

## 1 CORINTHIANS 8

### INTRODUCTION

In chapter 8 Paul is continuing to answer questions that the church has addressed to him (7:1). Now this question concerns food that had been offered to idols. Now this specific problem still exists in some parts of the world for Christians who have been saved from an idolatrous religion. However even though for us the specific problem is not relevant the basic problem that the Corinthians faced is one that we all face.

The issue is how far does Christian freedom go in regard to behaviour not specially forbidden in Scripture? For example should a Christian drink alcoholic, listen to certain styles of music or go to concerts etc. I was brought up in a Christianity that told Christians not to drink alcoholic, listen to pop music wear make up or go to the Cinema or concerts etc.

Christians in the past and today spend hours on questions relating to what some consider being questionable practices. Now Scripture is silent on many of these issues but the bible gives us principles that can be applied to all of these situations. Therefore it is possible that Christians will come to different conclusions about some of these and many more questionable activities and if we really believe in Christian freedom then that is what we might expect.

However we must be clear that Christian freedom is not license to do as one pleases. There is never freedom to sin or to lead other people into sin in the name of freedom. Now it seems that for some people in the church at Corinth Christian freedom was unqualified, as long as your own conscience is free then you can do anything except sin.

However Paul teaches in this chapter that it is wrong to offend the conscience of others who are weak or less mature in the faith especially if what we are doing is not necessary in our service for the Lord.

Now in answering a specific question about eating food offered to idols Paul gives a general and universal principle that can be applied to all questionable behaviour and activities. The principle is stated in verse 9. Before we exercise our Christian freedom we should consider how our actions would affect others.

### 1. HOW TO DEAL WITH QUESTIONABLE ISSUES

**a) Think of Love For Others (vs. 1-3)** - Now the words translated "food sacrificed to idols" (v 1) is one word in Greek and can be translated as idol sacrifices. These sacrifices were food offerings symbolically presented to the some god in order to gain that god's favour. Now in this ceremony some meat was sacrificed to the god, some was given to the Priest in charge and some kept by the person giving the offering.

Now the Priests usually received more than they could use and so they would take the meat to the market and sell it on. Because it was offered to a god it was highly prized and this meat was usually served at feasts and to guests. The problem that Christians faced was that this meat was associated with pagan gods having been offered to the gods and therefore should a Christian eat it or not?

It was almost impossible for a believer who had any personal contact with Gentiles to avoid this question of eating meat that had been offered to the idols of the day.

Some Christians no doubt refused to buy such meat at the market because it brought back bad memories of their past and because if others saw them buying it they might think that they have

reverted back to paganism. However what do you do when you are a guest in someone's home and you are offered such meat? On the other hand there were probably some Christians who were not troubled by the issue at all. To them meat was meat; they knew that pagan gods did not really exist. They were mature, well grounded in God's truth and their consciences were clear in the matter.

It is really to this group of mature believers that Paul addresses in this chapter and Paul tells them not to focus on their freedom but on the spiritual welfare of those who were less mature. Use your freedom in a way that will not offend weaker Christians. It seems that this group of mature believers had given Paul three reasons why they could freely exercise their freedom in Christ on this matter of eating meat.

The first reason given is that "we know that we all possess knowledge" (v 1). It seems that this statement was expressing an air of superiority. The mature believers were simply stating that they possessed enough knowledge of God's word to know that pagan gods and idols were not real and that food sacrificed to them was still only food. They knew that eating such meat could do them no harm and demonstrated their freedom. They believed they were free to eat of this meat even though there were Christians at Corinth who did not see things the same way. So Paul reminds this group of mature believers that "knowledge puffs up but love builds up" (v 1). These mature believers had knowledge and they were right in saying that meat offered to idols could not affect them but they were lacking in genuine love for less mature Christians who disagreed with them.

If they had genuine love for their fellow believers then they would consider if their actions built them up in their faith or was it a hindrance to them? These mature believers were strong in knowledge but lacking when it came to love. Now Paul is not saying that knowledge of God's word is not important and all that matters is love. Knowledge is vital; it is impossible to obey God unless we know what we are to obey and how we are to obey.

But knowledge of God's word is not enough for knowledge alone makes one proud. A Christian with knowledge and little love is a tragedy. The outworking of this lack of love is that the mature Christians were selfish. They applied what they knew to be true to themselves without even considering other Christians who were not as mature or who did not have the same knowledge. What would they think of these mature Christian's actions? Would they misunderstand what they are doing? These questions did not even dawn on them. Their actions could easily offend others Christians who were not as well grounded in the Scriptures or who were sensitive to their pagan past.

