

Speaking the truth in love

1 Corinthians 8

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What do Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Daniel, and his friends, Esther, and the Apostle Paul have in common? You might talk of the miracles God did through their lives. Or you might mention their devotion to God. Or you may even point out the way God turned their sufferings into victory. But, while all this may be true, one thing I recently noticed was this: They were all called to be faithful to God in the midst of a people who did not know or love their God. Now, God did this for many reasons. Because God has placed us also in the midst of unbelievers, we often disagree between believers on what it means to be faithful to God. Here, in our text from 1st Corinthians chapter 8, God's Apostle gives us three practical tips we can all apply to faithfully love and serve God and others in the middle of a hostile and unbelieving world.

1. Loving others is more important than being right (v.1-3).
2. There is only one God, and therefore, all idols are false (v.4-6).
3. Loving others is more important than getting what you want (v.7-13).

1. Loving others is more important than being right

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. (1 Corinthians 8:1-3)

To really understand this passage, we first need to understand the sacred nature of ancient Greek culture. In ancient Greece, there was not a sharp difference between religion and regular life. The government, the military, and the common people were all extremely religious. Most weddings, birthdays, coming of age ceremonies, funerals, and other symbolic ceremonies were all celebrated either in the temple itself or with the blessing of a Greek god or goddess. Whatever the occasion, there would be an animal offering to a god or goddess in which part of the animal would be burned,

another part would be served as food for the worshipers, and another part would be sold in the meat market. In fact, given the religious nature of the society, much of the meat that was bought and sold in these Corinthian meat markets was meat that had been sacrificed to idols. The Corinthians had a problem then. Could or should a Christian buy meat in these meat markets? There appears to have been two groups. One group argued for eating it, while the other argued against eating it. They wrote to Paul asking for his advice.

Wisely, Paul did not just agree with one group or the other. Notice the quotation marks. The marks signal that Paul is quoting something the Corinthians were saying. Many times as Christians, we answer too quickly. Paul is not like that. He is sympathetic to the truth on both sides. But he also confronts the error. This is a great way to deal with tricky issues. It is a great way to handle conflict. When I repeat what people say back to them, I show them that I am listening. When I agree with some part of what they are saying, it helps them to see that agreement is possible. That is why politics is so difficult in a fallen world. Everyone wants to be right. But where there is no dialogue, there can only be division. It can even happen in marriages. Sometimes, we are so incredibly focused on being right that we don't listen. Try this next time with your spouse. Don't just respond in defense. Listen and repeat what they have said. This is what Paul does. Whichever side of an argument you are on, you obviously think it's the right side. But, being right puffs us up. It makes us proud. Wanting what is right for everyone, on the other hand, is loving. Love always builds others up. It is a better way. "How can I be right?" and "How can I do what is right?" are two different questions. The wisdom of God says loving others is right. This is exactly what Paul does. To do what is right and reach those puffed up Corinthians who want to be right, he very lovingly listens and tells them they are right in at least one point: There is only one God and one Lord Jesus.

2. There is only one God, and therefore all idols are false

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one." For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Corinthians 8:4-6)

If you are a Christian, you know that the Bible teaches from cover to cover that there is only one God and that God is the Father of our Lord Jesus. Not only that, but you also know Jesus is fully divine and is actually the Creator of the universe. But if you are not a Christian, maybe you think there is more than one true God. Maybe, you think it is arrogant to claim that there is only one God. Maybe, you think there are many ways to God. We live in confusing times, where many popular beliefs are never challenged. Here, in this passage, we see how the Apostle spoke the truth to the Corinthians in love to cut through the confusion caused by the popular beliefs of their time.

We need to do the same today. I will never forget my conversation with one man. As I was sharing the Gospel, he said to me, "Do you know what I don't like about you Christians? You think you are right and everybody else is wrong." I said, "I can see how that might be hard to understand, but may I ask you a question? Do you think all religions lead to God?" "Yes I do", he said. "Do you think you

are right about that?" "Yes I do", he said. So you think you are right, and I am wrong. As a matter of fact, you are bothered by what Christians say because you think you are right." He got quiet. "I guess I do," he said. He never argued anymore about that. Do you see? Truth is by its very nature divisive. Because if you say something is true, you are saying other things are not true. Everybody believes that. You need to see through the lies of the enemy.

Here are a few common ways people in our culture respond today, when you say you believe there is only one way to God, or only one God, or that a certain action is a sin:

- a) There is no absolute truth. / You can't know the truth. / No one has the truth.
- b) It is arrogant to think you are right.
- c) You should doubt everything.
- d) You are a bad person because you judge others.

