

1 Corinthians 8

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[0 : 00] Please turn back to 1 Corinthians chapter 8 in your Bibles.! When it comes to the issues of the day, the world, the internet, the internet, the internet,! It has the answers we're told that we need.

And if we could just get our heads around this particular idea, or we could grasp this particular knowledge, or we could learn these lessons, well then we'd be fine.

The solution to the problems that we experience, the solutions to the problems that you experience in the day to day, well, information is what you need. More knowledge is what you need.

The answer to your frustrations and struggles in life, well, if you just knew these life hacks, well then you'd be able to thrive. What are the answers to the bigger problems in society?

Take it up a level. Not just the things that we struggle with, but societal problems. Education, we're told. That's what Google's ad from a few years ago told us. The strapline was, the closer we learn, the closer we get. The closer we get to, I don't know, but the answer was learning.

[1 : 24] Remember a conversation I had not that long ago with a guy who runs an executive coaching business, and he told me that racism would vanish from our country if people were educated.

That was the problem. They just needed to be educated. Reoffending, he said, would drop significantly if we could just teach, and he said, if we could just teach those people, whoever they are, how to make the right decisions and not the wrong ones.

It would, more information, more knowledge, that's what we need in order to clear up the societal problems. In every area where we feel there are problems, more knowledge we're told is the answer.

Now, we as Christians will hear this and we think, well, no, actually what we really need is Jesus. What people really need is the truth of God's Word in their lives.

And of course, that's true in a sense, but if we think about it, if you're a Christian, you're in a relationship with the Lord Jesus, and you have access to God's Word, and you still struggle to make good decisions and not bad ones.

[2 : 26] We struggle, even though we're Christian, even though we know Christ, to know how best to navigate the complex world that we live in. And if we were pushed for an answer, well, okay, yes, I do struggle, and life is complicated, and I wish I made better decisions and fewer worse decisions.

If we were pushed for an answer to how we were going to be able to do that, we'd probably have our own version of more knowledge. We need more knowledge. If I could just get to the bottom of that pile of books that I keep adding to and not taking from.

If I could just get the right authors, actually the sound authors, if I could get those into my system, well then, I'll be okay. If I could just get connected to the right podcast, the right Christian podcast, well, then I'll be all right.

Getting the right bit of information, we think, will be the key that unlocks the life of godliness that we long to have. More knowledge is the answer. Knowledge is good.

Better education would doubtless help some people make better life decisions. Knowing more about God undoubtedly is a good thing for any Christian. But Paul says here in 1 Corinthians 8 that if we're going to navigate the twists and turns of life in Christ well, if we're going to be a useful, encouraging, edifying church member, we need more than knowledge.

[3 : 54] We need more than the information in the books. We need our knowledge to be accompanied by other qualities. Look at verse 1. The issue here at this point in the letter now concerning food offered to idols.

Food offered to idols. That was a real problem in Corinth. In Corinth there were lots of deities being worshipped by lots of people a lot of the time. And the meat that was sold in the market would have been offered to one of those deities before it arrived in the butchers.

So, you would have gone as a Christian to the butcher, you would have bought your meat, but that meat would previously have been offered to a false god. And this question and related issues will occupy Paul for several chapters.

Is it lawful for a Christian to eat something like that? If this meat has been offered to a false god in worship, is it okay for a Christian to eat it? Can we who belong to the Lord eat food that has been in some way offered to another god?

And a bit like last week, if you were here, the answer? It depends. It depends. And when that's the answer, you know you'll need more than just the right information.

[5 : 07] It depends means that we've got to think carefully. We've got to weigh up different categories. There are perhaps different things that will modify the way we would answer the question in different situations.

Can we do this? Well, it depends. And if we need to nuance things in that way, if there are qualifiers, if there are things that shape the way we would answer, just reading the book isn't going to be enough.

Just listening to the podcast isn't going to be enough. Just getting the info isn't going to be enough. So, the Corinthians, verse 1, have said to Paul, the bit in quotation marks, all of us possess knowledge.

Paul quotes them back to themselves. All of us, me and you, we know the right things. We know the truth about idols, as you've said. Verse 4, an idol has no real existence.

We know that. They're nothing. They're a representation of a God that doesn't exist. So, they don't exist in any meaningful way themselves. And yes, we know the truth about God.

[6 : 12] Look, what does he say? There is no God but one. We know that idols don't exist, and we know that there is one true God. The only true God that exists is the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

He created all things, verse 6. There is God the Creator, that means, and therefore there is everything else which is called created. We have the Creator, and we have everything else.

And everything else comes into the category created. And this God has installed His Son as Lord of all of those created things. Jesus Christ stands as King and Ruler over everything that has been created, including every idol under the sun.

