

1 CORINTHIANS 8:2–3

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 8. Last week we returned to our study of 1 Corinthians, and we began a new section in this letter that covers chapters 8–10. The focus in this section is on food sacrificed to idols. That's what we saw in chapter 8 and verse 1 last week. Paul started this section by saying, "Now about food sacrificed to idols." That phrase "now about" comes from two words in the original Greek that are used together six times in chapters 7–16. And in each case this phrase is introducing a new section in this letter where Paul was responding to a letter from the Corinthian believers. We've already looked at the first two sections in chapter 7, and now we're on the third section.

Now the issue of meat sacrificed to idols isn't something that we deal with in our culture today. But this passage still has a great deal of relevance for us. That's because Paul gave some in-depth teaching on a variety of related issues. And these issues help us understand the principle of Christian liberty and how it applies to our lives. Now last week we saw that Paul started in chapter 8 and verse 1 by focusing on the subject of knowledge. He quoted a statement that probably came from the Corinthian believers. That's why this statement is in quotation marks in the Christian Standard Bible. It's the statement "we all have knowledge." But Paul introduced this quotation with the words "we know that." So it seems like Paul was agreeing with this quote.

Now I don't think Paul and the Corinthian believers meant that all human beings have some kind of knowledge. It seems more likely from the context that this statement is only referring to believers. And the knowledge here is probably a reference to some basic knowledge about God and other spiritual truths. We're going to see that Paul elaborated on this knowledge in verse 4. But in verse 1 he was focused on a danger that comes with having knowledge. He said that "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." The Greek verb for puffs up just literally means "to inflate," and so you can imagine blowing up a balloon for a birthday party. But of course we use this kind of language in a figurative way to talk about people. If we say that someone is puffed up, we mean that they're proud or arrogant. They have a higher view of themselves than they should.

And this was a problem in the Corinthian church. Paul already confronted these people several times earlier in this letter about their arrogance. In chapter 4 and verse 6 he said that they showed their arrogance by "favoring one person over another." This statement is a reference to the divisions in the church that were based on excessive loyalty to different Christian leaders. But in chapter 8 and verse 1 Paul was focused on one of the sources of their arrogance. He was warning them that knowledge puffs up. Now this doesn't mean that there's anything inherently wrong with having spiritual knowledge. After all, 2 Pe-

ter 3:18 commands us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” So it’s obvious that God wants us to increase in our knowledge of him and his truth.

But Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 8:1 is that knowledge can be dangerous if we don’t use it correctly. I like to think about the illustration of a knife. A knife is a very valuable tool in a kitchen for preparing food, but it can also be a deadly weapon. So we have to make sure that we’re using the knife properly, and it’s the same thing with knowledge. Spiritual knowledge is very valuable, but it has the potential to lead to arrogance if we’re not careful. And if we flaunt our knowledge and use it in a careless way, then we’re probably going to end up hurting our fellow believers. So we need to make sure that our knowledge is paired with love. Paul said at the end of verse 1 that “love builds up.” When we construct a building, we’re making something strong and useful that people can live or work in. And to build people up spiritually is similar in a figurative sense. We’re making them strong spiritually so that can serve God effectively and live in obedience to him.

But we need to make sure that we understand what it means to love people. In our culture love is viewed primarily as a feeling that we can’t control. People talk all the time about falling in love as if they couldn’t help it. But biblical love is not primarily a feeling. Instead it’s a choice to be loyal and committed to someone. And in chapter 13 Paul returned to this topic and explored it in more detail. Listen to what he said in verses 4-5: “Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs.” So this is how we need to love our fellow believers. We need to put them first and focus on what’s best for them. We need to use our knowledge to help them instead of hurting them.

Now let’s look at the next two verses in 1 Corinthians 8. We’re ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in verses 2-3: “If anyone thinks he knows anything, he does not yet know it as he ought to know it. But if anyone loves God, he is known by him.” In these two verses we have two conditional sentences. There’s one in verse 2 and another one in verse 3. A conditional sentence has two parts: one of them starts with the word “if,” and the other one starts with the word “then.” And usually they come in that order, just like we have here in our two examples. But sometimes the word “then” is not included, even though it’s still implied. And that’s the case here in both of our conditional sentences.

