

Freedom and knowledge

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Date: 10 April 2016

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[0:00] If you're using a church Bible, the reading is on page 1151, and it's 1 Corinthians, the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians, Church of Corinth, chapter 8, and all 13 verses. That's page 1151.

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

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. For though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, 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. 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.

Food will not commend us to God. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

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? And so by your knowledge, this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.

[2:01] Thus, sinning against your brothers, and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

As we stand, let's pray. All scripture is God-breathed.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much that you are indeed the one true living God, and thank you that you are a God who speaks to us. And we pray now that as we, having heard your word read, as we now hear it explained, please would you help us to accept your word and take it to heart as it is, the words of the living God.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. And turn back, if you will, to 1 Corinthians chapter 8 on page 1151.

Over these next four weeks, we are looking at 1 Corinthians 8 to 10, so we're a little bit behind where we are in our growth groups. And the big question which God wants us to ask is this, am I living for my glory or for God's glory?

[3:19] It's how the section finishes. Have a look at chapter 10, verse 31. So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

For those familiar with the Westminster Shorter Catechism, you'll know the first question it asks is, what is the chief end of man? And the answer, man's chief end, is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

But apart from not investing in dodgy offshore tax havens in Panama, what does it look like to give glory to God?

I assume it's something that anyone who calls themselves a Christian wants to do. But I think it's easy, isn't it, to have rather sort of romantic ideas as to what a life given over to God's glory might look like.

You might think, well, yes, I can see a missionary who takes the gospel to another culture. Well, they're clearly living for God's glory. Or perhaps you think of a business person who is highly

regarded both as a business person but also as a Christian in the workplace.

[4:24] Well, you could think, well, they're obviously giving glory to God in the way in which they're going about their lives. Well, I think the really big surprise of 1 Corinthians 8 to 10 is that it shows us how to bring glory to God in the matters of everyday life.

Which should be a great encouragement, I think, to those who, like me, feel their lives are very ordinary. And today we're going to see how to bring glory to God in the way in which we relate to other Christians, the way in which we relate to each other as other Christians.

Next week, in the way in which we relate to outsiders, those who aren't yet Christians. The week after, how we bring glory to God in our own Christian lives. And I hope if you're here and if you're looking in our Christian faith, as always, we're delighted you're here.

But I hope you'll keep coming because actually these four talks show us, I think, really well what it looks like to, what the Christian life looks like in practice. Jesus said that anyone who is considering following him should count the cost beforehand, just as if you're having a house extension or something like that.

You make sure beforehand you've counted the cost and that you'll be able to pay the bills. Well, these chapters will help us to see what it would look like for ourselves if we were to follow Jesus and so bring glory to God.

[5:42] First, you'll see there's an outline on the back of the service sheet. First of all, Christian maturity is measured by love. Christian maturity is measured by love.

1 Corinthians 8, verses 1 to 6. Now, verse 1 marks the start of a new section of the letter. Just as chapter 7, verse 1 began, now concerning the things about which you wrote, and then quoted the something that the Corinthians were saying.

So you get a similar thing here, chapter 8, verse 1. Now, concerning food offered to idols, we know that all of us possess knowledge. But I'm sure I'm not the only one who at first reading has not been put off by the title, Food Sacrificed to Idols.

Now, I guess Christians from an Asian or from many Asian backgrounds or many African cultures will be able to see the enormous significance of these chapters immediately.

Perhaps a family reunion, which involves a sacrifice to a pagan idol. Or a wedding, which involves presenting an offering to the spirits of ancestors or whatever it is.

[6:55] But I guess for many of us, this feels very remote and feels very irrelevant. Perhaps the first century equivalent of train spotting or something like that. But what we're going to see over these four weeks is that although the presenting issue may feel very remote and very distant, the issue of food offered to idols, actually that is only the presenting issue.

And I take it the reason why the Apostle Paul spends so much time on it, three whole chapters, is because there is a far more serious underlying issue. Much of life in Corinth revolved around temples.

The second largest city in the Roman Empire is dominated by temples and shrines to all the various Greek and Roman gods. One first century traveler lists more than a dozen temples in the main public square alone.

They are as common as corner shops in inner London or coffee shops in the city in the West End. And chapters 8 to 10 touches on a number of aspects of this temple culture.

In chapter 8, it's eating in a temple dining room. So many of the temples would have had dining rooms attached. And if you wanted to impress your friends or take people out on some kind of business, sort of expenses paid lunch, then rather than booking a table at a restaurant, you'd book a table at the temple.

