

# 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 8. For the past few months we've taken a break from our study of 1 Corinthians to evaluate a variety of Bible translations. But now we're ready to return to this long and important letter by the apostle Paul. He wrote it to the church at the city of Corinth, which is in modern-day Greece. And he probably wrote it in the year A.D. 54, which was about three or four years after he visited the city and started the church there. But during that time the church of Corinth began to experience a variety of problems. And Paul addressed some of those problems in the beginning of this letter. First he talked about the need for church unity in the first four chapters. We saw that the Corinthian believers were divided into factions based on excessive loyalty to various Christian leaders. And so Paul told these people to get on the same page and remember that the gospel is the foundation of our faith.

Then in chapters 5 and 6 Paul focused on the need for church purity. Now in the beginning of chapter 6 he dealt with the sin of Christians taking each other to civil court. But the rest of this section is focused on the topic of sexual immorality. In chapter 5 Paul addressed the sin of incest, and in the end of chapter 6 he dealt with the sin of prostitution. So the Corinthian believers were tolerating a man who was committing incest with his stepmother. They needed to remove this man from the church to motivate him to repent and maintain the purity of the church. But some of these believers were going to prostitutes, because they thought that they could do whatever they wanted with their bodies. So Paul reminded them that our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. We need to use our body to glorify God instead of committing sexual sin.

Then in chapter 7 Paul switched from the issue of improper sexual behavior to the issue of proper sexual behavior. And of course the proper place for sexual intimacy is marriage. That was Paul's focus in verses 1–24. He taught that a husband and wife have authority over each other's bodies when it comes to sexual intimacy. But Paul also touched on the subject of divorce in that passage. And his general rule was that divorce was off limits for believers. But if a believer is married to an unbeliever and the unbeliever wants to leave the marriage, Paul said that the believer should let the unbeliever leave. And once the divorce is finalized, the believer is no longer bound but has God's permission to get remarried to someone else.

Then in verses 25–40 Paul switched to the related topic of virgins. He taught that it's good to remain single, because it gives a person a lot of flexibility to focus on serving the Lord. Now there's nothing inherently wrong with getting married, but it's not something that single believers should become consumed with. Our marital status is not central to our identity as Christians. Our highest priority should be on serving the Lord and living in obedience to him, whether we're single or married. Then at the end of this

chapter Paul addressed the subject of widows. He encouraged them to consider remaining single, but he also told them that they were free to get remarried to anyone they wanted as long as he was a Christian. So God's not going to tell us in some subjective way whom specifically we should get married to. Instead he has given us the freedom to choose according to our desires. And that's true in many other areas of life, like where we live and what we do for work. We can do whatever we want as long as we're striving to be wise and living in obedience to God's revealed Word.

So that's a quick review of 1 Corinthians 1–7. Now let's jump into chapter 8, and today we'll just cover the first verse. Look at what Paul wrote here: "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that 'we all have knowledge.' Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Notice that Paul started this verse with the phrase "now about." This phrase comes from two Greek words, and they're the same two Greek words that Paul used in chapter 7 and verse 25. Look back at that verse: "Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I do give an opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is faithful." So you can see that this verse starts with the same two words that we have in our verse.

But these two words are also found even earlier in chapter 7. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 1: "Now in response to the matters you wrote about: 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.'" So this verse starts with the word "now," but the word "about" doesn't show up until later in the verse. There's a series of words in between them. So we have a more expanded version of the phrase here. And what this statement shows us is that Paul was responding to a letter from the Corinthians believers. Now we know that Paul had already written them a letter as well. Look at what he said in chapter 5 and verse 9: "I wrote you in a letter not to associate with sexually immoral people." So Paul wrote them a letter before 1 Corinthians, and then they responded with a letter of their own. Now in 1 Corinthians Paul was responding to their letter.