Now the way a conditional statement works is that there’s a condition that must be met for something to happen or for something to be true. The part of the statement that starts with the word “if” is where the condition is given. And the other part of the statement is where we see what’s true if the condition is met. So let’s take a closer look at our two conditional sentences. And we’ll start with some preliminary observations. Notice first of all that there’s a contrast between these two conditional sentences. We know that because the second one starts with the word “but.” So Paul was presenting two scenarios here that were quite different from each other. In fact, I think it would even be fair to call them opposites.

The second thing that I want you to notice is that both of these conditional sentences have the word “anyone” right after the word “if.” So Paul wasn’t talking about a specific person or even a specific group of people. Instead he was speaking more generally here. He was inviting the Corinthian believers to con-

sider which condition was true for them. Did the first condition describe them, or did the second one? Now before we jump into the first conditional sentence, I want you to notice one more thing here. The key word in these two verses is the word “know.” This term appears three times in verse 2 and once in verse 3. But that shouldn’t surprise us, because we saw that the key word in verse 1 is the related word “knowledge.” So Paul was continuing to focus on this theme in verses 2–3.

So let’s jump into the first conditional sentence and take a closer look at verse 2. The condition is that “anyone thinks he knows anything.” This condition is very similar to one that we saw earlier in this letter. Look back at chapter 3 and verse 18: “Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks he is wise in this age, let him become a fool so that he can become wise.” So in this verse we see some of the same key words that we have in chapter 8 and verse 2. In both places we have the words “if,” “anyone,” and “thinks.” Now there are a few different Greek verbs in the New Testament that are translated with the English word “think.” For example, in Ephesians 3:20 Paul said that God can “do above and beyond all that we ask or think.” The Greek verb there is focused on understanding or comprehending something.

But the verb in 1 Corinthians has the nuance of holding an opinion. And we use the word “think” in this way all the time. For example, we might say, “I think it’s going to rain today.” We’re giving our opinion about what the weather’s going to be like. And here in the Antelope Valley that opinion would usually be wrong, because we don’t get much rain here. So in chapter 3 and verse 18 Paul was talking about anyone who had the opinion that he was wise in this age. And in chapter 8 and verse 2 Paul was talking about a similar situation. He referred to anyone who had the opinion that he knows anything. The Greek verb for knows comes from the same root as the Greek noun for knowledge in verse 1. So those two Greek words are linked together just like the two English words that are used to translate them.

Now we might think that the Greek verb for knows in verse 2 is in the present tense. After all, we have a present tense verb in the Christian Standard Bible. The same thing is true in the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible as well as most other Bible translations. But the Legacy Standard Bible gives us a more literal translation here. It says, “If anyone thinks that he has known anything.” So here we have a perfect tense in English, and it accurately reflects the fact that there’s a perfect tense here in the original Greek. The Greek perfect tense has two nuances. It refers to a completed action with ongoing results. Now usually there’s an emphasis on either the completed action or the ongoing results. And I think the emphasis here is on the ongoing results. After all, it seems clear that Paul was focused on the condition of the Corinthian believers when he wrote them this letter.

Now the English perfect tense just focuses on completed action. And that’s why many translations use a present tense verb here. The translators don’t want us to think that the emphasis is on the completed action. So they give us a present tense verb to direct our attention to the time when Paul wrote this letter. But the problem is that there is no longer any hint about a completed action. Paul’s point here was that the Corinthian believers gained some knowledge in the past. And in the present they still had that knowledge, and they were using it in various ways. So unfortunately we don’t have a perfect way to represent the Greek perfect tense. But I’m inclined to follow the Legacy Standard Bible and use the English perfect tense.