[8:19] You'd take them out for a meal on meat that had been sacrificed to a temple idol previously. Business lunches, social occasions would have been held there. This is a major part of social life in first century Corinth.

And notice, will you, how Paul addresses two groups of people in the church in Corinth who are affected by this. Firstly, verse 1, there are those who have knowledge, who boast in the knowledge

they have and are happy to eat food sacrificed to idols.

Secondly, there are those who, in verse 9, are described as weak. Verse 10, as those with weak consciences. And Paul's fear is that a weak Christian, I take it someone perhaps who's a new Christian or perhaps someone who's not a very well-taught Christian, not a very well-established Christian, who wants to worship these idols, sees another Christian going along to the pagan temple, joins in, and ends up being drawn back into the worship of those idols.

That's the issue. But notice that Paul doesn't start with a weak. He starts with a warning to those who have knowledge. Verse 1, This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

[9:58] What is this knowledge, these well-taught, perhaps more mature in some ways, Christians have? Well, it's in verses 4 to 6.

And you cannot fault it. Let me read verses 4 to 6. Therefore, as the eating of food offered to idols, we know that an idol has no real existence, and that there is no God but one.

For although they may be so-called gods in heaven and on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is one God, the Father from whom all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Idols have no real existence. Whether the gods of Aphrodite or Zeus or Artemis or the gods and idols of today, there is no God but one, quoting Deuteronomy 6, verse 4, in the Old Testament, where God reveals himself as the only God.

There is no God but one. Idols of which there are many are simply so-called gods. They have no reality. They exist only in the mind of the worshipper.

[11:16] Perhaps like a house that no one lives in. You can think, can't you, that someone lives there. You can write a letter. You can put it through the letterbox. You can imagine they've read it. You can imagine they might reply.

But actually there's no one there. The house is empty. Because, verse 6, the God of the Bible is the only God there is. He's the creator.

The one from whom all things exist. And therefore the one for whom all things exist. It's what we've been thinking about this morning, isn't it? Our theme this morning. There is one true living God. And it's very striking, I think, isn't it, in verse 6, that the Lord Jesus Christ is described. Did you notice this? The Lord Jesus Christ is described in exactly the same way as God the Father, the creator and life giver.

You see, we mustn't imagine that in some way Jesus is less than fully God. That he is in some way a smaller version of God the Father.

[12:17] No, he is fully God, just as God the Father is fully God. Now, it's obvious, but I guess it's worth saying it, but 21st century London, it's remarkably similar, isn't it, to 1st century Corinth.

A city of many gods, a city of many idols, where the prevailing political correctness says that all should be treated equally and all should be given equal respect.

Idols which are impressive, culturally powerful, and part of the mainstream. But the glorious reality is that there is only one God.

And that is a knowledge that brings great freedom. It brings freedom from bondage to idols, freedom from worship of false religion, freedom to eat meat that's been sacrificed to an idol, because the idol is nothing.

In other words, this is good knowledge. It reflects a true understanding of God, verses 4 to 6. But, verses 1 to 3, Paul insists that Christian maturity is measured not by how much you know, but by love.

[13:40] Those with knowledge in Corinth are puffed up. In fact, in each of the main sections of 1 Corinthians, the church in Corinth is described as a puffed up church.

Look at me. Look at my knowledge. Be impressed. Puffed up people are very unattractive, aren't they? If you know them. According to verse 2, that kind of puffed up knowledge is actually bad knowledge.

Whereas good knowledge, verse 2, should lead to humility. If we've really grasped what God is like, eternal, infinite, hidden from our sight and senses. And verse 3, while bad knowledge delights in what it knows about God, actually good knowledge delights simply in the fact that we are known by God.

Christian maturity is measured by love. Well, what about Grace Church Dulwich? Do we give the impression that maturity is measured by knowledge, by how well we understand the Bible, or measured by love?

There are a large proportion of people in this room who are either highly educated already or are on the way to being highly educated. full of people, in other words, who get our self-worth from our education, either academically, professionally, our self-worth from what we know, from what we understand.

[15:17] As a church, we want to be a church that takes the Bible seriously. But it would be a terrible thing, wouldn't it, if other people, other Christians, found us puffed up.

Those of Bible knowledge, those who can tell exactly what was right and wrong with every sermon, we need to hear this, don't we? As, by the way, to those who sit in the Bible study and are afraid to answer questions in case they get the wrong answer.

Because that, of course, is also, isn't it, measuring maturity by how much you know or by how much you don't know in that case. Yes, knowledge and understanding are important, of course they are. But they are not the mark of maturity. Love is the mark of Christian maturity. Secondly, Christian freedom is limited by love.