Now how do we apply this principle to our own day and situation? Well we must think in two ways before we engage in any activity that might be seen as questionable by some Christians. We must think biblically and know what the bible says or does not say about say drinking alcohol and we think about others. We must act with knowledge and with love.

If our actions will offend another Christian then even though our actions are not wrong we would be better not to do whatever it was that we were planning to do for the sake of love. We can insist in doing something that another Christian finds offensive just because we know that it is not wrong to do. That is selfish, we must think about others about how they will be affected and how they will view our actions.

Far too often Christians act as if they are independent of everyone else, its doing their own thing that matters to them but Paul makes it clear that knowledge and love must go together for knowledge alone puffs up whereas love builds up. The Christian who thinks that he has all the answers to the questions about questionable activities is someone who does not know what he ought to know (v 2) for he does not know how to think of others in his application of God's truth.

The key to applying this principle is love for God for the person who loves God is known by God (v 3).

If we truly love God we will want to please him in everything including debatable things. We will love God's people as He does and therefore before we do what we consider to be right we will consider other believers how they will view our actions and how our actions will affect those who are not as mature in the faith.

**b) Think of the Weaker Christian (vs. 4-7) -**

In verses 4-6 Paul states his agreement with the Corinthians who were theologically well taught. First he agrees with them that there is no such thing as an idol (v 4). O the stone or wood or metal that the idol is made out of is real but the god is not real for there is no God but one.

There are plenty of imaginary gods, gods made up and believed upon by mankind, there are hundreds of them but none of them are real, even though millions of people believe they are. Paul was sometimes persecuted because he taught that there is only one true God (Acts 19:26), but that is the truth. There is only one God and one Lord he is the God who created and sustains all things and he has come to us in the person of his Son Jesus Christ.

We are brought to the Father through His Son, Jesus Christ. Everything in this world comes from the Father and all believers exist for Him (v 6). So Paul agrees with these mature believers that idols are not real and so called gods do not really exist. Now these mature Christians were right on this point but they were not right in how they applied that truth to their daily lives.

Paul now reminds them of an additional truth one they must have known, but they did not take into consideration when exercising their Christian freedom. The truth is that not everyone knows this; all believers are not mature or well grounded in the faith. Some Christians at Corinth were new converts from paganism, which believed in the existence of many gods.

These new Christians probably still believed that idols although evil were still real and that gods were real even though they might be represented by some material thing. They knew that there is only one right God but perhaps they had not yet fully grasped the fact that there is only one real God. Even if they understand that there is only one real God that exists their experiences of paganism was so fresh to them that they rejected everything that was related to their former way of life.

For them to eat meat offered to idols was too big a temptation for them therefore they could not understand why other Christians would want to do so. Some of these new converts did not want to take any chances with their former way of life; they did not want to risk being tempted back into their old ways. Their consciences were not yet strong enough to allow them to eat meat offered to idols without tempting them back into their old paths.

Now if these immature believers had followed the example of the more mature believers and went ahead and ate the meat offered to idols even though their conscience was telling them not to eat it. Then they would have felt guilty even though the act is not wrong it would have felt like it was because they were going against their conscience. A defiled conscience is one that has been ignored and violated (v 7). Such a conscience brings confusion, resentment and feelings of guilt. A person who violates his conscience willingly does what he thinks is wrong and in his own mind he has committed a sin. Until that person fully understands that eating food offered to idols is not a sin in God's eyes he should have no part in it.

Going against one's conscience leads to feelings of guilt, despair a loss of joy and peace. So Paul second principle is to think about the weaker brother. When we are thinking about doing something that might be considered questionable then we are not only to think about our love to

others and the affect our actions will have on them but in particular we must think of the weaker brother who has been saved from the world and how our actions affect that person.

For example if drinking alcohol affects someone who was saved out of this world and while in the world experienced the sinful effects that drinking alcohol can lead too; then we would be inconsiderate to drink alcohol in front of our weaker brother. Our knowledge of the bible may tell us that to do a certain activity is perfectly acceptable but our love for our fellow Christian will tell us; that because it is not acceptable to the weaker brother's conscience then we should not exercise our freedom for the sake of our brother.

**c) Think About Stumbling Blocks (vs. 8-13)** - The third principle that Paul gives to us in deciding on questionable issues is the issue of being a stumbling block to other Christians (v 9). Paul once again agrees with these more mature believers that eating or not eating meat offered to idols has no spiritual significance at all. Eating or not eating does not bring us near to God or make us more acceptable to Him.

