

1 CORINTHIANS 8:10

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 8. This chapter goes with the next two chapters because all three of them are focused on the subject of food sacrificed to idols. In chapter 8 Paul started by talking about the issue of knowledge. And in verse 4 he mentioned some specific areas of spiritual knowledge. He said, “We know that ‘an idol is nothing in the world,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’” But in verse 7 Paul said that “not everyone has this knowledge.” Now I think it’s safe to say that all Christians believe there is only one God. But some of the Corinthian believers did not have a good grasp of the fact that an idol is nothing in the world. Or even if they did know this fact, they didn’t understand the full implications of it. They needed to grow in their knowledge of this truth.

And because they were lacking knowledge in this area, Paul said in verse 7 that when they ate food sacrificed to an idol, their conscience was defiled. The conscience is our inner sense of what we believe is right and wrong. And it’s something that God has given to everyone, not just Christians. But no one’s conscience is perfect, and we can see that fact very clearly in this passage. Paul said that the Corinthian believers who were lacking knowledge about idols had a weak conscience. The point here is that their conscience was limited in its ability to help them accurately distinguish between right and wrong. They incorrectly thought that it was inherently wrong to eat food offered to idols. And as a result their conscience became defiled whenever they went against it. Scripture teaches that we should never go against our conscience, even though it’s not perfect. Instead we should strive to have a clear conscience.

Then in verses 8–9 Paul switched his focus to the Corinthian believers who did not have a weak conscience in this area. In verse 8 he told them that “food will not bring us close to God.” So eating food offered to idols will not make us pleasing to God. It will not draw us into a closer relationship with him or help us to be approved by him. So Paul could say that “we are not worse off if we don’t eat, and we are not better if we do eat.” In other words, if we don’t eat food sacrificed to idols, we won’t lack anything that will make us pleasing to God. And if do eat food sacrificed to idols, we’re not better in the sense that we’re more pleasing to God. Perhaps some of the Corinthian believers thought that they could build evangelistic relationships with unbelievers if they ate food sacrificed to idols with them at the pagan temples.

But whatever these believers were thinking, Paul was correcting their view here in verse 8. He basically said that the issue of food was neutral in God’s eyes. There’s no direct correlation between eating food and our spiritual state. And that’s true whether we’re talking about food sacrificed to idols or just food in general. Now this truth may seem obvious to us, but it would not have been obvious to Jews who were living in the first century. After all, God had given them a bunch of food laws in the Old Testament. But

when Jesus came to earth, he declared all foods clean. The food laws were temporary, and their purpose was to help God's people learn how to make distinctions. These laws were like training wheels on a bike. Training wheels help us learn how to ride a bike, but eventually we take them off because we don't need them anymore.

Then in verse 9 gave a warning to the Corinthian believers who had knowledge about idols. He said, "But be careful that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak." So as Christians we have the right or the freedom to eat anything we want. And this concept of freedom is something that we love as Americans. Our country was founded on the principle of freedom, and we even have a bill of rights that spells out our freedom in detail. But if we're not careful, we could end up loving our freedom so much that it actually becomes an idol. That's true politically, and it's also true spiritually. We need to understand that our freedom is not absolute. We can't just eat whatever we want wherever we want and whenever we want. We do have a large measure of freedom in this area and in many other areas of the Christian life. But we must be willing to let go of our rights in certain situations.

And Paul talked about one of those situations here in verse 9. We need to do everything we can to avoid being a stumbling block to our fellow believers who have a weak conscience. If we use a freedom in front of any believers who don't think that they have this freedom, then they might imitate us even though it goes against their conscience. It would be like sticking out our leg and causing them to trip and fall. So we must be willing to limit our Christian rights for the good of our fellow believers. For example, if others Christians think that it's wrong to drink wine, we should never drink any wine in their presence, because otherwise they might join in and sin against their conscience. So we need to commit ourselves to giving up our Christian rights whenever needed.

