and live in obedience to him. In 1 Corinthians 10:31 Paul said, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God." That's how Paul concluded this section in chapters 8–10. So we're getting a little ahead of ourselves. But we should reflect on this verse regularly. We need to remind ourselves that we don't have the right to do whatever we want. We need to live in submission to God and act in ways that please him. We need to bring him honor and glory in everything that we do. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to do that.