

Free to Love
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
BPC – 9/10/2022

“Everyone has the right to die with dignity how and when they decide.” “Everyone should be free to marry whoever they like.” “Feeling safe in the workplace is a human right.”

We are a culture obsessed with human rights and freedom. Our rights are connected to and often based on society’s conviction about the good life and human flourishing. And so it is our right to be true to ourselves and express ourselves and people should be affirm, even celebrate that.

Freedom of choice and human rights is the mantra of our culture and is seemingly primarily or even sole criteria for deciding an action. And Christians are not immune to this attitude or the question of rights.

What Christians have the right to do or not do was a pivotal question facing the Corinthian church is a central theme throughout chapters 8-10. And the question of freedom and rights revolved around one central issue: whether a Christian can or can not eat food sacrificed to idols (v.1).

And those opening words of “now about” suggest that, just as he did with marriage and singleness in chapter 7, this whole section of food to idols in 8-10 is Paul answering questions the Corinthians had asked him in a letter. It’s why in v.1 and v.4 we have some quotation marks as Paul likely referencing the very things they wrote to him.

But I suspect for many of us this subject is just totally foreign and seemingly irrelevant. Most of us are not overly concerned about where our food comes from and the very idea of being it connected to idol worship seems unlikely.

Yet for some, perhaps those from African or Asian backgrounds, this might be more familiar topic and relevant issue with the expectation to still participate in ancestor worship, visit temples, and offer sacrifices.

And so can Christians eat food sacrificed to idols? Can they go even go to the temple to eat? And this 1 main issue had 2 conflicted groups: firstly there are those whom Paul calls the weak in v.7, perhaps the conservative Christian whose conscience convicts them not to eat and clearly think it’s wrong.

Then on the other side there is the ‘strong’, though Paul doesn’t call them that, the knowledgeable who feel no issue here whatsoever. Their understanding of God and idols liberates them with the right to eat and go to temple because it doesn’t or won’t affect them at all.

And Paul only addresses this group in the passage, perhaps they were the majority in the church.

And this question was far from trivial for both groups because idol food was such a normal part of their life. Corinth was full of temples to different gods – it was a normal aspect of day-to-day life. The person would often bring food or especially an animal to be sacrificed at the temple in devotion or worship to their god – whether Zeus or Aphrodite or any other deity.

Some of this food would stay with the priest, but most would be divided up for use in the temple, taken home by the worshipper for their own meals, and some taken to local markets to sell.

And so this 1 issue with 2 groups, had 3 main contexts this question would play out. Firstly there would be invitations to a meal at dining rooms that were attached to the temple.

Most homes were small and unable to host many people. So temples had dining rooms that could be used for private events and meals. Excavations in Corinth have shown that some temples had as many as 40 dining rooms with it that could seat between 8-10 people.

So birthdays, business meetings, and private dinners would all take place in the temple of a god and for Christians, being invited to this temple, to eat food offered to the god of the temple would be a fairly standard event. A normal part of social life in Corinth.

Secondly, there would be meals in the home of another person. Your non-Christian friend was at the temple in the morning, brought home some food and is now serving it to you.

Or thirdly, this question would come up for just buying food, especially meat, from the local market. Most of it was sourced from the temples and so this question would even shape the daily life of a Christian of what they bought and ate.

The question of food offered to idols was a central issue of answering the question of how a Christian lives faithfully in a culture saturated in idolatry that pervades our public and private, our work and social life. And I hope you can see that answering that question is super relevant for us today regardless of how familiar or present the issue of food sacrificed to idols is.

And especially how Paul answers their question in chapters 8-10, but especially here in chapter 8, will be so helpful for us because Christians have often divided or been in conflict over what we might call the grey areas of the Christian life. Topics or issues that often come up in a culture saturated by idolatry, not just pagan temples but materialism or a sexed crazed society or just the sole pursuit of self-indulgence.

For example, how would you answer right now (in your head to save conflict!): Is it right for a Christian to watch R-rated movies? To drink or smoke or get a tattoo? Can a Christian listen to any kind of music, read Harry Potter, dress any way they like – to wear as much or as little as they like?

How we answer those questions, just as how the Corinthians answered questions of food offered to idols, would put them at odds with their culture, be costly in their work and social life, cause even conflict within their families.

