

# 1 CORINTHIANS 8:7

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 8. In chapters 8–10 Paul was dealing with the subject of food sacrificed to idols. He was responding to a letter from the Corinthian believers, and this was one of the topics that they asked him about. But Paul did not focus on food right away in his response. Instead he focused on the issue of knowledge. And in verses 1–3 he focused on a danger that comes with having spiritual knowledge. It has the potential to lead to being puffed up if we're not careful. And knowledge that's accompanied by arrogance is lacking because it's not going to be used properly. We'll end up using it to hurt others instead of helping them. So we need to make sure that our knowledge is paired with love so that we can build up our fellow believers.

Now in verses 1–3 Paul didn't give any details about the spiritual knowledge that he was talking about. But in verse 4 he was ready to discuss some specific areas of knowledge. He said, "We know that 'an idol is nothing in the world,' and that 'there is no God but one.'" Paul was quoting two statements from the Corinthian believers here, and he was agreeing with them. The first statement is focused on the fact that an idol has no real existence. It's completely helpless and worthless because it doesn't any power to do anything. Then the second statement focuses on how there is only one God. Scripture teaches clearly that Yahweh alone is the true God. This fact is one of the basic truths of Christianity. It's something that every Christian believes.

Then in verses 5–6 Paul explained these two statements in more detail. He acknowledged that there are many gods and lords, but they don't really deserve to be called by those titles. That's how unbelievers refer to them, but as Christians we know better. We believe that there is one God, and we can call him "Father" because we've been adopted into his family. He provides for us and protects us. And Paul said that "all things are from him, and we exist for him." So the Father is the source of all things because he created everything. And the reason all things exist is for him and his glory. He created us and everything else in the world because he wanted to show how great he is. So he didn't make us so that we could live for our own purpose and pleasure. He made us to glorify him and live in obedience to him.

Then Paul said that we also believe there is one Lord, and that's Jesus Christ. Now the word "Lord" primarily emphasizes the fact that Jesus is our master. We can't be saved without confessing that Jesus is Lord. But sometimes this title also stresses the deity of Christ, and that's what Paul was communicating here. He was putting the Father and the Son side by side to show that they're on the same level. And this is something that Paul did in many other places in his letters. But he almost always listed the Father before the Son, because there's a sense in which the Father is greater than the Son. They're certainly equal in

personhood, but they have different roles. The Father is the leader in the Trinity, while the Son always submits to the Father.

And this observation leads naturally to what Paul said about Jesus in verse 6. He said that “all things are through him, and we exist through him.” So Paul was basically saying that all things came into existence through Jesus. The Father is the ultimate source of all things, but he created everything through Jesus. We could say that he delegated the work of creation to Jesus. They worked together on this project, but the Father was behind the scenes while the Son was more actively involved. So we were created through Jesus, but we also continue to exist through Jesus. If he didn’t sustain us through his great power, we would immediately cease to exist. So we need to remember that our existence depends completely on him. He’s not just a perfect man who died on the cross for our sins. He’s also the all-powerful God who’s absolutely sovereign over our lives.

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 7: “However, not everyone has this knowledge. Some have been so used to idolatry up until now that when they eat food sacrificed to an idol, their conscience, being weak, is defiled.” This verse starts with the word “however,” which introduces a strong contrast with what Paul was saying earlier. The Greek word here is actually the same one that we saw at the beginning of verse 6, where it’s translated with the word “yet” in the Christian Standard Bible. But normally this Greek word is just translated with the word “but.” After all, that’s the normal word we use when we’re making a contrast. But the words “yet” and “however” can also function in this way.

So in the previous verses Paul was talking about some important areas of spiritual knowledge. But then he said here in verse 7 that “not everyone has this knowledge.” The Christian Standard Bible is not very literal here, and our more literal translations aren’t really any better. So here’s my own literal translation from the original Greek: “The knowledge is not in all.” There is no Greek word that means “this,” but the Greek article is here, which is similar to our definite article in English. So Paul wasn’t just talking about any knowledge; he was referred to the knowledge that he just mentioned. The Greek word for knowledge is the same one that he used twice in verse 1. That’s why most translations say “this knowledge” instead of “the knowledge.” They’re making it clear that Paul was pointing back to the knowledge that he was just talking about.

