

1 CORINTHIANS 8:11

December 17, 2023

Brad Norman

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 verse 8 Paul switched his focus to the Corinthian believers who did not have a weak conscience in this area. He told them that “food will not bring us close to God.” Then he said that “we are not worse off if we don’t eat, and we are not better if we do eat.” So the issue of food is 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 during Old Testament times God’s people had to avoid eating certain foods. But when Jesus came to earth, he declared all foods clean. Now we can eat anything we want as long as we thank God for it.

But 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 certainly have the right to eat anything we want. We have 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. 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 imi-

tate us even though it goes against their conscience. So we need to be careful not to influence our fellow believers to do anything that they think is wrong.

Then in verse 10 Paul explained what it looked like to be a stumbling block in this situation. He said, “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?” So in this verse we have a conditional statement, and the condition is found in the first half of the sentence. The condition is that any Christian saw a believer with knowledge dining in an idol’s temple. And the knowledge here must have to do with understanding that an idol is nothing in the world. So it’s obvious 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 to the temple for some kind of community event to eat a meal with a larger group.

But the point here is that 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. And if that happened, then the second half of verse 10 was true. Paul asked a rhetorical question here, and the obvious answer is “yes.” If the watching believer was weak in this area, then his conscience would be encouraged to eat food offered to idols. Now the Greek word for encouraged is a verb that literally means “to build.” And normally this Greek verb actually refers to the construction of a building. But sometimes it’s used figuratively to refer to encouraging and strengthening our fellow believers. And Paul already used this Greek word in that way back in verse 1. He said that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

So in that verse 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! The Corinthian believers who had knowledge about idols probably 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. It’s a good thing to help them retrain their conscience to follow God’s Word more accurately. 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. We should never lead our fellow believers to go against their conscience.

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 11: “So the weak person, the brother or sister for whom Christ died, is ruined by your knowledge.” This verse starts with the word “so” in the Christian Standard Bible. But the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have the word “for” instead. That’s because the Greek word here is the same one that we saw in the beginning of verse 10. It’s a conjunction, and normally it just introduces an explanation of the previous material. Now that’s clearly what Paul was doing in verse 10, but here in verse 11 it seems like Paul was drawing a conclusion. That’s why the Christian Standard Bible has the word “so.” And this word is also used in the NET Bible, the New International Version, and the New Living Translation. It’s one of the rare nuances of the Greek word here, and I think it’s the best choice in this verse.

So let's take a closer look at the conclusion that Paul drew here. The focus in this verse is on the weak person. The Greek word for weak comes from the same root as the Greek word for weak in verses 7, 9, and 10. These two words are different parts of speech, but they have the same meaning. They both refer to some kind of incapacity or limitation. And the focus in the context is on people who had a weak conscience. They thought that it was wrong to eat food sacrificed to idols even though it wasn't actually wrong. But in this verse Paul didn't actually refer to a person's weak conscience. Instead he referred to a weak person. After all, what's true of a person's conscience is true of the person since we can't separate ourselves from our conscience.

Now in this verse Paul described the weak person in two ways. First he said that the weak person is "the brother or sister for whom Christ died." The phrase "brother or sister" comes from just one Greek word, and it literally means "brother." That's what we see in the English Standard Version and the Legacy Standard Bible. The Greek word here is a masculine singular noun that refers to a sibling. But this word doesn't always refer to a physical brother. Earlier in the letter Paul used this word eight times in the plural to address his readers. And in each case it's obvious that he was referring to them as his spiritual siblings. He was stressing that they were all part of God's family. And he wasn't just talking to the men. After all, he gave instructions to the women at various points in this letter. Back in chapter 7 he gave commands to both men and women about marriage, and later in chapter 11 he talked about the need for women to wear head coverings.

So I think it's likely that Paul was using the Greek word for brother in the same way here in chapter 8 and verse 11. That's why the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "brother or sister." We also see that phrase in the New American Standard Bible, and I like that the words "or sister" are in italics to show that they don't come directly from the original Greek. But these words are implied, and that's why they're included. So when Paul referred to the weak person here, he was talking about any man or woman who was a believer in Jesus. And he was emphasizing that believers in Jesus are brothers and sisters in God's family. This is a theme that Paul stressed over and over in his letters.

But Paul didn't come up with this concept on his own. It's something that Jesus stressed during his earthly ministry. Turn to Mark 3, and look at what verses 31–35 say about Jesus: "His mother and brothers came, and standing outside, they sent word to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him and told him, 'Look, your mother, your brothers, and your sisters are outside asking for you.' He replied to them, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' Looking at those sitting in a circle around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'" So what Jesus was saying here is that his followers make up his true family. In other words, our heavenly family takes priority over our earthly family. It's a wonderful blessing when our earthly family members are part of our heavenly family as well. But for many Christians that is not the case.

