

1 CORINTHIANS 8:8–9

November 26, 2023

Brad Norman

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. And he began his response in verses 1–6 of chapter 8 by focusing on the issue of knowledge. First he talked about the need to have love to go with our knowledge. But then he focused on some specific areas of spiritual knowledge. In verse 4 he said, “We know that ‘an idol is nothing in the world,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’” Idols are completely helpless and worthless because they don’t have any power to do anything. So Yahweh alone is the true God, and we can call him “Father” because we’ve been adopted into his family. Paul said in verse 6 that “all things are from him, and we exist for him.” He created everything, and we exist for his glory.

But Paul also said that there is one Lord, Jesus Christ. The word “Lord” emphasizes that Jesus is our master, but it also stresses his deity. Paul could put the Father and the Son side by side here because they’re both God, and yet they have different roles. The Father comes first because he’s the leader in the Trinity, and the Son comes second because he always submits to the Father. So Paul said about Jesus here that “all things are through him, and we exist through him.” 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. But we weren’t just created through Jesus; we also continue to exist through Jesus. If he didn’t sustain us through his great power, we would immediately cease to exist. Our existence depends completely on him.

Then last week we looked at verse 7, which is the start of a new paragraph in this chapter. And Paul started this verse by saying that “not everyone has this knowledge.” But this statement seems to contradict what Paul said earlier. In verse 1 he agreed with the Corinthian believers that “we all have knowledge.” But he didn’t say that we all have all knowledge. He was just saying that we all have some knowledge about God and spiritual things. And some of us have more knowledge than others. I think we can safely say that all Christians believe the basic truths about God the Father and God the Son that Paul just talked about 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.

And in the rest of verse 7 Paul said three things about these believers who were missing some of this knowledge. The first thing he said was that they were “used to idolatry up until now.” They had a custom of worshipping idols, which would have involved going to the temple of an idol to offer sacrifices and eat some of the food from their sacrifice. But now that they were saved, they didn’t do that anymore. How-

ever, they did continue to “eat food sacrificed to an idol,” which was the second thing that Paul said about them. A more literal translation is that they ate “food as if it were sacrificed to an idol.” That’s what the Legacy Standard Bible has here. And the point is that they were thinking of the idol as real. The English Standard Version says that they were eating “food as really offered to an idol.” They were not thinking accurately about food that was sacrificed to idols.

So in Paul’s third statement he concluded that “their conscience, being weak, is defiled.” The conscience is our inner sense of what we believe is right and wrong. And this isn’t just something that Christians have. Scripture 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. Scripture teaches that before we were saved, we had an evil conscience. But then our conscience was cleansed, and now we have a good conscience that’s functioning more accurately.

But even as Christians our conscience isn’t perfect. We 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 some of the Corinthian believers had. 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. Now obviously our highest priority should be to follow God’s Word. But Scripture itself teaches that we should also strive to have a clear conscience. In other words, we should never go against our conscience, even though it’s not perfect. We should certainly train our conscience with God’s Word constantly so that it functions more accurately. But in the meantime we need to follow our conscience and not go against our inner sense of right and wrong.

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 8–9: “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. But be careful that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak.” The Christian Standard Bible is actually missing a word at the beginning of this verse. In the original Greek there’s a very common conjunction here that can have different nuances. Normally it has a slight contrast, and so the word “but” is an appropriate translation. That’s what we see in the Legacy Standard Bible. And we saw this nuance when Paul used the same Greek word back in verse 3. He said, “But if anyone loves God, he is known by him.”

However, this Greek conjunction can also be translated in other ways. One of them is the word “and,” but I couldn’t find any translations that use this word here. Another option is the word “now,” which is in the New American Standard Bible. And we saw this nuance when Paul used the same Greek word back in verse 1. At the beginning of the verse he said, “Now about food sacrificed to idols.” Paul was transitioning from one section in the book to another one. And I think this nuance makes the most sense here in verse 8. It doesn’t seem like Paul was giving us a contrast here. We might think that he was about to correct those who had a weak conscience regarding food sacrificed to idols. But that’s not what he actually did, as

we're going to see. Instead he apparently switched his focus to those who did not have a weak conscience in this area. And the word "now" communicates this transition nicely.

So in the beginning of the verse Paul said that "food will not bring us close to God." Now in the previous verse Paul talked about eating food sacrificed to an idol. But here he just referred to food in general. Certainly the idea of food sacrificed to idols is still included. But Paul was apparently making a more general point about any food. However, there is some debate about what exactly his point was. The Christian Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible both say that "food will not bring us close to God." But the English Standard Version and the Legacy Standard Bible both say that "food will not commend us to God." So why are there two approaches here, and which one is the best translation?

Well, both of these translations are just giving us a dynamic equivalence. The Greek verb here has the literal idea of presenting someone to God. The Legacy Standard Bible provides confirmation by giving us the word "present" in a footnote. Now this Greek word isn't used anywhere else in 1 Corinthians, but we can find it twice in 2 Corinthians. Look at 2 Corinthians 4:14: "For we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you." So this verse is apparently talking about our future resurrection when God will present us to Jesus in marriage. Now look at 2 Corinthians 11:2: "For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy, because I have promised you in marriage to one husband—to present a pure virgin to Christ." So this verse is similar to the one that we just read, except that here Paul was the one making the presentation. His goal was to help the Corinthian believers grow in holiness so that he could present them as a pure bride in marriage to Jesus.