Here are two ways to reply:

First, apply the logic of the statement to itself. If I say to you, "I cannot speak one word of English", you might ask, "Didn't you say that in English?" The statement "There is no absolute truth" is itself claiming to be absolutely true. The claim that "It is arrogant to think you are right" is coming from a person who thinks they are right. The statement that "You are a bad person because you judge others" is itself judging you as a bad person for judging others. These are common statements people say to Christians. They are called self-refuting statements. In other words, they contradict themselves. So, the first thing to do is to keep your ears open for this kind of talk. Lovingly point it out to people when they say contradictory things.

Second, just apply what I call the reality test. Ask, "Will this statement work in everyday life?" "Will this statement work in reality?" Could you imagine a person going to the bank and telling the cashier, "I want to withdraw one million euros."? And the cashier replies, "Sir, you only have 100 euros in your account." Then the person gets angry and says to the cashier, "That is true for you, but not for me." Here is the reality. That won't work at the bank. If a person goes to the doctor, and the doctor says, "I am sorry, but you are dying." You cannot say, "It is arrogant to think you are right." It won't work in reality. The truth is not my truth or your truth. Either something is true, or it is not true. It cannot be both. Could you imagine telling the judge, "There is no absolute truth."? He will say, "Either you committed the crime or you did not. There is no other option." So I believe these shallow lies run through our culture and cause people to dismiss important truths about God. These statements are lies. They are smokescreens. They are meant to cause confusion and stop the conversation. Do not fall for the smokescreens. Either God is real, or he is not. Either Jesus is the Creator of the universe, or he is not. Either he rose from the dead, or he did not. Our opinions do not really matter, either something is true, or it is not.

Here, in our text, Paul clearly agrees with the Corinthians' statements about God. To the Corinthians who are worried about idols, Paul lovingly reminds them that, in the end, there is only one God and that is what really matters. They do not have to fear false gods. They need to understand that if they choose not to eat the meat, it cannot be for fear of what the Greek god Zeus will do to them. Zeus is not real. So while the puffed up Corinthians do have some right knowledge about God, they obviously don't understand the implications of that knowledge for their own lives or the lives of

others. In fact, as we have seen, and will see in this next passage, it is not our knowledge that matters, but how we lovingly use or don't use that knowledge to faithfully serve God and others for Christ's sake.

3. Loving others is more important than getting what you want

However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

(1 Corinthians 8:7-13)

The Apostle Paul begins by recognizing that for some of the Corinthians, the idol worship was real. The food was contaminated and so, in their mind, they were worshiping demons. Paul will talk about this again in 1 Corinthians 10:19-20, because it is so important. You see, to ask a person to participate in something that they wrongly believe to be sinful is no different from asking them to sin. Because, ultimately, in such cases, it is not the action that is a sin, it is their view of the action. If I believe it is wrong to drink, then for me it is wrong. Because I would be doing something I felt God was saying not to do. So, these puffed up brothers in their knowledge are encouraging people to commit what they think is a sin. They want to eat cheap meat, and so they ignorantly drag Christians into sin. Lovingly applying his knowledge to the situation, Paul responds by saying, *"Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat"* (v.13).

To really understand what God is saying here, we need to understand the conscience. This word appears in verses 7,10, and 12. But what exactly is our conscience? It might be easier to start by saying what it is not. It is not the Holy Spirit, because even unbelievers have a conscience. It is not the soul of a person, because it is a voice that the soul itself hears. It is a witness. It is like a recording that plays when we search to make a decision about something that is right or wrong. Maybe, you have seen the old animated stories or drawings where the person is sitting, and there is an angel and a demon on each shoulder. While creative, that is actually a crude and misleading illustration of the conscience. The precise working of the conscience is accurately described in Romans 2:15:

"They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them."

One funny thing I have noticed in children is that they sometimes repeat out loud what their conscience is saying to them. So, they stare at the other child who just took their toy, and they walk over to the child and hit them. Then they say out loud, "I should not have hit them," and then they say to themselves, "They deserved it because they took my toy." Both are products of the

conscience. In one case, it accuses the child; in the other case, it defends them. But it is not that simple. In the case of the child, if he ignores his conscience, then it will stop talking to him. The Bible has two metaphors for this. The conscience becomes seared, or it becomes callous:

“The insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.” (1 Timothy 4:2)

“They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality.” (Ephesians 4:19)

The idea is the same as a loss of feeling. If you burn your hand, the skin will harden and the nerves deaden. The same sort of thing happens with a callous. When I play the guitar often, my fingertips become calloused. I can't feel much on the tip. In the same way, if a person repeatedly disobeys their conscience, their conscience will become calloused, and their heart will become seared. The voice will get softer until it disappears. It will just stop talking. This is the fear Paul has. What he is saying is that you may think your rights and your freedom are yours to do whatever you want, but if you teach people to disobey their consciences, you are causing them to sin. You are making them easy targets for the devil. When they fall into sin, you will be partly guilty.

