

Forsaking Rights for the Sake of Others

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[0 : 00] 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, isn't it? Because if someone close to me is in danger, I would do anything to save them.

But I wonder if we still think that at the end of this talk today. Because Paul is going to tell us how to save those close to us, how to keep them from perishing.

And the question is, how far are you willing to go? And today we're going to be in chapters 8 and 9. We're going to do the whole thing in one talk, which seems like a lot.

But actually, there's a very simple point going through both chapters. And it's this. What rights would we give up to save those closest to us? What rights would we give up?

And in Australia, we value our rights as much as any other virtue. And everyone has got an inner lawyer. So lawyers are designed to protect your interests.

[0 : 58] And our inner lawyer always says, I know my rights. So I have the right to raise my children the way I want. I have the right to enjoy my home.

So go away, noisy neighbours. And don't build that East Link thing extension anywhere near me. I have the right to spend my money the way I want. I have the right to free speech.

I have the right to religious freedom. I think I still have that right. I have to wait on Philip Ruddock to tell me. In Australia, rights are huge. We know our rights.

And as we turn back to Corinth, the presenting problem is a really peculiar one. It's there in verse 1. Food sacrifice to idols. That's really peculiar. But the underlying issue is something common to all Christians.

That is, what rights would we give up to save others? Here, Paul was prepared to become a vegetarian for life.

[1 : 58] Have a look at verse 13. 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 reaches for a Bible, checking our rights to eat meat. We know that it's the other two mobs who can't enjoy pork chops.

But then in chapter 9, Paul raises the stakes. Pardon the pun. He says in verse 19. Come on, work with me. Bit slow, bit slow. Have a look at chapter 9, verse 9.

This is Paul upping the ante. Though I am free and belong to no one, I've made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. He says in verse 20.

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. Then in verse 21. To those not having the law, so Gentiles, I've become like one not having the law.

[2 : 58] Paul talks about giving up meat. That's one thing. But he talks about giving up his own culture and taking on someone else's culture. if it means winning them.

And in the end of chapter 10, he says the same thing. It's the same thing at the end of chapters 8, 9 and 10. Give up your rights for others. Giving up our meat, that's extreme.

I wonder, would we be prepared to give up, say, Aussie or British culture and take on Chinese culture for the sake of winning or helping to win Chinese people?

Would we be prepared to give up footy and barbecues, Aussie slang, dry wit, tea with milk in it, if it would help other cultures to be saved, to keep them from perishing?

Who is your Christianity for? Who is your Christianity for? Is it for you to be saved? Yes. But is that all? And again, my inner lawyer boils to the surface because I know that I have the right to enjoy all those Aussie things that I love.

[4 : 11] But the tension in this passage is between knowing your rights and loving other people. Knowing your rights and loving other people. And that is our first point. Let me 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 is giving the Corinthians two ways to live. Both ways will make something bigger. So the first way is knowledge.

Knowledge makes me bigger. It puffs me up. The more I know, the more arrogant I become. The other way is love. Love makes other people bigger.

It builds them up as I put them first. Knowledge puffs up. Love builds up. And just like Melbourne, the Corinthians favoured knowledge.

[5 : 12] They were a very puffed up church. You'll remember their mantra was, we are already so spiritual. Chapters 1 to 4, puffed up in favour of one teacher over another.

Chapter 5, puffed up when one of their men was immoral with his mother-in-law. And here in chapter 8, puffed up with their knowledge about food and idols.

We all possess knowledge, they boast in verse 1. You can see it's in quotation marks. That was their boasting. And Paul comes in and shatters their egos in verse 2.

He says, those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. He says that their knowledge, which they're bragging about, only showed how little they actually knew because of verse 3.

You see, there's knowing about God and there's knowing God. Any theologian can tell you about God, but only a Christian knows God and is known by God.

[6 : 21] This is the knowledge or the knowing that we ought to have. You see, some Corinthians knew a lot about food and idols. And knowledge looked at other people and says, I know it all.

I know more than you. I'm more spiritual than you. And you are on your own. But love looks at the other person and asks, love asks, how can I help you?

And this is our second point. Let's read from verse 4. So then, about eating food sacrificed 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, verse 4, that an idol is nothing at all in the world.

And I've put that on your handout as knowledge one. And everywhere Paul went in the ancient world, he found people who believed in these gods and he said, your gods are so-called gods.

[7 : 29] Verse 5. Because he knows, verse 6, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things come, came, and for whom we live.

And there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came, and through whom we live. Paul says, your stone statue is a God to you, but to me, it's just a lump of rock.

As Isaiah said in our second reading, or our first reading, there is no other rock but the Lord. That sun, that's just a ball of fire to me.

Those emperors, they're just men like me too. That's what Paul said. Today, in Australia, the other biggest religion is Islam.

And in Islam, their God is Allah. It's worth noting that Allah is just the Arabic word for God. And I'm fine to join with Muslims in worshipping Allah.

[8 : 26] I'm happy to do that. If by Allah, they mean God, who is also, verse 6, one with the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things came, and through whom we live.

