

Freedom and Responsibility

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Introduction

Hard Passages: We're just continuing our jaunt through tough passages. This week we're talking about everyone's most pressing issue: **can I eat meat sacrificed to idols**.

- And, if you want to understand the **Bible**, you will need to understand this issue (e.g., Acts, Revelation, Corinthians). **All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable** (2 Tim 3:16).
- If we only study the (seemingly) easy-to-understand passages of Scripture, then we miss out on treasures of the gospel that may be buried under the surface (cf. **to diamond mining, must dig and blast to get to these beautiful treasures**).

Context: Chapters 8-10 fit into a larger argument (context is key), so try to keep the flow in mind as we move forward.

- A lot of this fits around this idea of freedom (liberty, rights, authority; ἐξουσία).
- If there were ever an idol in America, it might just be freedom (or power, or money, etc.). *Remember, idols aren't *just* bad things. "Idolatry is the worship of someone or something other than God as though it were God." Worship is the adoration, love, surrender, and obedience to something. It gives something lordship and control.
- We'll see *two* types of idolatry in this chapter: (1) a more literal one where a false god is worshipped through food sacrifice, usually involving a graven image. (2) We'll also see a type of person that worships their own authority and freedom above all things, even the well-being of others (they enshrine it as 'god' in their heart).
 - The reason the second kind of idolatry is so insidious is because it takes a good thing and elevates it to an ultimate thing. Freedom is good. **Part of the original sin of America was stealing the freedom and enslavement in the African slave trade (failure to live up to the ideals of our founding documents that all are created equal).**
 - But freedom is not ultimate.
 - "My family loves to relax in our hammock but it's only rated for 400 lbs. It's fantastic, unless I try to put too much weight in it. Idols function similarly" (Fries).
 - These kind of idols are sometimes hard to detect because they're so pervasive. "The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. **You would think they were praying to it**" (*Heart of Darkness*).
 - Unchecked freedom isn't a thing. We are not infinitely free to do whatever we want because our freedoms intersect with other people. Our choices impact other people.
- Paul is applying the principles we see elsewhere in Scripture:
 - (1) In Christ we are free: Free in Christ, Son has set you free ³⁴ **Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."** ³⁵

The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (Jn 8:34-36).

- (2) Freedom is an opportunity to love God and others: ¹ For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery... (circumcision, Judaizer, legalism) ¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal 5:1, 13-14).

Your freedom in Christ is not a call to do whatever you want but an opportunity to serve others in love.

¹ Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. ² If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. ⁴ 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.” ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹ But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ 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? ¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.¹

1. The Problem: Knowledge Without Love (vv. 1-3)

¹ Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. ² If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

¹ ¹ Περὶ δὲ τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων, οἶδαμεν ὅτι πάντες γινώσκοντες ἔχομεν. ἡ γινώσκις φυσικοῖ, ἡ δὲ ἀγάπη οἰκοδομεῖ· ² εἴ τις δοκεῖ ἐγγυκέναι τι, οὕτω ἐγγυ καθὼς δεῖ γινῶναι· ³ εἰ δὲ τις ἀγαπᾷ τὸν θεόν, οὗτος ἐγνωσται ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ. ⁴ Περὶ τῆς βρώσεως οὖν τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων, οἶδαμεν ὅτι οὐδὲν εἰδωλον ἐν κόσμῳ καὶ ὅτι οὐδεὶς θεὸς εἰ μὴ εἷς. ⁵ καὶ γὰρ εἴπερ εἰσὶν λεγόμενοι θεοὶ εἴτε ἐν οὐρανῷ εἴτε ἐπὶ γῆς, ὡσπερ εἰσὶν θεοὶ πολλοὶ καὶ κύριοι πολλοί, ⁶ ἀλλ’ ἡμῖν εἷς θεὸς ὁ πατήρ ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς αὐτόν, καὶ εἷς κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς δι’ αὐτοῦ. ⁷ Ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐν πᾶσιν ἡ γινώσκις· τινὲς δὲ τῆ συνηθείᾳ ἕως ἄρτι τοῦ εἰδῶλου ὡς εἰδωλόθυτον ἐσθίουσιν, καὶ ἡ συνείδησις αὐτῶν ἀσθενῆς οὕσα μολύνεται. ⁸ βρῶμα δὲ ἡμᾶς οὐ παραστήσει τῷ θεῷ· οὔτε ἐὰν μὴ φάγωμεν ὑστερούμεθα, οὔτε ἐὰν φάγωμεν περισσεύομεν. ⁹ βλέπετε δὲ μή πως ἡ ἐξουσία ὑμῶν αὕτη πρόσκομμα γένηται τοῖς ἀσθενέσιν. ¹⁰ ἐὰν γὰρ τις ἴδῃ σὲ τὸν ἐχόντα γινῶσιν ἐν εἰδωλείῳ κατακείμενον, οὐχὶ ἡ συνείδησις αὐτοῦ ἀσθενοῦς ὄντος οἰκοδομηθήσεται εἰς τὸ τὰ εἰδωλόθута ἐσθῆιν; ¹¹ ἀπόλλυται γὰρ ὁ ἀσθενῶν ἐν τῇ σῆι γινώσκει, ὁ ἀδελφὸς δι’ ὃν Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν. ¹² οὕτως δὲ ἀμαρτάνοντες εἰς τοὺς ἀδελφούς καὶ τύπτοντες αὐτῶν τὴν συνείδησιν ἀσθενοῦσαν εἰς Χριστὸν ἀμαρτάνετε. ¹³ διόπερ εἰ βρῶμα σκανδαλίζει τὸν ἀδελφόν μου, οὐ μὴ φάγω κρέα εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, ἵνα μὴ τὸν ἀδελφόν μου σκανδαλίσω.

