

The right use of rights

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we need your help as always. We are people who are dull in heart, whose ears can sometimes be hard of hearing. So we need you to unblock our ears, to soften our hearts to be able to receive you.

Help us to work out how we can indeed live lives to your glory and be the best possible neighbour to our fellow brother and sister in Christ as well as we can.

So work through your word today by your spirit we pray. In Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.

Now we all enjoy being right, don't we?

I know I do and I think you do too. I once heard a story of someone working in customer service at a very famous botanical garden. One day he took a phone call from a gentleman who insisted that according to this garden's website, he was entitled to a 50% discount on the entry price.

When this gentleman was told that that wasn't right, he got very angry and he started insisting.

That's what it says. Look, I have my rights.

[1 : 12] Stop trying to cheat me. Finally, he was asked where on the website it said this. And it turns out, right above where the ticket options were listed on the webpage, in large font, was written one stroke two.

And it was the day's date in the American format, January 2nd. And when that was pointed out, the gentleman became very sheepish and he paid the full price without another word.

So it's nice to be right. It feels nice when we argue for a certain action or decision, maybe with our spouse or amongst our colleagues or even in coffee shop talk about politics.

And down the line, it becomes clear that what we argued for was the right position to take. We feel vindicated even when we try our best not to say, I told you so.

And surely, it's right to be right, isn't it? If it turns out that the gentleman was actually correct, that he indeed should only pay half price, then surely he should insist on it as a matter of justice.

[2 : 33] to avoid being cheated. How can it ever be wrong to be right? Well, today God's word is going to give us a rather surprising perspective.

Now if we read throughout the whole Bible, it's clear that truth matters. It's clear that being right matters. In Job 8 verse 3, the question is asked rhetorically.

Does the Almighty pervert what is right? And the expected answer is of course, no. But what I often find so amazing about the Bible is that it is not a simplistic book.

In fact, the way it handles the many situations that crop up in life is highly sophisticated. And we're going to get a taste of that this morning. For what we're going to discover is that while wrong can never be right, sometimes being right can be wrong.

While wrong can never be right, sometimes being right can be wrong. But first, let me back up a little and let's just do a quick recap of where we are in 1 Corinthians since it's been quite a while since we were last in this book.

[3 : 51] Paul is writing to the Christian church in Corinth. Corinth was a large and strategic port city located on the southern peninsula of Greece and it was a cosmopolitan place.

If you wanted to be a big player in the business world, you'd go there. If you wanted to make it big in arts and culture, you would go there. If you wanted to chase sporting achievement, you would go there.

It was a place that was obsessed with status, with success, with the notion of self-sufficiency and freedom. And its ideas of what constituted status and success and freedom were beginning to seep into the church.

The Christians were beginning to buy into the world's point of view instead of being led by the word of God. As a result, some of them were beginning to see themselves on a higher spiritual plane

compared to the others.

And that's why they were becoming divisive and quarrelsome. And that's why their sexual ethics and their ideas about singleness and marriage were going wayward.

[5 : 04] We saw all that in 1 Corinthians 1-7. We did a series on it last year. They were becoming more Corinthian than Christian.

For they were beginning to lose their grasp on the message of the cross. The message that was basically weakness and foolishness to the world and failing to see how this weak and foolish cross should shape every aspect of their lives.

As a poet is writing to address a whole range of issues that crop up as a result of their failure to make the gospel central to everything that they do.

And in chapters 8-10, he's now going to address another issue that has cropped up. You can see what that issue is for yourself in 8 verse 1.

Now about food sacrifice to idols. And to better understand what is going to go on in these three chapters, we need to understand a little of the cultural and religious context of Corinth.

[6 : 16] Corinth was a place where many, many gods were worshipped. Everywhere you went, you would see a temple to this god or that god.

You couldn't really avoid coming into contact with shrines or relics or things that had been dedicated to this or that god. Unless, of course, you decide to go into full lockdown.

But that was just how it was. It's probably not that different if you were to visit some parts of Bangkok or Bali today. And this extended to food as well.

You see, a substantial portion of the meat available in the local city markets had a history of being a temple sacrifice.

After all, when meat was offered to an idol, it wasn't as if the idol then opened its mouth and ate it all up. So quite a lot of that meat was subsequently sold at your local pasar.

[7 : 19] So, if you went to your neighbour's home for a meal, it's quite possible that the delicious beef rendang that he serves up has previously been offered to a god.

And what if you were invited to a birthday bash or anniversary celebration or business luncheon? What if you wanted to take your date out to a nice meal on Valentine's Day tomorrow?