And what Paul said here was that this knowledge is not in all. So the question is what Paul meant by the word “all”? Was he referring to all people in general? That view seems very unlikely, because it would be obvious that most unbelievers don’t have this knowledge he was talking about. It’s much more likely that he was referring to all believers. After all, his focus in this passage is on relationships between Christians. But this interpretation leads to an apparent contradiction. In verse 1 Paul agreed with the Corinthian believers that “we all have knowledge.” He seemed to be saying that all believers have the knowledge that he went on to talk about in the following verses. So why did he say here in verse 7 that this knowledge is not in all believers?

Well, the key to solving this problem is to recognize that not all believers have the same amount of

knowledge. Paul didn't say in verse 1 that we all have all knowledge. He was just saying that we all have some knowledge about God and spiritual things. But some of us have more knowledge than others. Now I think we can safely say that all Christians believe the basic truths about God the Father and God the Son that we just saw in verse 6. But some believers may not have a good grasp of the fact that an idol is nothing in the world. Or even if they do know that fact, they may not understand the full implications of it. They need to grow in their knowledge of what it means that an idol is nothing in the world. Their understanding of that fact is inadequate in some way.

Then Paul gave us another contrast in verse 7. Now there's a new sentence here in the Christian Standard Bible, but it doesn't start with the word "but." However, if we look at our more literal translations, like the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible, we can see that all of them have the word "but" at this point. That's because there's a Greek word here that can mean "but." It's not the same word that Paul just used at the beginning of the verse. That word is introducing a strong contrast, while this word is introducing a slight contrast. In fact, sometimes this word doesn't even introduce a contrast at all, and in those cases it's normally just translated with the word "and." But most translations do give us the word "but" here, because Paul was giving us a contrast with the idea that all believers have all the knowledge he was just talking about.

So what did he say about these believers who are missing some of this knowledge? He said that "some have been so used to idolatry up until now that when they eat food sacrificed to an idol, their conscience, being weak, is defiled." Now once again the Christian Standard Bible is not very literal here. So let's look at the Legacy Standard Bible, which is probably the most literal Bible translation available today. It says that "some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled." So there are actually two separate statements here. They're certainly connected together, but they can be read separately and stand on their own. The Christian Standard Bible links them more closely together, and it does that by adding the word "when." It has the phrase "when they eat food sacrificed to an idol." But there is no Greek word that means "when" here.

So let's follow the Legacy Standard Bible as we work through the rest of the verse. It says that some believers were accustomed to the idol. Let me give you an even more literal translation: "Some in the custom of the idol." But this statement is kind of vague. What does it mean that some of the Corinthian believers were in the custom of the idol? Well, let's talk more about the Greek word for custom. It's used only three times in the New Testament, and two of them are here in this letter. The other one is found in chapter 11 and verse 16 at the end of Paul's discussion about the head covering. This is a tricky passage that we'll get to eventually. Here's what he said in that verse: "If anyone wants to argue about this, we have no other custom, nor do the churches of God."

So Paul was referring to a practice that had become established. That's basically what the word "custom" means. And I think we understand the idea of a custom pretty well. After all, most people have customs that they follow, especially on holidays. Thanksgiving is this week, and you probably have some customs that you follow on that day. Perhaps you always eat some turkey and mashed potatoes. And maybe you always watch some football. Then next month we'll be celebrating Christmas, and I'm guessing that most

of you will open some presents on that day. We used to open all our presents on that day, but lately we've been spreading it out and opening some of them later as well. That way we have more time to finish our Christmas shopping! And the little kids don't get overwhelmed with opening so many gifts at once.

So I think we all understand the idea of a custom. But let me show you one more example of a custom in Scripture. Let's look at John 18:39, which is the only other place where the Greek word for custom is used. Look at this verse: "You have a custom that I release one prisoner to you at the Passover. So, do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" Pilate was talking to the Jews about Jesus here. And he was referring to a custom that they had in connection with the Passover, which was their most important holiday. They had a custom that Pilate would release one prisoner. So on this occasion Pilate asked them if they wanted him to release Jesus. And of course we know that they said "no." Instead they asked for Barabbas to be released, even though he was a violent criminal who had committed murder. That's how much they hated Jesus!

