

with freedom in service

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[0 : 00] God has an opinion about idolatry that's very strongly expressed throughout the pages of the Bible. He hates it. So you come to the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament, and the first three commandments address idolatry.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below, and you shall not bow down to them or worship them.

No other gods, no manufacturing idols, and no bowing down or giving yourself to them. You come into the pages of the New Testament, you come to a place like Romans chapter 1, and verse 25 it says, They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator who is forever blessed.

Amen. And what it's telling us there is that the whole world is destined for judgment because we are idolatrous. We put created things in the place of God and we live for them.

Most of us, and when I say most of us, I think I mean people maybe from a Western culture like me, don't have idols in the cupboard. The concepts here are a little bit obtuse in some ways, and some of the things being spoken about in this passage.

[1 : 21] But if Pastor Faye was here tonight from our Mandarin congregation this morning, she could stand here and speak in quite a different way and tell us about how she was recently invited into the home of a Chinese convert, and she was asked into that home for one reason, and that was to come in and smash their idol and pray for them as a family.

Westerners, we're idolatrous, but we're more subtle with our idolatry. We seek wealth or we seek possessions or relationships or sex or esteem, whatever it is.

We look for security anywhere other than in God. And God hates it. He won't stand for rivals. He wants us to depend on him.

You go back into the Old Testament, and there's some wonderful passages in the Old Testament where the prophets literally mock idolatry. And let me read one of them from Isaiah chapter 44. And it's a picture. But listen, the carpenter, this is Isaiah speaking. The carpenter measures with a line, and he marks an outline with a marker. He roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses.

[2 : 37] He shapes it in the form of a man, of a man in all his glory that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars or perhaps took a cypress or an oak.

He let it grow among the trees of the forest or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It's man's fuel for burning. Some of it he takes, and he warms himself.

He kindles a fire. He bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it. He makes an idol, and he bows down to it.

Half of the wood he burns in the fire, and over it he prepares his meal. He roasts his meat. He eats his fill. He also warms himself. He says, ah, I'm warm. I see the fire.

And from the rest, he makes a god. He's idol. He bows down to it. He worships it. He prays to it. He says, save me.

[3 : 36] You're my god. They know nothing. They understand nothing. Their eyes are plastered over so that they cannot see.

Their minds are closed. They cannot understand. No one stops to think. No one has the knowledge or the understanding to say, half of it I use for fuel.

I even baked bread over the coals. I roasted meat and I ate. Oh, shall I make a detestable thing with what's left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?

He feeds on ashes. A deluded heart misleads him. He cannot save himself or say, is not this thing in my right hand a lie? I was thinking about the message for the night.

I reckon you could pick up some of these passages of the Old Testament. You could work yourself up into a lather of sweat with a very powerful biblical argument to say that idols are absolutely nothing.

[4 : 38] They're foolish and stupid. They have no real power. They're a joke. What can a bit of wood that somebody's carved on a lazy Sunday afternoon do to anyone?

And as I preach, I can tell you what a fool you are to give your life to such a thing. The people down in Chatswood who burn incense in their shops and give their morning offerings on their altars are wasting their time.

We know that it won't make one iota of difference to the business they get that day. Because that's why they do it. And in some ways, that's a secular sermon.

An atheist could preach almost the same thing with equal passion. For me, I believe in one God. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The atheist over here, he doesn't believe in any God. But we both think that other religious practices are nonsense.

[5 : 48] We actually agree at that point. So even though idols are nothing, in other ways, they are taken very, very seriously in the scriptures.

Daniel will not eat food from the king's table because it has been sacrificed to idols. He will take a stand over idols. Daniel will not bow down to an image of the king, even though he will be given a death sentence because he will not bow down.

He could have rationalised the food and the image away with scriptures that said to him, look, these things are nothing. I'm going to eat them because I know that there's only one real God. He will not do that.

He takes a stand. In Numbers 25, idols are a huge snare to the people of God. Verses 1 to 3, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods.

The people ate and they bowed down before these gods. And so Israel joined in the worshipping the Baal of Peor, and the Lord's anger burned against them. And what you see there is that their hunger for sex led them into worshipping other gods, and God's anger was so great that he killed 24,000 people that day.