Nowadays, you might go to a fine dining restaurant in Serendice. But back then, you would actually go to your local temple which would typically have private dining rooms.

And guess where your rib-eye steak or your butter chicken could possibly be sourced from? And so that's what Corinth was like. Perhaps more so than today, there is no need distinction between one's religious, social and economic lives.

They're all mixed up together. And so this raises the issue, should you eat the food sacrificed to idols or not? Would doing so mean that we are participating in idolatry or not?

[8 : 40] And what if you and I have differences about this? And of course, these are issues that remain contemporary. It's Chinese New Year right now and there will be some homes with food offerings being served at the ancestral shrine or to the kitchen god.

So, if you're a Christian, how should you approach these matters? Well, Paul will begin dealing with such issues.

And as he does so, what we're going to realize is that the issue at hand isn't just about idol food. More fundamentally, it's about how the gospel should shape the entire way we approach complex issues such as these.

It's about how the gospel should inform our logic and our relationships. And so, that's what we're going to look at. Now, 1 Corinthians 8 isn't necessarily always easy to follow, but I'll try to make the logic as clear as possible.

And to do that, we'll look at the passage under two headings, the paradox of knowledge and the priority of love and then we'll draw some applications from what we see today.

[10 : 05] So, first of all, the paradox of knowledge. In verse 1, Paul goes on to quote what a group of Corinthian Christians have been evidently saying.

We all possess knowledge. But what exactly do they claim to know? Well, verse 4 tells us. We know that an idol is nothing in this world and there is no God but one.

Idols, they were saying, are a non-entity. Non-Christians might believe that they are real and living, but Christians know that they're simply a fantasy, they're fiction, these so-called gods don't really exist.

Yes, the statues and images of the Greco-Roman gods like Aphrodite or Apollo or Hera were real enough. I mean, you can see them with your eyes.

But they are like shell companies with no substantial reality behind them. After all, we know that there is only one God.

[11:19] So, what's wrong with your theology, you might ask? Well, here's the answer. Nothing's wrong. They were right. After all, it's not the emptiness of idolatry, a major theme in the Old Testament prophets.

If you were to read Isaiah 44, for example, you'll find the prophet declaring that an idol knows nothing, it understands nothing, it sees nothing, and in fact, it's just made from the very things that we use for fuel or to bake bread over its coals.

And if idols are nothing more than just blocks of wood, inanimate things that cannot save us, then why do we even bother with them?

They are completely irrelevant. And is there any creed more significant in the Old Testament than the one found in Deuteronomy 6 verse 4?

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Well, that's what these Christians know and believe so fervently that there is only one God, not three or ten or thousands.

[12:41] So if that's the case, then how can idols be anything other than just man-made products? They certainly can't be alternative gods.

And Paul agrees. Notice in verse 4, he says, we know including himself in that statement.

You are right, he says. On this point, your theology is sound. Now, just to be clear, that's not all that Paul is going to say about idols or indeed idol food.

We must remember that 1 Corinthians 8 is part of a larger section. And in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, Paul is going to return to the question of what idols actually are, if they are not rival gods, and how that might impact us as Christians.

And so, if you have some questions about that, well, just wait a few more weeks. But for today, all we need to see is that Paul rejects the idea, in agreement with the Corinthian Christians, that these so-called gods have any basis in reality.

[14:05] Now, that's a real comfort, isn't it? If our universe was controlled by a pantheon of gods who sometimes didn't get along with one another, and they threw tantrums along the way, or who were just looking after their own interests against the interests of other gods, well, this wouldn't be a very nice place to live in.

I've hardly watched any of those Marvel superhero movies, but I think they give you a little snapshot of what the universe might be like if there were many gods contesting for control of this universe.

We'll all be living in fear and anxiety, wondering when Zeus is going to throw a thunderbolt against Shiva and cause collateral damage along the way.

But thankfully, we don't live in such a universe. We live in a universe where there is but one god and so-called gods are not gods at all.

But now, these Christians took it one step further. If it is true that idols are nothing, and there is but one god, the reason, then here's our conclusion.

[15:27] Idol food is nothing is nothing as well. There's no idol worship involved. It's just bakkwa, it's just ross pork. You know, the food is fine. So, dig in, no worries, right?

After all, did not Jesus declare all foods clean? And so, if that's right, let's exercise our rights and makan.

And that's also going to be good for our work and our social lives because now we can get on with attending those business lunches or those birthday parties at the temple without feeling like we are missing out.

