

1 Corinthians 8 - Laying Down My Rights

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1 Corinthians chapter 8, it says,

“Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up.² If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.³ But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

⁴ Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.”⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom (all, excuse me) are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷ However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.⁹ But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.¹⁰ For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.¹³ Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” (ESV)

Stop there. Let's pray.

Holy Spirit, we open our hearts to You this morning, that you might impart to us from this passage the wisdom and the application of Your Word that you desire to convey. Lord, speak to us about what Paul was saying. Talk to us, Lord, also about what you're saying to us today here in America in this modern day, because we believe Your Word applies across the ages. And so we pray for

wisdom. We pray for understanding. We pray for insight, and we pray for application. We ask it in the name of Christ, who is the Savior, amen.

It's not uncommon for people to want to settle a debate, and that's what the Corinthians are doing here. There was an issue related to whether or not it was appropriate to eat meat that had been offered in sacrifice at an idol's temple, and there were lots of idol temples around Corinth.

And so there were some people who believed it was like, yeah, go ahead, eat it, it's no big deal. But there were other people who thought, no, that's a big deal. In fact, I used to worship at that temple when I was a pagan, and I saw and heard some pretty wacko things while I was there, and I wouldn't put a piece of that meat in my mouth, if I was starving to death. And I think that if you do, you're wrong. And of course, the other person who says it's no big deal says, no, you're wrong. And so you've got this debate going on, and this goes on, and it has been happening a long, long time.

You remember even during Jesus' earthly ministry, He was asked to try to settle debates that were popular during that day as well. Like, if you're a real Jew, is it appropriate to pay taxes to Rome? Since they are oppressors and all. They threw that one at Jesus. Remember how He responded? (Matthew 22:15-22)

And then, other questions that came up from time to time. Was divorce allowed for any reason at all or only for specific reasons (Matthew 19:3-9)? They peppered Jesus with that one too. What is the greatest commandment of all the commandments in the law? What's the greatest one, you know?(Matthew 22:36-40) I don't know if you remember, one man even called on Jesus one time to settle an issue between him and his brother, you know. Lord, tell my brother to do this or that (Luke 12:13-15).

And then, you'll recall when Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well as He was passing through Samaria. And after she got a sense that maybe He was somebody special, she, of course, brought up a debate. Well, you Jews say we have to worship in Jerusalem. We Samaritans say the best place to worship is here on the mountain (John 4:19-24). She wanted Him to resolve that issue for her a little bit.

This happens, I mean, it's just fairly common. I don't know if you've ever been in a debate before, but it can be pretty intense when people feel pretty passionate about their particular side of the debate and as we see here, this one was going on, and you look at this question and you're like, meat sacrifice to idols.

I don't know when the last time you went to the grocery store and you saw that stamped on a piece of meat, sacrificed to an idol and wondered, gee, I wonder if I should buy this. It just doesn't happen. Not in our culture anymore.

A few years ago when Sue went over to India, she was reminding me that they had a Q&A time. And these, this was a women's meeting, of all these, and the women coming from various villages and stuff. And one of the questions that came up was, well, we just need to know when our husbands come home with meat that they've killed, and they come back bragging that this is the successful hunt by given by some pagan god, is it okay to go ahead and fix the food and serve it to our family? Yeah, it just doesn't come up here in the United States of America.

But these kinds of questions still are being raised in certain parts of the world, and so, you know, it would come up in various sorts of scenarios back in those days. For example, you might be invited to a social event that was being held at a temple. Because again, the pagan temples were so readily popular there in Corinth, they're going to... there's a feast you get invited to, and it's going to be at a pagan temple. They're going to serve food that has been dedicated to that deity.

Now you're a Christian. Do you go, or do you say, eh, I'll pass? This was a big deal. You know, it could happen that you just receive a personal invitation from someone. And while they're serving or getting ready to serve the food, up in conversation comes up the fact that this meat was dedicated to a pagan god. Should you eat it, or should you tell them you're vegetarian, you know?

And when they just went out into the marketplace, some markets were actually held in or near the temples. Because when people offered an animal to sacrifice, the food was usually divided into three parts. Some of it was given to the priest. Some of it was given to the worshipper.

And what wasn't burned up or eaten by the priest would be taken to the marketplace. If the priest didn't need all of the meat, which often they didn't when sacrifices were plentiful, they would just put it in their—the temple would have its own market, okay? So if you went to that temple to buy meat, you knew that temple was going to be, had been, dedicated to some deity.