And Jesus addressed this situation as well. Look at what he said in Matthew 10:34–37: "Don't assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. The one who loves a father or mother more than

me is not worthy of me; the one who loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” So the point here is that when we get saved, we will often face opposition from our earthly family members. In fact, Jewish Christians were often disowned by their families. But no matter how we’re treated by our earthly family members, we must ultimately be loyal to Jesus. He should be more important to us than anyone else.

Now Jesus wasn’t implying in these passages that we don’t have any responsibilities to our blood relatives. Paul taught us in 1 Corinthians 7 that a Christian should not pursue a divorce from an unbelieving spouse. And in 1 Timothy 5:8 Paul said that a Christian man must provide for the members of his family. That even includes his parents if they need support. Jesus taught in Matthew 15 that this is part of what it means to honor our parents. But life can be difficult when we have family members who aren’t saved. The closeness that we have with them is limited, because our bond is only physical and not spiritual. But as Christians we have the common bond of being adopted into God’s family. We share a heavenly Father and an eternal destiny. We submit to the same Lord and read the same Scripture.

And this is why it’s so important for us to be part of a good church. If we’re going to be together forever, then we should get started during this life! We should enjoy regular fellowship with our Christian brothers and sisters. We should pray together about our needs and concerns. And we should study God’s Word together and encourage each other to obey it. Those are all things that we do in this class! And they’re just some of the reasons that gathering together for church is essential. We need to stay connected, especially as we face increasing opposition in this world. Paul told us in 2 Timothy 3:1 that “hard times will come in the last days.” So we need to keep encouraging each other to stand firm on God’s Word.

Now let’s return to 1 Corinthians 8. In verse 11 Paul referred to the weak person as “the brother or sister for whom Christ died.” The death of Jesus is one of the most important themes in the New Testament. It’s the heart of all four Gospels, and Paul talked about it over and over in his letters. My favorite verse on this theme in Paul’s letters is Romans 5:8. It says that “God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” But another great verse is found right here in 1 Corinthians. Look at chapter 15 and verse 3: “For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” This verse shows why we needed Jesus to die for us. The reason he died was to pay the penalty for our sins.

So Scripture is clear that Jesus died for everyone who believes in him. But there’s also a sense in which Jesus died for all people. This concept is taught in a variety of passages, but I’ll just show you one verse. Look at what 1 John 2:2 says about Jesus: “He himself is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world.” So Jesus died for the sins of believers, but he also died for the sins of unbelievers as well. Now this doesn’t mean that everyone’s going to be in heaven. Jesus died to make salvation available to everyone, but only those who put their faith in him will actually be saved.

So I’m not a five-point Calvinist because I don’t believe in the doctrine of limited atonement. Instead I would say that the death of Christ was sufficient for all and efficient for the elect. So in one sense the atonement is limited, but in another sense the atonement is unlimited. Both of them are true, and we

shouldn't just hold to one or the other. But in 1 Corinthians 8:11 Paul was stressing the limited nature of the atonement. He was focused on how Jesus died for believers. He didn't just provide salvation for us; he actually washed away our sins when we trusted in him. And that fact is true about all believers, including weaker brothers and sisters.

So the first way that Paul described the weak person is "the brother or sister for whom Christ died." But then he added a second description at the end of this verse. He said that the weak person "is ruined by your knowledge." The Greek word for knowledge is the same one that Paul just used in verses 1, 7, and 10. It's a reference to the knowledge that an idol is nothing in the world. This word is modified by a second person pronoun. We saw second person pronouns in verses 9–10 as well. 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. I told you that the pronoun in verse 9 is plural and that the pronoun in verse 10 is singular. Now I'll tell you that the pronoun here in verse 11 is singular as well. Paul was continuing to address his readers individually. He wanted each one of them to take responsibility for what they did with their knowledge.

But what could the Corinthian believers do with their knowledge about idols? Paul said the weak person could be ruined by their knowledge. And remember that Paul was building on what he said in verse 10. He was talking about a situation where a Christian with knowledge was dining in an idol's temple. And if weak believers saw that Christian dining in an idol's temple, they would be ruined by that person's knowledge about idols. Now let's talk about the Greek word for ruined, because it's a very important word in this passage. It's a verb in the present tense and the passive voice. The Greek present tense normally refers to continuous or repeated action in the present time from the perspective of the writer or the speaker. And the passive voice just means that the subject of the verb receives the action. So the subject is not doing the action; that's the active voice. Instead the action is being done to the subject. If we said that Billy hit the ball, we would be using the active voice. But if we said that Billy was hit by the ball, then we would be using the passive voice.

Now the subject for our verb here is the weak person. So the weak person wasn't ruining another person. Instead the weak person was the one being ruined. And he was being ruined by the knowledge that other believers had about idols when they ate at an idol's temple. They were being a stumbling block when they did that, and it caused the weak person to be ruined. But New Testament scholars disagree about the precise meaning of this Greek verb. And that's understandable, because this word can have different nuances. So I want to show you some of the possible nuances for this word. The first one is the idea of losing someone or something.