But hang on, Paul says, not everyone possesses this knowledge, verse 7. Some people are still so accustomed that when they eat sacrificial food, they think of it as having been sacrificed to a God. And since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. So, here is who Paul has in mind. Think, he says, of someone who has been immersed in idolatry for just about his entire lifetime.

[16:46] He's gone to the temples since he was a kid, bowed before the statue of some idol, participated in its rites, and offered up food. But then, wonderfully, he heard the gospel and turned to Jesus as his only saviour and lord.

But, being a relatively neo-Christian, he still struggles when he knows that the wonton before him has been sacrificed to that same idol.

Due to his past, the very fact that it's been in the temple taints the food for him. And to consume it would seem to him to be denying the very gospel that he's come to embrace.

His conscience tells him that it is wrong and so to eat it will feel like rebellion against the lord he loves. Now, Paul is clear in verse 8, the food in itself is not the issue.

The problem is not with what the food does to us, which is nothing really. It does not bring us near to God and it makes no difference to your spiritual or social standing.

[18 : 05] we are no worse if we do not eat and no better if we do. It's not as if the food has gained some magical properties as a result of being offered in a sacrifice which could affect you spiritually or cause you harm in some way.

And so you might think Paul will just side with the knowledgeable Christians, right? Or at the very least he will tell them pass what you know on to these other Christians.

But notice what Paul does instead. He doesn't tell the knowledgeable Christians, high five, you are right, they are wrong. Instead, he tells them, well, yes, you are right as far as it goes.

And we'll see later on in chapter 10 that actually Paul will say that although their knowledge is right, it is inadequate. They haven't worked through all the implications of their position. There's actually more to say.

But for now, Paul says, let me just concede the point. Yes, you are right, but did you know that sometimes being right can be wrong?

[19 : 23] Did you know that being right isn't always right? right? How can that be? Well, that takes us to our second heading for this morning, the priority of love.

The priority of love. You see, Paul says, here's the paradox of knowledge. When knowledge exists without love, it has the potential to go completely off track.

When you utilize your knowledge without grounding it in love, your right knowledge can actually become destructive and therefore wrong.

How so? Well, Paul explains in verse 10, for if someone with a weak conscience sees you with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols?

And so here is Paul's worry. Imagine, he says that a verse 7 Christian happens to walk by his local temple and he sees you happily chewing on some sate in there.

[20 : 41] And now he's confused. You see, for you, the sate is just sate. But for him, eating idol food is the same as idol worship.

they are the one and the same thing. After all, that's his background. But he sees you, a long time Christian, having no worries about taking that seven steak or sate.

And so, he begins to think, I guess it must be okay after all to eat idol food. It's okay to worship Yahweh and to kind of worship Aphrodite at the same time.

it's okay to worship Jesus and Guan Yin at the same time. After all, you're a mature Christian and you're doing it. And so, the following Sunday, he goes into the temple to eat the food, not because he thinks that sate is just sate, like you, but because his convictions about the wrongness of idol worship has been weakened by your actions.

He has been led to sin against his conscience. Let me try to give you a contemporary parallel. So, imagine that maybe you're watching some art house movie because you're a very arty person and it has a couple of scenes of partial nudity.

[22 : 12] Now, for you, it's true that you don't feel any lust at all when you watch that scene because you are a very culturally sophisticated person. So, you know that that scene is actually an elaborate metaphor that makes sense within the artistic context of the movie.

And that's how you interpret the scene. It's just symbolism. It's free of any sexual connotations. But your weaker brother sees you doing it. He even hears you explain that it's all right because hey, isn't the Old Testament sometimes even as explicit as this movie.

But all he knows is that he's going back to his pre-Christian ways, his last thing. He doesn't feel right watching it with you.

But he kind of watches it still because he trusts you. And his conviction has been weakened. And he has been led to sin against his conscience.

sins. And that's the problem. When something is objectively speaking, not sinful, but your conscience tells you that it is, then you must not act against your conscience.

[23 : 32] Because when you do, that means you are choosing to act in a way you believe is dishonoring to God. Or as my old pastor Vaughan Roberts used to say, sin is sin if we think in our hearts we shouldn't do it.

Even though objectively in light of the scriptures, it's okay. And so if you're the knowledgeable Christian, what you've just done with your right knowledge is actually a very big deal.

Because look at what you've done to your fellow Christian, verse 11. Here is someone who is your brother or sister in Christ. They are someone you have a close bond with, spiritually speaking. And more than that, here is someone for whom Christ died. Here is someone whom Christ values highly. Christ has saved them.