[7 : 07] You come into the New Testament again in Acts chapter 15. One of the big disputes in the early church was people are coming to Christ from a non-Jewish background.

They're coming out from the Gentile world. They've got no history in terms of the scriptures and what God's people's practices were. And the big question of the day was, do these people need to get circumcised to show that they're a true blue member of the people of God?

And the matter is taken to the apostles in Acts 15. Paul and Barnabas come from the church outside of Jerusalem, and they tell them the delightful news about people from many nations coming to Christ.

And they say, what do we do about this issue? We don't think they need to be circumcised to show that they're a real Christian. And the apostles agreed with them. And they said to them, don't worry about the circumcision, but there's only four things that we want to ask of them.

People coming to Christ from other cultures. Three out of the four things that they were asked were to do with food.

[8 : 24] So you're not to eat food offered to idols. You're not to eat food with blood still in it. I heard a really interesting example of that when I was in South Africa. I heard a couple of the pastors talking one morning, and one of them was defending her culture.

And the other one was saying, I'll tell you why we want to leave that culture behind us. He said, one of the initiation practices for young men in our culture is that they go out, and when they're 14 or 15 and they go out and they're initiated, they are required to take a bite out of a living animal.

And then don't eat any strangled meat either. That was an insight I wouldn't have seen in my own culture. 1 Corinthians 8, and have your Bibles open there now, raises exactly that issue.

Verses 1 to 3, about food offered to idols. We know that we all have knowledge, and knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up.

If anyone thinks he knows anything, he does not yet know it as he ought to know it. But if anyone loves God, he is known by him. He's addressing an issue that the Corinthian church has raised in response to his teaching.

[9 : 42] So I think he's already come along as he would have done with all the Gentile churches, and he has taught them about refraining from food sacrifice to idols. They would know what the apostles in Jerusalem have requested of the people who are coming to faith in other places.

And they effectively say, look, we've got knowledge when it comes to idols. We don't need to be instructed. There's sort of a play on the idea of knowledge here. We're okay, we've got knowledge. And he says to them, careful, careful, because knowledge is very good at puffing people up with pride, and you think you know something when you don't know it the way that you should know it. And I think the Corinthians are actually asserting their right to make their own decisions in Corinth without being instructed by other believers in another part of the world in Jerusalem. They're running their own show.

And they have knowledge, and they're able to argue their case biblically and persuasively. They're well-grounded in some ways, but they are missing something they think they know, but they don't know.

[10 : 54] I was really good at sitting in university lectures, understanding everything that was explained to me on the board. I'd sit in my seat. I could understand why the lecturer was doing it all out there, and then I was required to duplicate it in an assignment or an exam.

And I didn't really know it as well as I thought I knew it. Got in lots of trouble, often. And Paul says to these guys, you lack something, you lack love. Knowledge puffs up, love builds up.

They think that their freedom extends to eating food that's sacrificed to idols. And in asserting that freedom, they are effectively rejecting a loving instruction, a loving request, a loving instruction not to.

They have this independent streak. They stand apart from God's worldwide church. They know what they're doing. Thanks very much. Thanks for the advice, but we're okay here on this issue. Pride. We know better. And my problem, and perhaps our problem, is that we can use our versions of Bible knowledge to stand in a secure and a prideful position over those who know less than us, or that we think know less than us.

[12 : 15] And we operate in a way that becomes a bit like it's my way is the highway. And we use our Bible understanding to mow a path over those whose understanding we deem to be less than us.

So we push ourselves up. We puff ourselves up. We judge others as deficient in relationship to us. And at the same time, we effectively give ourselves permission to do exactly what we want to do. Chrysostom was one of the early church fathers, and he wrote about this passage. He said, There's linkages to 1 Corinthians 13, which we'll come to on the celebration service in a couple of weeks' time.

In 1 Corinthians 13, verse 2, it says, If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains but have not love, I am nothing.

And then in verse 8, Where there is knowledge, it will pass away. And in verse 13, And now these three remain, faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love.

[13 : 33] So you come back into 1 Corinthians 8, verse 3, and you see that it is a rebuke to pride. It doesn't really matter what you know.

It matters who you are known by. To love God and to be known by God. It matters more that he knows my name.

