

Freedom and Surrendering Freedom

1 Corinthians 8

Sin is defined as the transgression of God's law. However, there is an exception. Consciences are guides that are only as good as we know accurately what God has revealed. If a person thinks that something that is not against God's law is sinful, and if he acts against what his misguided conscience tells him, he is sinning against his conscience, even though we know that he is not actually sinning against God's Law. What Paul is concerned about in 1 Corinthians 8 is that Christians should never pride themselves about what they know to the point where they ignore what love requires, and should not encourage a person with a misguided conscience to sin against it. Two things are central, the conviction that what you are doing is right in the sight of God, and love, which prompts you to treat kindly someone who has a tender conscience.

The Synod at Jerusalem after Paul's first missionary journey gave a direction to Gentile converts not to eat -meat that had been sacrificed to idols, to avoid giving offence to Jewish Christians. Yet it is fascinating that Paul never appealed to that resolution. Instead, he was always prepared to argue the case afresh based on the Gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul was discussing things that have neither been commanded nor forbidden. It is quite wrong to appeal to chapters like this one and Romans chapter 14, which speak about weak and strong in matters that have been clearly forbidden in God's word, such as women's taking leading speaking roles in church services where one person speaks and the rest listen. It is a command of the Lord that this should not occur, and no one has the right to regard us as weak Christians because we have a conscience about this. Our rejection of dishonest practices in fellowship is another case in point.

However, sometimes knowledge of what is permissible is used in unloving ways. For Jewish people, eating meat that had been offered to idols was a difficult thing, partly because the meat was ceremonially unclean. It had not been killed in the accepted way, by having the blood drained out properly. However, when Paul wrote "All of us possess knowledge", he was, very likely, quoting a slogan that was being used by some Gentile Christians at Corinth. They knew that nothing was clean or unclean in itself.

Eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols was something that people at Corinth could not avoid easily. Much of the meat that was for sale in the shops had come from sacrifices at the various heathen temples. For us that kind of question does not arise, but there are other situations where some Christians do have a needlessly tender conscience. Some think that Sunday has replaced the Old Testament Sabbath, and that no work should be done on Sundays. Actually, in the New Testament any day is like another. Jesus has fulfilled the Sabbath, which applied to the Israelites. It foreshadowed the One who was coming. Some people think that the food laws of the Old Testament that forbid eating the meat of an animal that has not been bled by having its throat cut still apply to us. Some think that, as pork was forbidden to people of the Old Testament as unclean, it is still unclean today. Some people on principle do not want to drink tea or coffee, or drink any form of alcohol or smoke cigarettes. Some people think it is wrong in principle to play sport on a Sunday, even if the sport does not take precedence over hearing God's word. The point is that, quite apart from the advisability of doing some of these things, they are not sinful in themselves. Knowledge is one thing. However, it may be the loving thing to surrender freedom in certain instances for the sake of others. Christians should never use their better knowledge to encourage others to sin against their misguided consciences. What has to be uppermost in such questions is love and consideration for the other person, for whom Christ died.

Sometimes a person insists that his tender conscience about a point that is neither commanded nor forbidden is something that is necessary for salvation. Then he is obscuring the central truth of the Bible, that we are justified solely by faith in Jesus Christ, apart from what we do or do not do. In that case, we will have to insist, as lovingly as we can, that the other person is wrong, and tell him so. However, that is not Paul's focus in this chapter.

Strong Christians know that God's grace has made them and others strong spiritually, not this food or that food. They are no worse off spiritually if they eat a certain food or do not eat it. Strong Christians at Corinth knew that "an idol has no real existence", and that "there is no God but one." At Corinth, apparently, some were also using these two statements as slogans. In chapter 10 Paul pointed out that idol gods were not harmless, because they had real demons standing behind them. As far as it went, however, it was true that food offered to idols could be used, because idol gods did not exist. Idols could harm people only if people worshipped them. However, the Corinthians needed to modify their slogans, so as not to use what was true in unloving ways.

Paul regularly connects ethical instruction with the basic doctrines of the Christian faith.

, Here he spells out, in one of the clearest passages of the Bible, the truth that there is one God, but that the Father is God and Jesus Christ is Lord alongside Him. They are more than one person. Paul placed alongside each other God the Father, from whom all things come as Creator, from whom came also the meat that was used for food with thanksgiving, and Jesus, the Lord. In the Old Testament the name “God” was used particularly in contexts where God’s creative power was thought about. The title “Lord” was used particularly where God’s relationship to His chosen people was spoken about. The Christians of the New Testament often used the word “Lord” for Jesus Christ. As Lord, like the Father, He is the mediator between God and human beings, as both very God and a human being. In Christ we see God in the ultimate close relationship with His people. The Son is the divine link between God and the world, in creation, in revelation, and in redemption. That is what strong Christians know about God, the Lord, and idols.

There is a knowledge that puffs people up. Such knowledge can be related to spiritual arrogance rather than to love for the neighbour. What people do in the privacy of their own homes with their knowledge and freedom does not usually hurt anyone else. However, if a weak Christian saw another Christian who boasted about what he knew, eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol god, the one who had not been out of paganism very long could easily have been persuaded that the Christian faith could co-exist with old idolatrous practices. He had not grasped the full significance of the basic Christian doctrine that there is only one God and one Lord. If we cause spiritual harm to another Christian, we sin against Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, the Lord.

. All of this is one aspect of a very important distinction between faith and love. By faith we are free from the wrath of God, from sin, from the condemnation of the law, and from death, we are called to be God’s holy people, declared righteous for Christ’s sake, children of God, heirs of God, lords and kings. In love we are slaves to one another, bound to serve others and consider them, and not just when one of them has a weak conscience about this or that. In this respect, we are something like our Lord Jesus Christ while He was on earth. He was God the Son, the almighty co-creator, all-knowing and all-powerful. Yet, as a human being, He was there to serve, and to give up even His life on the shameful cross, in service to us unworthy, weak, and imperfect people. There is often a relationship between bad theology and bad lives. Some liberal theologians have lived awful lives. Some Christians have experienced how people who leave the straight and narrow in doctrine and practice find it easy and convenient to act dishonestly and dishonourably. Yet there is another danger that we have to avoid: having the right theology and acting lovelessly. It is never enough to be able to assess what the right teaching is, and to condemn it where it is wrong. Alongside these we need to have care and loving concern for one another. Without that, knowledge of right doctrine is unattractive. Our love is driven and motivated by what God has done for us, by our faith in Jesus’ redemption.

Because we are free, our freedom becomes our motive to limit our freedom because of our obligations to one another. Therefore, freedom often means freedom not to do some thing that we could do.