

1 CORINTHIANS 8:13

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 8. We've seen that Paul was talking about knowledge in this chapter. In verse 4 he said, "We know that 'an idol is nothing in the world,' and that 'there is no God but one.'" But then in verse 7 Paul said that "not everyone has this knowledge." And I think he was talking specifically about the knowledge that an idol is nothing in the world. Some of the Corinthian believers did not understand this truth very well. So when they ate food sacrificed to an idol, their weak conscience was defiled. That's because they thought that it was inherently wrong to eat food offered to idols. That's not true, but 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 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, receive God's forgiveness, and experience eternal life. And we can find confirmation of this conclusion in verse 12, where Paul talked about wounding the weak conscience of our fellow brothers and sisters. But the Greek word for wound is never used in the

New Testament to talk about beating someone to death. It's just talking about leading other Christians to go against their conscience.

But we shouldn't think that this isn't a big deal. After all, Paul did say in verse 12 that it's a sin to wound the conscience of a fellow believer. And it's not just a sin against the other Christian. Paul said that it's also a sin against Christ. In fact, that's true anytime we sin against a fellow believer. As Christians we're all connected to Jesus, because we're members of the church, which is described repeatedly in Scripture as the body of Christ. Jesus himself taught about this principle near the end of his earthly ministry. In Matthew 25 he gave the parable of the sheep and the goats. Listen to what he said to the sheep in verse 40: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." But listen to what he said to the goats in verse 45: "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 certainly 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. Instead of fighting them, we'll pay more attention to their needs. That's the secret to loving them the way we should.

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 13: "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." Notice that this verse starts with the word "therefore," which indicates that Paul was drawing a conclusion. But the Greek word here isn't the normal one that has this meaning. It's a very rare word that's used only twice in the New Testament. We're going to see the other occurrence in chapter 10 and verse 14. But this word is actually a longer version of a more common Greek word that has this meaning. So both the length and the rarity of this word bring emphasis to it. Paul wasn't just drawing a conclusion; he was drawing an emphatic conclusion.

Then we see the word "if," which is a key word in this chapter. We've now seen it seven times in just 13 verses. We already saw it in verses 2, 3, 5, 8, and 10. And this word actually occurs twice in verse 8. Now we're seeing it here in verse 13 as well. And this means that once again we're looking at a conditional sentence. As you probably remember, a conditional statement has two parts. One of them begins with the word "if," and the other one sometimes begins with the word "then," though that's not required. But the word "if" is the key word in a conditional sentence, and normally it comes first like we have here. This word introduces a condition that must be met for the other part of the sentence to happen or to be true.

So here's the condition that Paul gave in verse 13: "If food causes my brother or sister to fall." The Greek word for food here is the same one that Paul used back in verse 8. There he said that "food will not bring

us close to God. We are not worse off if we don't eat, and we are not better if we do eat." So Paul 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. Now this view 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. For a long time there were many foods that they were not allowed to eat. But then Jesus showed that those food laws were temporary. In Mark 7:15 he said, "Nothing that goes into a person from outside can defile him but the things that come out of a person are what defile him." And in verse 19 Mark clarified that Jesus was declaring "all foods clean."

Paul taught the same thing in 1 Timothy 4. Listen to what he said about some false teachers in verses 3–5: "They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods that God created to be received with gratitude by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, since it is sanctified by the word of God and by prayer." So now we can eat anything we want to as long as we're thankful to God for it. The food laws were just designed 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.

But some of the believers in Corinth thought that it was wrong for them to eat food sacrificed to idols. So in 1 Corinthians 8:13 Paul said, "If food causes my brother or sister to fall." The phrase "brother or sister" comes from just one Greek word, and it's the same one that we've already seen in verses 11–12. It literally means "brother," but once again it's a reference to a fellow believer in God's family, just like we just saw in the previous two verses. So it's appropriate to add the word "sister," because Paul was clearly talking about a Christian of either gender. The English Standard Version and the Legacy Standard Bible just have the word "brother," and so does the New American Standard Bible, which is surprising because it has the word "sister" or "sisters" in verses 11–12. But the Christian Standard Bible adds the word "sister" in verse 13, and so do other translations like the NET Bible and the New International Version.

Now in verse 11 Paul referred to a singular brother or sister to stress the harm that we can bring on an individual believer. Then in verse 12 he switched to plural brothers and sisters to stress that there was a group of weak believers in the Corinthian church who were being affected. Here in verse 13 Paul switched back to the singular to focus on these believers as individuals again. But notice that this time Paul added a small but important word. In verse 11 he just mentioned "the brother or sister," and in verse 12 he referred to "brothers and sisters." But in verse 13 he added the word "my." He didn't just say "the brother or sister"; instead he used the phrase "my brother or sister." He was emphasizing the special relationship that he had with each one of his fellow believers.