He has called me by name. I am his. So the issue here is food sacrifice to idols.

And in some ways, Corinthian meat is just like Jerusalem meat. Animals are slaughtered at the temple. They're offered to gods. Some of it's burnt up completely as an offering.

Some of it goes to market to generate income for the priests or to feed their families. It's eaten at pubs and clubs and marriage banquets around Corinth. Some is taken home by the worshipper to feed his own family.

[14 : 35] None of it's wasted. And so a Jew, what would a Jew not normally eat? They normally wouldn't eat things like pork chops and prawns.

That was the ritual. That was the ritual food. But a Jew would also not eat Corinthian beef because it had been sacrificed to an idol.

And a Corinthian with any scruples wouldn't eat Jerusalem lamb because it's been slaughtered by the name of the wrong God. They're not going to eat his. I'm not going to eat yours. And he's not going to eat mine.

Because they're worshipping the wrong God. And so you get this Corinthian Christian comes along. He's been asked by his brothers in Jerusalem not to eat meat sacrificed to idols.

But he knows other things that embolden him. He knows that Jesus in the Gospels declared all food clean. He knows that idols are only created things like Isaiah did.

[15 : 34] They've got no power in themselves. They're only something that's made at the hands of men. They're nothing. And he doesn't care that the priest has offered some words over them because they're all a load of mumbo jumbo.

I'm a Westerner. Again, this is not my cultural background. For me, if Jamie Oliver says it's good, then it's really good. And if my wife or one of my daughters cooks it, it's even better.

I eat what takes my fancy. I don't normally eat with respect to God other than to give him thanks when we give thanks at the table before we eat our dinner. We workshopped this message in my community group the other night.

And Cecile, who's of Asian background, said something that made me really stop and think. She said that her family background takes her often to a Buddhist funeral. And she said when there's a Buddhist funeral, they put on a really decent Chinese meal with lots of food and the priest says his bit over it.

And she told us that she was at a funeral and her Christian friend said to her, we can't eat that. It's been offered to an idol. And I think for her it was a bit like, oh, it's really good food.

[16 : 54] But her friend's conscience wouldn't allow her. And so Cecile's got this dilemma. She gave me permission to say it this morning so I can say it again tonight. She knows it's just food.

It's all from God's hand. The idol is a nonsense God. It's an invention of man. It has no real power. But there are other less obvious problems.

Her friend was Christian but she didn't yet understand her freedom. There's social pressure. We want to fit in. We want to conform.

We don't really want to spend all afternoon at the funeral explaining why we don't want to join in and eat the food. What's wrong with you guys? And it's a really good looking dinner and I'm one for a Chinese banquet.

Taste the pork bun and, you know, salivating about the chilli crab just thinking about them. So what do you do? Do you tell your friend how ignorant they are?

[18 : 01] Do you give them an on-the-spot Bible lesson explaining the reality of what we have in Christ? Do you follow up with a practical demonstration of freedom by scoffing the Chinese banquet and say, look, it didn't hurt me?

Or do you say to your friend, I want to want a Christ too. Let's just eat the veggies.

In verses 4 to 6, Paul affirms the Bible realities about idols and about God. He said, about eating food offered to idols, then we know that an idol is nothing in the world and that there is no God but one.

And even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth, as there are many gods and many lords, yet for all of us there is one God and the Father.

All things are from him and we exist for him. And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, and all things are through him and we exist for him. And you go into the Bible commentaries on this passage and they will tell you that this is one of the most wonderful Christological statements in the New Testament.

[19 : 21] Idols are nothing. Everything exists for the one God and Father and our existence is through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is God. But I don't really want to dwell there right now except to say that it is a huge affirmation of the Old Testament teaching that we've already looked at.

It's a magnificent picture of the glory of Christ as being the one who gives us existence and reveals to us God, his Father. That is true knowledge and the Corinthians get it in part.

But what they don't get comes in verse 7. Not everyone has this knowledge. In fact, some have been so used to idolatry up until now that when they eat food offered to an idol, their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

Food will not make us acceptable to God and we are not inferior if we don't eat and we are not better if we do eat.

So the truth is, food is nothing, it's neutral. It doesn't make us closer to God if we do or if we don't eat. But he says to us and he says to them, he says, not everybody understands this truth.

