

4.1 On Winning at Everyday Christianity

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[0 : 0 0] We are going to read this evening together in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. And Josh Johnson is going to be leading us through a few of these chapters in 1 Corinthians over these next few Sunday evenings in our times together.

And we're going to read together this evening 1 Corinthians chapter 8. And Paul in these central chapters of this letter is dealing with things that the Corinthian church have written to him and asked him about or mentioned to him.

And here he's bringing up something that they have brought up. Now concerning food offered to idols. We know that all of us possess knowledge.

This knowledge puffs up. But love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.

But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that an idol has no real existence.

[1 : 1 1] And that there is no God but one. For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things and for whom we exist.

And one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. 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. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat. And no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

For 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?

And so by your knowledge, this weak person is destroyed. The brother for whom Christ died. Thus sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it's weak, you sin against Christ.

[2 : 3 3] Therefore if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat. Lest I make my brother stumble. Amen.

And may God bless to us his word. Well do turn up in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 8 again.

And as you turn there, it's very appropriate to be singing about the cross there as we lead in because that is something that is all over this letter. Now let's begin with a question about maturity as Christians.

Who do you think of when you think of a mature Christian? And why? What is it about them that stands out as being mature? The Corinthians thought that they were the essence of maturity.

Very mature indeed. So mature that they had outgrown Paul. And for the next few weeks, we're going to be diving into 1 Corinthians chapters 8 to 10, which deals with the question of whether to eat food that has been sacrificed to idols.

- [3 : 45] This was a particularly important question in 1st century Corinth for a couple of reasons. The first, the distinguishing mark of conversion in the 1st century was turning away from idols.
- And 2nd, because food offered to idols was everywhere. The idol temple was at the heart of Corinthian life and celebrations and all sorts of things would be held there, giving plenty of reasons and opportunities to be dining in the hall of the temple.
- But the leftover meat from here was also passed on to the market and sold there. So idol food was everywhere. And so you might wonder as we come to these chapters, why it takes so long to deal with this?
- After all, a very similar issue is dealt with in Acts chapter 15 in just a few verses. But here there's three long chapters. And the middle chapter is all about Paul's right to be paid.
- At first glance, that can seem like quite a big diversion. What on earth is going on? But in actual fact, this section is about a much bigger issue than whether to eat certain meat or not.
- [4 : 56] It's about an approach to everyday life and all kinds of decisions. We could skip to the answers after all. I remember when I was at school and won't learn the lesson if we don't bother doing the work.
- But even if we do turn up the answers in chapter 10, it's not so straightforward. Because Paul gives three answers. He says flee from it.
- He says eat it without asking questions. And he says eat it unless someone else poses a question. And so what's most important in these chapters is the principle that Paul's applying.
- It's about how to answer questions on all kinds of everyday things. So the principle transcends the question of idle meat that to us in 21st century Glasgow seems utterly obscure and irrelevant.
- So look over just very briefly to chapter 10 verse 31. Paul's conclusion as he finishes the section. Notice what he says. So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.
- [6 : 10] For the Corinthians, the issue is whether to eat or not. But Paul's principle applies to whatever we do. And so before we jump into chapter 8, let's just quickly get our bearings in the letter.
- There was a group in Corinth who had begun to exhibit a distaste for Paul's ministry. Both his message, which was cross-focused, and his manner of life, which was cross-shaped.
- It wasn't that the Corinthians were denying Jesus' death or anything like that. It's just that Paul was stuck on the basics. We've moved on from that. They'd matured.
- They'd grown up into the fullness of Christian freedom and victory. They were a strong, wise, honored bunch. And they were captivated by impressiveness.
- They drew lines through the church to separate the mature, the impressive Christians, the gifted ones, from the weak. But their lines would have cut off the very apostle who brought the gospel to them.
- [7 : 17] Paul was an embarrassment to them. He undermined their standing. You see, Paul embraces weakness. He's marked by it. Not because he's a feeling apostle, but because he was walking in the steps of the one who is most mature, the Lord Jesus himself.
- The Corinthians were a resurrection-nigh people. They wanted victory here and now. Paul was cross-nigh and resurrection to come. And so again and again in this letter, Paul comes down on the side of the so-called weak.