And what have you done? Paul uses extremely strong language. You've put them on the road to destruction. All for the sake of your right knowledge.

[24 : 44] You failed to love them rightly. And that's why verse 9, Paul says, Be careful however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

Just because you're in the right doesn't mean that the exercise of those rights is always right. Because in the end, love is the priority.

And in this case, love means never wanting to lead your brother or sister to fall into sin. That's why Paul says in verse 13, love means love means giving up what you love, sacrificing what brings you earthly satisfaction.

if that is for the sake of a fellow Christian's spiritual condition. And so love is the priority.

That's why Paul starts this section as he does. Notice that at the beginning he names the issue at hand, idol food, but then he suddenly digresses to talk about knowledge and love before coming back to the subject.

[26 : 22] Why? Because Paul knows that this is actually the foundational issue at stake. What matters isn't just about getting our theology of idol food right.

What matters even more is whether love is present. For, end of verse one, knowledge paths up while love builds up.

Now, we mustn't misunderstand what this verse is saying. Verse one is not saying that knowledge doesn't matter at all as long as there is love. That's a common way to twist this verse.

But if we look even to the end of just the next verse, verse two, we find Paul talking about things that we ought to know. And all throughout this letter, Paul clearly thinks that there are many things the Corinthians should know.

I put some of them on your sermon outline. And not knowing those things are to their disadvantage. So clearly then, knowledge, generally speaking, is not the issue.

[27 : 30] What Paul is against is a knowledge that is divorced from love. When love directs our knowledge, it builds up others. But when love does not, it can tear others down, as we've just seen.

There is a kind of knowledge that puffs up, has zero love in it, and can actually hurt others. And that's what Paul is challenging. And that kind of knowing, Paul says, is actually a fake kind of knowledge in the end.

If you have a knowledge that only puffs up, that only makes you want to insist on your rights rather than give up your rights in love for the sake of others, well, you don't really have true knowing.

Notice how after talking a lot about knowing in verse 2, Paul suddenly talks about loving in verse 3. Do you find that a bit strange?

You know, we would have thought that he would have said verses 2 and 3 in this way. He would have said something like this. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But if they know as they ought to know, he or she is known by God.

[28 : 49] You know, we thought that Paul would say something like that, but instead he says whoever loves God is known by God. It's almost as if right knowing and loving bound up so together that they can be used almost interchangeably.

And so Paul is establishing the priority of love here. Without love, he says, your knowledge is useless in the end because if you have no love, that means you don't really know God and his ways.

And if you don't know God, you can't really be known by God. But why is love such a priority? Well, let's think again about what the Corinthians know and what we know.

We know that idols are nothing and that there is only one God. And we saw earlier that Paul agrees with this, right? Even quoting Deuteronomy 6 verse 4 in verse 6.

Except he doesn't just quote Deuteronomy. He modifies it. In verse 6, he says, there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live.

[30 : 12] And so that's Deuteronomy 6 right there. But then he adds to it. And there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

And so Paul is actually saying, hey guys, if you're a Christian, what do you really know? Well, yes, you know that there is one God, but you don't just know there is one God.

You know that the God we worship is actually the Lord Jesus Christ. And what do we know about Jesus? We know he is God himself come in the flesh.

but when he came, he did not exercise his rights. Rather, he gave up his rights and in fact gave up his very life for others.

He is someone who was always unfailingly right in all things. And yet he poured out his entire self in love for those who are weak who were even wrong.

[31 : 29] And when we know Jesus, we know what true love is like. And we will know that our knowledge is for the purpose of love.

We will love as he does. That's our priority. We won't exercise our rights if it becomes a stumbling block to the weak. We won't exercise our rights if it leads them back to the sin, into sin.

And the other side of the coin is true too. Look at verse 12. If we sin against our weaker brothers and sisters in Christ in this way, that is by insisting on our rights, and wound their weak conscience, we end up sinning against Christ.

And so it matters how we use our knowledge in relation to others. Now, this can be a challenge to those of us who care about being theologically sound and making sure that everything we say is biblical, isn't it?

Sometimes we can care about those things so much that we lose sight of the person in front of us. And I know I can certainly be guilty of that.

[32 : 42] But Paul says, theology with love is the best option. So let's apply this.

And let me start first by showing you how this might be misapplied before we think about how we might rightly apply this. You see, sometimes people apply 1 Corinthians 8 in this way.