Now let's look at the next verse in 1 Corinthians 8. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 10: "For if someone sees you, the one who has knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, won't his weak conscience be encouraged to eat food offered to idols?" This verse begins with the word "for," which is not a word that we normally use when we start a new sentence. But we see this word in Paul's letters quite regularly at the beginning of a sentence. It's used to introduce an explanation of what was just written. In verse 9 Paul mentioned the possibility of being a stumbling block to the weak, and in verse 10 he explained how that could happen.

Then the next word in verse 10 is one that we've already seen several times in this chapter. It's the little word "if," which is the key word used in conditional statements. We've already seen some conditional statements in verses 2, 3, 5, and 8. Now we have another one here in verse 10. A conditional statement has two parts, and one of them begins with the word "if." Normally this part of the statement comes first like we have here. And the word "if" introduces a condition that must be met for the other part of the statement to be true. So here's the condition: "If someone sees you, the one who has knowledge, dining in an idol's temple." The word "someone" normally just refers to any person out there. But here in this context I don't think Paul was just talking about anyone. After all, this passage is focused on relationships between believers. So he was talking about any Christian, and he presented the scenario that a Christian sees something.

Now notice what Paul didn't say here. He didn't say that a Christian hears something. So this believer didn't learn about something by hearing about it from another person. Instead this believer learned about something by seeing it with his own eyes. It wasn't just some unverified rumor; he observed it for himself. And I think this fact shows the power of the eyes. When we see something that stands out and grabs our attention, it's hard for us to forget about it. We can't just unsee something that we've seen. We can't simply press the delete button and erase it from our memory banks. It sticks in our brains and has a lasting impact on us. This fact reminds me of the children's song titled "Oh Be Careful Little Eyes What You See." We need to do whatever we can to avoid looking at things that will be harmful spiritually. And we need God's help to do that. We need to pray like the psalmist did in Psalm 119:37: "Turn my eyes from looking at what is worthless."

So what is it that a Christian sees here in 1 Corinthians 8:10? Paul said that "someone sees you." Now in English we no longer distinguish between second person singular and plural pronouns. But in ancient Greek they most certainly did. So when we're studying the New Testament, it's important for us to know which one the writer was using. And in this case Paul used a second person singular pronoun. So he was addressing the Corinthian believers individually. He wanted each one of them to take responsibility for their own actions. But Paul wasn't just talking to any Christian in the Corinthian church here. He clarified by adding the phrase "the one who has knowledge." The Greek word for knowledge is the same one that Paul already used in verses 1 and 7. And we've seen that the focus in this passage is on the knowledge that an idol is nothing in the world. Some of the Corinthian believers had more knowledge in this area than others.

So in verses 8–9 we saw that Paul was talking to the Christians in Corinth who had more knowledge in this area. In other words, they didn't have a weak conscience about eating food sacrificed to idols. And in verse 10 we can see that he was still talking to these believers, but now he was addressing them individually and not collectively. In verse 9 the word "yours" comes from a plural pronoun in the Greek, but here in verse 10 Paul switched to a singular pronoun. So what did the other Christian see about this believer who had knowledge? Paul said that the believer who had knowledge was "dining in an idol's temple." The Greek word for dining is a verb that just means "to lie down." It's used only 12 times in the New Testament, and this is the only one that Paul wrote. All the other occurrences of this verb are found in the Gospels and the book of Acts.

Let me show you a few examples from the Gospel of Mark. Look at Mark 1:30: "Simon's mother-in-law was lying in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once." Now Jesus had two disciples named Simon. One of them is well known, and the other one is not. First we have Simon Peter, and then we have Simon the Zealot. And we know that this one was Peter, because the previous verse talks about Simon and Andrew's house, and we know that Peter was Andrew's brother. But this verse isn't focused on Peter. Instead it's focused on his mother-in-law, which obviously means that he was married. It's strange that Peter is so highly revered by the Roman Catholic Church, and yet he wouldn't even qualify to be a priest today! But the focus in this verse is on the fact that Peter's mother-in-law was lying in bed with a fever. Mark used the same Greek verb here that we have in 1 Corinthians 8:10. But thankfully she didn't stay in bed, because in the next verse Jesus healed her.