Otherwise, their Allah is just another God, or just another idol. And idols are nothing at all in this world. You see, some Corinthians knew that meat sacrificed in front of an idol was just the same meat you get from Woolies.

And it was the same meat in your cheeseburger. It's all just meat. And they were right. See, you could eat meat in front of a carved block of wood. People do that every night in front of their dining tables.

Knowledge says that an idol is nothing. And verse 8, food does not bring us near to God. They are the two pieces of knowledge. I've put them on your handout. An idol is nothing.

Food does not bring us close to God. Knowledge says that you have the right to start munching. But verse 7, not everyone possesses this knowledge.

[9 : 31] Not everyone knows 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 is defiled. You see, in Corinth, lots of Christians used to worship idols. Lots of them still looked at lumps of wood and blocks of stone and still saw their former gods.

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter whether their gods were real or not. What matters is that when they ate, their conscience thought they were worshipping Zeus.

Zeus. And if you think you're worshipping Zeus, then you are worshipping Zeus. And so Paul says, in love, you have to be careful that your rights don't cause others to stumble.

And this is our third point. In verse 9, he warns the Corinthians who know their rights. He says, be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

[10:35] You see, when knowing my rights speaks louder than loving other people, it can be a stumbling block. Verse 9, I might destroy by my knowledge the brother for whom Christ died.

It's verse 11. I will be sinning against them and wounding them. That's verse 12. I might cause my brother or sister to fall into sin. That's verse 13. The language here is at the life and death level.

We are playing for sheep stations. And so it's no wonder then that Paul says, I will never again eat meat. And verse 10 explains how all this works.

Verse 10, For if 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? And so let me illustrate with a bit of role play.

So I want you to imagine that we're all back in Corinth. So this is Corinth. And I want you to imagine that I'm an accountant again. And it's Monday morning before the week starts. And the boss of my firm, he really wants to make sure all the books balance.

[11:40] You know, that's what accounting is supposed to do. And so he takes a cow and he sacrifices it to Zeus, the god of accountants. I don't know if accountants have a god. I assume they don't given what I know.

So he sacrifices a cow for a good accounting for the week. Now, at lunchtime, at lunchtime, the boss gives everyone some of that steak. Now, I start eating because I know, verse 4, I have the first piece of knowledge.

I know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and I know knowledge too. I know that food does not bring me closer to God. And besides, I love steak and so I start munching away.

But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Verse 7. And so I work with another Christian fellow from my church and this Christian fellow, he used to be heavily into Zeus' worship in his old pagan way of life and rightly or wrongly, he still thinks that Zeus is a real god.

And even though I know his background, as he sees me munching away, he is encouraged to start eating for himself. But for him, when he starts eating, his mind thinks that he's going back to Zeus' worship.

[12:59] And if your conscience thinks you're sinning, then you are sinning. And so thus, I have wounded him and wounded his conscience fatally. I've led him back on the path of sin towards destruction.

I have done the opposite of what love is supposed to do. As I've exercised my right to enjoy a steak, I've wounded the brother for whom Christ died.

What would I give up to save someone close to me? Who is my Christianity for? And giving up our rights for other believers, I think it's some of the hardest teaching in Christianity.

In chapter 8, the issue is meat, giving up meat. In chapter 9, Paul gives up the right to earn money so that poor people can hear the gospel too.

And my inner lawyer at this point, my inner lawyer is happy to provide some concessions. So, if you need some money, if you need to borrow a car, if you need a place to stay, I'm happy to give you this much.

[14:02] I'll be gentle. I was this much at 9am, I'll give you this much at 10.30. There you go. My inner lawyer is happy with that concession. And Paul, Paul is pretty incredible here.

Gives up meat for life, that's amazing. Gives up money, amazing. But is there anything that anyone can think of that would be more than what Jesus gave up for us?

Jesus had the right to stay in heaven. He had the right not to come to earth to be like one of us. But he gave up his rights in love to build us up into Christians, to make us believers.

Not my will, but yours, he said, as he rescues us from the slavery to sin and idolatry. What would you give up to save someone close to you?

Who is your Christianity for? And what we're going to do now is move to application and get really practical with some of these things to help us think through this principle.

[15:05] And before we do that, I just want to address the box on your handout, the weaker brother principle. Because the weaker brother principle can be used like a trump card for anything you want in church.

And so here are five rules for it. So you can't use the weaker brother principle for things you simply don't like. So I'm not the biggest fan of modern church music.

We've all got, we feel quite different about music and quite strongly. I can't use the weaker brother principle to say, oh, look, I really think you should play old Wesley hymns. I'm a weaker brother, trump card.

It doesn't work that way because of rule number two. We have to show a past association to sin. So I have to prove to you that modern church music has somehow led me to sin in the past, which I think is almost impossible to do.

So play your modern songs. Rule number three, I have to tell people where I'm in trouble of sinning, where my conscience is weak. You are never going to be able to guess my past and what I struggle with personally, just as I'm not going to be able to guess for you.