Now let me show you perhaps the most prominent place where Paul used this Greek verb. Look at Romans 12:1: "Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship." So here Paul talked our need to present ourselves to God right now. We need to offer our bodies to God in his service so that we can be pleasing to him. Now let's look at one more place where Paul used this Greek verb. Look at 2 Timothy 2:15: "Be diligent to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth." So this verse is similar to Romans 12:1, because it's talking about how Timothy needed to present himself to God. If he taught God's Word accurately, he would be approved by God.

So when Paul said in 1 Corinthians 8:8 that food will not present us to God, I think he just meant that food will not make us pleasing to God. It will not draw us into a closer relationship with him or help us to be approved by him. So the two different dynamic equivalence approaches to this verse are basically on the right track. Now the Christian Standard Bible has a footnote that says "bring us before (the judgment seat of) God." But it has the phrase "judgment seat" in parentheses to show that it's not based directly on the Greek text. And I don't see any clear evidence in the context here that Paul was talking about God's judgment seat. That's a view held by some commentators, but the support for it is pretty weak. I think Paul was just talking more generally about pleasing God in our daily lives.

Then in the rest of verse 8 Paul gave us two scenarios regarding food, and he used two conditional state-

ments to do that. We've already seen several conditional statements in this chapter, and now we have two more in this verse. The key word in a conditional statement is the word "if." That word introduces the condition, and normally it's first in the sentence or at least near the beginning of the sentence. But here the word "if" is in the middle of each statement, and so the condition is found in the second half of each statement. The other half of each statement shows us what's true if the condition is met. Normally that part is at the end of the conditional statement, but here it comes in the beginning of each statement.

So let's take a closer look at the first conditional statement. Paul said that "we are not worse off if we don't eat." So the condition is that we don't eat, and in the context I think Paul was talking about eating food sacrificed to idols. If we don't eat food sacrificed to idols, then we meet this condition, and the first half of the statement is true. We are not worse off. The phrase "worse off" comes from a Greek verb that literally means "lack." That's the word found in the Legacy Standard Bible. But the Christian Standard Bible has it in many places where this Greek word is used. In fact, we've already seen it earlier in this letter. Look at chapter 1 and verses 6-7: "In this way, the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you, so that you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ." So the Corinthian church was blessed with all the spiritual gifts. Every single gift was represented by at least one person in the church. So as a group they did not lack a single gift.

We also see this Greek word used in Mark 10:21: "Looking at him, Jesus loved him and said to him, 'You lack one thing: Go, sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'" So in this verse Jesus was talking to a rich young ruler who had just claimed that he had kept all of God's commands from the time he was young. But Jesus told him that he wasn't good enough to get to heaven. He lacked at least one thing. Jesus told him to sell all his possessions and follow him. But the next verse tells us that he wasn't able to let go of his possessions. He served money instead of God. This doesn't mean that God wants all of us to sell all our possessions. But we should be willing to do that if Jesus came down and asked us to do it.

So what did Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 8:8 that we don't lack if we don't eat food sacrificed to idols? What is it that we don't we lack? Paul didn't clarify that detail for us, but I think he expected us to figure it out. He was simply saying that we don't lack anything that will make us pleasing to God. Eating food sacrificed to idols does not improve our relationship with God. And that's what Paul talked about in the second conditional statement in verse 8. He said that "we are not better if we do eat." He was just looking at the flip side of the coin here. He reversed the situation and talked about the opposite scenario. What if we do eat food sacrificed to idols? In that case we are not better.

The Greek word for better literally means "abound." That's the word found in the Legacy Standard Bible. Now the Christian Standard Bible doesn't normally use the word "abound" to translate this Greek word. Usually it has the word "overflow" instead. But we do have the word "abundance" in a few places. Look at Luke 12:15: "He then told them, 'Watch out and be on guard against all greed, because one's life is not in the abundance of his possessions.'" So in this verse Jesus was warning us against greed. It's easy for us to boil our lives down to our possessions, especially if we have a lot of stuff. But what matters in life is not how much stuff we have but how much we please God. And I think that this is what Paul was talking

about in 1 Corinthians 8:8. He was saying that if we eat food sacrificed to idols, we are not better in the sense that we're more pleasing to God.

Now we would have expected Paul to word these two conditional statements a bit differently. It seems like he should have said that we're not better if we don't eat and that we're not worse if we do eat. After all, he was just talking about believers who had a weak conscience and thought that it was wrong to eat food sacrificed to idols. But Paul was not trying to correct them and retrain their consciences at this point. Instead he seemed to be focused on the opposite problem. There were apparently some believers in the church who thought that eating food sacrificed to idols somehow brought them closer to God. Now we can't be sure why they thought that. Perhaps they thought that they could build evangelistic relationships with unbelievers if they ate food sacrificed to idols with them at the pagan temples.