Someone might say, oh, I think drums are of the devil and shouldn't be used in church. Or someone might say, men should always wear ties when they come to church, otherwise they're not honoring God.

And they say, according to 1 Corinthians 8, you must listen to my grievances, otherwise you're sinning against Christ. And so what can happen is simply because one or two Christians are offended by something, they block an entire church from doing anything or they resist certain changes using 1 Corinthians 8 as their basis.

But, it's very important to observe that 1 Corinthians 8 is not referring to a situation where certain Christians are offended because their preferences are not being met.

[34 : 05] The situation here, instead, is that of someone whose consciences are so defiled that they are being led back into sin.

And so, if a group of Christians disapproves of another Christian group's activities, but they themselves are not being tempted to do something that they consider wrong, then they cannot use 1 Corinthians 8 to justify their disapproval.

Now, of course, depending on the exact scenario, there might be other biblical principles that come into play, perhaps 1 Corinthians 9 next week will have something to say. But, let's make sure not to twist and apply 1 Corinthians 8 wrongly.

So, how does 1 Corinthians 8 apply to us, then? Well, let's consider a Christian. Let's call him Greg. Greg used to live a party lifestyle.

He was very happy to head to pubs, chat up a few ladies and end up completely drunk six nights a week. Sometimes he might even pop a few ecstasy peels on the side.

[35 : 19] But then he has an encounter with Jesus, he believes in the gospel and he has his life turned upside down. Drunkenness is something that he leaves behind. The way he relates to girls has completely changed.

But he can't quite go to pubs anymore. They remind him too much of his old lifestyle and even to enter into a pub is to be pulled back into a world where alcohol used to be his God.

Touching even one drop feels like betraying Jesus. But one day after church evening service, he is shocked to hear some of his fellow Christians, his Christian friends say, hey, let's go to this new bar

downtown.

You know, we can watch the World Cup final there. They have a huge TV. Maybe the Guinness Stout is the best and the price is good. And Greg struggles with this.

He can't believe that good Christians would even dare to go into such a place. But maybe he should go. After all, the other Christians don't seem to have a problem and they are right, the Guinness Stout there is amazing.

[36 : 28] Who knows, if he goes tonight, maybe he can come back again on his own next week and just have another one. Since it doesn't seem to be an actual issue for these Christians.

But one Christian notices that Greg is noticeably struggling, even though he's been keeping quiet. And so, he just quickly says to the others, Hey guys, why don't we go and watch the World Cup at my place instead?

Yeah, I know the TV is not as big, but my sound system was also pretty good. And my sister can go grab some Coke and some Pringles. Hey, we better save some money, right? Nowadays, inflation very high.

And so, he manages to persuade the others while still including Greg. Now, this Christian knows that going to the pub is not wrong in itself.

He knows that the Bible doesn't forbid having a pint. And actually, to be honest, he's been looking to go to that place for many weeks. But he knows love builds up.

[37 : 37] And he knows exercising his right to go will actually weaken Greg's conscience such that there is a possibility that he might fall back into his old habits.

And so, he is determined not to be a stumbling block to the weak. Yes, he's right that alcohol isn't bad in itself.

But sometimes, being right can be wrong if it could potentially destroy someone else spiritually. That's just one example.

And we can multiply that in so many other areas, whether it's in the food we eat or the way we spend our money or the shows we watch or the clothes we wear or even the language we use. And so, today, it's just good to pause and ask, is there any way that my actions in light of my knowledge could cause a fellow Christian to sin?

[38 : 41] is there any possibility that what I'm doing could be leading someone else away from Christ? And if so, then 1 Corinthians 8 tells us today that let's be willing to give up that right for that is the right use of rights.

That is the way of love. That is the way of Jesus. That is one way we show ourselves to be gospel-centered. And as we do so, here's an encouragement.

When our goal is not so much to say to others, I told you so, but to show, I love you so, we show that we are those who are truly known by God because we are being just like his son.

what greater privilege can there be? Let's pray. Father, as we come again to you, we pray that your Holy Spirit right now is convicting us, challenging us in areas that might need to be challenged.

we pray indeed that you would help us to ponder that question, whether we are exercising our rights in a wrong manner, in an ungodly way, in a way that causes others to stumble.

[40 : 18] Please help us, Lord, to examine ourselves and to make sure, Lord, that we want to love you and love others in the best way possible. For those of us with weaker consciences, Lord, please would you train our conscience so that we would know what is right according to your word and grow stronger and be more mature.

But Father, together, Lord, let us just consider each other's interests first and to serve one another so that we can build each other up and together glorify you. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.