[20 : 51] For some people the thought of eating meat tears at their conscience. For them it is a defiling thing to do. To eat the meat is to go on a journey back into the idolatry that they have been saved from.

It takes them back into the old life. And so to press against their conscience is a violation of love. Now if you think back to Cecile and to her friend, it's actually in some ways, this is harder for the strong one.

This is harder for us if we've got this knowledge of how stupid an idol is. Because we are being asked to give up some of our freedom, some of the true things that we know, the freedom that we have out of the true things that we know, for the sake of the one who doesn't have the same knowledge as us.

And we are being asked to give way on something that could be considered their right. Or something that could be considered our right. Why can't I eat from that magnificent banquet, that spread of food tonight?

Somebody take me for Chinese after church, please. Not quite. But this is a familiar issue in 1 Corinthians.

[22 : 15] These are the people who are really big on freedom and rights. They've said it before. One of their slogans, which has been quoted in the chapters before, is everything is permissible for me. That's their slogan.

And Paul comes back at them and says, but not everything is beneficial. Last week in chapter 7, we saw that a deeply connected, other person-centred marriage is one in which a man and a woman yield or give themselves over to the other in every way.

You can give yourself to the other sexually when you know that you can trust their love for you. Next week, Sam's preaching from 1 Corinthians 9.

And Paul will use himself as an example of laying aside rights to an income. He says, I'm an apostle. I'm doing the work that Christ has called me to do. I have a right to be paid for you, but I'm not insisting on my right.

I'm laying aside my right for the sake of the gospel. And the same sort of thinking comes from Christ himself, the wonderful picture for Philippians 2, which Sam did read to us earlier in the service.

[23 : 24] Where Jesus left heaven, took on the form of a servant, became obedient to death, even death on a cross. And 1 Corinthians 8, where we are right now, is yet another demonstration of the way of the cross.

It's a relinquishing of rights for the sake of another, especially one who is weaker than us. I have an 80-year-old friend, and he hasn't been to a movie theatre for 60 years since he came to Christ.

He refuses to go because, for him, it's a journey back into his old life and the remembrance of how he behaved in a dark cinema with women 60 years ago.

Now, he's strong enough in Christ that he won't, if he was here tonight talking to you, he would not say to you, you shouldn't go to Hoyts. But it would be a violation of love if you prevailed upon him to try to make him go and brought all your biblical knowledge to bear about why it's okay and he's new in Christ and he's free of all that stuff.

I'm the husband who, at times in my marriage, has pushed on with my right.

[24 : 48] You know, Sunday night, Sunday's sometimes a hard day for ministers. You think it's a great time. I'm glad you think it's a great time. Go home after day on Sunday, and sometimes you're absolutely whacked. And you get some great conversations, and sometimes you get some really disturbing conversations as well.

And so I'll go home on Sunday night and sometimes just like to put my feet up in front of a movie, and sometimes the more violent the better, because to see a few bad guys blown away really helps my feelings at that time.

And I feel like I can watch a movie like that without it turning me into a serial killer. It doesn't bear on my conscience in a way that disturbs me particularly, most of them.

There's a few exceptions these days. But I have also known and I know that some of those movies have a very negative impact on my wife, Kerry.

She'll go to bed after watching something like that and she can't sleep, or she'll be disturbed by them. But I'll come home. I have my rights. I have my needs. I'll put my feet up.

[25 : 54] I'll watch. And she will either leave the room or be churned up. That's a violation of love of her by me.

And violation of love and harm to brother or sister in Christ is the last part of the passage. Verse 8. Verse 9. Be careful that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block for the weak. For if someone sees you, the one who has this knowledge, dining at an idol's temple, won't his weak conscience be encouraged to eat food offered to idols?

And then the weak person, the brother for whom Christ died, is ruined by your knowledge. Now when you sin like this against the brothers and wound their weak conscience, you are sinning against Christ.

And therefore, if food causes my brother to fall, I will never eat meat. I will never again eat meat so that I won't cause my brother to fall. I think I experienced something like this when I was at theological college.

[27 : 06] A friend and I were invited by a group of peers to join them to a gathering with a particular name. I look back now and I think it was probably a bit like a private school boys club, pretty in some ways.