So if this condition is met here in verse 2, then the second part of the conditional sentence is true. Paul said that “if anyone thinks he knows anything, he does not yet know it as he ought to know it.” The second half of this verse has two more occurrences of the same Greek verb for knows that we saw in the first half of the verse. But this time Paul switched to a different tense. He used the Greek perfect tense in the beginning of the sentence, but then he switched to the Greek aorist tense at the end of the sentence. The aorist tense is just the simple past tense in Greek. It doesn’t really have any special nuance. So Paul was just talking about the acquisition of knowledge in the past. He was saying that the person who thought he had some knowledge hadn’t actually acquired that knowledge.

Now in the Christian Standard Bible the word “it” appears twice in the second part of this conditional sentence. But if you look at our more literal translations like the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible, you won’t find that word. But normally we put a direct object after the verb “know.” And that’s what we had in the first part of the sentence. Paul talked about knowing anything. So it may seem a bit strange that Paul didn’t use a direct object after the second and third uses of the word “know.” But I think this is just a simple case of ellipsis. Sometimes a writer drops a word or a phrase when it’s obvious. In English that’s especially common in poetry, but in biblical Greek it was common in various types of literature. And think that this is what was happening here in the second half of verse 2. The translators of the Christian Standard Bible were just trying to give the correct meaning in smooth English.

Now that phrase “not yet” comes from one word in the original Greek, and it’s used one other time in this letter. Look back at chapter 3 and verse 2: “I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, since you were not yet ready for it.” Paul was using an illustration here to refer to the spiritual immaturity of the Corinthian believers. So he wasn’t saying that it was a good thing they weren’t ready for solid food. That phrase “not yet” implies that there was something wrong. I think he was hinting that they should have been ready for solid food. And I think we have the same nuance in chapter 8 and verse 2. It was not a good thing that some of the Corinthian believers didn’t know certain things like they should have. And this nuance is emphasized by the word “ought.” Paul said that the person who thought he knew anything did not yet know it as he ought to know it.

Now the English word “ought” has the sense of a duty or an obligation. And there is a Greek word that has this nuance. We can find it in 2 Corinthians 12:14. Listen to what Paul wrote at the end of this verse: “For children ought not save up for their parents, but parents for their children.” So in this verse Paul was talking about the obligation that parents have to save up for their children. When our children are young, we need to provide for them. This is a principle that pretty much every parent understands intuitively. So in that verse Paul used a Greek word that communicates the idea of duty or obligation. But here in 1 Corinthians 8:2 Paul used a different Greek word, and it has an even stronger meaning. This word stresses the idea of necessity or compulsion. So Paul was talking about something that was essential. If anyone thought he knew anything, he didn’t actually know it. But he should have, and he needed to.

Now Paul’s statement here sounds kind of crazy, doesn’t it? Was he really saying that if we think we have some spiritual knowledge, we don’t actually have it? So if I think I know that God is all-powerful, then I

don't actually know it? That sounds like nonsense, doesn't it? But we need to remember the most important principle of Bible interpretation: context. If we go back to verse 1, we can see that Paul was focused on the fact that knowledge has a tendency to puff us up and lead us to arrogance. So in verse 2 when Paul talked about anyone thinking he knows anything, it's very unlikely that he was just referring to knowledge in itself. Instead he must have been referring to knowledge that's accompanied by arrogance.

But does this mean that an arrogant person who thinks he knows that God is all-powerful doesn't actually know this fact? Well, I think we can safely say that he knows this fact in a limited sense. But he doesn't know this fact like he needs to know it. He needs to know it in the fuller sense of being able to use it properly. In his arrogance he's using it to hurt people instead of helping them. Let's return to our illustration about the knife. We can understand some facts about a knife, like how heavy it is and how long it is and what type of blade it has. But if we throw the knife across the room and injure one of our friends, then our knowledge about the knife is seriously deficient, because we didn't use it properly.