And the question for these Christians was, should you buy it? And they were very real issues. And so they're writing to Paul to settle the matter. What do you think? And there are people to whom Paul will speak who are on his side. And Paul does have a side, by the way. And there are those who Paul thinks are not necessarily thinking with the knowledge that they should, but he's going to be

very gentle about the way he responds to this thing. But what's really interesting is that as he begins to address this thing, he doesn't just come out of the chute going, all right, you're right, you're wrong, next question.

In fact, the very first thing he says in verse 1, if you look with me again in your Bible is: *“Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge”(you see, he says) puffs up, but love builds up.”* All right, what does he mean by that?

Well, he's talking — when he talks about knowledge puffing up — first of all, he's talking about it inflating our pride. But knowledge is, first of all, the knowledge that idols really aren't anything significant. They're really, there's no other God, but our God. The creator of heaven and earth. And that's really it.

The knowledge that he speaks of here is the knowledge that these individuals have, that there's really only one God, and so it's not a big deal. You see in the marketplace a hunk of meat, and you know that it's been sacrificed to an idol, big deal, eat it. It's not going to hurt you, right? That is knowledge. And Paul says, great, you have this knowledge, but understand this about knowledge: it tends to inflate your pride.

In other words, the more we know, the more we tend to look down on those who don't know, right? We tend to look at those people like, oh, you poor people. You don't know the things I know, sort of a thing. It just inflates our pride. It makes us think highly of ourselves because we know things. You've heard the statement, knowledge is power. Well, it's also prideful, very much. And suddenly, we're the ones who have the knowledge.

And so Paul begins here, addressing this issue by addressing the real issue. You see, because were he to simply respond to the question by saying, alright, here's the deal, idols are nothing but hunks of wood, metal, or whatever. And you guys stop worrying about it. So yeah, meat that's been sacrificed to an idol is no big deal. You're right. You're wrong. Let's move on. He would have missed the greater issue, the greater need in the Corinthian church, and frankly, the greater need to be conveyed to you and I as well.

So along with this, he goes on here in verse 2, he says, *“If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.”* And that sounds like a really circular, confusing sort of a statement, doesn't it? The stuff like you hear from little kids. I love listening to little children because they will say something and then contradict themselves right away. Some of my own kids would say, I can jump over that, but I can't jump over that.

Just the other day, my five-year-old grandson— we were, he and I were outside, looking at the moon, and he goes, he had this pearl of wisdom for me. He said, when the moon isn't full, it is. And I was kind of like, okay. I don't have a clue what it is. He had something going on in his five-year-old brain, but I'm not sure what it was.

But this is not what Paul's doing. He's not saying, listen, if you think you have knowledge, you really don't have knowledge. What he's saying is, you can know something and still not know everything you need to know, and here's why: knowledge in the kingdom of God is more than just head knowledge. It involves heart knowledge, right?

In other words, it's possible to be right about something and yet be wrong in the kingdom of God. You can know something is absolutely true and have the power that goes along with that knowledge, to know things and be wrong about the way you convey that knowledge, about the way you respond to others who don't have that knowledge, and so forth. See, knowledge is very cool, but in the kingdom of God, love trumps it all. And that's something we forget.

In fact, Paul is going to work his way through this theme until he gets to the 13th— or to what is for us, the 13th— chapter. And he's going to make a statement about knowledge related to love. And I want to show it here to you from 1 Corinthians 13.

1 Corinthians 13:2 (ESV)

...if I have...all knowledge...but have not love, I am nothing.

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He's going to say, “*...if I have...all knowledge...but have not love* (in the kingdom of God, I am nada), *I am nothing.*” Now that's, I want you to think about that for a moment. I've never met anybody who had all knowledge. I've met a few people that thought they did. But imagine for a moment if you actually met someone who had all knowledge. Now you've met God. He has all knowledge, but He doesn't get puffed up. Humans do, right?

And imagine though if you actually met an individual who had all knowledge. I mean, knew everything in the universe. That I would be pretty impressed, wouldn't you? And yet, Paul says, in the kingdom, in the kingdom of God, I mean, if that person does not have love, they're nothing. That tells you a little bit about the priority of love in the kingdom of God, doesn't it?

And about the time we start feeling pretty good about ourselves because we've learned something new or we know something that someone else doesn't know, God reminds us how important love is in the kingdom toward other people. So without love, we are nothing. And so it's not just knowledge that makes you someone in the kingdom of God.