But Paul didn't start doing that until chapter 7 and verse 1. Earlier in the letter Paul was responding to reports that he received about the church. Look at what he wrote in chapter 1 and verse 11: "For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and sisters, by members of Chloe's people, that there is rivalry among you." Now look at chapter 5 and verse 1: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and the kind of sexual immorality that is not even tolerated among the Gentiles—a man is sleeping with his father's wife." So the first six chapters were based on reports that Paul received about the Corinthian church. Then in chapter 7 he started responding to the letter that they wrote to him. The first response begins in chapter 7 and verse 1, and the second response begins in chapter 7 and verse 25. We're now on the third response, which begins in chapter 8 and verse 1.

But there are actually three more responses that Paul gave later in this letter. Look at what he wrote in chapter 12 and verse 1: "Now concerning spiritual gifts: brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be unaware." Now this time the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "now concerning" instead of the phrase "now about." But in the original Greek text we have the same two words that are found in the earlier passages. Now look at what Paul said in chapter 16 and verse 1: "Now about the collection for the saints: Do the same as I instructed the Galatian churches." There's our phrase once again at the beginning of the verse. Now look at in verse 12 of this chapter: "Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged

him to come to you with the brothers, but he was not at all willing to come now. However, he will come when he has an opportunity.”

So in chapters 7–16 Paul gave a total of six responses to the letter from the Corinthian believers. Their letter must have been pretty substantial, but it also had some significant flaws. So Paul spent a considerable amount of time correcting their thinking. They needed to change their views in a variety of areas. So let’s return to chapter 8 and take a closer look at the topic that Paul was addressing here. In verse 1 he said, “Now about food sacrificed to idols.” Now this is not the most literal translation. The Legacy Standard Bible has the phrase “things sacrificed to idols.” So there is no Greek word for food here. There’s just a compound word with two parts. The first part refers to idols, and the second part refers to sacrifices.

But sacrifices usually involved an animal of some kind. And that’s certainly what we see in the Old Testament. God told his people that they could offer bulls, goats, lambs, turtledoves, or pigeons, depending on the type of sacrifice. Now grain and wine could also be used in certain sacrifices, but normally animals were sacrificed. And the context here in our passage makes it clear that an animal was in mind. Look at verse 13 in this chapter: “Therefore, if food causes my brother or sister to fall, I will never again eat meat, so that I won’t cause my brother or sister to fall.” So this is why most Bible translations give us the word “food” in verse 1. The Christian Standard Bible does that, and so does the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible.

So in chapters 8–10 Paul was focused mainly on the subject of food sacrificed to idols. Now the issue wasn’t whether Christians were allowed to offer sacrifices to idols. Obviously that was wrong. The issue was whether Christians could eat the food that was sacrificed to idols. And if they could eat it, where could they eat it? Could they only eat it at home? What if they were with other believers? Now these questions may seem irrelevant to us, but this issue was a huge deal for the Corinthian believers. They lived in a place where there was a lot of idol worship going on. And sacrifices were a part of that worship. Animals were sacrificed to idols, and then the leftover meat was sold in the markets. So could believers buy that meat and eat it?

Now in our culture today this isn’t an issue that we face. It is an issue in other parts of the world, but not here in the United States. So does this passage have any relevance for us? The answer is yes. Paul didn’t just give short and simple answers to these questions. He provided some in-depth teaching on a variety of related issues to give the foundation for his answers. And much of his teaching still has great relevance for us today. Chapters 8–10 help us understand the principle of Christian liberty and how it applies to our lives. And we won’t have to wait long before we start to learn some material that’s very practical for us today. We’re going to get some of the material right here in verse 1. So let’s continue our study of this verse and see what Paul had to say. After he started with the phrase “Now about food sacrificed to idols,” he said, “We know that ‘we all have knowledge.’”