The general point is that doing things that are not commanded or forbidden by God has no significance in our relationship with the Lord. Such things are spiritually neutral (v 8). Eating or not eating certain foods simply has no spiritual significance at all. However although eating food offered to an idol has no spiritual significance for those who are mature and understand these things; it has significance for those who are not as mature in their faith.

It is possible that our actions concerning questionable issues might not affect us at all but they could be a stumbling block to others. What might not be wrong of itself becomes wrong if our actions become a stumbling block for those who are weak in faith (v 10). It is clear that some of the Christians at Corinth could not handle Christian freedom, for them freedom was more of a bondage because of their weak faith and immaturity. If immature Christians see mature Christians doing something that bothers their conscience then their spiritual life is harmed.

Therefore the lesson is that we should never influence a fellow Christian to do anything that his conscience is protecting him from.

A mature believer at Corinth rightly sees no harm in dining in an idol's temple (v 10), perhaps in some family or community event. That Christian does not accept the pagan beliefs associated with the temple nor does he participate in the pagan practices that go on there. He has no problem associating with pagan people because he knows that it has no affect on his relationship with God.

But if an immature Christian whose conscience is weak sees a mature believer eating in the temple then the immature believer could be tempted to go against his own conscience and eat in the temple himself (v 10). That might be dangerous for him for he has gone against his conscience. Consequently this immature believer could be destroyed because our actions although not wrong have become wrong because of the effect they have on others (v 11). The idea of the word "destroyed" (v 11) here is not destroy his faith but it is the idea of causing the person to sin by leading him into a situation that he cannot handle because he is not mature enough. It is never right to cause another believer to violate his conscience to do so runs the risk of causing a Christian whom Christ died for to stumble.

Our Christian freedom must never be used at the expense of a Christian brother or sister who has been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. The voice of a Christian's conscience is God's warning system to keep us out of places and from activities that will do us harm because we are too immature or too young in the faith to handle such situations.

As a Christian matures in the faith his conscience matures and he will then be able to do some things that he would not dare do as a young immature believer. We will grow in knowledge and

wisdom so that we will be able to do without question something that before we would never have done (i.e. drinking alcohol). If you think about young children; there are places that they are not able to go and things they cannot do or play with. Why? Because they cannot handle them and it would be dangerous for them. But as they grow and mature then they are able to go to places they couldn't go as a young child they can do things that they previously couldn't and the reason for it is simple; they are more mature. So it is with the Christian faith. For new converts there are places and things that would be unwise for them to go and do.

It would be too dangerous for them but as they grow and mature then those things that once were a problem for them ceases to be so and as their knowledge of God's word and principles matures, so does their conscience. We should never encourage anyone either directly or indirectly to go against their conscience in matters that are not fundamental to the gospel.

By causing a brother to stumble is more than an offence against our brother but it is an offence against Christ (v 12). Therefore we should always be willing to place limits on our own freedom in Christ in order to help our fellow believers. What we do is not a matter of satisfying our own conscience (as long as it is not sin) but we must always consider others, especially the weaker brother.

We must be careful that our actions although not sinful do not cause our fellow believers to stumble into sin. Therefore the conclusion is given for us in verse 13. If eating meat to idols or any other activity that we engage in causes another believer to sin then simply stop doing it. It might be right to do it, you are not sinning but if it causes someone else to sin then it becomes wrong.

The spiritual health of our fellow believers is more important than our own Christian freedom.

Therefore we all should be willing to forgo our Christian freedom for the sake of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

So let me conclude by giving us the three principles for considering whether to engage in something that is all right of itself but might be questionable to others and might lead others into sin.

- A) Think of love for others. Do our actions show that we love others by considering them before we engage in a questionable activity?
- B) Think of the weaker brother. How will someone who is still weak in the faith understand and perceive our actions. How will it affect them?
- C) Think about stumbling blocks. Will our actions place a stumbling block before a fellow Christian? Will our actions hinder them in their Christian faith? Could our actions lead someone who Christ died for into sin?

If we answer in the affirmative to any of those questions then the teaching is quite clear. Do not do it. Do not exercise our Christian freedom if doing so could cause a fellow believer to sin.

Our Christian freedom must always be curtailed so that the spiritual welfare of God's people is not hindered or damaged.

May God give us wisdom through his Spirit to be able to make wise choices when it comes to Christian freedom?

Amen