Let me show you a good example of this nuance. Look at what Jesus said in Luke 15:8–9: "Or what woman who has ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, 'Rejoice with me, because I have found the silver coin I lost!'" Now our Greek verb is used twice in this passage. We see it once in verse 8 and once in verse 9. And in both verses it has the same meaning. It refers

to losing a coin. Now we wouldn't think twice about losing a coin today. But coins were much more valuable during New Testament times. And this woman apparently had only 10 coins, so losing one coin meant losing 10% of her wealth. Now I think we can understand why she looked so hard for that coin! And we can also understand why she was so happy to find it.

Now I couldn't find a single Bible translation that has the word "lost" in 1 Corinthians 8:11. That nuance just doesn't fit here in this context at all. But we can find our next nuance represented in several translations. Another nuance for this Greek verb is the idea of being destroyed. The word "destroyed" is used in the English Standard Version, the NET Bible, the New International Version, and the New Living Translation. Let me show you a good example of this nuance. Look at Mark 1:23–24: "Just then a man with an unclean spirit was in their synagogue. He cried out, 'What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!'" So this unclean spirit was afraid that Jesus was going to destroy all the demons. The idea is not that they would cease to exist but that they would be completely defeated and cast into hell.

And this word can also refer to human beings being cast into hell. That's how this word is used in the most famous verse in the Bible. John 3:16 says, "For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." So in that verse our Greek verb is translated with the word "perish" instead of the word "destroyed." But the meaning is very similar to what we just saw in Mark 1. Those who believe in Jesus will not perish, which means that they won't be separated from God forever in hell. And the implication is that those who do not believe in Jesus will perish. They will be separated from God forever in hell.

Now many Bible scholars think that this is what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 8:11. And that's why so many Bible translations have the word "destroyed" in this verse. These Bible scholars argue that this is the normal meaning of this Greek word and that it's the nuance Paul always used in his letters. Let me show you an example from this very letter. Look at chapter 1 and verse 18: "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is the power of God to us who are being saved." So the first half of this verse is referring to unbelievers who are on their way to hell. When these people hear the good news about the death of Jesus on the cross, it's foolishness to them.

So this nuance makes plenty of sense in chapter 1 and 18. But it doesn't make as much sense in chapter 8 and verse 11. And the reason for that is very simple: this verse is talking about believers! Why would Paul say that a Christian brother or sister would perish and be separated from God forever in hell? Well, some Bible scholars have no problem with that idea, because they believe that Christians can lose their salvation. But they have to ignore or twist a whole bunch of very clear passages in Scripture. One of my favorites is John 10:27–29. Listen to what Jesus said in these verses: "My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all. No one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."

Did you hear the word "perish" in the middle of that passage? This word comes from the same Greek

word that Paul used here in 1 Corinthians 8:11. So why would Paul say that a believer could perish when Jesus said that a believer could never perish? That makes no sense, and so we should conclude that this is not what Paul meant. The Bible does not teach that true Christians can lose their salvation. But some Bible scholars think that Paul was just talking about someone who claimed to be Christian. Now that's a possibility, but there's no clear evidence for it in this verse or in the context. Another popular view is that Paul was just referring to a hypothetical situation that wouldn't actually happen. But it seems pretty obvious that Paul was talking about a situation that was actually taking place in Corinth.

So I don't think the word "destroyed" is the best word to use in this verse. Paul was not talking about the weak person perishing or being separated from God forever in hell. But there's one more nuance for the Greek word here that we haven't covered yet. And you can probably guess what this nuance is. It's the idea of being ruined. This is the word that we see in the Christian Standard Bible, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible. Let me show you a good example of this nuance. Look at what Jesus said in Matthew 9:17: "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the skins burst, the wine spills out, and the skins are ruined. No, they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved."

So the point here is not that these wineskins were completely destroyed. They were just ruined, which means that they had a hole in them and couldn't hold wine very well. So in 1 Corinthians 8:11 the word "ruined" does not imply that the weak person was going to hell. Instead it just means that the person fell into sin. This person was damaged but not destroyed. So this nuance makes the most sense here, and it also fits very well in the context. In the next verse Paul went on to talk about wounding a person's weak conscience. Now if we wound someone, we certainly hurt him, but we didn't kill him! He can recover if he was just wounded.

And the same thing is true in the spiritual realm. If we become a stumbling block and cause fellow believers to go against their conscience, that situation is certainly serious. Paul definitely didn't want that to happen, and he warned us very strongly against it. But the situation is not hopeless. Those people are not destined for hell without any chance to escape. They can repent and receive God's forgiveness. We all know what it's like to go against our conscience, and so we also know that we can recover from that situation with God's help and the help of other believers. And if we cause people to go against their conscience, we can help by confessing our sin to them and asking for forgiveness. Then we should dedicate ourselves to avoid being a stumbling block in the future. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help in this area.