Notice that Paul didn’t go on to say anything about food sacrificed to idols right away. In fact, there’s no further mention of this topic in verses 1–3. Now Paul would return to this issue in verse 4. But he was putting it on hold for the time being, because he wanted to back up and focus on something more fun-

damental. He wanted to talk more generally about the subject of knowledge. That's why he said, "We know that 'we all have knowledge.'" But notice what's going on in the Christian Standard Bible here. The translators put part of this statement in quotation marks. They did that because they think the words "we have all knowledge" came from the Corinthian believers. They believe that Paul was quoting these words from the letter that they sent to him.

Now we can't be certain that this is what Paul was doing here. When we write a letter and want to give a quote from someone, we put it in quotation marks. But in ancient Greek there was no such thing as quotation marks. Now a quote could certainly be introduced with a phrase like "Scripture says." But an introductory phrase was not always used, so in those cases we have to look at the context for clues. And the context here seems to support the idea that Paul was quoting the Corinthian believers. After all, in chapter 7 and verse 1 he mentioned that he was responding to a letter that they had written to him. So it makes perfect sense that he would quote them several times as he did that.

In fact, you may have noticed that chapter 7 and verse 1 has one of these quotations. The Christian Standard Bible has this statement in quotation marks: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." And this statement is clearly a quote from the Corinthians, because Paul went on to refute it in verse 2. He said, "But because sexual immorality is so common, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman should have sexual relations with her own husband." So apparently some of the believers in the Corinthian church thought that it was a good idea for a husband and wife to abstain from sexual intimacy. But Paul said that this is not allowed. Married people should be having regular sexual intimacy. It's not something that a spouse should withhold.

But here in chapter 8 it seems like Paul was agreeing with the quote that he gave from the Corinthian believers. After all, look at how he introduced the quote. He said, "We know that." So he was just saying that he knew what they knew. They knew that "we all have knowledge," and so did Paul. But what did they mean by this statement? Well, the first thing to understand is that the phrase "we all" doesn't refer to every single human being. They were only talking about Christians here. They were saying that all believers have knowledge. Then the second thing to understand is that the word "knowledge" doesn't refer to all knowledge. We're not omniscient as Christians; only God knows everything. But as Christians we all have some knowledge, like some basic knowledge about God. And when we get to verse 4, we'll take a closer look at some of this knowledge.

But for now it's important to understand that Paul wasn't disputing what the Corinthian believers said. He agreed with them that all Christians have some knowledge that we share in common. But there is a danger that comes with having knowledge, and that's what Paul focused on in the end of the verse. He said that "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Now what did Paul mean when he said that "knowledge puffs up"? The Greek verb here just literally means "to inflate" or "to puff up," and so the Christian Standard Bible is giving us a very literal translation. Just imagine that you're preparing for a party. In my family we celebrate nine birthdays every year, and one of the things that we like to do at birthday parties is to inflate some balloons. We're adding some air to them and puffing them up so that they're bigger than they were originally. But of course we use this kind of language in a figurative way to talk about

people. If we say that someone is puffed up, we mean that they're proud or arrogant. They have a higher view of themselves than they should.

Now this Greek verb is used only seven times in the New Testament, but Paul wrote all of them, and six of them are right here in this letter. We've already seen four of them, so let's do a little review. Look at what Paul said in chapter 4 and verse 6: "Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying: 'Nothing beyond what is written.' The purpose is that none of you will be arrogant, favoring one person over another." So Paul didn't want the Corinthians believers to act in any way that went beyond Scripture. And he said that the purpose was that none of his readers would be arrogant. That word "arrogant" comes from the same Greek word that we have in our verse. It's not translated literally here, but the word "arrogant" accurately communicates the idea that Paul intended.

So Paul taught clearly here that he didn't want the Corinthian believers to be arrogant or puffed up. And I think it's obvious that none of God's people should be like this. We see this principle taught throughout Scripture. But it's especially clear in the book of Proverbs. Let me show you a few key passages. Look at Proverbs 6:16–19: "The LORD hates six things; in fact, seven are detestable to him: arrogant eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that plots wicked schemes, feet eager to run to evil, a lying witness who gives false testimony, and one who stirs up trouble among brothers." So in this passage King Solomon gave us a list of seven things that God hates, and the one that I want to focus on is the first one. Solomon said that God hates "arrogant eyes." The idea here is that arrogance can even reveal itself in the way that we look at people. That may not seem like a big deal, but it shows just how much God detests arrogance. He hates every expression of arrogance, including an arrogant look.

