

# 1 CORINTHIANS 8:12

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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 these believers 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, whether we’re talking about believers or unbelievers. 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.

So Paul gave a warning to the Corinthian believers who did not have a weak conscience in this area. In verse 9 he said, “But be careful that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak.” As Christians we 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 imitate 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?” Paul asked a rhetorical question here, and the obvious answer is “yes.” If a believer with a weak conscience saw a Christian with knowledge about idols dining in an idol’s

temple for some kind of community event, then his conscience would be encouraged to eat food offered to idols. Paul used the word “encouraged” here because the Corinthian believers with 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 we can certainly try to educate weak believers and give them the knowledge that they’re lacking. But we can’t force their conscience to change. And as long as their conscience is against something, we shouldn’t lead them to do it.

Then in verse 11 Paul drew a conclusion about the weak believer. He said, “So the weak person, the brother or sister for whom Christ died, is ruined by your knowledge.” Paul described the weak person in two ways here. First he said that this person is a brother or sister in God’s family and that Christ died to wash away his or her sins. But the second description here is that the weak person was ruined by the knowledge that some of the Corinthian believers had about idols. Now some Bible scholars think that Paul was talking about the weak believer being destroyed and going to hell. But Scripture teaches very clearly that true Christians can’t lose their salvation. And there’s no evidence that Paul was just talking about a hypothetical situation here. He was referring to a scenario that was actually happening in the Corinthian church.

So it’s more likely that Paul was simply talking about weak believers being ruined. They just fell into sin, and so they were damaged but not destroyed. They were not destined for eternal separation from God in hell without any chance to escape. They could repent and receive God’s forgiveness. So this kind of situation is certainly serious, but it’s not hopeless. If we go against our conscience, 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.

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 12: “Now when you sin like this against brothers and sisters and wound their weak conscience, you are sinning against Christ.” Notice that verse 12 starts with the word “now” in the Christian Standard Bible. But this word suggests that Paul was transitioning to a new thought. The Greek conjunction here can also be translated with the word “and,” which is what we see in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. This word indicates that Paul was just adding another statement to the previous verse, and I think that’s the right idea here.

So in this verse Paul summarized what he was talking about in the previous verses. He said, “When you sin like this.” The phrase “like this” is just pointing back to the situation that Paul described in verse 10 when he talked about dining in an idol’s temple. This is the action that led the believers without knowledge to go against their conscience. And what Paul basically said here was that it was sinful to do this. The Greek word for sin basically means “to miss the mark,” and in the New Testament it always refers to doing something wrong in God’s sight. We can find a simple and clear definition of what sin is in 1 John 3:4. In that verse John said that “everyone who commits sin practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.” So when we sin, we’re breaking God’s law and disobeying him. If we lead someone to go against their conscience, we’re disobeying God.

So every sin is ultimately against God, but many sins are against other people as well. And that's what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 8:12. He said, "When you sin like this against brothers and sisters." The phrase "brothers and sisters" comes from just one Greek word, and it's the same one that Paul just used in verse 11. It literally means "brothers," but once again it's a reference to fellow believers in God's family, just like we just saw in verse 11. And so it's appropriate to add the word "sisters," because Paul was talking about people of either gender. Now Paul did switch from the singular to the plural in this verse. And so there's a slight shift in meaning here. In verse 11 Paul was focused on how our actions affect an individual believer. But here in verse 12 Paul was stressing the fact that our actions will normally affect multiple believers, not just one of them. So we shouldn't take this matter lightly.

Now other Bible translations have slightly different wording here in the beginning of this verse. The Legacy Standard Bible has the phrase "and in that way, by sinning against the brothers." The New American Standard Bible has the phrase "and so, by sinning against the brothers and sisters." The English Standard Version has the phrase "thus, sinning against your brothers." So both the Legacy Standard Bible and the English Standard Version have the word "brothers." But the New American Standard Bible agrees with the Christian Standard Bible and says "brothers and sisters." And I like how the New American Standard Bible puts the phrase "and sisters" in italics to show that it doesn't come directly from the original Greek. But that phrase is certainly implied, as I already mentioned. So I think it's helpful to include it. And by the way, there is no Greek word that means "your" here, but I think it's obvious that this word is implied. So I have no problem with the English Standard Version including this word.

But there are some other differences here as well. The English Standard Version doesn't even translate the conjunction at the beginning of the verse. Instead it starts with the word "thus," which is not a very common word. The New American Standard Bible has the more common word "so," and the Legacy Standard Bible has the phrase "in that way." But all three of these translations are giving us a legitimate way of handling the original Greek word here. Now the Christian Standard Bible gives us another legitimate translation with the phrase "like this." But what's really significant here is that the Christian Standard Bible pushes this phrase to a later position in the sentence. This way it has a stronger connection to sinning, and I think this interpretation makes the most sense.