But Paul corrected that view here in verse 8. He 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. And that's true whether we're talking about food sacrificed to idols or just food in general. 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. Look at 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 that 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.

Now let's look at the next verse in 1 Corinthians 8. In verse 9 Paul said, "But be careful that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak." So this verse starts with the word "but" in the Christian Standard Bible and most other translations. In the Greek text we have the same conjunction that we saw in the beginning of the previous verse. But here it clearly introduces a contrast. Paul just finished telling us in verse 8 that the issue of food was neutral in God's eyes. But that's not the end of the story. Here in verse 9 he warned us that we need to be careful about this issue. The phrase "be careful" comes from a very common Greek verb that literally means "see." That's the word used in the Legacy Standard Bible.

And normally the Christian Standard Bible has the word "see" whenever this Greek word is used. Let me show you a clear example in Matthew 6:6. Look at what Jesus said in this verse: "But when you pray, go into your private room, shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who

sees in secret will reward you.” So the idea here is that our heavenly Father is always watching us. There’s no place where we can go to hide from him. And that truth should have an impact on our prayer life. If the only way that we pray is out loud with other people, then we’re not praying very well. Most of our prayers should be in secret so that we’re not tempted to try to impress others when we pray.

So normally the Greek word that we’re talking about just means “to see.” But sometimes it has the idea of watching out for someone or something. Look at Matthew 24:4: “Jesus replied to them, ‘Watch out that no one deceives you.’” In this verse Jesus was warning his disciples against being deceived about his second coming. Now it wouldn’t be inappropriate to use the word “see” in this verse. That’s actually the word used in this verse in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. But it’s clear that Jesus was talking about seeing in a special way. He was telling his disciples to watch out and be careful. And that’s what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 8:9. He was telling us to watch out or be careful about something.

And in the rest of the verse Paul told us what to watch out for. He said that it has to do with “this right of yours.” The Greek word for right usually means “authority.” That’s the word used in the Legacy Standard Bible. And normally the Christian Standard Bible has the word “authority” whenever this Greek word is used. A good example is found in Matthew 28:18. Listen to what Jesus said to his disciples in this verse: “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.” Now Jesus certainly had authority before that time, but after his resurrection God exalted him and gave him even more authority. And Jesus used that authority to give his disciples the great commission in the next two verses.

So normally this Greek just refers to authority, but sometimes it refers to the right to do something. Let me show you a few places where the word is used in this way. Look at what Jesus said in John 10:17-18: “This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” This passage is very significant, because it shows that Jesus wasn’t helpless when he died on the cross. It’s not like he was backed into a corner and forced to die against his will. But he had the right to lay down his life, and he used that right. He died voluntarily to pay for our sins.

Now let’s look at a place where Paul used this Greek word. Look at 2 Thessalonians 3:9: “It is not that we don’t have the right to support, but we did it to make ourselves an example to you so that you would imitate us.” So in this verse Paul was saying that he had the right to receive financial support from the people he ministered to. But he didn’t use that right. Instead he worked as a tentmaker so that he could be an example of hard work for God’s people. Some of the believers in Thessalonica were lazy, and Paul wanted them to imitate him. So in 1 Corinthians 8:9 I think that Paul was also talking about a right. And he said “this right of yours” because he was pointing back to verse 8 and the freedom that we have to eat anything we want. Now this concept of freedom is something that we love as Americans. Our country was founded on this principle, and we even have a bill of rights that spells out our freedom in detail.

But if we’re not careful, we could end up loving our freedom so much that it actually becomes an idol.

That's true politically, and it's also true spiritually. We need to understand that our freedom is not absolute. We can't just eat whatever we want wherever we want and whenever we want. We do have a large measure of 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. And Paul talked about one of those situations here in verse 9. We need to make sure that this right "in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak." The Greek word for weak is the same one that Paul just used in verse 7. He was talking once again about believers who had a weak conscience in the area of food. They thought that it was wrong to eat food sacrificed to idols.

So we need to be careful that we don't become a stumbling block in any way for our weaker brothers and sisters. The Greek word for stumbling block is used only six times in the New Testament, and it appears only here in 1 Corinthians. But this word does appear four times in Paul's letter to the Romans. Listen to what Paul said in chapter 14 and verse 13: "Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Instead decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister." So in that verse Paul was basically saying the same thing that he said here in our passage. He told us to do everything we can to avoid being a stumbling block. I think we all understand what it's like to trip over something. If we're not paying enough attention to the ground in front of us when we're walking, then we can easily trip over something in our path if it's big enough and strong enough.

Well, we can have that effect on people in a spiritual sense. If we use a freedom in front of believers who don't think that they have this freedom, then they might go ahead and imitate us even though it goes against their conscience. It's like we're sticking out our leg and causing someone to trip and fall. We're basically using our knowledge with arrogance instead of love. Now we're going to be talking a lot more about this topic in future weeks. But for now I want us to understand that we must be willing to limit our Christian rights for the good of our fellow believers. For example, if other Christians think that it's wrong to drink wine, we should never drink any wine in their presence, because otherwise they might join in and sin against their conscience. So let's commit ourselves right now to giving up our Christian rights whenever needed. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to do that.