So in 1 Corinthians 8:7 Paul referred to a custom. He said that it was literally "the custom of the idol." The Greek word for idol is the same one that Paul just used in verse 4 when he said that "an idol is nothing in the world." An idol is just an image or some other representation of a supposed deity. But what did Paul mean when he referred to the custom of the idol? I really don't think he meant that idols have customs! Instead he was talking about people's customs that involved idols. And obviously their main custom would have been worshiping their idols! They would have gone to the temple for an idol to offer a sacrifice. And most likely they would have eaten some of the food from their sacrifice.

Now Paul wasn't saying that any of the believers in Corinth were still doing that. They weren't going to the temple of an idol to offer sacrifices anymore. That's why Paul used the phrase "until now." He was apparently talking about new believers who hadn't been saved for very long. They used to offer sacrifices to idols, but they stopped when they got saved. So what did Paul say about these new believers? The Legacy Standard Bible says that they ate "food as if it were sacrificed to an idol." Now there is no Greek word for food, and that's why it's italicized in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. But of course the concept of food is clearly implied, because Paul did use a Greek word that means "eat."

Now this is the first time that Paul used the Greek word for eat in 1 Corinthians. But he ended up using it another 26 times in this letter. And he used it only 16 times in his other 12 letters. So it's obvious that the theme of eating is a major focus in this letter. We're going to be seeing a lot more of this word in the near future. Now in this verse the Greek verb for eat is in the present tense. And the Greek present tense normally refers to an ongoing action in the present time. So at this point Paul was not talking about what these new believers used to do. Now of course they used to eat food in the past as well. But his focus here was on what they were doing at the time he wrote the letter. They were continuing to eat food, and it was something that they did over and over.

Now that point seems pretty obvious, doesn't it? After all, we all have the same experience. We've all eaten food in the past, and we'll continue to eat in the future. But of course Paul wasn't just talking about any food. He went on to make a reference to food that was sacrificed to an idol. The phrase "sacrificed to an

idol” comes from one Greek word, and it’s the same one that Paul already used in verses 1 and 4. It’s a compound word that has two parts. The first part refers to an idol, and the second part refers to a sacrifice. But notice that Paul included some words between this phrase and the word “eat.” He said that these new believers were eating “food as if it were sacrificed to an idol.” The word “as” is a small word that’s easy to overlook, but it’s important because introduces a comparison.

Now Paul wasn’t saying that these people were just eating regular food and that they compared it to food sacrificed to an idol. It kind of sounds like that’s what Paul meant, but that makes no sense. They were actually eating food that was sacrificed to an idol. But the point here is that they were thinking of the idol as real. They didn’t fully understand that the idol was nothing in the world. They were comparing this idol that was actually fake to an idol that they thought was real. Now this idea doesn’t come across very clearly in the Legacy Standard Bible, but we can see it in the English Standard Version. It says that these people were eating “food as really offered to an idol.” So they were still thinking that this idol was real, just like they used to believe before they got saved. And as a result they were not thinking accurately about food that was sacrificed to idols.

So what was Paul’s conclusion about these people? Look at what he said at the end of verse 7: “And their conscience, being weak, is defiled.” I was reading the Legacy Standard Bible, and it’s almost exactly the same as the Christian Standard Bible. But there’s one word here in the Legacy Standard Bible that’s not in the Christian Standard Bible. It’s the word “and” at the beginning of the statement. Paul was just adding another statement to follow up with what he just said. And what he focused on here was the conscience. The Greek word for conscience is used 30 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 20 of them. But this is the first of eight occurrences in this letter. So the conscience is a significant word in Paul’s letters and especially this one. Now we’re not going to look at any of the other seven occurrences in this letter today. We’ll get to them before eventually, and I don’t want to steal their thunder.

But I do want to take you to what is probably the most important passage on the conscience in Scripture. Look at Romans 2:14–16: “So, when Gentiles, who do not by nature have the law, do what the law demands, they are a law to themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts. Their consciences confirm this. Their competing thoughts either accuse or even excuse them on the day when God judges what people have kept secret, according to my gospel through Christ Jesus.” So in verse 15 Paul made a reference to the consciences of unbelieving Gentiles. These people did not have God’s law in handwritten form. But they did have it written on their hearts. They had an inner sense of what’s right and wrong. And their conscience is connected to this inner sense of right and wrong.