Now let's look at chapter 11 and verse 2: "When arrogance comes, disgrace follows, but with humility comes wisdom." Most translations have the word "pride" here instead of "arrogance," but the idea is the same either way. If we're prideful and arrogant, we will end up being disgraced eventually. Solomon said that if we want to be truly wise, we need to humble ourselves. Then in chapter 16 Solomon took things up a notch. Look at what he said in verse 18: "Pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall." Pride and arrogance don't just lead to disgrace; they also lead to destruction. That's often the case in this life, but it will definitely be true in the next life. God's going to judge prideful and arrogant sinners in hell for all eternity.

Now let me show you one more verse in the book of Proverbs. And this verse speaks really well to the situation in the church at Corinth. Look at what Solomon said in chapter 13 and verse 10: "Arrogance leads to nothing but strife, but wisdom is gained by those who take advice." This verse is one of my favorites in the book of Proverbs. It packs a lot of truth into two short statements. And each statement focuses on an important theme that we see taught throughout the book. The end of the verse focuses on the need to follow the advice of others if we want to be wise. We need to learn from others instead of thinking that we know it all. But the first half of the verse is a perfect description of what the Corinthian church was like when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. This church was basically testifying to the truthfulness of this proverb. Many of the people were arrogant, and it was creating a lot of strife and divisions in the church.

And as we return to 1 Corinthians 4:6, we can see that Paul talked about what their arrogance looked like. At the end of the verse he said that it involved “favoring one person over another.” The idea is simply that the Corinthian believers supported one spiritual leader and opposed another. Back in chapter 1 and verse 12 Paul pointed out that they would say, “‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas.’” So the people created factions in the church that were based on excessive loyalty to these Christian leaders. Instead of seeing these men as colleagues, the people saw them as competitors. It was like they were fighting a boxing match, and the Corinthians rooted for one and rooted against the other. In their arrogance they would argue about which one of them was better using worldly criteria. But they should have viewed these men as teammates instead! They needed to recognize that their leaders were just servants of the Lord. Ultimately our loyalty should be to Jesus and not to any human leader.

But thankfully not everyone in the church of Corinth was arrogant. Our Greek word for arrogant shows up again twice in 1 Corinthians 4. Look at what Paul wrote in verses 18–19: “Now some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk, but the power of those who are arrogant.” So Paul made it clear here that not all the Christians in Corinth were arrogant. But apparently some of them became arrogant after Paul left the city during his second missionary journey. So he made plans to return and deal with them personally. And he wasn’t coming to admire their eloquent speech but to inspect their ministry effectiveness. He wanted to see if they had spiritual strength as a result of God’s power at work in them.

Now let’s look at the other place where Paul already used the Greek word for arrogant or puffed up. Look at what he said in chapter 5 and verses 1–2: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and the kind of sexual immorality that is not even tolerated among the Gentiles—a man is sleeping with his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Shouldn’t you be filled with grief and remove from your congregation the one who did this?” So in this passage Paul once again pointed out the arrogance of the people. And I think his point was that their arrogance made them blind to the seriousness of the incest that was happening among them. They were overlooking the impact that it would eventually have on their church. They didn’t think it was a big deal, and so they basically swept it under the rug and ignored it. The principle here is that arrogance often leads to other sins. If we don’t get rid of it, we’ll usually find ourselves struggling with other sins before long.

Now let’s return to 1 Corinthians 8:1. What we see here is one of the sources of arrogance. Paul was warning us that knowledge puffs up. Now he wasn’t saying that there’s anything inherently wrong with having knowledge. Otherwise he would have been contradicting himself. When Paul prayed for the Colossian believers in chapter 1 and verse 9, he asked that they would “be filled with the knowledge of [God’s] will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.” And Paul wasn’t the only one who stressed the value of knowledge. In 2 Peter 3:18 we’re commanded to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” So the Bible clearly teaches that God wants us to increase in our knowledge of him and his truth.

