

Forsaking Rights for the Sake of Others

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Date: 10 June 2018

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[0 : 00] Let me start with a question. What would you give to save someone close to you? What would you give to save someone close to you? How far are you willing to go to protect them?

On one hand, it's a very silly question because if someone close to me was in danger, I would do anything to protect them. But I wonder if you still think that at the end of this talk. Because Paul is going to tell us how to save or protect those closest to us. And the question is, how far are you willing to go?

Today, we're going to do all of chapters 8 and 9, which, as I said, are open in that one page of your Bible. And it seems like a lot to do in one talk, but it's all the same simple point. What rights are we willing to give up to save those closest to us? What rights are we willing to give up?

And in Australia, we value our rights as much as any other virtue. We've all got an inner lawyer. You know, lawyers are there to protect your rights on your behalf. Our inner lawyer always says, I know my rights. I have the right to raise my children the way I want. I have the right to enjoy my home. So go away, noisy neighbors. Don't build that freeway too close to me.

I have the right to spend my money on the things that I want. I have the right to free speech. I have the right to religious freedom. Well, I think I do. I have to check with Philip Ruddock about that one. In Australia, rights are huge. And I know my rights.

[1 : 41] And as we turn to Corinth again, the presenting problem is a bit of a peculiar one. It's there in verse 1. Food sacrifice to idols. That's a bit peculiar.

But underneath, it's a principle common to all of us. What rights could we give up to save those closest to us? And here Paul raises the stakes. He is prepared to become a vegetarian for life. Have a look at verse 13.

He says, therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again so that I will not cause them to fall. That is pretty extreme stuff. And our inner lawyer, the inner lawyer reaches for the Bible.

And we check and we know our rights to eat meat. We know it's the other two mobs who can't eat pork chops. And in chapter 9, Paul raises the stakes again. Pardon the pun.

He says, verse 19, chapter 9, Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. In verse 20, he says, To the Jew I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.

[2 : 53] In verse 21, he says, To those not having the law, that is to Gentiles, I became like one not having the law. I became like a Gentile to the Gentiles.

Paul talks about giving up his own culture, taking on someone else's culture, if it would help to win them for Jesus. At the end of chapter 10, it's the same sort of thing.

At the end of each chapter is the same principle. Giving up your rights for the sake of others. Now, giving up meat is one thing. For me, that's pretty extreme. But Paul was prepared to give up his culture.

Would we be prepared to give up Aussie or British culture? To take on Chinese culture, if it means winning Chinese people. Would we be prepared to give up footy and barbecues?

Aussie slang? A dry wit? Tea with milk in it? If it would help other cultures to be saved? To keep them from perishing?

[3 : 57] Who is your Christianity for? For you to be saved? Yes. Is that all? And again, my inner lawyer boils to the surface.

Because I know I have the right to do those Aussie things that I love. But the tension in this passage today is between knowing your rights and loving other people.

Knowing your rights and loving others. And this is our first point. Let's read from verse 1. Now, about food sacrifice to idols. We know that we all possess knowledge. But knowledge puffs up. While love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God. Here, Paul gives the Corinthians two ways to live. Two ways to live. Both ways are good at making things bigger. So, the first way is knowledge.

[4 : 59] Knowledge makes me bigger. It puffs me up. The more I know, the more arrogant I become. The other way is love. Love makes others bigger.

Love builds up. Building them up. By putting them first. Knowledge puffs up. Love builds up. That's the principle. And just like in Melbourne, or out there in Melbourne, the Corinthians favoured knowledge.

They were a very puffed up church. You'll remember their mantra. We are already so spiritual. Chapter 1 to 4, puffed up. In favour of one teacher over another.

Chapter 5, puffed up. When one man was immoral with his mother-in-law. And here in chapter 8, puffed up. Because of how smart they were.

We all possess knowledge. They boast. You can see it there in quotation marks. In verse 1. That is their boast. But Paul shatters their egos in verse 2.

[6 : 02] He says, Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. Paul says, Their knowledge that they were so proud of only actually showed how little they really did know.

Because of verse 3. But whoever loves God is known by God. You see, there is knowing about God. And there is knowing God.

Any theologian knows about God. But only a Christian knows God. And is known by God. This is the knowledge we ought to have.

This is the knowing that is important. See, some Corinthians knew a lot about food rules. They knew a lot about idolatry. And their knowledge looked at others and said, I know more than you. You are on your own. I'm more spiritual than you are. But love looks at that other person and asks, How can I help you? How can I help you?

[7 : 09] And this is our second point. Verse 4. So then, about food sacrifice to idols. We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world. And that there is no God but one.

For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords. You see, knowledge says, knowledge says that an idol is nothing at all in the world.

And I put that on your handout as knowledge number one. An idol is nothing at all in the world. That's verse 4. And that there is no God but one. Some Corinthians knew that meat sacrificed to an idol was just regular meat because the idol was nothing.

So the meat sacrificed to the idol is the same meat you get from Woolies. It's the same meat you get in your McDonald's hamburger. It's all just meat. And everywhere Paul found religious people in the ancient world, he kept on insisting that their gods or their idols were nothing at all.