Life in this age isn't going to look victorious for the Christian. We saw that so helpfully this morning, didn't we? We're never going to be the toast of the world. Paul's answer throughout the letters of the Corinthians, perversion, is to point them again and again to the pattern of the cross.

And when it comes to this issue of whether to eat food offered to idols, he begins by saying, first then, verses 1 to 3, maturity places love above knowledge.

Maturity places love above knowledge. Knowledge, especially Christian knowledge, is never an end in itself.

[8 : 35] What it produces is deeply important. In fact, it's possible that the most destructive influence in a church comes from a member who's incredibly well-read in theology.

Look at verse 1. That phrase, now concerning, appears throughout the letter. And it's used to introduce issues that the Corinthians have written to Paul about.

And the pattern with these now concernings is that Paul introduces the issue that they've brought up. He then quotes what the Corinthians say and believe about it.

So in the ESV, we see their phrases in speech marks. That's their words. And then Paul modifies their understanding and begins his long argument. And Paul's correction is to show that knowledge can have bad consequences.

Having read great theological tomes or being able to quote large swathes of the Bible is no guarantee of maturity. For the Corinthians, their knowledge puffs up.

[9 : 40] That's what Paul says. It's not that they don't know stuff. It's not that they've not been well taught. But rather that they have let the stuff that they knew become a stick to measure themselves against others.

Notice Paul's instant response to the question here has nothing to do with eating. The problem isn't really to do with whether they should eat Poseidon's pork. The problem is the behavior of those who see themselves as the knowledgeable ones.

And so he says, verse 2, If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. Throwing your weight around in church because you knew some theology, or even a lot of theology, isn't a sign of maturity.

But rather the opposite. What is your knowledge for? Where did it come from? The Corinthians' knowledge came from God granting it to them.

If you turn back very quickly to chapter 1, Paul starts the letter by thanking the Lord that in every way the Corinthians were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge.

[10 : 55] The Corinthians' knowledge came from God granting it to them. When we have a firm hold on the truth in any real way, then we only have that at the Lord's hand.

That's worth remembering in a culture that so reveres knowledge and expertise. So if you're a well-taught Christian, if you've had the benefit of years of good Bible teaching, that's not something to be smug about.

That's what the Corinthians were doing. That's a surefire sign of immaturity. And so with the over-inflated theological education that they had, they were determined that these lesser Christians wouldn't stop them enjoying all that they knew they were free to do.

They were jolly well going to eat. Well, it's easy, isn't it, for us to see every debate, every disagreement, every decision as a battle that must be fought, an argument that must be won, a principle that must be defended to the hilt.

But very often that is to expose that the love of God is not in us. This isn't a diatribe from Paul against seeking to grow an understanding of theology, not at all.

[12 : 12] But Paul's point is that the goal of growing in our understanding, the goal of reading good Christian books, listening to good Christian talks, isn't so that we can make out that we know more than we really do.

The goal is to grow in our love. Our love for our brothers and sisters that verse 1 builds up. And our love for God.

It's the depth of our love that reveals the only knowledge that's worth boasting in. What's that knowledge? Verse 3. If anyone loves God, he's known by God.

That's the knowledge that counts. Far better to have a simple grasp of theology, but cling tightly to God, than be able to recite verbatim, the Westminster Confession of Faith, or other ancient creeds.

If it's matched with cold-heartedness towards our Father, and callousness towards his people. Far better to be known by God, than to be someone's theology guru.

[13 : 23] That's worth remembering the next time we're heading off to our growth group. Isn't it? The goal of our groups isn't to show others how good our understanding is. So don't be afraid of answering a question if you aren't sure if it's right.

The goal of our groups is to grow in our love for the Lord, and our love for each other. Not to get an A in theology. Maturity places love above knowledge.

A mature church is a church that loves well. Well, let's pause there, and reflect on the words that are going to be on the screen.

Take my life, and let it be. vom dólar Hungry Thank you.

Thank you.

[15 : 18] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Secondly, maturity prizes our father above our freedom. The purpose of the Christian life is shaped by and focused on the Lord and how we can best honor and glorify him.

The big question in these verses is whether the strong Corinthians knowledge is correct and used correctly. So we see verse 4, their knowledge.

[17 : 22] An idol has no real existence, they say, and there's no God but one. The Corinthians are delighted to know that there's only one God.

