

Watch Your Rights

Westview Church | 1 Corinthians 8:7-13 | Pastor Brett Toney | September 8, 2024

Warning of Idolatry

The perennial problem God's people have faced through the millennia has not foremost been persecution or political frustration but worshiping the gods of the nations. From the Garden to Babel, through the Exodus and into Exile, the "achilles heel" of God's people has been the allure to worship other gods besides the "one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (v.6). This is why, weeks after leading his people out of slavery in Egypt, God warned his people through Moses at Mount Sinai in Exodus 23 about what was going to happen. God was going to bring them to the promised place of his presence. God was going to drive out the nations that resided there little by little. He told Moses that the people were to make no covenant with the nations *nor their gods*. Make no peace; give no quarter. Why? Exodus 23:33, "For if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you."

Idolatry will be the end of you. When Paul and the early church read that verse in their Greek copy, serving the gods of the nations would not be a "snare" but a "stumbling block." Idolatry would make God's people not walk in the Way but trip and fall flat on their faces. And that was the same danger in Corinth, and it is the same danger in Crystal. What do you look to for hope or happiness, security or significance? Idolatry is enticing because it puts you in the driver seat, not requiring faith *alone*. And idolatry sneaks in as our guard is let down, through just a little compromise here and there. For Israel, a gentlemen's agreement here, a marriage there. The thought, "These neighbors aren't *so* bad." For Corinth, it was veiled with gospel verbiage like, "Christ has freed us! I have the right to enjoy his gifts!"

O Church, watch your rights that could lead to a casualness and flippancy with idolatry that damns a brother. That is what is at stake in our passage this morning—we're not trifling with disagreements over vaccines, school choice, or skirt length. Will we make way for idolatry and forego our union together in Christ? So, we see here Paul draws out another knowledge problem (adding to the one we saw last week in v.1) before exhorting the church to watch your rights and commending the unity of true freedom.

Another Knowledge Problem (1 Corinthians 8:7)

Paul started to address this problem about food offered to idols but pivoted to reframe the problem. The Corinthians were focusing more on what they “know” than that they “have been known by God,” this God from whom, to whom, and through whom are all things. But that's not the only knowledge problem. In v.7, he returns to that presenting problem by acknowledging another knowledge problem. Namely, there are Christians—because of their former way of life beholden to idols—who do not know nor live in light of the reality that there really are no gods but One. And such weakness prohibits them from eating food associated with outward idolatry without sinning against their conscience.

Now, there is much that could be said about conscience. But I don't think that really is Paul's priority here. There are principles derived from his comments here for sure, but for a fuller discussion of those topics, I would commend to you Andy Naselli's little book *Conscience*. I have a few copies this morning if you would like to read it. Paul is more focused on what governs our interaction with the unbelieving culture around us. We don't want to defile our consciences nor are we to entirely withdraw—we must preach Christ and him crucified to the nations (1:24).

There evidently were different practices in Corinth along that spectrum of defilement to full withdrawal. There were those in v.7 who eat what is really just food but think it is really idolatry. Others eat, as in v.10, in an idol's temple without issue themselves. And yet others, in 10:20, who eat what is not ok to eat but think it is just fine. These practices align with the historical record of dining options in Roman cities like Corinth. Not having modern refrigeration, all meat would have been freshly butchered. And nearly always in some connection to an idol. Some meat would be consumed by priests in worship to false gods, Paul seems to envision in chapter ten. There were also public banquet halls connected to the temples that operated like restaurants. This seems to be what Paul references in v.10. What the priests didn't eat nor was served in the banquet hall would be sold at market, disconnected from the temple. It's that food Paul likely has in view with those in v.7.

Watch Your Rights (1 Corinthians 8:8-12)

There were different practices in Corinth, but Paul doesn't turn to inform the weak. That's not the corrective. He doesn't say to them, "Stop it. Just stop it. It's just food." Rather, he tells the church, "Watch your rights." Yes, food is neither here nor there in your standing before God, but—v.9, "Take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." Take care! Watch out! This is the application of his assertion in v.1, "This 'knowledge' puffs up, but love builds up." Let your apparent knowledge be governed by love—love for God supremely since you have been known by God and love for neighbor, love for your brother. Asserting your rights in Christ ought not be your primary decision grid. It's not, "What am I free to do?" but, "How do I love God supremely and my neighbor thoroughly?"

