

Forgoing Freedom to Build Others Up

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[0 : 00] In this particular five or six weeks, we're actually looking at the middle portion. So we started at chapter 7, and today we're looking at chapter 8. Well, let me pray before we start. Father, we pray that tonight, even though the situation that's being described may seem foreign to us, yet the principles and what you want us to do from this text will become clear.

So, Lord, make this passage relevant for us at Holy Trinity tonight. We pray this, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, many of you would be familiar with Chinese New Year, particularly if you're Chinese.

And the tradition goes, and I think it's still being practiced here in Australia, that during Chinese New Year, what you would do is go from house to house visiting your family and friends.

It was a mark of respect, so the younger people would be visiting the older people and showing them their respects.

And for young kids, this was, for us, when we were young, the biggest payday of the year. Because there's little things called red packets where the married people or the married couples were meant to give red packets with lots of money in them to those that were single.

[1 : 24] So that was a great highlight. The other highlight with Chinese New Year was all the New Year goodies that you get to sample when you visit the houses. And so that's what we, my brother and I, two of us in the family, looked forward to when we were in Singapore.

Now, the thing was that my parents were Christians, and many of our relatives weren't. In fact, many of them would worship idols. So it was not uncommon to go to a house to find the same New Year goodies on the table, also being stacked on the shelf right next to the ancestral altar.

And so Mum, being a Christian and a very committed Christian, would do a quick rundown of the visitation lists every day. And she would work out what were the foods that we were allowed to eat at whose house.

And then she would also work out how she would diplomatically refuse the foods that were being offered at those houses where we knew that perhaps the food was being offered to idols without causing offense.

Well, I describe this situation because I think in many ways this would have been quite a similar situation we find in the city of Corinth in the first century.

[2 : 44] Idol worship was prevalent in that city. And often food would have been offered to idols and then subsequently be used for human consumption. And there were sort of three general ways where that could occur.

So first, it could be that the food was offered as part of a dining hall that was attached to a temple. And you still see, I think, some of that in Asia nowadays.

Or else you could be invited to an unbeliever's home and be served food without really knowing whether that food had been offered to idols or not. And the third way would have been that you could go to the market and purchase food which had previously been offered to idols.

There was also the social added dimension of social status. Just like today, eating is more than just about the food.

So if an important person invited you to dinner, it was a thing of prestige. And to refuse it could be a thing of insult. So for some, in the church in Corinth, there would have been pressure, social pressure to eat, even when the food was being offered to idols.

[3 : 56] So I believe the Corinthian church was actually divided on this. And they wanted to, I guess, ask Paul what he thought. And hence, we have this section of the letter. Now, the one view is reflected in the first verse, in a quote.

And Paul says, we know that all of us possess knowledge. That is, all of us know that there is no such thing as idols if we believe in Jesus.

And so even if the food had been offered to idols, we are free to eat because idols don't exist. And in fact, the Bible reading from Isaiah today confirms that. Now, others weren't so sure.

And so Paul, in his reply, gets in the very first verse to the heart of the matter. He counters the quote in verse 1 by saying that the real issue is not knowledge but love.

The Corinthians wanted to use knowledge as their criterion. But Paul uses love instead. So can you see the contrast there? Paul says, knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

[5 : 00] Both knowledge and love are said to cause things to grow. But knowledge leads to pride. That's what puffs up means. And so there's nothing really underneath that.

And so when you prick it, it bursts. On the other hand, love builds up. That is, it's filled with substance. And it fills and benefits not just the person with knowledge, but everyone else as well. We see that often with knowledge, don't we? How easy it is to fall into pride. We think we're better than others just because we know more than them.

Those of us with more education tend to look down on those without. And we love those letters for some of us behind our names on our business card. The more there are, the more important we feel we are.

And so even in the church, we can be guilty of this. And I have to say, especially at a knowledge-loving church like HDD. Maybe I'm just speaking for myself, but, you know, we take pride in being able to quote a Bible verse here or there to substantiate our argument.

[6 : 14] Or better still, if we can throw in Calvin or Luther, or one of our favorite Bible scholars. And then we think if we've passed one or two subjects at Bible College, suddenly we begin to see ourselves as experts on the Bible.