They've got that clear. And in the first century, that would have been particularly liberating. No need to try and please the whole gamut of gods with all their conflicting demands.

There is one God. So the Corinthians get a tick there. So the Corinthians get a tick there. That's true. There's one God. They've got it right. And it seems that, and it seems that in their minds, by eating the food offered to idols, they claim to be upholding that truth.

An idol has no real existence, they rightly say. So whether the pig was offered to Poseidon or not, it's still the Lord's pig.

The true God doesn't relinquish his lordship over his creation just because some made-up God has worshipped with it. Every pig, every wonderfully cooked fillet steak, that means rare, not well done, every juicy bacon cheeseburger in any temple cafe anywhere in the world still belongs to the Lord.

[18 : 33] That's true again. The problem is that the Corinthians' bulging theological brains are being put to use only for themselves.

Their attitude seems to be something like this. Why would we limit ourselves from all the good stuff that Corinth has to offer? Because some of our other immature and silly Christians don't understand that.

We've got our theological arguments nailed. We know that we're allowed to partake, so why wouldn't we? And notice that whilst Paul says, yes, verse 6, there is one God and one Lord, he still acknowledges that there are many so-called gods and lords, verse 5.

And even though they are not real, that doesn't mean there are not forces at work. Idols are not real gods, but that doesn't mean that participation with them has no consequence.

We'll see that develop shortly in verse 7 for the so-called weaker Corinthians. And then when we get to chapter 10, we'll see that played out quite a bit more.

[19 : 46] We'll see that the Corinthians' theology maybe isn't quite as sound as it appears. The idol temple in Corinth was at the heart of life for all things religious, social, and much more.

So for the temple, think gym, coffee shop, pub, courty house, all these things rolled into one. Weddings would be there, birthday parties would happen at the temple.

And so it would be a very costly thing to forego that. But knowing that God is the only God is not a merely academic thing. It's not something to be used to suit ourselves, no matter what happens to other Christians.

Look at verse 6. When Paul says there is one God, the Father, our Father, the one who knows us, he then finishes by saying it is from him that all things exist, and it is for him that we exist.

Now, avoiding the temple would have been costly, very costly. For the mature Corinthians, they'd lose face by not going. The respectable thing was to go.

[21 : 03] And it would be isolating for them in their day. But the point to get here is that knowing who God is, knowing the truth, isn't for us.

It isn't for our freedom. It's not to do what suits us. It's so that we can honor our Father. The question is, what will most honor him?

And so finally, Paul moves on to say, maturity prioritizes others' perseverance over our preferences, verses 7 to 13. Maturity prioritizes others' perseverance over our preferences.

When souls are at stake, no sacrifice is too much to make. We've come to the nub of the issue in this chapter. It's never honoring to God to contribute to the stumbling of a brother or sister.

Verse 7, not all in Corinth possess this knowledge that the mature Corinthians have. Not all have clarity on the power of idols.

[22 : 19] Some in the Corinthian church have tender consciences. It's not long ago that they were fully involved in all that was going on at the temple.

Hearts captive to the worship of these idols. Senses tantalized by all that happened in the temple. And so for them to embrace the food would be a terrible slip.

It would be falling back into the life that they'd left behind. They'd be defiled. Their allegiance to Christ would be corrupted. Now, we have to be very careful in drawing lines of application from these chapters because the problem that Paul's addressing originally, it's with a very first century problem.

But we can think of things that have similarities, can't we? When someone joins our church having come to faith through Hope for Glasgow, their background's in addiction, how far do we assert our freedom?

When we have them for lunch, will we match a merlot to our meat? Couldn't that have an utterly corrupting influence upon them?

[23 : 32] Pulling them back into their old life that they're trying to escape? Isn't it utterly understandable even that they'll want to be very wary of taking part in that?

This section of 1 Corinthians is a firm rebuke to those who think themselves strong. In this chapter 8, it's a firm rebuke to those who don't care about the impact on others.

And actually in chapter 10, it's a rebuke to those who think they're stronger than they really are. Paul is absolutely on the side of the weak here.

Look at verse 8. Verse 8 is addressed to the knowledgeable ones. Food does not commend us to God. We're no better off if we do not eat and no better off if we do.

And this is where Paul begins to lose some of the Corinthians. I'm not sure they would agree with verse 8. In the Corinthian mind, to eat is to show their freedom.

