



Central  
Peninsula  
Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

*When Your Rights Aren't Right*  
1 Corinthians 8:1–13, 10:23–11:1  
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series: crazychurch

Several years ago I was in Romania with one of our elders, Frank Cutter. We were there to help a small Romanian church with their building project and to do some teaching. One day the pastor and his wife were driving us around and showing us their community. They brought along a few members of their youth group. At lunch time we stopped at a restaurant to eat and Frank and I could tell that they were all a bit uncomfortable. As we sat around the table it came out this was the first time any of them had ever been in a restaurant. We assumed the reason for that was they couldn't afford it, but there was another reason. In Romania, many Christians view going to restaurants as wrong or sinful. Things happen at restaurants they don't approve of, such as drinking and dancing. For many Christians in Romania, going to a restaurant is a bit like a believer here going to a strip club, though nothing like that was going on.

Of course, Frank and I were stunned. The more we talked the more we discovered they felt the same way about a lot of things we enjoy. For example, we noticed a soccer stadium in the center of town. I mentioned how much I loved soccer and how my daughter played. Again, there was an awkward silence because, as I later learned, they would never think of attending a soccer match and the idea of a young girl playing soccer was sacrilegious. Committed believers would never do such a thing. You can tell our ministry there was a hit!

But this kind of thing is nothing new. A very similar situation took place many years ago in the Greek city of Corinth. Paul had visited Corinth on his second missionary journey and established a little church there. Many of the believers had come out of a very dark background that included immorality and idol worship. The presence of idols was a normal part of life in that day. In fact, in Corinth and other ancient cities, the temples functioned almost like restaurants. Each town would have several shrines to local gods and goddesses, like Apollo or Venus, and even to the Roman emperor. The way it worked was people would come to the shrine with animals for sacrifice to the gods. When the animal was killed, it would be cooked. Some of the meat would be given over to the gods, but some would be eaten together by the family. There was usually more meat than one family could eat, and so they would invite others to come to the temple or shrine and share in the food with them. These also became important social occasions. Much like today, they were places where you could kind of "wine and dine" business contacts as well.

But even that would fail to use up all the meat that was sacrificed. So the temple officials would take what was left over to the public market, where it would be sold much like meat is sold at a supermarket today. In fact, most of the meat available for sale in a city like Corinth would have already been offered to a god.

As you might imagine, this could cause a problem for a Christian. Unless they were Jewish, most of these new believers had come right out of this kind of pagan background. And they had questions about what to do. Was it wrong to ever attend one of these functions in the temple? It was really more of a social event than religious. How about just buying the everyday meat sold in the market when you knew it had probably at one time been offered up to a god? And what if you went to someone's home and they served up some of this idol meat? What kind of guest would refuse to eat food served at a friend's table?

Within the church at Corinth different people said different things. Some teachers said it was no big deal. We know there is only one God. All these idols amount to nothing. They don't even exist. If you want to buy your meat in the market, go ahead. If you want to go to a social meal in the temple, feel free. You know who the true God is. But there were others who weren't so sure. Obviously, if you had come out of a Jewish background you wouldn't be comfortable with that. The Ten Commandments warned against idols. But there were also those who had come out of idolatry and had a hard time disassociating this meat from the actual practice of worshipping idols. In their head they knew there was only one God, but just being in one of those temples and eating the meat brought back that whole lifestyle that they didn't want to have anything to do with.

Now you might think this all sounds irrelevant to us. We don't have a whole lot of shrines to idols. But these are issues we face all the time. How do you feel about Christian kids reading Harry Potter books, or playing Dungeons & Dragons? How do you feel about participating in martial arts classes or yoga that might include some aspects of eastern religion? How do you feel about going to movies where things are happening on screen you don't approve of? How do you feel about attending a wedding or a cocktail party where people might have too much to drink? How do you feel about going to a soccer match or watching a football game on a Sunday?

These are the kinds of questions believers have been asking from day one. The Corinthians had written Paul and asked him what he thought of all of this. Paul takes some time to answer their question. He doesn't just give them a pat answer. He helps them to see both sides of the issue; he gives them tools to think Christianly about this. His discussion starts in chapter 8 and he really won't finish until chapter 11. Today we're looking at what he says in chapter 8 as well as at the end of chapter 10. There are four things he gives them: 1) an overriding principle, 2) a fundamental truth, 3) a supreme consideration, and 4) some helpful questions.

### **An overriding principle: Love matters more than knowledge.**

He starts with an overriding principle. Look at verses 1–3.

**Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.**

The overriding principle is love matters more than knowledge. Some of the Corinthians were using this phrase “We all have knowledge” to teach that Christians could go into the temples and eat. The “knowledge” we possess is there is only one God and idols don't really exist, so why is it a big deal? Paul says a couple of things about this. First he says, what's the net effect? “Knowledge makes arrogant.” One translation says, “Knowledge puffs us.” On the other hand, love builds up; love edifies. It's like what Paul says later about love, *“If I...can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge...but have not love, I am nothing”* (1 Cor 13:2). Love matters more than knowledge because knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

Then he says something else: love matters more than knowledge because it's not about what you know but who knows you. If you think you know it all, you reveal you really don't know what you ought to know. Compared to God, what you know is like a small drop in a vast ocean. Real knowledge makes you humble, not proud. The more you know, the more you know you don't know. What really matters is who knows **you**. Again, this is where love comes in. The one who loves is known by God. What does it mean to be “known” by God? It means God recognizes him as his own. It's like when I take my little dog Daisy to run in the park with all the other people and all the other dogs. She knows me and I know her. She can run off but I always have my eye on her and I know amidst all the other dogs she's mine. And she loves me. She always comes back to me—almost always! So it's not about what you know but who knows you. Again, love trumps knowledge, because when you love God and others you show you belong to him.

Later, Paul will apply this to the issue of eating food sacrificed to idols. But for now let's go on and look at the second thing.

### **A fundamental truth: There is only one God.**

The second thing is a fundamental truth. Look at verses 4–6.

**Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.**

The fundamental truth is there is only one God. In verses 1–3 Paul took on those who prided themselves in having knowledge, but here he agrees with what they were saying. There is no such thing as an idol; there is only one God. That's Theology 101. The Ten Commandments start, *“Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One.”*

Now Paul acknowledges there are “so-called gods in heaven or on earth.” He says in one sense there **are** many gods and many lords. Even though they don't exist in reality, in the minds of idol worshippers they're real. It's like you can tell a child that ghosts don't exist, but when they wake up in the middle of the night scared to death you know those ghosts are real to them.

Paul says, “That may be true, but for us they're not real.” For believers, there is one God, the Father, and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ. Notice how Paul perceives God. There is God the Father and God the Son, but they're one. God the Father is the One “from whom all things came and for whom we live.” He's the source and origin of all things. He's the goal and purpose of our existence. At the same time, Jesus is the one “through whom all things came and through whom we live.” He's the agent or the mediator through whom all things were created and through whom we have new life. God the Father created and redeemed the world through God the Son. How different our God is from man-made idols!

The fundamental truth in this whole debate is there is only one God. Paul wants them to know that whatever he goes on to say, they need to keep that in mind.

### **A supreme consideration: the welfare of the one Christ died for.**

This leads him to the third thing, a supreme consideration. Look at verses 7–13.

**However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. But take**

**care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.**

He starts out by saying not everyone has knowledge. Not everyone understands there is only one God. Some people are so used to thinking about idols as real, it's so ingrained in their hearts, when they eat meat sacrificed to idols it defiles them.

Notice he says "their conscience is weak." In v. 10 he says they have a "*weak conscience.*" In v. 11 he refers to a "*weak brother.*" Who are these people? These are believers who feel in their hearts it's wrong to eat food sacrificed to idols, or attend a soccer match, or whatever. They're "weak" because they've not yet grown in their faith enough to fully embrace the freedom they have in Christ; freedom based on the knowledge that idols don't exist and what we eat or drink can't commend us to God. They can't separate certain practices and objects from what they represented before they came to Christ. Because of their "weak conscience," they feel guilty and dirty and condemned if they participate. To "defile" your conscience is to ignore it. And when your conscience is ignored, it brings confusion and guilt. Whether they've sinned or not, if they think it's wrong, then in their own mind they have sinned.

When I became a Christian, I came out of a typical "party" lifestyle. That included a lot of bad stuff I won't even mention. As a young Christian I couldn't be around that stuff. Even if I went to a party and didn't participate in what others were doing, I couldn't separate it out. Other believers might have been able to go and even be a positive influence, but at the time I couldn't see how that could be possible. I was a weaker brother.

Now Paul says even though that's true, even though they're weaker in their faith, the supreme consideration is their spiritual welfare. Christ died for them. You see, this is where love comes in. Paul already laid down the principle that love matters more than knowledge. If you in your knowledge cause them to do something that violates their conscience and they fall back into idol worship, you've sinned. You've sinned against them and you've sinned against God. You've turned a good thing into a bad thing. You've turned your freedom in Christ into something that ruins your brother.

He gives an example: what if one of the weaker brothers sees you dine at a temple function where this idol meat is being eaten? When that person sees you there he may be emboldened to

do something that for him is sin and leads him right back into that lifestyle. He says God forbid I ever do that! I'll become a vegetarian. I'll never eat meat again if it causes my brother to stumble!

Now let me say something by way of qualification. Paul isn't saying we should never do anything that our brothers or sisters in Christ disagree with or are offended by. The issue here is causing a weaker brother or sister to fall back into sin. There are always going to be people in the church who are offended by things. A seminary teacher of mine called them professional weaker brothers. These aren't true "weaker brothers" who might fall back into sin when they see us doing what they feel is wrong. They're legalists who reduce the Christian life to a list of rules we have to keep in order to be pleasing to God. These rules don't come from Scripture. Of course, Scripture spells out things that are right and wrong, but the legalist adds to these things.