Look at what else Paul says here in verse 3, makes you somebody in the kingdom. He says, *“But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.”* See, it's not the brainiacs that just have all the information and they can just snap their finger, and they've got this mental concordance where they can zoom in on any verse in the Bible at any time, and they've got every answer, and yeah, but what about, and boom, they just know their stuff.

Listen, the people in the kingdom of God that are known by God are the lovers of people and lovers of God. It's just not; it's not really something that we tend to emphasize. But how desperately in the body of Christ we need lovers. And I'm obviously not referring in any sort of a sexual way, you know that. I'm talking about people who love people.

And it's a wonderful thing when folks walk into a church and the first thing they think of is, man, I just really feel loved. I just, because a lot of people come into church for the first time. They've been away for a while or never been to church. And they come to church just like the rest of us, just totally messed up. And sometimes they walk in and their marriages are a mess, and their lives are a mess, their thoughts are a mess. They're just a walking mess.

And yet people love them when they walk in the door and they don't judge them and say, this is for smart people that have it all together, maybe you should go away for a little while. No, it's just a church that opens their heart to people and says, this place is for you. This is a hospital. This is where we love people through the difficulties and challenges of life. And so isn't that what you want? Isn't that what we should be as the body of Christ? Isn't it, in fact, what we're even looking for?

And yet we're so delinquent sometimes in offering it. The people who are really somebody in the kingdom of God are those who have that, just that love of people, you know? It doesn't matter how they look or even how they smell, they just love them! And they want to just put their arms around them and bless them.

So what Paul's done here now, you'll notice he hasn't answered their question yet. What he's done in this little introduction he's given them here is he's laid

down what the real issue is. You guys asked me about this question about meat sacrificed idols, but I need to tell you first what the real underlying matter is. It's a matter of how we love one another in the body. And so I know some of you are just dying for me to say, you're right and you're wrong.

But you see, that right there is a wrong attitude. That desire to be right, to be the part of the knowledge group, or the spiritual group. Paul deals or reveals the big issue.

But then he goes on. Now that he's established the real issue, he goes on in verse 4. He says, *“Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’* So he says, this is where we start, this is where the knowledge base begins.

And by the way, this is knowledge, okay? This is knowledge. When you know these things, what does the Bible say happens when we know the truth? It tells us that we get set free, doesn't it? You will know the truth and the truth will set you free. So knowledge is a wonderful thing. Paul's not speaking against it, you know these things.

First thing he says, we all know that as to the eating of food that has been offered to an idol, we know that an idol isn't really real. It's not a god at all. It's a hunk of something. And we know, we know that there is only one God.

But then he goes on, verse 5: He says, *“For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth (and in other religions there are many, as he says)—as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’, (but for us as believers, it's really a non-issue, he says)—⁶yet for us there is one God (and then he speaks of the two persons of the Trinity that he's bringing up in this case, he says), the Father, from whom are all things...”*

In other words, who created all things, and all things are for him. And then he talks about our Lord, Jesus Christ, who is also God, who created all things, and for whom are all things, and so forth.

What's he doing here? He's giving you more knowledge. This is knowledge, guys. This is good stuff, not to become puffed up with, but to understand there's only one God, right?

And so he goes on, and he says, in verse 7, *“However, not all possess this knowledge...”* He's talking about believers here, you guys. He says, in fact, some of the people, through their former association with idols, they might eat

food that they really think is—it's been offered to an idol and then therefore their conscience, being weak, as it becomes defiled. All right, stop there.

This is really an important verse, he says, not everybody possesses this knowledge. And again, he's talking about believers. You guys remember when you came to Christ, how long it took for you to shed some of the ideas that you brought into your relationship with Jesus? I mean, we learn things along the way, and pagans learned a ton of things, which you and I would today call superstition. And really, that's where superstition gets its beginning - in the ideas of paganism and the misconceptions of superstitious thought.

And so here's these people who have now come to Christ, and their superstitions come right with them. And there are some in the body of Christ who have the knowledge to know that all that stuff that they've brought with them is a bunch of hooey. But the question is, how are they going to respond to these people who are still responding in their old pagan ways, or with pagan thinking or ideas or whatever.

I mean, do you guys remember? Do you remember the stuff you brought into your walk with God? I remember. I remember quoting things to people as if they were in the Bible, and they weren't. I remember that. Well, I wanted to be up with all these other people that are quoting God's Word. You know, God helps those who help themselves. And somebody with knowledge said, that's not in the Bible. Really? I didn't know that, you know, sort of stuff like you just, you bring those things along.