Compared to the true and living God, an idol is nothing. And there is no God beside the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This means that idols have no authority, and any food that is offered to them is not affected in any way.

There would be no reason to abstain from eating it because of anything in the meat itself. To do that would be superstition. And superstition is the thing that pagan idolatry relies upon.

[7 : 24] Any kind of idolatry relies on superstition. What I mean by that is pagan religions depend on people attributing power to idols that those idols don't actually have.

And so, joining in with superstitions that are just untrue. They're just lies. To say this particular statue has a particular power is false.

It is to engage in superstition. And Paul says, he will say later, quoting Psalm 24, The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

And that means, as one author has said, quote, Everything else being equal, it would be perfectly fine to have a BLT made from bacon that came from a pig that was slaughtered on the altar of Satan.

This kind of freedom that Christ brings does not give power to Satan, but rather takes all his power away. Do you see that? The bacon may have been offered up to some false god or other, But the fact that you eat it to the glory of God in God's world means that all the superstition has been taken away, And you are directing glory where it's supposed to go.

[8 : 34] There is no superstition. The idol has no power. And Paul says, we know this. We know this. We know that idols are nothing. And that God is the one true God.

But that knowledge isn't enough. On its own, he says, verse one, it puffs up. And I asked the children this morning about this.

What does that mean? It means it makes us proud. It makes us superior to others. There is a kind of knowledge that gives you a big head. There is a kind of theological precision and correctness that just makes you proud and superior.

You know an idol is nothing. That's great. It is also true that knowing an idol is nothing is also nothing. If you think you know, says Paul, and he's talking about know-it-alls, If you're that kind of person, regardless of what information you have at your fingertips, you don't know as you ought. You have the kind of knowledge that puffs up. The kind of knowledge that makes you proud. Knowing stuff, even knowing theology, even knowing good theology, isn't enough.

[9 : 50] Even if it's absolutely true. Your knowledge needs, verse one, to be accompanied and directed by love. This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

This is the goal of the Christian life. To be built up ourselves, but also to be the kind of people who build others up. Rather than, verse 11, see the language Paul uses in verse 11, rather than destroying them.

Build them up rather than tearing them down. And that flows from love. And unsurprisingly, Paul has in mind the two-fold love that summarizes the entire Christian faith.

So, when Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, you remember he gave the questioner two commandments. What's the greatest? There are two. Love God and love others. And that is what needs to control our knowledge when it comes to deciding on ethical matters, like whether or not you can eat food sacrificed to idols.

Whether you can buy your chicken from Hanwell grocers and your lamb from Damascate. Can you do that as a Christian? Well, what is required is love. Love for God and love for others.

[10 : 56] But not only that, the principles that Paul applies here, not just about choosing where you get your meat. The principles that Paul applies here, as we'll see in coming chapters, should affect how we live in all kinds of different ways.

All kinds of different settings. How we decide what godly living looks like in a pluralistic culture like ours. We need those decisions to be governed by love.

First of all, what does it look like to love God? Point number one, loving God, God before gods.

Capital G, God before gods.

If anyone, verse 2, 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. So, can you see here, Paul's contrasting not knowing as you ought with loving God.

And being known by God. So, true knowledge starts with loving God and being known. Verse 3.

And this being known isn't the possession of information. It isn't just getting the data right.

[12 : 03] When you love God, he becomes aware of who you are. It's the knowledge of relationship. When you put your faith in the Lord Jesus, you are giving God his rightful place in your life.

And he sets his love upon you as a heavenly father. But among all the things that this relationship offers you, forgiveness, yes. Reconciliation with God, yes.

Hope, joy, peace. We get all of those things when we give ourselves over to the Lord Jesus and put the true and living God at the center of our lives.

We get all of those things. But it also, that relationship also opens us up to true knowledge. When you put God at the center of everything in your life, the book of Proverbs tells us that is the beginning of true wisdom.

But for Paul, being in that relationship also brings the requirement for loyalty. Verse 6. There is one God, the Father, from whom all things and for whom we exist.

[13 : 06] Sorry. 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. The one true God owns us.

He owns you. And when you love Him, by definition, you are refusing to love other gods. You cannot serve two masters. When you choose to love the one true God, you can't love other gods.

And there are many of those. Verse 5, do you see, tells us many gods and many lords. And they are persistent little fellas. They try and draw you away from the living God all the time.

How does that work? Well, it's important to understand this. To say that idols have no real existence isn't to say that there aren't demonic powers behind them using them to draw people to worship false gods.