This is an important point that we shouldn't miss. Other believers are not just brothers and sisters in Christ. They're our brothers and sisters in Christ. Each believer is my spiritual sibling and your spiritual sibling. That's true even for the believers we don't know personally. We have a special bond with every Christian through our relationship with Jesus. And that should have a profound impact on how we treat our fellow believers. When we remember the special relationship we have with them, that will help us

avoid doing anything that will bring spiritual harm on them. Instead we'll work hard to do what's best for them. That was Paul's focus here in verse 13.

So Paul started this verse by saying, "Therefore, if food causes my brother or sister to fall." The Greek verb here for causing someone to fall can also be translated with the word "stumble." That's what we see in the English Standard Version and the Legacy Standard Bible. But this verb is never used literally in the New Testament to refer to someone physically tripping and falling down. Instead it's always used figuratively, and it can describe two different scenarios. The first one is causing someone to be offended or upset. Listen to what the disciples told Jesus in Matthew 15:12: "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" And in Matthew 11:6 Jesus said, "Blessed is the one who isn't offended by me."

So obviously there was nothing wrong with Jesus causing people like the Pharisees to be offended. The problem was not with him but with them. Instead of receiving his words and submitting to them, they rejected his words and got upset at them. They were offended by him. And I think there's a good lesson for us to learn here. When we get offended by people, it doesn't necessarily mean that they sinned against us. It might just mean that they told us something uncomfortable that we needed to hear. So when we feel offended, we need to ask why. We should only confront those who offend us if they actually sinned against us. And we shouldn't be afraid to offend others with the truth. After all, that puts us in pretty good company with Jesus!

So the Greek word for causing someone to fall sometimes refers to offending someone. But usually it refers to causing someone to sin, and that's clearly the meaning that Paul intended in our passage. In fact, that's exactly what the New American Standard Bible says here in 1 Corinthians 8:13. It says, "Therefore, if food causes my brother to sin." And the word "sin" is also used in the NET Bible, the New International Version, and the New Living Translation. But causing someone to sin can have two different nuances. It can refer to sin that leads a professing Christian to hell. That seems to be what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 5. In verses 29–30 he said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

Now the point of these verses isn't that we should literally chop off any body parts that are causing us to sin. After all, Jesus taught elsewhere that sin flows ultimately from our hearts. So I think this is a very clear example of hyperbole or exaggeration. Jesus was just saying that we should treat sin very seriously and take whatever steps are necessary to root it out of our lives. Now this doesn't mean that we have to get rid of all our sins so that we can go to heaven. The Bible teaches clearly that we'll never get to a point in this life when we can stop sinning. But the point here is that if we tolerate sin and let it flourish in our lives, then we're in danger of ending up in hell!

So there are a few places where our Greek verb for causing someone to sin refers to leading a professing believer to hell. But there are other places where this verb just refers to causing a genuine believer to fall

into sin. That's how Jesus used this word in Matthew 26. Listen to what he said to his disciples in verse 31: "Tonight all of you will fall away because of me, for it is written: I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." Now this verse isn't saying that Jesus caused his disciples to sin. Our Greek verb is in the passive voice here, not the active voice. So it's not focused on the cause of the sin. Instead it's just emphasizing the fact that people would fall into sin. Now Jesus did say that the disciples would fall into sin because of him. But he just meant that his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane would trigger their sin.

Now we know that none of the disciples ended up going to hell except Judas. So Jesus was just talking about a short period of time when the other 11 disciples turned their backs on him. When he was arrested, they ran away, and then Peter denied three times that he knew Jesus. But after Jesus died and rose again, he restored his disciples to service. And they served him faithfully for the rest of their lives. So there are times when this Greek word for causing someone to sin is describing people who were genuine believers. And I think that's how Paul was using the word in 1 Corinthians 8:13. He wasn't talking about causing professing believers to go to hell. He was just saying that if he ate food offered to idols, he could cause a true believer go against his conscience and to fall into sin. And that conclusion fits perfectly with how we've been interpreting this passage.