Not everybody has that knowledge. Not everybody has the knowledge that you have. And so because of their former associations and their former influence, he says, they eat food that has been offered to us in sacrifice, and their conscience is defiled. That's an important thing to say, too, or to understand - their conscience is defiled. The person with the weak conscience actually believes that they're being physically defiled. See, that was the problem. This is what was going on.

Because meat or animals were sacrificed to an idol, those believers with a weak conscience thought that some of that deity actually got into the meat. I mean, they literally thought that way. And so then when they consumed it, they got some of that God inside of them. That's literally what they thought.

And what they believed was, I will be defiled by eating this meat because it's got some of this pagan god in it, okay? Paul says here, no, that's not what's

going to happen, but their conscience will be defiled and they'll be cut to in their conscience and think, oh, what have I done?

But Paul and I love this, he brings it back and makes a great statement in verse 8 that you need to pay attention to. It's a very good statement. He says this: "*Food will not commend us to God...*" In other words, what you eat is not going to get you a pat on the head from God, nor what you don't eat or abstain from. Those things aren't going to make you closer to God, whether you eat or whether you don't eat.

And what Paul is doing here is, he is rendering all food spiritually neutral, okay? That's an important thing to remember, particularly in our day and age when there are groups within the body of Christ that are trying to foist the Levitical food laws back on the body of Christ today.

Listen, you need to understand Paul's clear teaching in the New Testament: eating or not eating does not affect your spirituality. It is spiritually neutral to either eat or not eat. Food isn't the issue. It will not commend you to God.

Do you know what commends you to God? The blood of the lamb and that's it. That's the only thing that will commend you to God. We come into His presence predicated on the blood of the lamb that has been applied to our lives. That's all. It's nothing that you do or nothing that you don't do that is going to make that difference.

Paul goes on to emphasize this. I only read the first part of verse 8. I'll read the whole verse. Again, Paul, "*Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.*" And honestly, the spirituality end of this thing is where this debate really lies.

When people want to be right about something in Christian circles, it's because they want to be seen as spiritual. If I'm right, then I'm more spiritual than you. And the person who says, I can eat anything I want to eat, I don't care if it's been sacrificed to an idol or not, and that proves that I'm spiritual.

And the person who abstains says, I never put anything in my mouth that has been dedicated to a pagan god, never, ever, I abstain, and that makes me spiritual, more spiritual than you.

And that's what the whole debate is all about, who's more spiritual? Right? And Paul is going to pull this thing away from both parties and he's going to say, no!

First of all, what you put in your mouth or what you don't put in your mouth is not going to commend you to God one way or another. That is not spirituality.

Now he's going to talk about real spirituality; you ready for this? Here we go, verse 9: *"But take care that this right of yours..."* and what he's talking about is yours, he's talking to the people who have knowledge now. Okay? And they have a right to eat whatever meat they want, okay? It's a right. You can do it if you want. You have a God-given right because of your knowledge.

Now he says, *"...(be careful that this right of yours) does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak (the person who thinks he can't eat or shouldn't eat) ¹⁰ For (he says) if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple..."* Some feast is going on in there, and they walk by the door, and the doors are open, and they see, oh, there's Jack. He's in there eating at this idol's temple. He's eating the food; it's been dedicated to an idol.

Now, this is a person who doesn't have that knowledge, thinks it's bad, thinks it's wrong, right? He says, if they see you in there eating, he says, *"...will he not be encouraged (end of verse 10), if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?"* He's going to think, well, Jack can do it. And then he's going to be emboldened, or feel like, yeah, well, okay, yeah, he'll get bullied into it, in a sense, and he'll partake.

And then Paul says, he says, *"¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died."* Because ultimately he's going to, his conscience is going to be struck by this thing, and he's going to go, oh, that was wrong, I shouldn't have done that.

And I want you to notice what he says in verse 12. This is really serious stuff. He says, *"Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak (Fundamentally what's going on is you actually sin against Jesus.), you sin against Christ."* Why? Because this is your brother. This is your sister.

You didn't care enough about how they felt that you actually stepped out and wounded their conscience, even though you knew that they were weak in that area. You didn't care enough. You were just like, yeah, I got, I'm a free man. I'm free to do anything I want. I'm free to eat whatever meat I want. I'll eat it whenever I want.

And we somehow think that's spiritual. I don't answer to anybody but God about that. That's just prideful and arrogant, and you will answer to God about how

you treated your brother and sister. And that's the point of what Paul is saying here: don't wound their weak conscience by the simple exercise of your freedom, because when you do, you're sinning against your brother, and that means you're sinning against the Lord.