But even the reference to sinning is handled differently by these translations. The Greek word here is a participle in the original Greek, and so the English Standard Version is the most literal with the word "sinning." The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have that word as well, but they add the word "by" right before the participle. That word doesn't come from a separate Greek word; it's just an interpretation of the participle. But in my opinion the Christian Standard Bible has a better interpretation. It has the phrase "when you sin." The word "when" just indicates that the action of sinning happens at the same time as the main verb, which we're going to see later in the verse. And I'm inclined to think that this interpretation is the best way of reflecting the present tense of the participle.

Then Paul added a parallel phrase here in verse 12, and he connected these phrases together with the word "and." He said, "And wound their weak conscience." So this phrase shows us how the believers with knowledge about idols were sinning against their spiritual brothers and sisters. They were wounding the

weak conscience of these fellow believers. The Greek word for wound is another participle in the present tense, and it just means “to strike someone or something.” It’s used only 13 times in the New Testament, and this is the only place where Paul used it. All the other occurrences are in the Gospels or the book of Acts. Let me show you a few key places where this word is used.

Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 27. This is where Matthew records the crucifixion of Jesus. The Jewish religious leaders wanted to put Jesus to death, but they weren’t allowed to do it themselves. They needed to get the governor to do it. So they sent Jesus to Pilate in the beginning of the chapter, but he didn’t find anything wrong with Jesus. He actually tried to release Jesus, but the Jews wanted him to release a criminal named Barabbas instead. So Pilate gave in to their demands and handed Jesus over to the soldiers to be crucified. That’s what we see in verse 26. Now look at what happened to Jesus in verses 27–31: “Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the governor’s residence and gathered the whole company around him. They stripped him and dressed him in a scarlet robe. They twisted together a crown of thorns, put it on his head, and placed a staff in his right hand. And they knelt down before him and mocked him: ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ Then they spat on him, took the staff, and kept hitting him on the head. After they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe, put his own clothes on him, and led him away to crucify him.”

So Jesus didn’t just die in the most horrible way possible at that time. He was also treated in a very cruel way right before his crucifixion. Many people know that the soldiers put a crown of thorns on his head. But it’s easy to overlook the fact that the soldiers also hit him repeatedly on the head with a staff. That would have been painful enough by itself, but it must have been even worse with thorns on his head! And this Greek word for hitting in verse 30 is the same one that Paul used in our passage. So this is why Jesus came to earth and was born as a baby. He came to suffer and die on the cross for our sins. The baby in the manger became the man on the cross. And the result is God can now forgive our sins. All we need to do is repent and trust in Jesus.

And there are many good examples in Scripture of what it looks like to repent and trust in the Lord. One of them is found in Luke 18. In verses 9–14 Jesus told a parable to people who were trusting in themselves and their own righteousness. In this parable he compared a Pharisee to a tax collector. The Pharisee was boasting about some of his good deeds. But look at what the tax collector did in verse 13: “But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even raise his eyes to heaven but kept striking his chest and saying, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner!’” So the tax collector didn’t brag about any righteous deeds he had done. Instead he admitted that he was a sinner and pleaded with God for mercy. And in verse 14 Jesus said that this man was the one who was declared righteous by God.

So the point here is that we must humble ourselves before God if we’re going to be saved from our sins. James 4:6 says that “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” And it’s hard to think of a better illustration of that verse than this parable that Jesus taught. But notice here in Luke 18:13 that the tax collector didn’t just humble himself with his words. He also humbled himself with his actions as well. He stood further away from the temple than the Pharisee. He looked down instead of looking up. And he kept striking his chest. The Greek word there for striking is the same one that Paul used in 1 Corinthians

8:12. Now I don't think the tax collector was trying to injure himself like the soldiers were doing to Jesus. It was just a way to express physically what was going on spiritually in his heart. He was showing that he knew he deserved God's judgment.

So the soldiers struck Jesus on the head, and the tax collector struck his own chest. But in 1 Corinthians 8:12 Paul said that the Christians with knowledge struck the weak conscience of their fellow believers. We already saw the Greek word for weak in verse 11, and we already saw the Greek word for conscience in verses 7 and 10. So Paul was continuing to focus on the same thing that he's been talking about. Now some translations have different wording here. The English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible all talk about "wounding their conscience when it is weak." But the difference in meaning here is very subtle, and I'm fine with the phrase "weak conscience" in the Christian Standard Bible. This phrase is also found in the NET Bible and the New International Version.

Now obviously you can't physically hit someone's conscience. So Paul was speaking figuratively here, and that's why most translations have the word "wound." This word doesn't have such a strong physical connotation like the word "strike." It just conveys the general idea of hurting someone. But it's never used in the New Testament to describe beating someone to death. And this is one of the reasons that I don't think Paul was talking about spiritual destruction here in this passage. He was certainly talking about bringing spiritual harm on someone, and we definitely don't want to do that. But he wasn't talking about people going to hell. Their conscience was just being wounded, which means that they were falling into sin. But they were not doing anything that couldn't be forgiven by God.