So Paul's point here in verse 2 is that if we're proud about our knowledge of spiritual things, then that knowledge is lacking, because we're not going to use it properly. There's a very wise saying out there that you might have heard before: "The more you learn, the less you know." This is exactly what I experienced when I went to seminary. I thought I had a lot of spiritual knowledge before I went to seminary. But the longer I was in seminary, the more I realized that there was so much I didn't know. I certainly gained a lot of knowledge, but I also discovered that there's still much more to learn. So as we grow in our knowledge of spiritual things, we need to be growing in humility as well. We need to recognize that our knowledge is very limited, but we also need to use our limited knowledge to help others instead of hurting them.

Now let's move on to verse 3 and look at the second conditional sentence: "But if anyone loves God, he is known by him." So in verse 2 Paul gave us a bad scenario, but in verse 3 he gave us a good scenario. The condition involves anyone loving God. Now we shouldn't be surprised to see the word "loves" here, because we just saw the word "love" in verse 1. The Greek word here in verse 3 is a verb that comes from the same root as the noun for love in verse 1. So once again we're not talking about a feeling. Biblical love is a choice to be loyal and committed to someone. It's not selfish but selfless. It puts others first and does what's best for them. And the verb that Paul used here is in the Greek present tense, which normally does refer to present time. But usually this tense also points to a continuous or repeated action. So Paul was not talking about a momentary love but a lifestyle of love. It's something that should characterize our lives on a regular basis.

Now we might have expected Paul to talk about loving one another. After all, the main focus in this section is on our relationship with other believers. But Paul wanted to back up and focus on the most important command. In Matthew 22:36 an expert in the law asked Jesus about that issue. He said, "Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?" Here's how Jesus answered that question in verses 37-40: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands." So the second most important command is to love other people. But the most important command is to love God with our whole being.

So Paul knew that these two commands are connected to each other. And the apostle John showed us very clearly how they're connected. Listen to 1 John 4:20-21: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar. For the person who does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And we have this command from him: The one who loves God must also love his brother and sister." So if we truly love God, then it's going to lead naturally to loving our brothers and sisters in Christ. I think that's why Paul focused on loving God here in 1 Corinthians 8:3. He wanted to make sure that we have the right starting point. If we're struggling to love our fellow Christians, then we should examine our hearts and check on our love for God, because those two issues are closely connected. And we just might find that our love for God has grown cold. We need to be constantly stoking the fire of our love for God.

So loving God is the condition that Paul gave here in the beginning of verse 3. And this condition is true for every genuine believer. So the end of verse 3 applies to every Christian. Paul said that "if anyone loves God, he is known by him." Notice that we have two third person masculine singular pronouns here in the Christian Standard Bible. And I think it's pretty obvious that the first one refers to the believer, and the second one refers to God. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible both capitalize pronouns referring to God, and so the second pronoun is capitalized in both of these translations. I'm not a huge fan of this approach because it causes some problems in a few places. But I will admit that it's helpful in this verse.

Now in the original Greek we don't actually have two third person pronouns here. There's only one third person pronoun in this verse, and it's at the very end of the verse. In the middle of the verse there's a different kind of pronoun in the Greek text. It's called a demonstrative pronoun. A demonstrative pronoun is stronger than a personal pronoun, because it's a pointer. In English we have two kinds of demonstrative pronouns, and we call them "near" and "far." The near demonstrative pronoun is the word "this," and it points to someone or something close by. So I could point to "this table" or "this chair." The far demonstrative pronoun is the word "that," and it points to someone or something farther away. So I could point to "that car" in the parking lot or "that building" across the street. Those things are farther away than any of the tables or chairs in this room.

Now biblical Greek has the same two kinds of demonstrative pronouns that we have in English. And the one that Paul used here in verse 3 is the near demonstrative pronoun. So a more literal translation here would be to say that "this one is known by him." That statement is more emphatic than what our Bible translations are giving us here. They're not preserving the emphasis that Paul was putting on the believer. And when Paul described the believer here, he once again talked about the theme of knowledge. In fact, he used the same Greek verb that we saw three times in verse 2. But once again most of our English translations mislead us here. They use the English present tense even though Paul didn't use a present tense in Greek.