For example, suppose you decide not to watch R-rated movies. You wouldn't allow your children to watch them, so you decide for you to watch them would be confusing to them. That's not legalism; that's being wise. But what if that choice made you feel judgmental toward other parents who did watch R-rated movies? You began to feel they're not fully committed to Christ because they watch things you don't watch. You want your church to make a rule that says no one can watch R-rated movies. Since it's a sacrifice for you, you judge others' spiritual dedication by this standard. But can we really judge someone's walk with God by what rating of movies they watch? Is that even biblical? What about your own sin? Do you really know their heart? The essence of legalism is to judge by the standard of one's outward religious performance. You see sin in others and ignore it in your own heart. It's fine to have rules to guide our own behavior, but when we extend those rules to everyone around us, and they don't even come from the Bible, we become legalists.

There is a fine line here but it's an important one. Jesus wouldn't bow to legalists. He and his disciples did things on the Sabbath that offended the Pharisees, but he didn't change. Same with Paul. In Galatians 1 Paul was eating with Gentiles and Peter got offended. He felt Jewish Christians weren't supposed to do that. Paul didn't stop, but instead he confronted Peter about his legalism. If you're a legalist, you need to rethink the rules you use to not only judge your own walk with God but that of others as well. Focus on the heart. Confess your pride. Remember we're a work in progress.

Having said that, when it comes to our true weaker brothers and sisters in Christ, their spiritual welfare must come before our personal rights and freedoms. Just because you have the right to do something doesn't mean it's right. For example, scripture doesn't forbid drinking alcohol in moderation. There are even some verses that thank God for it. But it does caution us in our

use of it; it tells us to be careful; it can become addictive; it can lead us into other sins; scripture prohibits drunkenness. And there are people who come to Christ out of a background of alcohol abuse; it was part of a sinful lifestyle that God saved them from. The idea of going back to that would be so wrong for them.

But how about the rest of us? Should we drink or not? The answer is yes. In some situations, we're free to drink; in others we should curtail our freedoms for a brother or sister who might be tempted to violate conscience and fall back into a life of sin and drunkenness. God forbid that alcohol is more important to us than our brothers' spiritual health.

This is one of these areas where "situational ethics" is correct. In v. 10 Paul gave them one situation where they shouldn't eat—in the temple where a weaker brother might see them and stumble. But if you skip down to chapter 10 he gives two situations where they could eat. Look at verses 25–29.

**Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake; FOR THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND ALL IT CONTAINS. If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake. But if anyone says to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake; I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience?**

He says go ahead and eat the meat sold in the markets without raising any questions. After all, everything belongs to the Lord! And if someone invites you over for dinner, go ahead and eat what they put in front of you. Don't ask any questions. But if they tell you the roast lamb was sacrificed to Venus, it won't hurt you but don't eat it for the sake of your brother. Once again, when it comes to our weaker brothers, their spiritual welfare comes before our personal freedoms.

### **Some helpful questions: to eat or not to eat.**

This leads us to the fourth thing—some helpful questions. In chapter 10 Paul gives us some helpful things to think about and I'll use this to pose some questions you can ask when trying to figure what to do in these gray areas. Again, you can apply this to any of the areas of questionable behavior.

The first question is, **will it build up or tear down?** Look at verses 23–24. *"All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor."* I'm free to watch TV all I want. The Bible doesn't say anything about how much TV I

watch. Most of us will spend four hours this afternoon watching a football game and some every expensive commercials. We'll consume both food and drink. Before we do, we should ask, will it build me and others up in our faith or will it tear us down?

Second question: **can I thank God for it?** Look at v. 30. *"If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks?"* If you're about to do something and you can't in good conscience see that as God's gift to you and thank him for it, it's probably not best to do it. But if you can thank him, it's probably okay.

Here's another question: **does it glorify God?** Look at v. 31. *"Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."* Maybe you can read a book like *Harry Potter* and separate out all the witches and warlocks as just part of a fantasy and actually get some redeeming value out of the book that glorifies God. Maybe you use that as a conversation starter to actually talk with unbelievers about Christ. That glorifies God. Go for it. But not everyone can do that. I wouldn't recommend that book to someone who actually practiced witchcraft at one time in their life.

Finally, ask yourself the question you've heard before, **what would Jesus do?** In v. 33 he said he doesn't seek his own profit but *"the profit of the many, that they may be saved."* Then he says in 11:1: *"Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ."* Paul can tell them to imitate him in this because he imitates Christ. So think of what Jesus would do. In certain situations, Jesus might choose not to do something because it would hinder someone from faith.

Let me say a word to two different groups. First, a word to weaker brothers. You have a weak conscience. There are things that aren't necessarily wrong that are wrong for you. And you should be careful not to violate your conscience. But I also encourage you to grow in your faith. You do that by educating your conscience and taking responsibility for your own walk with the Lord. It's possible for something to be wrong for you but right for someone else. Ask God to strengthen you so you can enjoy your freedom in Christ. Ask a more experienced believer to come along side of you and mentor you. Study the Scripture and let it guide the choices you make.

Second, a word to the mature. You have freedom in Christ. That's a good thing. Enjoy your freedom. But temper your freedom with love. Just because you have the right to do something, doesn't mean it's right. You also have the right **not** to exercise your freedom for the sake of love. Jesus laid down his rights to save you. On the cross, he gave up his rights for you.

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