Christian freedom is limited by love. Verse 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.

[16:36] The problem is that some, in Corinth, those with weak consciences, still think of these idols as in some way real. So, they believe, verse 4, there is no God but one, in their heads, but not in their hearts.

Perhaps they're younger or less well-taught Christians. Perhaps those with knowledge were saying to them, well look, if you really want to show that you are a more mature Christian, then you should go to the temple, you should eat idol meat, because you'll be declaring that idols don't exist and there is only one God, but not many.

Well, how does Paul respond? Verse 8, firstly, he says that whether you eat food sacrificed to an idol is not an issue of right or wrong. Food will not commend us to God.

We are no worse off if we do not eat and no better off if we do. In other words, this is not a right-wrong issue. Okay, it's not an issue, it's a morally neutral issue.

But that doesn't mean it's unimportant and they can do what they like. Verse 9, but take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

[17:54] What do you say? How might that be possible? Verse 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?

And what will the result be? Verse 11, and so by your knowledge this person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.

Notice, will you have, each phrase in verse 11 reflects the seriousness of what is happening, the seriousness of what's taking place and the value of the weak Christian to God, a Christian brother, one for whom Christ died, who might now be destroyed, meaning destroyed as a Christian.

And so destroyed for eternity. It's very striking, isn't it? You see, here is something, eating idol meat, it's not a sin in itself, it's not a right, wrong issue, but actually by so doing, they are sinning against their fellow Christians.

Verse 12, thus sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. So what is the application?

[19:12] Verse 13, therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. That's the key verse to the chapter.

It'd be a good verse to learn, wouldn't it? That's the first principle for living a life that glorifies God, not to cause other Christians to stumble, but to do all we can to build up other Christians in the Lord Jesus instead.

I remember before we had children being rather alarmed by how friends' holiday destinations seemed to change radically once they had a child. The great surprise it was to see friends who perhaps once had gone whitewater rafting in New Zealand or headed off to the Himalayas for trekking or whatever it was, now had to be fine going on holidays to Devon making sandcastles for whom a one-mile walk seemed like a trek across the Himalayas.

And I remember thinking how dull and how boring. But of course, you see, the freedom which those parents had to go on holiday, of course, even with children wherever they wanted to go, they limited their freedom for the love of their child.

They figured that it might be more loving to go to Devon and to build sandcastles and to go on one-mile walks along the prom rather than going to New Zealand. Limiting freedom for the sake of love.

[20:33] And that is the principle here. But you say, why on earth should I limit my freedom for the sake of another Christian who, for goodness sake, has such a poor grasp of the gospel? Well, out of love.

Because you don't want them to stumble because you want to bring glory to God. Now, I want us to think about the implications of this in a moment, of which I think there are many.

But before I do so, let me say one or two things about conscience. Because God has given all of us a conscience and 1 Corinthians 8 has important things to say about how we think about our consciences.

So firstly, will you notice that our consciences may be wrong? What seems to be a right thing can be a wrong thing. Sometimes our consciences make us feel things are okay when actually they're sinful.

At other times, as with the weak Christians here in 1 Corinthians 8, our consciences can tell us to keep away from things which actually are completely fine. I guess the way to think about conscience is like a sort of poorly calibrated scientific instrument or a pair of kitchen scales which aren't properly adjusted.

[21:55] And therefore, we need to be very careful about making decisions purely on the basis of what our conscience tells us and on the basis of what feels right to me.

And we should do all we can to bring our consciences under the word of God such that our consciences are trained and taught by God's word, the Bible.

But secondly, notice this, that although our consciences are unreliable, it's very important not to do what our conscience tells us is wrong.

Because to do that is to set our hearts against what we know and think about God. The Puritan Richard Baxter wrote this, if you forsake conscience and go against it, you reject the authority of God in doing that which you think he forbids.

If you forsake conscience and go against it, you reject the authority of God in doing that which you think he forbids you. That is precisely the mistake which those with knowledge in Corinth are making.

[23:07] which means finally that we need to do what we can to make it easy for our Christian brothers and sisters to follow their consciences.

Not of course where their conscience is going to lead them into sin but where it is as in the case of food sacrifice to idols, a matter of genuine Christian freedom.

I think for many of us this is a very hard chapter to hear actually because you see our response will be instant pushback but I am free and God is saying yes you are free but will you limit your freedom?