Christians in all times and places have to face the tension of being in the world as salt and light, shining a dark world, balanced with just straight out compromise where this is no distinction at all.

But how a Christian answers any of these questions will also put them at odds with other Christians who answer differently. So how does a Christian community navigate this?

Well notice that rather than just burst in with a yes or no or even a maybe, Paul begins with the foundational question of what drives our decision in the first place as he contrasts knowledge and love.

¹ *Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that “we all have knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*

The knowledge Paul has in mind here is v.4 – knowledge about the true and living God that is foundational to being Christian. Knowledge of the true God revealed in Jesus would have been central to Paul’s teaching when he started the church in Corinth.

And Paul here agrees with Corinthian quote, we all have knowledge about God as Christians. But he then quickly qualifies that *knowledge puffs up*.

Knowing things, even good things about God, can inflate us with pride and arrogance. We boast about our knowledge, even look down on those with less knowledge.

You’ve probably met this kind of Christian at some point – maybe you’ve even been this kind of Christian... That just has a smugness based on how much they know. “I remember when I hadn’t read all the bible...” “Oh I used to be confused by Revelation too but it’s actually really obvious.”

“I’ve just finished reading my 12th commentary on Mark, how many have you read?” Sadly all too often Christians have let their knowledge of God cause them to become puffed up and self-inflated.

But Paul is not anti-knowledge or anti-intellectual. Knowledge in itself is not bad, but Paul is wanting them to reflect on where their knowledge is taking them. While knowledge has a self-absorbed benefit, love looks to the needs of others. V.1 *Love builds up*.

By contrasting love with knowledge he is not saying they are opposed or incompatible. Rather than knowledge should not be used to inflate ourselves but guide us in how we love.

We see that in v.2, ² *If anyone thinks he knows anything, he does not yet know it as he ought to know it*. Knowledge and humility go together for the Christian because we know that knowing God is given not earned. As Paul said in 1Cor 2, we are fully dependent on the Spirit to reveal God to us.

True knowledge of God ought to express itself in humility and other person centeredness. Because there is a supreme difference between knowing *about* God and *knowing* God. ³ *But if anyone loves God, he is known by him*.

On that surface that seems like a typo right? We’d expect *if anyone loves God, he knows God*. But that’s not what he says: *if anyone loves God, he is known by God*.

Paul is showing how absurd it is to let knowing God become a source of pride. Boasting in knowing God is crazy when you should be absolutely humbled by the fact that God knows you. Not in the sense of knowing your address or job or favourite music.

To be known by God is to be in relationship with God, to be called and chosen and belong to God. To know and love God is a response to God’s loving initiative that should then lead us to love too.

And so in these verses Paul is laying a foundation to say that the decision to eat the food offered to idols or not is not simply about what you know or your freedom or rights. It’s about love. Love and looking to the needs of others is central to being Christian and true knowledge of God.

So it's worth asking and reflecting where your knowledge of God is taking you? Does it lead to a self-promotion and ego? Or to humility and loving care of others?

It's easy to be in a church that values + invests in good biblical teaching, and just get it plainly wrong in where it takes us or what it does to us? Does your knowledge lead to love or self-inflation?

Because unlike our culture, love does not promote subjective truth or just blind acceptance of whatever people want. Love is informed and shaped by knowledge, especially right knowledge of God.

So Paul clarifies what it is that all Christians know about God. ⁴ *About eating food sacrificed to idols, then, we know that "an idol is nothing in the world," and that "there is no God but one."*

It's likely that Paul is again quoting the Corinthians here and again he agrees with them. Christians know that there is only one true God in the world and that idols, all other gods, are not real. They are *nothing in the world*. As we heard in Jeremiah 10, just sticks and stones that do nothing!

And Christians know this despite the claims and behaviour of the world. ⁵ *For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth—as there are many "gods" and many "lords"*

The idols and gods of the world are not real. There is no god behind the statue or hearing their prayers regardless of how passionate or devoted their worshippers are. They exist only in the minds and imaginations of those who worship them.

Whether Islam or Buddhism, Hinduism, or any of the religions throughout the world and history, they are wrong.

Now such a statement is of course counter-cultural both in 1st century Corinth and now. It caused riots, saw Christians jailed and even lose their life.