Because he knows, verse 6, Paul says, Our second reading in Isaiah, And you can imagine the riot that Christians used to cause.

[8 : 49] In the ancient world, everything was infused with idolatry and little gods. And annoyingly, the Christians kept insisting that there is no other God but one.

There is no other God but Jesus. Today, here in the 21st century, the other big religion for us is Islam. Their God is Allah.

Allah is just the Arabic word for God. So that's important. It's just the Arabic word for God. Now, I'm fine to join with them and worship Allah. But only if by Allah, they mean God who is also one with the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we exist.

Otherwise, their Allah is just an idol. And idols are nothing. You see, you can eat meat in front of a carved piece of wood. People with dining tables do it every day.

Knowledge says that an idol is nothing at all in the world. And verse 8, Food does not bring us near to God. They're the two knowledges that we're talking about today.

[10 : 01] I've put them on your handout. And so knowledge says you have the right to start munching. Eat away. But verse 7, Not everyone knows this.

Not everyone possesses knowledge one and knowledge two. Paul says, Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food, they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god.

And since their conscience is weak, it or the food is defiled. You see, in Corinth back then, lots of Christians used to worship idols. Lots of them still looked at lumps of wood and blocks of stone and used to think they were their former gods.

And it doesn't matter whether those gods were real or not. Because when they ate that food, their conscience thought it was offered to Zeus. And when you think you're worshipping Zeus, you are worshipping Zeus.

And so love says, Be careful. Be careful that your rights don't cause others to stumble. And this is our third point.

[11 : 13] And here comes our key verse for today. Verse 9. Paul warns those Corinthians and those Christians who know their rights. He says, Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

You see, when knowing my rights speaks louder than loving someone else, I might cause a stumbling block to the weak.

Verse 9. I might destroy by my knowledge the brother for whom Christ died. Verse 11. I will be sinning against them and wounding them and sinning against Christ.

That's verse 12. I might cause my brother or sister to fall into sin. The language here is at the life and death level. And so it's no wonder that Paul says, I will never, ever eat meat again if that would cause my brother or sister to stumble.

And verse 10 explains how all this works. So verse 10. For someone with a weak conscience sees you with all your knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols?

[12 : 23] And so let me illustrate with a bit of a scenario. I want you to imagine we're all back in Corinth and we are the Corinthian church. And I want you to imagine I'm an accountant back in my former days.

And it's Monday morning before the week starts. And the owner of the firm I work for, he's really keen at the books balance, which is what every accountant has to do. And so he goes down to the temple next to our firm and he offers up a cow to Zeus, the god of accountants.

I don't know if Zeus is the god of accountants. I don't think there is a god of accountants. There can't be. There wouldn't be. Thank you, God. There wouldn't be. So the owner of the firm offers his cow to make sure everything for the week goes well.

Now, it's lunchtime on that Monday and the boss decides to give everyone some of that steak.

Terrific. And I start eating because, verse 4, I know that idols are nothing.

I know, verse 8, that food doesn't bring me closer to God. And I know it's just beef and besides, I love beef. I love steak more than anything. So I start munching away.

[13 : 29] But not everyone possesses this knowledge, verse 7. And I happen to work with another Christian from my church. And this fella, he used to be a Zeus worshipper back in his former days.

And rightly or wrongly, he still thinks Zeus is a real God. And even though I know his background, as he sees me munching away, he's encouraged to eat also.

But when he starts eating, for him, he thinks he's taking part in Zeus' worship again. And if your conscience thinks you're sinning, then you are sinning. And so I have wounded him fatally.

I've led him back to sin and probably destruction. I have done the opposite of what love was supposed to do for people. The weaker brother for whom Christ died, I have played a part in destroying him rather than help saving him.

What would I give up to save those closest to me? Who is my Christianity for? And giving up rights for other believers, I think it's one of the hardest teachings in Christianity.

[14 : 48] In chapter 8, the issue is giving up rights to eat meat. In chapter 9, Paul gives up the rights to earn money so that poor people can hear about Jesus too.

And my inner lawyer, at this point, my inner lawyer is happy to provide some concessions. So, if someone needs some cash, someone needs to borrow a car, if you need a place to stay for a few nights, no worries.

I can give up this much. Maybe, there you go, this much. Pretty generous today. This much. And Paul, Paul is incredible here. Paul is giving up meat.

He's giving up earning money. That's incredible. But, is there anything that anyone can give up that would be more than what Jesus gave up for us?

He had the right to stay in heaven. He had the right not to come down here like one of us. But he gave up his right to save others.

[15:49] He was free to stay there. And he gave it up to bring us back to him by dying on the cross. Not my will but yours, he said. And so, what would you give up to save someone close to you?

That's the big question today. And as we move now to thinking about this and applying this, I just want to outline that box which is on your handout, the weaker brother principles.

And here are some rules for the weaker brother principle because the weaker brother principle sounds like it can be used as a trump card to get whatever you want. And so, here are some rules. So, I can't use the weaker brother principle for things I simply don't like. So, me personally, I don't really like modern church music.