Now let's look at another verse in Mark's Gospel that uses this Greek verb for lying down. Look at Mark 2:15: "While he was reclining at the table in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who were following him." Here our verb is translated with the word "reclining." And Jesus wasn't reclining in bed like Simon's mother-in-law was. Instead he was reclining at a table, and this is a reference to eating a meal. In that culture people didn't sit on chairs to eat like we do. Instead they reclined on a couch next to the dinner table. And this is what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 8:10. That's why most translations have the word "dining." The English Standard Version has the word "eating," but it has a footnote with the phrase "reclining at table," which is a more literal translation.

But in this verse the believer who was reclining at the dinner table wasn't reclining at Levi's house or anyone else's house. Instead he was reclining at the dinner table at an idol's temple. The phrase "idol's temple" comes from one Greek word, and it's used only here in the New Testament. It just refers to a place where an idol was worshiped. So this word shows us that some of the Corinthian believers didn't just eat food sacrificed to idols in their homes. Sometimes they also ate this food at the idol's temple. Now this doesn't mean that these people made their own sacrifices to the idol. Instead they probably just went there for some kind of community event to eat a meal with a larger group.

Now at this point Paul was not commenting on whether it was okay to do that. We'll be returning to that issue in chapter 10. But Paul's focus here in chapter 8 was just on the general theme of eating food sacrificed to idols and what effect that could have on other believers. You see, people weren't invisible when they went to an idol's temple to eat. If any Christians did that, it's very possible that another believer would see them there. Now Bible scholars don't agree on all the details of this situation. Some of them think that those who were eating could only have been seen by people who were also in the temple. But I think it's possible that there were places to eat outdoors in the courtyard of the temple. And it's not too hard to imagine some of these outdoor places being visible to people outside the temple. Even today many restaurants have outdoor eating areas that we can see from a street or a parking lot.

But ultimately the details of this situation don't matter. Paul's point here is that somehow one Christian could see a fellow believer eating at an idol's temple. And if this condition was met, then the second half of verse 10 was true. But Paul didn't make a declaration at the end of this verse. Instead he asked a rhetorical question. A rhetorical question is a question that has an obvious answer. The purpose of a rhetorical question is to make people think more carefully about a situation. Paul wanted the Corinthian believers to reach the correct conclusion on their own. He asked them, "Won't his weak conscience be encouraged to eat food offered to idols?" He was talking about the Christian who saw a fellow believer eating at an idol's temple. And the obvious answer to this question is "yes." That Christian's weak conscience would be encouraged to eat food offered to idols.

The Greek word for conscience here is the same one that we just saw in verse 7 a few weeks ago. As I mentioned in our review time, the conscience is our inner sense of what we believe is right and wrong. It's a gift that God has given to everyone. But no one has a perfect conscience, even Christians. Some of the Corinthian believers clearly had a weak conscience. The Greek word for weak here is the same one

that Paul already used in verses 7 and 9. This word just refers to some kind of incapacity or limitation. So a weak conscience is limited in its ability to help us accurately distinguish between right and wrong. These Corinthian believers who had a weak conscience thought that it was inherently wrong to eat food offered to idols, because they didn't understand that an idol is nothing in the world.

Now the Christian Standard Bible doesn't have the most literal translation at this point. The phrase "his weak conscience" is more literally "his conscience, being weak." That more literal translation is actually very similar to what we saw in verse 7. In that verse the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "their conscience, being weak." So the only difference in verse 10 seems to be a change from a plural pronoun to a singular pronoun. But there's another change here that's more subtle. In the original Greek text the participle translated with the word "being" is a little different. In verse 7 this participle was feminine to match the gender of the Greek word for conscience, which is also feminine. This doesn't mean that only females have a conscience. In Greek gender usually just has a grammatical function to help pronouns point back to their antecedents.

So in verse 7 the word "weak" is clearly referring to the conscience. But in verse 10 the gender of the Greek participle changes from feminine to masculine. In other words, the word "weak" is no longer referring to the conscience. Instead it's referring to the word "his," which is a masculine pronoun. So this time Paul wasn't talking about a weak conscience but a weak person. The masculine pronoun doesn't necessarily refer only to a male. Instead it can be used generally to refer to a person of either gender. We used to do that a lot more often in our language, but that's changed with the rise of feminism. Now we tend to use a plural pronoun instead. But in ancient Greek the masculine singular pronoun was often used to refer to a person of either gender.