And I did a quick count just this week, particularly for our congregation at 6 p.m. And there's something like 15 or more people here that have been either trained or are training at Bible College. So that's a fair proportion of us. And there's a great temptation, isn't there, to value knowledge and to take pride in knowledge. Now, there's nothing wrong with that in and of itself, but Paul warns those who think like that, those who think they know it all, that actually they don't.

That's my paraphrase of verse 2. Instead, Paul says in verse 3, if you really want to talk about knowledge, then instead of focusing on what you know about God, focus on being known by God. See how Paul shifts that when he says in verse 3, but anyone who loves God is known by Him. So be assured that God knows you because you love Him and trust in His Son Jesus.

[7 : 33] Take joy in the fact that God knows you as the Father knows His Son. Your value comes from being known by God, not by how much you know about God.

Now, does that mean that Paul then is saying that knowledge doesn't matter, that we needn't worry about what's right or wrong? You know, as the song from the Beatles go, all you need is love.

Well, not quite, because if we move on to verses 4 to 6, Paul affirms the very knowledge that some of the Corinthians were claiming to have. And so we read, Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that no idol in the world really exists, and that there is no God but one.

Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven and on earth, and in fact 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.

So Paul thought it important enough to state that truth explicitly, to state that knowledge, as it were, explicitly. And this is knowledge or truth, which is actually very relevant to the question of idols, or food offered to idols.

[8 : 56] So no, Paul wasn't trying to pit knowledge against love. Rather, he was saying that knowledge must be constrained by love.

Knowledge alone puffs up with pride. Instead, those with knowledge need to respond with love. Now, notice Paul doesn't say that those with knowledge should teach the ignorant, because that doesn't solve the problem here, because the relevant knowledge in question is actually aligned to the conscience.

And so we read in verse 7, It is not everyone, however, who knows this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol, and their conscience being weak is defiled.

So it's actually possible for someone to know the truth in the head, but yet not know the freedom it brings in life. And I guess it's very similar to people who have phobias, people who are afraid of, I don't know, spiders.

You can tell them, and they might even know that, you know, spiders can't hurt them. But yet, the phobia is real, and for them, they do not have that knowledge, as it were.

[10:17] And so it's the same thing with this kind of knowledge. It's knowledge that doesn't align with what their conscience says. And so when that is the case, those who have the freedom to do something because of knowledge need to consider those who aren't free, those whose conscience are still weak.

Now notice that the very act of eating the food, I don't think Paul considers as sinful at all. Because in verse 8, he says again, that food will not bring us close to God.

We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But Paul here is fearful that the weak Christian is being forced or pressured to do something which he thinks or she thinks is sinful. And so the pressure may come from, I guess, wanting to keep up with the other Christians and maintain the social standing. And if they do that, what either happens is that they become overcome by guilt by doing that, or else they start thinking that, well, maybe God doesn't mind sinning at all. When that happens, the weak Christian is being made to stumble. Now this is actually quite a serious matter because when we say stumble, a lot of us imagine it's sort of tripping over a step or something.

[11:37] But I think the word here to stumble means to fall out of faith, not just a trip and then getting back on your feet again. And so Paul charges the strong believer, the one who has freedom, of sin.

For he or she has destroyed someone whom Christ has died for. That's in verse 11. Christ has died for this person, and they have, in a sense, undid all that by what they've just done.

They have wounded the person's conscience, in verse 12, when they should have built that conscience up or built that person's faith up. And so Paul concludes, in the exercise of that freedom, they have sinned against Christ.

Notice what Paul says, they have sinned against Christ. And that sounds pretty serious, doesn't it? Because I would have thought, I'm just exercising my freedom, and it's not wrong to do it, and all of a sudden, I've sinned against Christ.

And that's not how we think today, is it? Today the emphasis is all about working out what's best for yourself, and having the freedom to do what you want, provided your conscience is clear.

[12:53] Well, Paul says, not so with the body of Christ. When you are part of the body, you need to think about not what's best just for yourself, but also what's best for your brother or sister.

And not only must your conscience be clear, the conscience of your brothers and sisters as well. Otherwise, you can do the right thing and still sin against Christ.