But Christians know this is reality. ⁶ *yet for us there is one God, the Father. All things are from him, and we exist for him. And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ. All things are through him, and we exist through him.*

The background to v.4 and v.6 is what is called the *Shema*, as saying of Deuteronomy 6 that God's people were to memorise and pass on. Deut 6:4 ⁴ *"Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*

Paul takes this OT verse and says our commitment to monotheism, to one true and living God is not based on preference or convenience but revelation. God has made himself known through Jesus.

But through Jesus the one God and Lord of Deuteronomy is understood or known as God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Together they are spoken of as the one God in v.6, the shared source and agents of creation.

The oneness of God is actually quite complex, what we call the Trinity: one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. Hopefully this is showing you the value and helpfulness of the Nicene Creed that puts this complex reality in clear statements about each of the Godhead.

But Paul's goal is not to explain or unpack the complexity of the Trinity, but to show that God's own revelation of himself in Christ puts an end to any question or doubt about world religions or the existence of God or so-called gods.

And as people who know God through Christ, we therefore know idols are nothing and thus are completely free to eat food offered to idols. Right knowledge of God will mean you are free to eat because you know whether from the temple or woollies, the meat is just meat.

There is no danger or threat to eating food offered to a lump of wood or pile of stone, you can eat. But Paul makes clear that your freedom and right to eat is not the only consideration! Because being a Christian never happens in isolation. We live in community!

⁷ However, not everyone has this knowledge. Some have been so used to idolatry up until now that when they eat food sacrificed to an idol, their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

Now by this Paul is not saying that there are some Christians who do not yet know God or confess Jesus as Lord yet as if that was possible. No he's saying that some Christians have not yet grasped the full implications of the knowledge they have.

And we should expect that right? It takes time for our Christians to shape our thinking and response to our culture or even our previous life as we participated in several kinds of idolatry.

For those in Corinth, they are so used to idolatry that even though now despite being Christian, they see idols as real gods and so eating food offered to them would sin against their conscience and defile them.

Our conscience is that inner voice, that moral decision maker that tells us what is right or wrong. And as Christians, our conscience is our understanding of the Gospel that then impacts our behaviour.

Our conscience needs to be informed and shaped by the Gospel. But Paul is not saying that our conscience is always right. He does not agree with those who think idols are real – that couldn't be clearer as he says this is because their conscience is weak.

They don't understand and enjoy the freedom they could through the Gospel, they haven't applied its reality to all of their life. Yet despite that, Paul says for them, to eat the food is defilement. Even though it isn't sinful or wrong, because it is for them in their conscience, it is sin for them.

He says something similar in Romans 14: ¹⁴ *I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. Still, to someone who considers a thing to be unclean, to that one it is unclean.*

²³ *But whoever doubts stands condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith, and everything that is not from faith is sin.*

And so as we live in Christian community we will be among Christians, who may resolve that they won't drink alcohol or watch certain movies or smoke. And for them, because that is how they have resolved to live for God and honour him, to go against that would be to sin.

So this means for all Christians, we need to ensure that we both educate and follow our conscience. We need to make sure our thinking is informed by the bible, having the Gospel shape our whole worldview. Reading good books, making the most of sermons and talks, and studying the bible.

But we can imagine at this point, some in Corinth saying to Paul, well good for them! They won't eat, they are free to do that, but I will eat because I'm free to do that!

But Paul says no. Our life in community as Jesus' people is not governed by our rights or freedom, but by love. And so while they may eat in the privacy of their own homes, because the 'strong' live among the weak, Paul says their knowledge must be expressed in love which will ultimately mean that more often than not, they won't eat – and he gives them three reasons why.

Firstly because their knowledge gives them perspective in v.8. They are free to eat sure, but it doesn't actually change anything. ⁸ *Food will not bring us close to God. We are not worse off if we don't eat, and we are not better if we do eat*

Implicit in this, just as it is made clear in Romans 14, is that Christians are not under the OT food law. No food is unclean or restricted for the Christian – but we also know it will not bring us close to God, we are not more or less righteous if we do or don't eat.

And so for the sake of those among them, they won't eat. Especially because of Paul's second reason, the damage their example can cause the weak. ⁹ *But be careful that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak.* ¹⁰ *For if someone sees you, the one who has knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, won't his weak conscience be encouraged to eat food offered to idols?* ¹¹ *So the weak person, the brother or sister for whom Christ died, is ruined by your knowledge.*

Despite our culture's obsession, Christians are not governed by our rights. Exercising our rights, v.9, may be a stumbling block for the weak. Living in community we need to be aware of our influence.