The Limit of Knowledge: ¹ Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” We have a new topic (Now concerning). Yippee we’re done with sex, circumcision, and slavery. It’s about food sacrificed to idols (Boooo).

- That is the **symptom** of the problem but not the **root** (e.g., thirst symptom vs. cause diabetes; drinking more water doesn’t actually fix the problem).

Spiritual deficiency (knowledge without love).

- Corinthians: All of us possess knowledge.
- Paul: “Knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up.
 - They should reconsider their actions to others based less on knowledge (γνῶσις) and more on love (ἀγάπη).
 - We should always do what is right (don’t do what is wrong). But we should also ask ourselves if it is loving (**not just “can I do it” but “should I do it”**).

The Danger of Knowledge: Paul uses this language of arrogance in chs. 4-5.² Knowledge without love is, at best, incomplete, and, at worst, false. Right knowledge always leads to love.

- Instead, the Corinthians have become puffed up. Knowledge has become an end in and of itself. And braggin about knowledge is often silly since you don’t know what you don’t know. A lot of times, lack of knowledge is unintentional.
 - Bodybuilding, superhero movies (dehydration, diuretics to make muscles look more pronounced) but weaken *actual* strength (look good vs. be good). Show muscles vs. go muscles (e.g., Roy Big Country Nelxon, Tyson Fury, Strongmen vs. Body Builders).
- The unencumbered pursuit of knowledge is no guarantee of love (e.g., German universities were widely regarded as the peak of learning in the 19th and 20th centuries. “Pure learning, the disinterested pursuit of truth, knowledge for its own sake.” And their culture produced the greatest atrocities of the 20th century; holocaust; WWI; WWII).
- In truth, humans were not made simply to **know rightly** but to **love rightly**. If we idolize knowledge over love we miss the end goal of true knowledge.
 - Know (head), do (hand), love (heart). Your affections matter as much as your doctrine. Your love guides you as much as your behavior.

Humility: ² If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. It’s a little hard to know if it should be translated “” or “something”. Regardless, what little you think you know, it’s not enough. With all of your knowledge you don’t know very much (e.g., the smartest Ph.D. knows only a fraction of a fraction of all human knowledge).

- When you truly know God, it creates humility not arrogance. When you recognize the enormity of God and the finitude of yourself, you are reminded of your dependence on him.
 - “Knowledge is proud that it has learnt so much. Wisdom is humble that it knows no more” (Kay).
 - “We look down on others because we are not looking up at God” (Sally Lloyd-Jones).