[16:17] We have to tell people where we struggle as a weaker brother. Rule number four, I think this is right as well. The weaker brother or sister should be educating their conscience from the Bible so that things become less of an issue over time.

And I think this last one is right as well. In certain circumstances, the stronger brother may be able to continue that activity in secret because they are free in Christ.

They have the right to enjoy whatever that activity is. So there are five weaker brother principles and I just want to move to some modern examples because food sacrifice to idols is quite peculiar. What are some examples of it today? And remember, we are talking about things that are not inherently sinful but that other people may struggle with. So maybe good things that some people have turned into an idol and that now they struggle with.

So firstly, I'll give you an example from me. So smoking. So I used to smoke for many years and in my conscience, smoking was a sin. That's how I felt about it.

[17:29] And I finally quit back over ten years ago whilst I was in England. And in England and in Europe, everyone smokes. Just so you know, no one in Australia smokes much but everyone in Europe smokes like a chimney.

And on Christian camps, Christian men love nothing more than sitting around a bonfire with a whiskey and a cigar or a cigarette. They love that. Christian men, that's how you win them for Christ.

Just the ministry of whiskey and cigarettes. Anyway. Now one weekend away, the minister of my church, who I really looked up to, I really loved, he, around the bonfire with his whiskey, and someone passed a packet of cigarettes around and he took one and he had one and my jaw hit the floor and I was devastated.

How could he do that? But worse still, if he is smoking, maybe it's okay. And so I thought maybe if I have one again, that will be okay.

But if I did, because of my conscience, I would be dragged back to my former sin and idolatry. And so I told him about my past association and how it affected me watching him smoke cigarettes and it was really bad.

[18:44] And he knows he has the right to smoke. He is free in Christ, but he would rather not destroy me. And so he gave up what every British man loves on church weekends away.

And if he does smoke now, he might do it socially and in private where I can't see, which is perfectly fine. And so that's one example smoking. Let's turn to some more practical examples.

So some people here may have struggled making an idol of wealth and materialism. Maybe that's lots of us. And let's say as part of their repentance, they work hard to value lesser things.

So a less fancy car, less fancy clothes, less fancy gadgets and the like. And maybe they become a bit fussy about the whole thing. And that's fine.

Are you free to drive past them in your German car? Are you free to show them photos of you in the sun on your fantastic holiday?

[19:50] And my inner lawyer, your inner lawyer, says, I know my rights. I have the right to own a German car. It is not sinful. Because, verse 8, cars do not bring us near to God.

Knowledge says that luxury cars are not sinful, but not everyone possesses that knowledge. Not everyone knows knowledge 1 and knowledge 2. And so what would love say?

Love might say, go on less fancy holidays. Love might say, trade in the German car for just an Aussie car instead.

And as your inner lawyer boils to the surface saying, but, but, but, but, Paul says, kill your lawyer. He says, kill your inner lawyer.

He says, verse 9, be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights, verse 9, does not become a stumbling block to the weak. Is it worth it?

[20 : 48] Asks Paul. Who is your Christianity for? Another example, the last couple of weeks we've talked about contentment in marriage and contentment in singleness.

Now all of us have been either married or single before. And we all struggle with contentment in either situation. But lots of us may have struggled to the point where we have fallen into a pattern of grumbling against God.

We've fallen into potentially sinful discontentment in life. Always looking over our shoulders now. I have the right to gush about my wife.

I have the right to gush about my marriage. I have the right to post pictures of my children on the internet. But as I exercise my rights, I might be slowly destroying weaker brothers and sisters as they start feeling sinfully discontent in their own situation.

Here's another one. drinking alcohol. So lots of Christians, we've all walked a fine line with alcohol. And some of us in the past may have crossed that line into alcoholism in the past.

[22 : 06] In a room this size, I think that's bound to be true. Would we be willing to limit our social engagements to cafes or people's houses? You know, some unlicensed venues.

Rather than potentially lead a weaker brother or sister back into drinking and wounding them fatally. Because for them, it was a former idol. And there's some examples I've worked through, but there are other examples too.

So lots of Christians have conscience issues about films with certain classifications or films or books about magic. Ancestor worship, I know, is big in Asian communities.

Gambling. What would you give up to save someone from Holy Trinity? Who is your Christianity for? What could we give up that would be more than what Jesus gave up for us?

In Australia, we all know our rights. And there is immense freedom in Christ. But here is a passage that challenges us to kill our inner lawyer.

[23 : 17] That challenges us to limit our freedoms for the sake of weaker brothers and sisters. You can give this life in sacrifice of your rights for others because you have another life to come.

That is the whole of 1 Corinthians. We're going to get there eventually in chapter 15. But for now, verse 9. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

That's really difficult and so we're going to pray. Our Father God, we thank you for the Lord Jesus who gave up his home in heaven, who lived and died like one of us, to save us, to build us up.

Thank you that he loved us like this. And Father, would we give up our rights too for other brothers and sisters here? Would we try to build them up in love?

This is really, really difficult, Father. We need your help because we know our rights and we love our rights. Help us to hold loosely to them. In Jesus' name.

[24 : 29] Amen.