Now there's not a big difference between talking about a weak conscience and talking about a weak person. After all, we can't separate ourselves from our conscience. It's part of who we are. So I think there's a simple point that Paul was making in this subtle shift. He was just saying that if a person has a weak conscience, then that person is weak as a result. What's true of our conscience is also true of us. And we shouldn't be surprised by this shift in Paul's language. After all, in verse 9 he said that we shouldn't become a stumbling block to the weak. The word "weak" in that verse is clearly referring to a weak person and not a weak conscience. So in verse 10 Paul was just continuing to talk about a weak person instead of a weak conscience.

And what this means is that the Christian Standard Bible is giving us an incorrect translation here in verse 10. It has the phrase "weak conscience," but the word "weak" is referring to the person and not the conscience. The English Standard Version has a slightly different translation with the phrase "his conscience is weak." But this phrase is also incorrect for the same reason. However, the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible are more accurate here. They both have the phrase "if he is weak." And this phrase shows that the word "weak" is not referring to the conscience but to the person. Now these two translations do add the word "if" here, and so does the English Standard Version. There is no Greek word here that means "if," but sometimes a Greek participle can have the nuance of a condition, and that seems to be the case here.

So Paul was not saying that every Christian who saw a fellow believer dining at an idol's temple was weak. But some of them were, and if a weak person did see that happening, then his conscience would be encouraged to eat food offered to idols. This was the conclusion that the readers should have drawn if they dined at an idol's temple. Now this doesn't necessarily mean that the weak believers would have started dining at the idol's temple. But maybe they would have started buying food offered to idols in the market so that they could eat it at home. So whether they ate this food publicly or privately, the problem was that they were going against their conscience when they ate food offered to idols.

Now the Greek word for eat is just the same one that we saw earlier in verses 7–8. And the phrase “food offered to idols” comes from a Greek word that we've already seen as well. Paul used it in verses 1, 4, and 7. It's a compound word that has two parts. The first part refers to idols, and the second part refers to sacrifices. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible give us a literal translation of this compound word. They both have the phrase “things sacrificed to idols.” So there's actually no Greek word for food here, but of course that concept is implied by the word “eat.” And it's even implied by the idea of a sacrifice. After all, sacrifices usually involved an animal of some kind. And later in verse 13 Paul referred to meat, and so it's obvious that he was talking about animal sacrifices here.

Now Paul used an interesting word here to describe this situation. He said that the weak person's conscience would be encouraged to eat food offered to idols. The Greek word for encouraged is a verb that literally means “to build.” As usual the Legacy Standard Bible has the most literal translation with the word “built.” And normally this Greek verb actually refers to the construction of a building. For example, it's 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!

Now in 1 Corinthians 8 we've already see this Greek verb that means “to build.” In verse 1 Paul said that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” So Paul was talking very positively about building someone up in that verse. But here in verse 10 Paul was obviously using this word negatively. It was a bad thing that a weak believer's conscience was encouraged to eat food offered to idols! So why did Paul use a word that has such a positive connotation? I think the answer is that he was using irony or sarcasm here. He was probably just using the same language that the Corinthian believers did. I think it's safe to say that those who had knowledge about idols thought that they were building up their fellow believers who were weak in this area. But they were actually hurting the weak instead of helping them.

Now this doesn't mean that we can't talk with weak believers and educate them. We should certainly try to give them the knowledge that they're lacking. After all, that's exactly what Paul was doing here in chapters 8–10. We should follow his example and even make use of this passage as we teach weak believers. But we can't force their conscience to change. And as long as their conscience tells them not to do something, they shouldn't do it. So there's a good way to encourage the conscience of a weak believer, but

there's also a bad way to do it. We should help our fellow believers retrain their conscience to follow God's Word more accurately. But we shouldn't lead them to go against their conscience. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help in this area.