We don't believe that Apollo or Zeus were who they claimed to be. We don't believe that the Buddhist statues or the Taoist icons or the trappings of folk religion are what they claim to be. That little statuette on the side, we don't believe that that has divine power.

[14:17] But just because these things are worshipped under false pretensions, pretenses, doesn't mean that they aren't there at all. What I mean by that is idols can mislead us and we can find ourselves under their thrall.

We see this when someone leaves the Christian faith to join another religion. They didn't make that decision overnight. That wasn't a snap thing. There was a point they started down that track. They knew that there was no God but one. But they were interested and they went down a track of exploration. And what happened was at some point their heart was changed. They went from knowing that there is only one true God to not knowing that there was only one true God. To being convinced of something else. How does that happen? The idol is nothing. False gods are nothing.

Demonic powers are not nothing. Demonic powers it was that led them to believe this. I've seen this happen in a number of different contexts. Yoga is one example.

[15:23] Christians go along, they say, oh, I don't bother with the spiritual stuff. That's all nonsense. I know there's only one God. But yoga is a version of Hindu worship. So it's no surprise that after a while, actually, they're more into yoga than they are into Jesus.

Participating in the worship of a false god does not honor the Lord, regardless of what you're thinking in your head. And even though you might be thinking the right things at a particular point, the significance of what you're doing.

We are embodied souls. The physical matters. The way that we do things matters. And when you use your body in a particular way, when you perform particular physical actions, well, over time and by repetition, they can change the way you think.

And it doesn't just happen with other religions. A false god is anything that demands your devotion. Anything that demands your obedience. It could be anything. It could be an overreaching state. It could be your employer. It could be the in-crowd that you care about. Teenagers, young people. It could be the in-crowd that you so desperately want to be liked by at school or socially.

[16:36] They have a power over you like a false god. And we know that they're not gods. We confess with our mouths. You've done it this morning.

That there is one God, the Father. And we only submit to one Lord Jesus, His Son. But in practice, well, we let the state tell us how to live.

Because we don't want the hassle. We don't want to have to say no. We don't want to be that guy or that girl. We do whatever our boss tells us, whether it's consistent with our love for God or not.

Because we need to keep the money coming in.

And we toe the line with the cool shamers on whatever we need to do to not cause offence.

Because, well, we just really care about their approval. How is that not just another form of idolatry? We're being controlled by these other things that aren't gods. Don't presume to think that because you know sound doctrine that you aren't susceptible to being misled.

[17:38] Paul's doctrine of God forbids any encroachment by false gods. Those who love God are known by Him and they shouldn't mess with idols. We shouldn't do that. Loving God with a complete loyalty would have had personal consequences in Corinth as it does today.

Loss of faith, loss of income, no doubt, as these people withdrew from pagan celebrations. When love for God governs our loyalties, it will inevitably cost us in a culture that doesn't live that way. But we've got to make that choice. It is God before gods. If we're going to love God, it means we don't play with idols.

That's the vertical dimension. Loving God. Loving God. God before gods. Point number two, loving others. The horizontal dimension. People before preferences.

That's the principle. Loving others. People before our preferences. You may well know the truth about idols and about God. Look at verse 7. However, not all possess this knowledge.

[18:46] Your knowledge is absolutely tip top, but others isn't. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as rarely offered to an idol, and their conscience being weak is defiled.

Food will not command 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.

People before preferences. What's Paul doing here? He's introducing the idea of weaker and stronger people within the church. As I said earlier, food in and of itself is spiritually and morally neutral.

God doesn't prefer any kind of diet. Jesus declared all foods morally clean, and that means that you can eat anything. If you fancy it, you can even eat the packaging that it comes in.

It will neither benefit you nor will it hinder you spiritually. It might hinder you health-wise. A mouth full of polystyrene is probably not great for you, but it actually won't be any detriment spiritually.

[19 : 48] But there are those who have a weak conscience, and that conscience doesn't afford them that freedom. If you have someone who has been in a context where eating certain foods was associated with idolatry, when they come to faith in Christ, they leave the idolatry behind.

But the association with the food in their mind still remains. So, a strong Christian who knows the right things about idols, they've got the knowledge.

They don't have any connection in their mind between eating and false worship. They eat the meal, they enjoy God's generous creation of all of these foods, and they sit back with a contented smile full of gratitude to God.

And the meal has done nothing except bring them pleasure and bring glory to God. But a weaker Christian, freshly converted from some form of idolatry, sees the strong Christian doing this and thinks it's okay for them to eat the meat.

Which it is, but they can't actually do this without being drawn back into the idolatry again. So, when they eat the meat, they are drawn back to whatever gods they used to worship.