Now look at what Paul said he would do if this condition was met. In the middle of the verse he said, "I will never again eat meat." This statement is very emphatic. The word "never" comes from two different Greek words that both mean "not." Now in our language two negatives equal a positive. But in Greek two negatives was an emphatic negative. And the word "never" is a good way to convey that emphasis. But the word "again" is also very emphatic. It comes from a Greek phrase that literally means "into the age." And usually it's translated with the word "forever." The Legacy Standard Bible does a good job by giving us the word "ever" along with the word "again." Paul said that he would never eat meat ever again if it meant causing a fellow believer to sin.

Now notice that Paul switched from the word "food" to the word "meat" in the middle of this verse. And obviously meat is just one kind of food. So was Paul saying that he was fine with causing a fellow believer to sin with other foods? Of course not! And we can confirm this conclusion by looking at the only other place where this Greek word for meat is used in the New Testament. It's found in Romans 14, where Paul was teaching something very similar to what we're exploring in this passage. Listen to what he said in verse 21: "It is a good thing not to eat meat, or drink wine, or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble." So in 1 Corinthians 8:13 Paul was just focusing on the specific food that was causing the most trouble. After all, most food sacrificed to idols was meat. But we know from Romans 14 that we shouldn't do anything that would lead a fellow believer to go against their conscience.

So Paul was willing to go to extreme measures to avoid causing his fellow believers to sin. Now does this mean that he would never eat meat again on any occasion? That's what it sounds like, but I think Paul was using hyperbole or exaggeration here. After all, we're going to see in chapter 10 that Paul said it was fine to buy meat in the marketplace and eat it. So what he meant here was that he would never eat meat in the presence of any fellow believer who had a weak conscience in this area. He didn't want them to fol-

low his example and eat meat that might have been sacrificed to idols if they thought that it was wrong to do that. But if he was eating privately or with believers who weren't weak in this area, then there was no problem with eating meat offered to idols.

So we've covered the two parts of the conditional sentence here in chapter 8 and verse 13. But there's a third part of the sentence that Paul included as a bonus. He ended this verse by giving us the reason that he wouldn't eat meat if it caused a fellow believer to sin. He said, "So that I won't cause my brother or sister to fall." Now Paul didn't really need to include this additional statement. After all, he was basically just repeating what he said in the beginning of the verse. He used the same Greek word that's translated with the phrase "brother or sister." And he used the same Greek verb for causing someone to fall. But he wanted to repeat himself for emphasis and make his point very clear. He refused to do anything that would cause a fellow believer to sin.

Now there is one slight change that we see at the end of this verse. In the beginning of the verse Paul talked about food causing his brother or sister to sin. So the Greek verb is in the third person. But at the end of the verse he switched to a first person verb. He was focusing on the ultimate source of the problem. It wasn't really food by itself that was the problem. It was the fact that someone was eating the food. So Paul was leading us by example here. He understood that he was personally responsible for the spiritual welfare of his fellow Christians. He knew that we need to love and encourage each other instead of leading each other into sin. And he certainly could have given us a command at this point. But instead he took a more subtle approach. He told us what he was going to do, and he was trying to motivate us to follow his example.

And Paul actually concluded this section by focusing on that very point. I've been telling you that this section covers chapters 8–10, but that's not very precise. This section actually ends with the first verse of chapter 11. The chapter and verse divisions are not inspired by God; they were actually added hundreds of years after Scripture was finished. And this is one of those places where the chapter break was not chosen very well. Look at what Paul said in chapter 11 and verse 1: "Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ." I love the balance in this short statement. We should definitely follow Paul's example, and we should even follow the examples of mature believers around us today. But we need to remember that our ultimate example is Jesus. We should only imitate our fellow believers to the extent that they imitate Christ.

So we need to remember that our fellow Christians are watching us carefully. That's especially true if you have believing children who are still living in your home. But even at church other believers are listening to what you say and watching what you do. And you're rubbing off on them to some degree. At least a few of them are going to start copying you, whether they're aware of it or not. So we need to strive to be a good example to them in how we treat our fellow believers. Are we showing care and concern for others in the way that we talk and act? Or do we focus on ourselves and our own desires? We need to understand that we have a big impact on people around us. And of course we can even cause believers to go against their conscience!

Now we should be careful not to go too far with this concept. When we talk about causing someone to

sin, we're not saying that the other person is helpless and can't avoid sinning. We're all responsible for our choices. When we sin against the Lord, we're accountable for those sins, even if someone else led us to sin. But many sins involve dual responsibility. The person who sinned is responsible, but so is the one who led that person to sin. If we lead others to sin, we're contributing to their sin. You could say that we've opened the door for them to walk through. So we're not forcing them to sin, but we are influencing them. We're setting up an obstacle for them to trip and fall on. So we need to do everything we can to avoid being a stumbling block. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help in this area.