Will you give up your freedom out of love for others? Now there's lots more to say on conscience. If you want to think more about conscience, Christopher Ash has written this excellent book called Pure Joy Rediscover Your Conscience.

It came out last year. It's a great read. It's not difficult to read. I thoroughly recommend that and he spends a lot of time on 1 Corinthians chapter 8. But for the rest of our time together let's think about how this might apply to us.

[24:11] These two principles that Christian maturity is measured by love and Christian freedom is limited by love. Well first of all will you remember this is about the weak Christian.

In other words when a mature Christian a strong Christian perhaps comes up to you at an office party or at a party or something like that and says it's against his conscience that you should drink alcohol that he should drink alcohol and therefore he doesn't think you should be drinking alcohol well that is not a 1 Corinthians 8 issue is it?

This is about weak Christians not strong Christians. But if it's a new Christian who in their past life perhaps was enslaved to alcohol then stick to tap water when they come round for a meal. I guess the most obvious parallel perhaps is whether or not to eat halal meat. Knowledge says well it's still God's cow. God has not handed the ownership of this cow over to another god. But what does love do? Or perhaps for someone who is from Muslim background who has wonderfully come to put their trust in the Lord Jesus you might decide to give up on your curry or kebab and have something else instead.

[25:32] But I guess the biggest idol in 21st century Britain is materialism isn't it? Surely that's the biggest idol in 21st century Britain today. So imagine a wealthy city worker who for the last 10 years has invested every moment of every day in their career and pursued the dream lifestyle making money spending money worshipping money.

Wonderfully they hear the gospel they repent and they put their trust in the Lord Jesus. And they decide to make a clear break with their past life of worshipping money and career and success. That would be a very sensible thing to do wouldn't it? Isn't that something you would all encourage them to do? And so they downsize their house they buy a second hand car and they take their holidays in the UK.

But you see what then happens when they see your new car with the coveted badge on the bonnet? What happens when they see those photos of that dream holiday you posted on social media?

The designer kitchen the electronic gadget yes of course at one level you're free but actually might that not in time encourage them back into their former idolatry?

[26:55] Yes I too actually would love to have a kitchen like that. And over time set a course where they turn their back on the Lord Jesus for the pursuit again of money and success and everything that brings.

Someone was telling me recently about a family who moved to serve a church in the northwest of England and how they quickly realized they'd have to abandon their annual skiing holiday. Now they know there's nothing wrong with skiing holidays but they also know there could be a lot wrong with a skiing holiday if they caused others to stumble and so they decided not to do it having moved to the northwest.

Or what about mixed sex flat sharing arrangements? Perhaps a student perhaps a young city worker who just arrives in London to start work what about sharing a flat or a house with those of the opposite sex?

Well we're told to flee sexual immorality but beyond that the Bible says very little. Should Terry from a Christian home well taught strong in the faith should he share being a mixed flat mixed sex flat sharing arrangements?

[28:08] Well it may not be an issue for him at all. but should he encourage Ben who's a new Christian for whom before he was converted sleeping around was very much part of his lifestyle should he encourage him to join him in this mixed sex flat sharing?

Well that could be a disaster couldn't it? It could lead him to fall away from the Lord Jesus and destroy him as a Christian. 1 Corinthians 8 is so helpful isn't it on guidance?

We look for guidance from God don't we in all sorts of things. Yet so often what of course we want is simple answers isn't it? You know where should I live? Who should I marry?

Where should we send the kids to school? What job should I do? What clothes should I buy? But actually what God gives us is a framework for making godly decisions.

Decisions which glorify him. And as such 1 Corinthians 8 actually is very radical indeed. You see if we go away from this morning thinking oh yes there's just one or two little areas here where I need

to tweak my life then actually we've missed the point entirely.

[29:21] Because 1 Corinthians 8 actually is about turning our lives completely upside down. Such that we live lives not for ourselves which revolve around serving ourselves but we live lives which revolve around serving others other Christians seeking to build them up.

And that says God brings glory to him. And we'll see next week in chapter 9 how Paul extends exactly the same principle to living lives for the good of unbelievers as well as chapter 8 living lives for the good of believers.

Let's have a few moments of quiet I'll then pray and then we've got time for questions after that.

Therefore if food makes my brother stumble I'll never eat meat lest I make my brother stumble.

Heavenly Father thank you very much for 1 Corinthians 8. We confess our self centredness how easy it is to stand on our rights simply to do what we think we want to do or is best for us.

And we pray Heavenly Father for each one of us that you would help us to use our gifts and abilities to build up other Christians lest they stumble and we ask it in Jesus name.

[30:48] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.