The scenario of v.10 only works to serve Paul's point if eating in the banquet hall of the temple is not fundamentally off limits. But don't let your guard down. Make no covenant with

the gods of the day. Be wary of compromise. You may very well bring idolatry into the community. Asserting your rights is an individualistic mindset; love considers the other. Love builds up, but asserting your rights “encourages” or “strengthens” your brother or sister to sin. So you have to take care and watch out lest your rights become a “stumbling block.” That term has been softened to mean another Christian offended you or did something you don’t think Christians ought to do. Yet the background from Exodus and the immediate context make clear that is not what Paul means. The inconsiderate, unloving stumbling block leads to v.11, “The weak person is *destroyed*.” The assertion of your rights leads the weak person to conclude it’s alright to worship Jesus *and* Caesar. Jesus no longer is the “one Lord ... through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (v.6). He’s just one of many options who *I* can decide to worship. It doesn’t take much for that syncretism to evolve into a return to full blown idolatry. And the brother for whom Christ died is destroyed.

We’re not trifling about what to eat or not. We’re not squabbling over disputable matters. Eternity is at stake here. Would you who “know” and have such “rights” be willing to so jeopardize the soul of a brother for whom Christ died? The Lord won’t let such a thing come about because those whom he has called will take care and build up in love. The Lord will see to the preservation of his own. Such a warning is meant by the Spirit to awaken us to the dangers of dealing unthinkingly with our rights, with things that can foster idol worship. Yet I doubt any of us have experienced this exact scenario. Consider a few possible parallels. You’ve developed relationships with Indian colleagues, and one invited you to her wedding at a local Hindu temple. You know of two other Indians at work who are Christians and told you they will not go. Do you? You’re pursuing a career in microbiology and are offered an internship at a facility that does research on an embryonic stem cell line developed from a child aborted years ago. Your

roommate, who professed faith last year, can't understand how you are considering accepting the position. He's accused you of rank hypocrisy. It's the end of June and you love trying food fusion places, so you head downtown to a parking lot with all kinds of food trucks. You haven't paid attention to the Pride parade, but some teens from church see you. Church, take care lest you sin against Christ by "sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience."

The Unity of True Freedom (1 Corinthians 8:13)

Paul concludes this line of thinking in v.13 with a summary exhortation by way of example. He holds out to us the unity of true freedom. Take note of what he has *not* done in addressing this church problem. He resolves to never eat meat if doing so would cause a brother in Christ to stumble back into idolatry. But he does not provide here in this chapter a list of do's and don'ts. That's what we want. Just give it to me straight, plain and simple, black and white. Just give me the list so I know what I can and cannot do. Such lists—they're not ever published, right? They're just assumed and learned. Such lists appeal to our carnal nature. They make the Christian life achievable, not lived by *faith*. Paul also does not address the weak person. He certainly does not give such a person license to impose his or her standards on others. This chapter does not advocate for a kind of "lowest common denominator Christianity" where everyone has to abide by what the weakest among us will tolerate. Calvin called such people who insist on that arrangement "strong giants" who tyrannically desire to subject the liberty of others. We do not need to fear the warnings here for such people who are not at danger of being drawn into sin by their weakness but rather are merely zealous to find fault with others.¹ Be watchful of such a critical spirit.

Last, and with this observation we come to the Table. Paul gives no indication that true Christian freedom is found in giving expression to your rights. "Ah, but for freedom Christ has

set us free” you may say (Galatians 5:1). Indeed, “You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13). Paul knows an idol is no god. He knows he *can* eat meat, dine even in the temple banquet hall. He is free to do many things. But he puts his freedom on display by laying down the right he has. You know the freedom of Christ, your rights in Christ, when you can go without them. If you always have to give expression to your rights, always have to eat meat, you aren’t free. You are in bondage to your so-called right. Your freedom has become your idol. When you can lay down your rights in love for your brother, you follow Christ who laid down his life for that brother’s redemption. Church, what unites us is exceedingly greater than what would distinguish us—our convictions, preferences, and persuasions are far lesser than being united together in Christ.

¹Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries (Complete)*, trans. John King, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), paragraph 83333