And earlier in 1 Corinthians Paul actually thanked God for the knowledge that he gave to the Christians in Corinth. The Greek word for knowledge in chapter 8 and verse 1 is also used back in chapter 1. Look

at what Paul wrote in verses 4–5: “I always thank my God for you because of the grace of God given to you in Christ Jesus, that you were enriched in him in every way, in all speech and all knowledge.” So the Corinthian believers had an abundance of knowledge, and there was nothing inherently wrong with that. But Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 8:1 is that knowledge can be dangerous if we don’t use it correctly. Let’s think about a knife, for example. A knife is a very valuable tool in a kitchen. It can be used to cut meat, cheese, or vegetables. We’d have a pretty hard time preparing food without a knife! But a knife can also be a deadly weapon. It can be used to hurt people or even kill them.

Now we don’t stop using knives just because they’re dangerous. Instead we’re careful about how we use them. And it’s the same thing with knowledge. We need to understand that knowledge has the potential to lead to arrogance. Paul wasn’t saying that knowledge always leads to arrogance. But when we have knowledge, we can easily start thinking too highly of ourselves. And if we flaunt our knowledge and use it in a careless way, then we will probably end up hurting our fellow believers. So we need to make sure that our knowledge is paired with love. Look again at what Paul said at the end of 1 Corinthians 8:1: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” I love the contrast here between puffing up and building up. Those concepts sound pretty similar, don’t they? But the first one is bad, and the second one is good.

Let’s talk more about what it means to build people up. The Greek verb for building up is normally used literally in the New Testament to refer to the construction of a building. For example, this word is found in Matthew 7 at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. In verse 24 Jesus said, “Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.” But sometimes this word is used figuratively to refer to encouraging and strengthening our fellow believers. Listen to what Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:11: “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing.” It’s so important for us to build each other up that Paul commanded the Thessalonian believers to do it even though they were already doing it!

And in 1 Corinthians 8:1 Paul told us how we can build up our fellow believers. The key is to make sure that we’re showing love to them. Now in our culture love is viewed primarily as a feeling that we can’t control. People talk all the time about falling in love as if they couldn’t help it. But biblical love is not primarily a feeling. Our emotions are certainly involved, but the root idea is more profound. Biblical love is not a feeling that comes and goes but a choice to be loyal and committed to someone. And one of the ways we know that love is a choice is that it’s commanded over and over in Scripture. Listen to what Jesus said in John 13:34: “I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another.” This command was new because there was a new model in the person of Jesus. But notice that he didn’t tell us to love our fellow believers only if we feel like it. That’s because true love isn’t really about us.

In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul returned to the theme of love and described it in more detail. Look at what he said in verses 4–5: “Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs.” There’s our Greek word for arrogant again. Paul said that love is inherently “not arrogant” or puffed up. It is by definition “not self-seeking.” Now certainly this kind of love should be present in our marriages. But it also needs to be

present in the church as well. This is the way that we need to love our fellow believers. We need to put them first and focus on what's best for them. We need to use our knowledge to build them up instead of tearing them down.

So there's a lot of great application for us to consider today. First of all, are you growing in your knowledge of God's Word? How well do you know your Bible? How well do you know the doctrines of the Christian faith? If your biblical knowledge is deficient in this area, I encourage you to take some classes in our Bible institute at the church. I would love to help you grow in this area. But just having biblical knowledge is not good enough. We must speak the truth in love. We need to use our knowledge in a loving way so that we're building people up. So I want you to think about your relationships with fellow believers. How are you doing in showing love to them? Are you patient and kind with them? Or do you get irritated easily and act arrogantly toward them? I think it's safe to say that we can all grow in our love toward others. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to do that.