[21 : 03] There was a time when they ate this meat, and their heart and their mind were connected to their false god. They now see you eating the meat, and they think, oh, I can eat the meat. And they eat the meat, but because the connection is still there, they're led astray.

They're stumbled. Paul, do you see verse 9? Paul describes the freedom to eat idol meat as a right. In Christ, you are free to eat whatever you like without concern.

In fact, it's a right that you possess. It's one of your Christian rights. But you mustn't use your rights in a way that will cause another to stumble back into idolatry.

A common example often here on this is alcohol. So, the neutral thing, wine, associated with a sinful thing, drunkenness, means that someone converted from a background where drunkenness was normal for them has real difficulty dissociating those two things.

So, when they see the stronger Christian having some wine, they think that they can too, but they can't because they slip back into old ways. Your knowledge may be such that you're free to do this, but love demands that you bear others in mind first.

[22 : 24] People before preferences. You could say people before rights. One author says this, This is the heart of the matter in proud and divided Corinth.

And Paul warns against getting this wrong in the strongest terms. Do you see verse 9? Take care. Literally, it's watch out. Be on guard. Do not let this happen.

It is really serious. If you stumble your brother in this way because you allowed your knowledge to trump love, you can actually destroy them.

Verse 11. The person is destroyed. You were able to swim in the current, but your brother wasn't.

And because he saw you in there swimming, he jumped in as well, and he got washed away.

Christ died for him, but you couldn't curtail your freedom in order to protect him from idolatry, in order to keep him from sin. You can see why Paul says, verse 12, to do this is a sin against that person, and because of Christ's relationship to them, why it is also a sin against him.

[23 : 51] Christ takes a dim view of those who, even though they know the right theology, don't let that theology lead them to love others. Particularly the weaker among the church family.

I want us to see this. Although the weaker brother's conscience is misguided, although he's actually wrong on the matter, Christ identifies with the weak brother.

So what that must lead us to conclude is that there is a deeper right than being right. The spiritual health of our brother or our sister is more important than our liberty.

It is better to accommodate their error than to destroy their faith. Now this isn't the same thing as allowing the freedom police to control how others behave.

Paul isn't talking about those Christians who enjoy scolding others, who enjoy liberties that they, for some reason, just don't like. He's not talking about that. Neither is he saying it's okay to have an immature conscience.

[24 : 57] We want an immature conscience to grow and become a mature conscience. But he is talking about those kinds of people who put preferences before people to those people's spiritual detriment.

He's not talking about causing offence so much as causing people to sin. And he says, watch out. Take this very, very seriously. I want to say, oh, you know, they should grow up. They should know that actually it's okay to do these things.

They should, dot, dot, dot. No. You should accommodate your weaker brother or sister. Set your freedoms aside for their spiritual good.

Buy your meat from wherever you want. You know those halal prayers are nothing. But if your former Muslim friend who has recently come to faith in Christ sees you there and can't dissociate that from the prayers they used to pray, get it somewhere else.

[26 : 00] You'll have quite a job in London now finding meat that isn't halal, but there will be some somewhere. You'll have quite a lot of time. Enjoy your wine. Enjoy your wine. But if your Christian friend can't have it without getting drunk, don't bother.

Yoga. Yoga. Yoga is getting a hard time this morning. You've somehow found a way to do it because you know gods are nothing.

But even if that is the case, your friend recently converted from Hinduism can't do that. So don't bother. Do Pilates or something else instead. And we do this.

Not just, we do this because it's the way of the gospel. Going without for the sake of another is exactly what Jesus did for us. For the weaker brother.

We're the weaker brother. He did it for us, for the world. When he gave up his privilege. When he gave up his rights. And he left the glories of heaven where he had every right to stay in order to come and go to the cross for us.

[27 : 04] That is why the apostle Paul calls us to this approach. It's not just some arbitrary thing so that the church can all get on a bit better. It is because it is the way of Christ.

It is the way of the cross. It is profoundly Christian. To love God before gods. There's no alternative if you're going to be a Christian. It is profoundly Christian to put people before your preferences.

The world that we live in grasps for what it can get. It stands on its rights and it insists that others bend to its will. I'll have what I want on my terms when I want it.

And well, if you don't like it, too bad. The Christian gospel is the total opposite. It is my life for yours. As it was for Christ, so it must be for His followers.

And my life for yours bleeds out into every area of the Christian life, not least my preferences for your good.

[28 : 07] And you don't get this through more knowledge. You don't get it through just reading the right books and getting more information into your head. You get it through the Spirit. The Holy Spirit who grows us in love.

Love for God and love for others. So what we must do as we seek to implement this is to ask God to give it. Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find.

Knock on the door of this kind of love will be opened to you. Let's pray together.