² 4:6, 18-19; 5:2

- “Most of us go through life worrying people will think too little of us. The Apostle Paul worried people would think too much of him” (D. A. Carson).
- I think pride actually proves our ignorance of God.
- If you truly “knew” what you think you know, then you’d be more humble and loving. True knowledge of God and self makes you humble because you see more sin in your life. Increased holiness equates to increased acknowledgment of weakness (e.g., flashlight surface area).
- Salvation is a humbling experience because it doesn’t come from us, but from God. We don’t think so highly about ourselves because we know we didn’t save ourselves.
 - The gospel wounds to save. It hurts you to rescue you. It humbles you and lifts you up. Without the humbling of the gospel you will fall to arrogance and self-righteousness. Without the encouragement of the gospel you will sink into despair and apathy.

Knowledge vs. Love: This *isn’t* knowledge vs. love, but knowledge *devoid* of love of God and others. Knowledge is good (when submitted to the lordship of Christ). “Knowledge is good in itself as long as *devotion to God* is its foundation. In the hands of wicked men, it becomes empty and useless: love is its true seasoning, where that is lacking it is tasteless” (Calvin).

- True knowledge (Aquinas) should make you: humble (not arrogant), level-headed (not superstitious), confident (not cocky), truthful, honest, compassionate, helpful, generous, and effective.
- True Knowledge (Aquinas)
 - To know (1) humble, (2) soberly, (3) with assurance, (4) truthfully without error, (5) without deception, (6) with love, (7) usefully, building up, (8) liberally, sharing, (9) efficaciously with good action

Known: ³ But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. You might expect Paul to say: “If anyone thinks he knows something, he does not know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he knows something.” But instead, he says he is known by God.

- This is a fundamental gospel truth. Our salvation is not *ultimately* based on our knowledge of God but on his knowledge of us. **The most important thing is not that we know God, but that he knows us** (e.g., White house; know the president or does the president know me; know about vs. *know*).
- “Everything belonged to him—but that was a trifle. Thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own” (*Heart of Darkness*).
 - The Lord knows those who are his (2 Tim 2:19, cf. Gal 4:9)
- The myth of independence: We think we can just hit the road and leave our responsibilities behind but “the road is already somebody else’s idea of where you should go. The highway is not a blank slate; it is a network of channels laid down where many others wore a path before. The irony is that even when you’re alone on the open road you’re following somebody.” You’re always following somebody. The question is, “who”? (James K. A. Smith).

2. The Reality: Not Everyone Is at the Same Level (vv. 4-8)

⁴ 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.” ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”— ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.

Two Truths: ⁴ 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.”

- Rebuked the Corinthians for their “loveless knowledge.” Now he gets back to the truth at hand.
 - (1) An idol has no real existence. Idols aren’t real (just wood and stone).
 - (2) There is no God but one. There is only one God (basic Christian truth; *shema*).
Whatever false gods might exist, they can be little more than demons or figments of one’s imagination. It is true that other

False Gods: ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—

- Walk through Corinth and see tons of “so-called” (λεγόμενοι) gods. Many “little g” gods and “little l” lords. You would see statues of traditional deities, maybe icons of famous teachers.
- In many places in the world, even in our city, you will see icons and idols to false gods.
 - As far away as these issues might seem, they exist. And the implications still come up.

Creed: ⁶ 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.

- The Bible is full of early Christian confessions and hymns, summarizing basic Christian beliefs. Never let someone tell you that Christians didn’t have clearly articulated beliefs early (e.g., 1 Corinthians ca. 53-54 AD; Philippians ca. 57-62 AD)
 - One God, the Father εἷς θεὸς ὁ πατὴρ
 - From whom are all things and we for him, ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς αὐτόν
 - And one Lord, Jesus Christ, καὶ εἷς κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς
 - Through whom are all things and we through him. δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς δι’ αὐτοῦ.
 - Beautiful proto-trinitarian formula, describing both Jesus and Father as one God, with a distinct relationship of origin (*from whom*) and personal properties (*through whom*).
- Whatever Paul says about love, it is not a baseless, truthless, relativistic thing. Love for another does not diminish or ignore the truth.

- The truth of God is the foundation of our love for others. We don't (and can't) love others by ignoring the truth.
- True love isn't found in a lowest common denominator form of generic spirituality but in a robust allegiance to the triune God revealed by his Spirit through the Scripture.

Reality: ⁷ However, not all possess this knowledge. Do we all possess knowledge? Not actually. Here's the reality, not everyone is as far along in their theology as you. Not everyone necessarily knows what you know.