Okay? I'm not going to admit that at 10.30. I'll only say it to you. I'll reverse it for the night. Truth be told, I really only like hymns.

[16:53] Okay? There you go. I really only like hymns. Can I say, look, I don't like modern church music. Boom. I'm a weaker brother. So, now change all the music to Wesley hymns.

No. Rule number two, I have to show that modern church music has a past association with me and sin. I have to prove that modern church music causes me to sin, which I think would be very difficult. Rule number three, I have to tell people the things that I struggle with, the things that I have a conscience issue. You can't possibly know what is in my head.

We have to let others know what we struggle with. Rule number four, I think, as the weaker brother, I think it's my obligation to educate my conscience from the Bible over time so that these issues become less and less.

And rule number five, I think this one's true as well. In certain circumstances, the stronger brother can still continue with that activity in secret. And the reason why is because they are free in Christ.

[18:00] They have the right to do these things, whatever they are. And so let's finish now with some modern examples. And remember, we're talking about things that aren't inherently sinful, but that others may have a conscience issue with.

things like good things that some people may have turned into idols in the past as an example. So for me, this is a real life example. So for me, I used to smoke cigarettes for many years and in my conscience it was a sin.

Regardless of what it really is in the eyes of God, in my conscience it was a sin. I finally quit in 2007 when I was overseas in England. And in England and in Europe everyone smokes.

I don't know if you've been there but everyone smokes in England and Europe. And on church camps Christian men love nothing more than sitting around a bonfire with a cigar or a social cigarette and a glass of whiskey.

They love that. Now, one weekend away the minister of my church was sitting around the bonfire and someone passed around a packet of cigarettes and he lit up a social cigarette and I was totally shocked.

[19:11] How could he do that? What was worse was I thought if he's doing it and I look up to him maybe I could just have a few puffs myself.

But that would have dragged me back into something that for me was sinful. And so I told him about my past smoking and how it was a real conscience issue for me and it was really bad for me when I saw him smoke.

And he knows he has the right to smoke but he would rather not destroy me. And so because of love he gave up what every British Christian man loves on a church weekend away to protect his weaker brother.

Now, I think if he does smoke he does it in secret and I don't know about it which is fine for me. And so that's one example. Let's move on to some more practical examples. So, many here may have previously struggled with wealth and materialism and making an idol of them.

I think that's really common. As part of their repentance maybe people work really hard to value less fancy things. So they go out and get a less fancy car, less fancy clothes, less fancy gadgets.

[20:26] Maybe they become a bit fussy about the whole thing but that's okay. Are you free? Do you have the right to drive past them in your new German car? Do you have the right to show them

pictures of you in the sun on your fancy holiday?

And your inner lawyer says, I know my rights. You have the right to buy a German car because, verse 8, cars do not bring us near to God just like food.

Knowledge says that luxury cars are not sinful but not everyone possesses this knowledge. And what would love say? Love might say to go on less fancy holidays.

Love might say trade in the German car for a more practical Aussie car. And as your inner lawyer boils to the surface saying, but, but, but, but, but, Paul says, kill your lawyer.

He says, kill your lawyer. He says, be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights has not become a stumbling block to the weak. Is it worth it? Here's another example.

[21 : 40] So for the last few weeks we've talked about contentment in marriage and contentment in singleness. And I think we've all struggled at times with this. Contentment in marriage, contentment in singleness.

We've all struggled, I think some people have struggled, sorry, to the point where it's now become an unhealthy grumbling against God. A sinful discontent in life.

I have the right to gush about my wife. I have the right to gush about my marriage. I have the right to gush and post pictures of my children on the internet.

But as I exercise my rights, I might slowly be destroying the weaker brother or sister for whom Christ died as they look at their own situation and go back to grumbling and sinful discontent.

Here's another example. Drinking alcohol. Lots of Christians have walked the fine line of drinking alcohol and some in a room this size, some may have crossed over that line into alcoholism which is sinful.

[22 : 50] Would we be willing to limit our social engagements to cafes and people's homes? places that are not licensed for the sake of weaker brothers and sisters?

For the sake of not encouraging them to take up a drink and potentially destruction again? There are just some examples I can think of work through but there are more examples.

So what about conscience issues about films with certain classifications? Films about magic?

Books about magic? Ancestor worship?

I know that's big in the Asian community. Gambling? What would you give up to save someone from Holy Trinity? How far are you willing to go?

Who is your Christianity for? What could you give up that would be more than what Jesus gave up for you? You see, in Australia we all value our rights and we have an immense freedom in Christ.

[23 : 52] but here is a passage that challenges us to kill our inner lawyer, to limit our freedoms out of love for weaker brothers and sisters.

Verse 9, be careful however that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. So let's pray. our Father God, we thank you that you tell us the truth, that you tell us tough things.

And Father, we all know our rights, we value our rights. Please help us to be careful when we exercise them, that we don't damage or wound or cause to stumble one of our weaker brothers or sisters.

This is really tough stuff. We've only scratched the surface, so please Lord, help us to care for others in this church, knowing we have another life to come. In Jesus' name, Amen.