Now, let's be clear here. This verse is not talking about trying to restrict someone's freedom to appease your own conscience.

I've seen a lot of mature Christians use this very verse to try and restrict young Christians from doing something or not doing something. No, this verse needs to be applied to ourselves, not to others.

And so Paul himself appeared to be willing to go to great lengths for his fellow Christians. I guess when I read verse 13, I get in my mind a sense that Paul must have been, I think, a meat lover.

[13:59] I think he would have been right at home at an Aussie barbecue or with a great roast dinner. Maybe I'm just imagining, but whatever it is, he says that he would rather forgo all of that if it meant saving a brother or sister.

So he doesn't say, for example, oh, let me see, maybe I can, you know, try and source undefiled meat somewhere, you know, maybe raise my own sheep in my farm and then get it slaughtered by myself.

No, he actually values his brother and sister's faith so much that he would go out of his way to ensure that none of them would stumble. Well, my guess is that many of us probably don't come face to face with physical idols here in Australia today.

Not if we're sort of in the sort of western part of Australia or, you know, not new migrants to this country. And not many of us, I think, would have been faced with the same situation that my parents did regarding food offered to idols.

But I want to say that that doesn't mean that there aren't idols in Australia. And by that I mean false gods or things that used to enslave some of us before we believed in Christ.

[15 : 19] Things like alcohol, problem gambling, pornography, violence, and I'm sure there are other things as well. And it's probably also true that some of us may still have weak consciences in relation to some of these things.

That is, we are still susceptible to falling back into some of these things. And so I think the application tonight is that as a body, we need to think carefully about how we can build our brothers and sisters up when we realize that they are facing some of these things.

What freedoms will we forego to help them? When we go out together, what kinds of venues will we avoid? What movies will we pass up on?

How might we dress? How should we use alcohol? These are just some scenarios which we should think through carefully, particularly as well as, I think, in our congregation and more and more in Melbourne, we are being more and more a multicultural society, in which case that there are cultural expectations which are not common between us.

So it's good to be open about these things, to talk about these things. I'm not suggesting we go back into legalism again and say, oh, there's a whole list of do's and don'ts that we do this and we don't.

[16 : 47] But if we do become aware of risks that fellow Christians might be facing, then shouldn't we really think carefully and if need be, err on the side of caution in relation to our freedom?

But let me push, I guess, the application one step further, beyond, I guess, the strict definition of sin and idols. Because I think if you look back into verse 1, ultimately, I think the underlying principle here and indeed in the rest of the next few chapters is the fact that it's all about going out of our way to build others up.

Paul says that Christ gave up his freedom to save us and so we should do likewise for others. Our natural tendency, however, is that, you know, the more we know, the more set we can be in our ways.

And this applies particularly to church as well. We've worked out how we like things done, our worship, the way we fellowship, the way we study God's word.

And, you know, we've comfortably organized ourselves around all that. But just because most of us are happy with these things, it doesn't mean that we shouldn't be thinking of the new Christian or the young believer who comes in who may not find some of these things helpful.

[18 : 22] And these people might be in the minority. If that were the case, would we be willing to forgo our preferences in order to build others up?

Now, I'm not suggesting that anything goes. There are obviously a lot of important and fundamental things about the gospel which we shouldn't be compromising on. But the fact is that we often mistake preferences as essentials.

And so the test really is this. The more knowledge that you think you have, then I think the more accommodating you should be with your freedom and the more willing you should be to give that up for others.

And I guess in a small way, I think we are seeing that with our congregation. The fact that we do go out of our way to welcome new people and how we've gone out of our way to, for example, help those who are doing the Christianity Explored course at the moment.

But take a look around at your brothers and sisters here tonight and remember that Christ died for each and every one of us. Which means that we should be willing to go out of our way to build them up so that they don't fall from faith.

[19 : 36] Which means that their salvation and their endurance and faith is actually worth more to each of us than our own individual freedoms and preferences.

And so if you have knowledge, let me encourage you tonight. Don't let knowledge puff you up. Instead, use it to build others up in love.

Amen. We're going to sing again the Servant King.

Please stand. Thank you.