[24 : 40] To eat is to declare God's supremacy and theirs along with it. To not eat is actually sub-spiritual in their mind.

It is giving in to the weak. It's limiting yourself. It's accepting less than what you know can be yours with the Lord. And so literally, their response is to hell with those who don't know any better.

That's what's at stake here. Verse 9. Insisting on your rights can become a stumbling block to the weak. Verse 10. What if a weaker brother does see you eating in the temple?

And what if that leads him to indulge in what he thinks is wrong? Verse 11. That would mean your knowledge, your privilege in having great Bible teaching has literally destroyed a brother for whom Christ has died.

And actually, your impressive knowledge has only served to verse 12. Lead you to sin against Christ.

[25 : 50] Now, it's worth pausing here. This passage is so often misused and abused. Paul's concern here isn't to spare Christians from being upset.

Where we turn things that we don't like about church into weaker brother issues. You're causing me to stumble because you're not wearing a hat. Or you're causing me to stumble because the music isn't the way I'd like it to be.

Or your personality, your sense of humor just isn't like mine and that's a problem for me. And on and on. To insist on things like that, that you're causing me to stumble, is actually to get this all backwards.

Because this is about people's perseverance. It's about our preference. Not our preferences. It's about souls, not sensibilities. It's not about not upsetting people.

It's about not leading people to sin. Pause, Uber. Now, notice, Paul hasn't really answered the question about whether we should eat yet, has he?

[26 : 55] And that's because verse 13 is what he's really interested in here. It's the principle. He says, therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat lest I make my brother stumble.

It's a drastic conclusion from Paul. And this flexibility that he exhibits is an affront to a proud Corinthian. How can an apostle, an apostle, how can he decide not to do something that he's gloriously free to do?

And this affront for the Corinthians is why chapter 9 is a long defense of Paul's rights. They think an apostle who cedes ground, who stoops from his glorious position to help out these foolish ones, it's so unprincipled, it's so weak.

It's almost like having a savior who made new contests to prove his innocence, who put up new fights on his way to dying as a shameless criminal, a shameful criminal.

And that's the nub of it. It is like that. This is where this passage gets rather uncomfortable. For those who love things to be black and white, Paul is utterly principled.

[28 : 20] His principled position is that he will be flexible on things that are not essential, where it enables the gospel to be held onto. He won't compromise on essential things, things like how people are sieved, on the necessity of meeting together.

But things in which we have freedom, he will bend all over the place if it's for the sake of someone's soul. His principled position is to embrace the pattern of the cross in all things.

Sacrifice for the saving of lives. Now we so often think of picking up our cross in large scale ways. We think of prison and persecution and death.

But actually Paul's point here is that all of our decisions, all of our lives require that approach. 1031, so whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

So take heart. We are carrying our cross when in little ways we sacrifice our rights and our preferences for the benefits of our brothers and sisters.

[29 : 30] There is a cross-shaped way to eat and drink. There's a cross-shaped way to spend our time and our money. There's great freedom as to how to do these things.

The Bible allows Christians to do all sorts, to own a holiday home. But isn't it worth thinking with all of that, what that says to a young believer in your growth group?

Will that set their aspirations racing and turn their priorities away from church? Well that's worth thinking about. There's a cross-shaped way of approaching our politics. And with all issues of day-to-day life, it's worth thinking about two questions.

Are we doing this for our Father for whom we exist? And what impact will it have on other Christians? Will this lead them to sin? So there's a cross-shaped way to watch TV.

It's worth thinking, isn't it? Are we watching this for our Father for whom we exist? And what impact might watching this have on other Christians? Can they handle those illicit sins? Chapter 10 would ask, can you?

[30 : 39] So to return to the question, what does maturity look like? It's not having a bulging theological brain or a reading list full of the reformers.

It's not fighting for every last right and preference, every theological debate, however small. Maturity is seen in our priorities in big things and small things being fashioned after the cross, laying them down if we need to for the sake of our brothers and sisters.

Maturity is seen in a love for our Father that drives us to serve the spiritual needs of our brothers and sisters. Maturity is foregoing things in this life to prioritize the unseen reality of heaven and hell.

Maturity is cross-shaped. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that we have a Savior who laid down everything for us. give us grace to do likewise.

[32 : 03] We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.