I hadn't been to a private school so I didn't know these things. But here I was being invited into the group. It was a privilege to be invited. It was connecting with people who had a name, whatever it was, becoming an insider.

You're one of them. You can join them. And when I went to join in the fellowship, they were discussing theological issues.

And they were smoking cigars. And they were drinking port. And they were speaking coarsely. And I felt shocked.

I felt isolated. I felt confused. And I felt affronted. And I later told them.

[28 : 11] I said I didn't feel loved. I felt like the price of acceptance to become like them, to participate. I felt like the price of acceptance was to become like them, to participate according to the unspoken rules of their gatherings, to do their things.

That's a peer pressure type thing, isn't it? We want to conform. We want to fit in. But for me to participate in those things in that way was like a journey back into my old life.

And I didn't want to go there. Now if they forced me, I think it would have been a violation of love and quite damaging to my Christian war.

I think what they did was they treated me as the weaker brother. They took some rebuke as well probably. They modified the coarseness of their language and some of their behaviour.

I look back now and I think I can look back maybe stronger and with more years in between I can look back and say well not all their behaviour was really wrong.

[29 : 18] I mean they didn't drink to excess. And smoking in some ways is a neutral. I mean damage your own body. Yes, there's consequences but maybe it's a moral neutral.

I think maybe it is. You might want to argue that. But what they did was they gave way on some of their rights and their freedoms in a way which helped my conscience. And it also led to a long term growth in our love for one another and for our growth in Christ.

I've seen the opposite as well. I've probably done the opposite. I just can't name it quite tonight. But I was shocked by a Christian friend who absolutely asserted his right to serve alcohol at a gathering of church people at his home.

It's my home. I drink and I'm going to serve alcohol if I want to. And this particular gathering was one to which we were inviting two brothers who had big alcohol problems.

And we asked our brother not to serve alcohol on this occasion out of love. Not to ban it for all time but on this occasion please would you not serve it because of our brothers.

[30 : 31] And he refused to yield some of his freedom. And in that moment I think my brother failed to love. As a young Christian an older pastor told me that I was a disobedient believer because I hadn't been baptised properly.

And that caused a crisis of conscience in me that took away my assurance of salvation for three years. Every time the issue of baptism came up I was just wobbly and at sea.

Was I safe in Christ? Wasn't I safe in Christ? Should I do this baptism this particular way? And all about externals and nothing about internal which is what God is looking at.

But the older, wiser, more knowledgeable brother threw a stumbling block at my feet that robbed me of joy that I had been knowing in Christ. And I can look back now with more strength and

hopefully wisdom.

And I can tell you I think his knowledge was faulty. And it led to a failure to love. One of the really interesting things about this passage is I think lying in the background of it is Acts 15.

[31 : 47] An instruction to take to all the Gentile churches to be in fellowship with the Jewish church and the wider Christian world. And Paul doesn't use it against the Corinthians as a rule, as a law, something you've got to keep.

He works with them relationally and he asks them to apply principles rather than law. And the principle I really want you to apply to this matter is the principle of love.

I want you to bring love to bear in how you conduct yourselves in relationships over this issue. And the Corinthian church had Jewish believers in it because that's where Paul started preaching when he first got there and the synagogue ruler got beaten up and all sorts of things went on.

They were there in this congregation and the action of some of their brothers was possibly going to cause them great harm. If we're Christian, we're slaves of Christ.

We serve a master who has laid down his life for us. He calls us to lay down our lives for each other, to give way, to yield our freedoms for the sake of a brother or sister.

[32 : 57] We belong to a wider church than just St. Paul's. We are called to be mindful of brothers and sisters in different congregations within our own church family but also in the world around us.

And in the end, to live like this and to take these things to heart will build up Christ's church. It will grow the depth of love that we have for one another and reflects his glory.

He warns us. He says, The weak person, the brother for whom Christ died, is ruined by your knowledge. Now when you sin like this against the brothers and wound their weak conscience, you are sinning against Christ.

Therefore, if food causes my brother to fall, I will never eat meat again so that I will not cause him to fall. We're called to love.

We're called to live wisely, to not press our freedom over a weaker brother or sister. Not over their conscience. To do so is a failure of love.

[34 : 08] And it is a sin against Christ himself. Amen.