But once again the Legacy Standard Bible comes to the rescue. It says that "he has been known by Him." That's the English perfect tense, and it's coming from the Greek perfect tense, just like we saw in the beginning of verse 2. So once again Paul was talking about a completed action with ongoing results. But this

time Paul switched the voice of the verb. In verse 2 all three verbs are in the active voice. In other words, the subject of the verb is doing the action. Here's a simple example: "Billy hit the ball." Billy is the subject, and he did the hitting. But here in verse 3 Paul switched to the passive voice, which means that the subject is receiving the action of the verb. In other words, the action is being done to him. Here's another simple example: "Billy was hit by the ball." Billy is still the subject, but this time he didn't do the hitting. Instead he was the one being hit. And we're even told what hit him; it was the ball.

Now sometimes when we use a passive verb, we don't explain who or what did the action. We might just say, "Billy was hit." And we don't know exactly what happened. Did he get into a fistfight at school? Did a bully punch him between classes? Did he get struck by a car? We just don't have those details. And so many times we add a phrase that starts with the word "by." This phrase tells who or what did the action of the verb. If we say that Billy was hit by the ball, now we don't have to fear the worst. He was not hit by a car. And thankfully Paul added a similar phrase here in verse 3. He ended this conditional sentence with the phrase "by him." And this phrase tells us who did the knowing. At this point he was not talking about what Christians know. Instead he was saying that we are known by God.

Now Paul certainly could have said that those who love God know him. After all, Jesus said in John 17:3 that knowing God is the essence of having eternal life. He said, "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and the one you have sent—Jesus Christ." But a deeper way to describe our salvation is to say that we are known by God. Listen to what Paul said in Galatians 4:9: "But now, since you know God, or rather have become known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elements? Do you want to be enslaved to them all over again?" So it's true that Christians know God, and Paul affirmed that truth in this verse. But I love that he went a step further and showed how we even came to know God in the first place. We know him because he knows us.

Now we know from Scripture that one of God's attributes is omniscience. In other words, he knows everything and everyone perfectly. But in Galatians 4:9 and 1 Corinthians 8:3 Paul was talking about a different kind of knowledge. He was using the word "know" to refer to more than just intellectual knowledge. He was using it to refer to an intimate relationship. And there are some very clear examples of this nuance in the Old Testament. Genesis 4:1 literally says that Adam "knew" his wife according to the English Standard Version. And then this verse says that she conceived and gave birth to a son. That verse is talking about a very intimate kind of knowledge. Now listen to what God said to Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." That's the wording in the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible. So God decided to enter into a special relationship with Jeremiah before he even existed. God chose to make him a prophet and speak through him.

And I think this is the nuance that Paul was using in 1 Corinthians 8:3. He was saying that God decided to enter into a special relationship with us before the foundation of the world. This is exactly what he was talking about in Romans 8:29. In the first part of that verse he said, "For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." So first God decided to enter into a special relationship with us, and then he chose us or predestined us to salvation. Ultimately the reason we're saved is that God decided to know us in a special way. And it wasn't based on any supposed goodness that we would

have. God didn't look down the corridor of time and see that we would be worthy of salvation. Our salvation is based completely on God's grace.

Now that's a very humbling thought, isn't it? It's easy for us to think that we somehow deserved our salvation. But there's nothing that we could have done to deserve this incredible gift. And I think that's why Paul brought up this issue here in 1 Corinthians 8:3. The Corinthian believers were struggling with arrogance, and it had a detrimental effect on their knowledge. So Paul took them back to a very important foundational truth. He taught them that being known by God is more significant than any knowledge that we might have. We wouldn't know God and have a relationship with him unless he initiated it. So the next time you're tempted to indulge in a little pride and flaunt your knowledge about God, remember that you're only saved because of his grace. We're saved because he decided to know us. Let's close in prayer and thank God for this wonderful blessing.