I once referenced Harry Potter in a talk at youth group on a Friday night that was swiftly followed by a phone call the next morning from a parent asking why I was encouraging their child to watch it. For those parents and that family, they had decided it was wrong to watch the movies or read the books.

How would you respond to that? Our default is to get out our inner lawyer, drop some theology and knowledge and defend ourselves right? But Paul goes the other way: be careful about your influence.

And the language could not be stronger: in v.11 he says we need to remember the preciousness of other Christians. They are brothers and sisters *for whom Christ died*. He laid down his life for them, you can surely forgo certain food!

But notice he says that by the influence and example of the strong, the weaker Christian is *ruined by your knowledge*. That word ruined, or 'destroyed' in the NIV actually speaks of losing your faith completely, their ruin and destruction is eternal as they stand before God in judgement.

And so our behaviour and influence can set others on a path of compromising their faithfulness to Jesus to the point they abandon him all together.

Which naturally leads to Paul's third reason not to eat in v.12, that to influence and potentially destroy another Christian like this is to *sin against Christ* himself. Lovelessness is sin.

And so Paul finishes in v.13 with his own example and application: ¹³ *Therefore, if food causes my brother or sister to fall, I will never again eat meat, so that I won't cause my brother or sister to fall.*

Love might even make you vegetarian. But actually meat was a luxury food and for most Christians it would be beyond reach unless they were invited to an event like these at the temple. And Paul is saying yes he'd even pass on the wagyu and endure the cost.

Because the power of v.13 is not simply the loss of missing out on a great steak. Participating in meals and celebrations at the temple would be a massive social cost too. For Christians in Corinth it would be a time to mingle with the upper-class, improve your reputation, perhaps get you a job or move you up the corporate ladder.

And we saw in chapters 1-4, the Corinthians, like many of us today, were deeply concerned for their social status and acceptance amongst the unbelieving world. Yet love will take the cost for the good of another Christian. Because as God's people we are free to love.

As Paul says in Galatians 5:13, ¹³ *For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love.*

But that leads us to two clarifying things: 1) While Paul says the conscience may lead some Christians to refrain from doing certain things that are not sin, it does not go the other way. Our conscience must not be allowed to accept and do things that God's word says *is* sin. We see that in 1Cor 5-6 as Paul confronts the Corinthians for that.

2) The weak are not to impose their preference or conviction on others. What he is calling for is the thoughtful and voluntary love by refraining in an area of life for the good of another Christian. But I imagine that for some us this just feels totally paralyzing: it seems that what we watch, wear, eat, drink, or say could potentially influence or destroy another Christian! How can we possibly navigate through the minefield of grey areas that doesn't leave us essentially wanting to bunker down and not let anyone know or see anything about us!

Well we actually need to be a community of love – where we know and value each other as brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. Where we actually get to know each other because we long to build each other up in love. Where we can talk about these topics to know each other well!

A community where we can share our struggles or get to know someone's background so we know what will build them up or what might be particular areas of challenge. A community of people known by God but actually known by each other too.

But if we do that, if we become that kind of community, we'll see just how needed and application 1Corinthians 8 really is! How would feel about changing the TV show or movie you watched based on who was came to your house?

Would you be willing to change what you eat or drink at a party because you know a brother or sister in Christ is also there for whom this is a struggle?

Would you even be willing to consider the how you spend your money? What kind of car you drive or how much money you spend on tech or luxury or holidays because you're among several brothers or sisters struggling financially or who have self-destructive habits with money.

Love that wants others to be built up is thorough and deeply practical, but are we willing? If you're like me you know that is a searching question that challenges our inner lawyer and wants to just say, why can't they change?

And so how can we possibly do this? How can we possible sustain this? Love is sustained and motivated by our knowledge of God through the Lord Jesus. Jesus who gave up his place in heaven to become a man. Jesus who deserved and had the right to be worshipped and adored yet was whipped, mocked, and killed for our sake.

Jesus who endured the cross so we could have the right to become children of God. We are free to love as we bask in the grace of the Lord Jesus who was rich, yet for our sake became poor so that we might become rich.

It is by looking to and resting in him alone that we know and enjoy our freedom, but then use it to love in following his example. Let's pray.