Now look at what Paul said at the end of verse 12. He said that when the Christians with knowledge about idols were wounding the conscience of their fellow believers, they were sinning against Christ. Paul used the same Greek verb for sin that we saw earlier in the verse. But this time it's a main verb instead of a participle. We've now reached the heart of this verse and the main idea of the sentence. Now in the original Greek there is no separate word that serves as the subject of this verb. That's hard for us to imagine in English, but it's actually pretty normal in Greek. That's because Greek verbs have suffixes that indicate the person and number of the verb. So there was often no need to have a separate word as the subject, and that's the case here.

Now in our English translations we can tell that this Greek verb has a second person suffix. But we can't tell whether it's singular or plural, because we no longer distinguish between second person singular and plural pronouns in English. So this is one of the many times when it's valuable to look at the original Greek text. Now this is actually the fourth verse in a row where we've seen a second person pronoun. In verse 9 Paul referred to "this right of yours," and he was using a plural pronoun. He was referring to the believers with knowledge as a group. Then in verse 10 he said, "If someone sees you, the one who has knowledge." And in that verse he switched to a singular pronoun to stress the individual responsibility of these believers with knowledge. Then in verse 11 he said that the weak person "is ruined by your knowledge." And once again he used a singular pronoun to stress their individual responsibility.

But here in verse 12 Paul switched back to a plural pronoun. And that makes sense, because we already

saw that he switched from talking about a weak brother or sister in the singular to weak brothers or sisters in the plural. So I think Paul was stressing in this verse that this problem was having a strong effect on the Corinthian church as a whole. There were multiple weak Christians who were being led to go against their conscience by multiple believers who were dining in an idol's temple. So it should have been obvious that there was a big problem here, but Paul ended verse 12 by showing that the problem was even worse than they may have thought. These believers who ate at the idol's temple weren't just sinning against their weak brothers and sisters. They were also sinning against Christ.

And that's true whenever we sin against a fellow believer. After all, every Christian is part of the church, which is described repeatedly in Scripture as the body of Christ. Listen to 1 Corinthians 12:27: "Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it." So whenever a Christian is wounded, there's a sense in which Christ is wounded. If someone hits my knee, he's not just causing my knee pain. He's causing me pain as well. My knee is connected to me as a person, just like every Christian is connected to Jesus. So if we hurt another believer, we're also hurting Christ himself. And Jesus himself taught about this principle near the end of his earthly ministry. Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 25. In chapters 24–25 Jesus was teaching his disciples about what would happen in the future. And in chapter 25 he gave several parables about the need to be ready for his return. First he told the parable of the ten virgins, and then he told the parable of the talents.

But Jesus ended this chapter by teaching his disciples about the final judgment. Look at what he said in verses 31–33: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on the left." Then Jesus went on to explain that the sheep would inherit the kingdom, but he sent the goats into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. And he described how different the sheep and the goats were. The sheep did all sorts of things for Jesus, like feeding him, giving him clothes, and taking care of him when he was sick. But the goats didn't do any of those things.

Now this doesn't mean that we've saved by doing good works. That's not what Jesus was saying here. Scripture teaches clearly that we're saved by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone. But the kind of faith that saves is not a dead faith. It's a faith that produces good works. And this isn't something that we can pull off by ourselves. It's a result of God's work in our hearts. When God saves us, he gives us the Holy Spirit, who starts changing us so that we become more like Jesus. This is the doctrine of progressive sanctification. Over time we grow to be more holy and separate from sin, and we do more and more good works. So it's appropriate for Scripture to speak about good works as the evidence of our salvation. That's what Jesus was doing here in Matthew 25.

But notice the final words that Jesus spoke to the sheep in this passage. They were confused because they couldn't remember helping Jesus in any of the ways that he mentioned. But look at verse 40: "And the King will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" And Jesus said the same thing in reverse to the goats. Look at verse 45: "Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not

do for me.” So the point here is that whatever we do to our fellow believers, we’re ultimately doing it to Christ. If we do a righteous deed for another Christian, we’re doing it for Jesus. But if we sin against another Christian, we’re sinning against Jesus. Any action that we take toward a fellow believer is also directed toward Christ.

So there’s a sense in which we should see Christ whenever we see a fellow believer. Now we shouldn’t go too far with this, because obviously no Christian is perfect like Jesus is. So we shouldn’t worship other believers, and we do need to rebuke them when they sin. But otherwise we should treat them just like we would treat Jesus if he were here with us. And if we have this mindset, I think it’s safe to say that we’ll start treating our spiritual brothers and sisters much better. We’ll stop fighting them and getting into petty conflicts with them. We’ll stop being insensitive toward them and start paying more attention to their needs. We’ll love them the way Jesus loves them. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help to improve in this area.