- Think about an issue you know a lot about: politics, culture, sports, theology, etc. Do you look down on others who don't know as much?
- Are you ignoring the needs of those who don't have what you have, who aren't where you are? (e.g., 10-year-old wanting 5 or 7-year-old to be able to do what he does and think how he thinks; preaching, learn in 35 minutes what took me at least a week, if not 35 years).

Application: But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

- You should consider where someone comes from and where they are.
 - In this case, some are being tempted back into their idolatrous lifestyle by eating food sacrificed to idols.
- This is a **live** issue around the world. There are places in the world where food is offered to **ancestors**. Believers might struggle. There are places in the world where **witchcraft** is a part of the daily culture. Believers might struggle.
 - Maybe not an exact corollary, but a real situation: group of new believers in Mali. Muslim country. Family comes over and wants a rug and a water to wash and prayer. *It's just water and fabric*. Should I give it to them?

Liberty and Conscience: Some things are sins for all people at all times. Some things are not but if your conscience convicts you, it is a sin for you (don't bind someone else by your conscience).

- ¹ As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ² One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³ Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him... (Sabbatarianism as well). ¹⁴ I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵ For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died... ¹⁹ So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding... ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Rom 14, can't preach the whole thing).
- What should you do with your conscience (**obey**, God-given; **question**, culturally-conditioned; **calibrate**, Bible/Spirit-formed/sanctified) (Jamieson).

Two Forms of Works-Based Righteous: ⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.

- There is a type of person that tries to prove their holiness (1) by their abstinence and another (2) by their partaking.
 - You'll see this in the discussion of beverage alcohol sometimes. The Bible is *crystal clear* that drunkenness is a sin. The Bible is clear that alcohol has plenty of dangers. But alcohol also has benefits (Paul and Timothy, medicinal; Jesus at the wedding, celebratory; "and wine to gladden the heart of man" (Ps 104:15)).
 - I remind people that drinking alcohol or abstaining from it are *not necessarily* a sign of spiritual maturity (this is not an endorsement of either position).

3. The Solution: Love in Action (vv. 9-13)

⁹ But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ 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? ¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Others First: ⁹ But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

- As a believer you have bound yourself to Christ and to his church. You are not an island.
 - You don't want to be an island. You need others and they need you.
 - Weekly worship is not an obligation but an opportunity to be present in the lives of each other, under the word of God, united in worship.
 - Isolating yourself from the body is a recipe for ruin.
- "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful (1 Cor 6:12).
 - "Freedom is not the permission to do what you like. It's the power to do what you ought" (Os Guinness).
 - Just because you could, doesn't mean you should (e.g., paper straws).

It's simply not enough to know what is right if you don't care about your brothers and sisters in Christ (starts in the church). What good is having the right knowledge if it ruins a brother or sister in Christ.

- Paul's problem is not with this truth, but it's application.
 - Too often we want to make a point rather than make a difference.

Drawn Back: ¹⁰ 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?

- Paul doesn't want them drawn back into idolatry (e.g., why not drinking alcohol is more persuasive if a brother is a former alcoholic than some legalistic idea that abstention is more holy).

- Interestingly, idolatry and sexual immorality are constantly connected in 1 Corinthians, Acts 15:28-29, Rev 2:14, 20.

Destruction: ¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

- Not simply “offense” but “destruction.” Stumble is not simply “offend” (incur hatred or displeasure of men), but to actually hinder them and lead to destruction.
- Christ gave up his life for them, and you won’t even give up your food?
- Do you view your brothers and sisters with this level of value? Someone worth dying for?
- When you sin against others you sin against God (Psalm 51). When you sin against a brother or sister in Christ, you sin against someone Christ died for.

Destruction: ¹³ Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

- Paul will give up his rights for the good of another. Love is not measured by how much you can get but how much you’re willing to give for the good of another.
 - This can be overapplied (there is truth, there is sin). We also aren’t bound to the consciences or narrow, legalistic demands of any group.
 - This is not a call to enable sin or encourage legalism (don’t overread)
- But it is a call to consider the needs of others before our own. It’s a call to love others.
 - Why? Because the gospel (Jesus considered us, gave for us, condescended for us; we do for others).

Conclusion:

We want our church to be a place where knowledge and love overflow for the glory of God and the good of others.

- That can only happen when we use our freedom in Christ to serve others rather than do whatever we want.