So here’s a definition of the conscience: our inner sense of what we believe is right and wrong. And this isn’t just something that Christians have. This passage in Romans 2 makes it clear that unbelievers have a conscience as well. So the conscience is a gift that God gives to everyone. But this doesn’t mean that everyone’s conscience is the same. People have different senses of what they believe is right and wrong. And I think it’s safe to say that the consciences of unbelievers don’t match God’s law very well. Listen to Hebrews 10:22: “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean

from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water.” So before we got saved, our conscience was evil because it didn’t line up very well with Scripture. But when we got saved, our evil conscience was cleansed and repaired. Now we have a good conscience that’s functioning more accurately.

But even as Christians our conscience isn’t perfect. We constantly need to be training our conscience according to Scripture. And we need to be guarding our conscience so that it doesn’t become weak. This was the problem that Paul mentioned in 1 Corinthians 8:7. He said that some of the believers in the Corinthian church had a weak conscience. The Greek word for weak just refers to some kind of incapacity or limitation. So if we have a weak conscience, this means that it’s limited in its ability to help us accurately distinguish between right and wrong. It’s going to tell us that doing something is wrong when it’s not actually wrong. And that’s what was happening with some of the Corinthian believers. They thought that it was inherently wrong to eat food offered to idols.

So Paul said that because these believers had a weak conscience, their conscience became defiled. Now this doesn’t mean their conscience was in a constant state of defilement just because it was weak. What this means is that whenever they went against their conscience, it became defiled. The Greek word for defiled refers to something that’s dirty or stained. This word is used only three times in the New Testament, and both of the other ones are in the book of Revelation. Listen to what Jesus said in Revelation 3:4: “But you have a few people in Sardis who have not defiled their clothes, and they will walk with me in white, because they are worthy.” Now Jesus wasn’t speaking literally about defiled clothes here. He was just using a figure of speech to talk about spiritual defilement. These believers were not spiritually defiled because they were living in regular obedience to God.

Now obviously our highest priority should be to follow God’s Word. But Scripture itself shows us that we should also strive to follow our conscience. We should never go against our conscience. Instead our goal should be to have a clear conscience. That’s what Paul said about himself in Acts 24:16. Listen to what he said in this verse: “I always strive to have a clear conscience toward God and men.” But Paul didn’t just want that for himself. Look at what he wrote in 1 Timothy 3:8–9: “Deacons, likewise, should be worthy of respect, not hypocritical, not drinking a lot of wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.” So Paul wanted the deacons in the church to hold to the Christian faith with a clear conscience. They need follow their inner sense of right and wrong so that their behavior will be consistent with their beliefs.

But Paul wasn’t the only writer of Scripture who talked about the importance of having a clear conscience. Listen to Hebrews 13:18: “Pray for us, for we are convinced that we have a clear conscience, wanting to conduct ourselves honorably in everything.” So the writer of Hebrews was confident that he had a clear conscience. But he asked his readers to pray that he would continue to have a clear conscience. Let’s look at one last passage about the conscience. Look at 1 Peter 3:14–16: “But even if you should suffer for righteousness, you are blessed. Do not fear them or be intimidated, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. Yet do this with gentleness and reverence, keeping a clear conscience, so that when you are accused, those who disparage your good conduct in Christ will be put to shame.”

So in this passage Peter taught us that we need to be willing to suffer for doing what's right. This is a message that we need to hear today! The persecution of Christians is increasing in the world, and we need to be ready for it. But when we face persecution, we need to take advantage of the opportunity to defend the Christian faith. And as we do that, we need to keep a clear conscience. We need to speak and behave with gentleness. That way if unbelievers accuse us of wrongdoing, they'll be put to shame because we're doing what's right. So we need to make sure that we're training our conscience by feeding it with God's Word so that it's as accurate as possible. And then we need to make sure that we're following our conscience. We always need to do what's right according to our conscience. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to do that.