There are many ways in which we push others to sin. Maybe one of the easiest ways is with drinking in Spain. Some countries train their people to believe that drinking is a sin. Others come to faith from alcoholism and cannot have a drink without it causing them to want to get drunk. For some, it bothers them because it reminds them of their lost days. We need to be people of love who are quick to put other people first. We need to be quick to understand that just because the struggles of another are not my struggles, they are still real struggles. What about the way women dress? I remember a Christian woman saying that men could just look away if her clothes tempted them. She didn't care about them or think of them. Are you free to fill your minds with every movie and television series out there? Be careful what the eyes around you watch. Your freedom may lead others to sin against their own conscience. So to those that boast that they are free, he says love must come before freedom. Love is more important than doing what we want.

What about the other people, what does Paul say to them? He gives a few thoughts to them as well. He tells them their consciences are weak. That means that their consciences are not set correctly. They make laws that do not match God's laws. The conscience is something that can be reset. It can be taught. So take the time to listen to others. Try and learn why they believe what they believe. The weak conscience group might have a worse and even more dangerous problem. They are proud of their religious non-eating. They become self-righteous. Paul quickly tells them, **“Food will not commend us to God”** (v. 8). Here is the key. God has made us righteous in Christ. God has commended us to Himself by the blood of his Son. I can obey because I love God, but it is impossible to obey to earn something. Earning is putting the other person in debt. I work for you, and you owe me. Listen to one of the simplest but most important phrases you can ever learn: **GOD HAS NO DEBTS**. He absolutely never owes anyone anything. Let me tell a story to illustrate it.

A poor man and a rich man were friends. The rich man let the poor man borrow 10 million euros. The poor man took the money and began to spend the money. Sometimes he spent it well, but most of the time he spent it selfishly. He did not help other poor people. He did not care. He even used the rich man's money in ways that even offended the rich man. Then after years, the poor man took some of the money and bought gifts for his rich friend. The poor man bought the rich man a small car. The poor man bought the rich man the latest greatest mobile phone. Then after giving him the

gifts, the poor man said to the rich man, "I gave you a car and a nice phone, now you owe me." The rich man was very angry. He said, "How is it possible that I owe you anything?" "You bought the presents you gave me with my own money."

This sounds like an implausible story. But this is exactly what people try and do to God. God gives them everything: health, jobs, education, strength, and family. But incredibly, those same people still sin against him, whether big or little. Then they come to a temple or church. They pray a little, sing a little, and give a little money. Then they say to God, "You owe me. Look at me God; I am so good to you." People do things to get God to owe them. They fight to earn favor from God. Does it work? Never! Whatever God gives a person is a gift. It is grace. It is undeserved. Don't be deceived. I recently heard a person say, "I do everything God asks, and he still won't do what I ask him to do." That is a business relationship. God does not do business with his family. Please hear this: God is not against our effort; he is against earning. The Bible says to love God with all your heart, not earn God with all your heart. This is why God's Son had to die. Even our ways that feel right and religious can be a sin.

Maybe you are here today and you are trying to earn from God. Please stop. God is pleased by your faith, not your earning. Take some time. Look at yourself. Are you trying to force God to love you or to answer you? Turn away from all those things that are sucking your life away. Come to God in faith and fill that hole in your heart. It can only be filled by his love. It can never be filled by your earning. Please hear God lovingly say this to you:

*"For by grace are you saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God."
(Ephesians 2:8)*

Now go and do likewise, and graciously speak the Truth in love to your neighbor. Be right, but do right, and graciously speak the Truth in love to your neighbor.

Discussion questions:

1. Why do you think Paul does not just give the Corinthians a simple yes or no answer to the question of food sacrificed to idols?
2. What is the difference between being right and doing what is right?
3. Jesus says that he is the only way to God (John 14:6). Is that arrogant, if it is true?
4. What are some ways we can be a bad influence on those around us?
5. What is the conscience, and how is it helpful to the Christian?
6. Why is earning God's favor wrong? Why does it offend him so much?