And then, in the final verse of the chapter, Paul comes out very clearly and defines in his summary statement what true spirituality is, and I want you to see this in verse 13, because this is so good. He says, "*Therefore, if food (if food) makes my brother stumble (fine), I will never eat meat (won't do it), lest I (do that very thing) make my brother stumble.*"

If that's the problem, see I'm... Here's the point: I'm going to care more about my brother than the exercise of my freedom. I have these freedoms, but I'm going to care more about him. I'm going to prefer you over the exercise of my freedom.

Now, this whole idea of our freedoms and laying them down, Paul's going to get into in the following chapters, okay? And we'll get into that as we do. But you need to see and understand the point of what he's saying as it relates to this, the example that we're showing others and the example we're following.

Do you guys get why this is such a really cool thing to lay down your life for somebody? That's what Jesus did for us. He laid down his life for you. He laid down His rights. Jesus had every right to say, no, I'm not going on that cross. There's no reason I have to go on that cross. I didn't sin. I didn't do wrong. These are the people that did wrong. Let them die for their sin.

Aren't you glad He didn't have that attitude? You see, but yet instead, He said, I don't deserve death on a cross, and I don't deserve to bear the penalty that they earned through their sinning, but I'll take it anyway. I'm going to lay down my rights.

Paul talks about this in the second chapter of Philippians. How our attitude should be the same as Jesus, who being in the very form of God, did not consider that equality with God, something to be held on to but rather poured Himself out, took the very form or nature of a servant (Philippians 2:6-7).

God became a servant. And having been found in that appearance as a man, He went further and humbled himself even to the point of death on a cross. Why? He chose to do it out of love. He chose to lay down his rights out of love.

And that's what Paul's asking of us. You have wonderful, glorious freedoms and rights that God has given you. Now, are you willing to lay them down for other people? And that means not flaunting your right. It means not flaunting it on your Facebook page or somewhere else where somebody with a weak conscience sees it and says, oh, what's going on here?

It's talking about loving people enough that you care. Care what they think and how they're going to respond. There's a song that we sing here on Sunday morning and every so often the lyrics of songs really grab me from the standpoint of, I don't think I'm living up to this lyric. You ever feel that way? Well, here's a song when it's just that way. It's called, I Surrender.

I'm giving you my heart, and all that is within I lay it all down for the sake of you my king I'm giving you my dreams, I'm laying down my rights I'm giving up my pride for the promise of new life

And it says, here's what we sing: I'm giving you my heart and all that is within. I lay it all down for the sake of you, my king. I'm giving you my dreams. (Oh, look at what else we like to sing.) I'm laying down my rights. Wow, did I just say that to God? I'm laying down my rights.

What we sing when we're singing that song is the very thing Paul is talking about here in 1 Corinthians chapter 8. Talking about laying down your rights for others to show not your knowledge, but your love, your love for one another in the body of Christ.

And that's a powerful thing to do! So do I have the right to do various things, like eat anything I want as in the case here that Paul's doing? Yes, I do. Eating doesn't make me unspiritual. Eating doesn't make me spiritual. Partaking or not partaking doesn't affect my spirituality. What does make me unspiritual? When I refuse to lay down my rights for the sake of others, that makes me unspiritual.

And as I said, Paul is going to begin to launch into in the next couple of chapters more on this very important topic of our rights as believers and what we should do with those rights and how we should exercise them and how we should take care in the exercise of them.

But for right now, that's where we're going to stop, and we're going to close, and I'm going to have you stand here with me, please, if you would, as we close in prayer. But I just want you to be thinking about just the way you live and the way you exercise your freedoms in Christ.

The body of Christ has a tendency to be pretty judgmental about things sometimes. In our past history, it has come out and made some really stupid things, like anybody who ever walks into a movie theater is going to hell, or that proves you're not a Christian, or anybody who ever takes a drink of any alcoholic beverage. And we've come up with things like that over the years, and that's the legalistic side of things flexing its muscle.

And then, but then those who have the knowledge that we talked about here in 1st Corinthians have come back in an equally unbiblical manner and said, I'm going to flaunt my freedom. You say I can't do this. Well, the Bible doesn't say it. And I'm going to exercise my freedom.

And what we've done is we've swung back so far the other direction that we've been unloving, just as unloving as the legalistic side of things was, by demanding this and this, all the rules that they came up with, you see, and we're just excited about the fact that we're free and have rights to do things, and we forgot we were supposed to love.