

## “Liberty Yielded in Love”

### 1 Corinthians 8

**Hymns: Several from Billy Graham’s 1959 Crusade Songbook in celebration of his Homecoming.**

#### **Reading: 1 Corinthians 8**

Sometimes when you enter a main highway or come to an intersection, you will see a “Give Way” or “YIELD” sign. The sign doesn’t mean STOP; it doesn’t mean WRONG WAY; it doesn’t mean make a U-TURN; it doesn’t mean ROAD CLOSED. What it means is that it is your responsibility to slow down and look carefully before proceeding. If another car is coming YOU, not the oncoming car, must give way and yield your right to keep going and let them have the right of way. It’s YOUR responsibility to prevent an accident from happening.

This morning as we come to Ch. 8 of 1 Corinthians, we come to a “Give Way” sign a “YIELD” sign that Paul puts up as he continues to answer the specific questions which the Corinthian delegation had brought to him. The Corinthians had specific questions about what they should do in regards to food that had previously been sacrificed to idols. In answering their questions, Paul addresses and clarifies three fundamental principles: First, he deals with the principle of knowledge. Second he deals with the principle of conscience. Then he posts a big red Give Way sign (or big yellow YIELD sign for all our American listeners) as he deals with the principle of liberty. I’ve titled this morning’s message “Liberty Yielded in Love”.

**1. Principle of Knowledge (V. 1-7a)** *“Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. (Or “We all possess knowledge,” as you say). Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 2The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. 3But the man who loves God is known by God. 4So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. 5For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), 6yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. 7But not everyone knows this.”*

In order to understand what Paul is saying in this chapter, we have to understand the background and circumstances in which the Corinthians were living. In that day, there were two places to buy and eat meat. One was the market and the other was the pagan temples. The market meat was expensive and often poor quality, while the pagan temple meat was cheaper and of higher quality. The pagan temples had meat because people would bring an animal there as a sacrifice to their idols. They believed their idol gods were only interested in the spirit of the animal, so once it was killed, they had no use for the meat. And because the animals that were brought to sacrifice to their idols were usually the best animals they had, the temples had an abundance of high quality meat that needed to be disposed of. So they both sold raw meat and set up “steak houses” where people could go and eat. They had the volume, unlike the market vendors, which meant they could sell the meat and meals at a much cheaper price. The question had arisen as to whether it was right for a Christian to eat there or buy meat from there since it had been sacrifice to an idol? What do you think? Hold on to that first thought that just entered your mind, for it will be useful to you later in this message. It appears as if the delegation letter included both the question of rightness and their reasoning at the time. With that background let’s pick up the text.

Paul says in v. 1 “Now...about food sacrificed to idols”. This word “Now” is used numerous times through this letter and is a marker to let us know when Paul is dealing with and transitioning between his answers to their specific questions:

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- 7:1 Now for the matters you wrote about
- 7:8 Now to the unmarried and the widows I say
- 7:23 Now about virgins
- 12:1 Now about spiritual gifts
- 12:31 Now I will show you the most excellent way
- 13: 6 Now brothers...(regarding teaching about the gift of tongues)
- 15:1 Now brothers...(regarding the gospel and the resurrection)
- 16:1 Now about the collection for God’s people

Back in chapter 6, we saw several slogans that the Corinthians were touting to justify their reasoning and actions. We saw another slogan in chapter 7:1. So again, here in v. 1, we see another likely slogan that the Corinthians were using. They were fond of saying “We all possess knowledge”... “We all possess knowledge”. And to a degree this was true, even as Paul had said back in Chapter 1:4-6 “I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. 5For in him you have been enriched in every way, in all your speaking and in all your knowledge, 6because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you.” But Paul has a counter slogan of his own, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” he says. He employs this slogan to make a very clear distinction between simply having knowledge verses how to apply it.

Simply having knowledge does nothing but “puff up” the knowledge holder; it fills him with his own “hot air”; it fills him with pride. These are the ones who know lots of little Christian ditties like how old Methuselah was when he died; the name of Moses’s first wife; and what colour of thread was used on the pomegranates in the building of the tabernacle. These are all fine things to know. But by themselves they are nothing but prideful knowledge displayed in “hot air”. Of these kind of people, Paul says in v. 2 “The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.” In other words, when we really start to have and hold knowledge properly it produces humility and love.

Humility, because the more we know the more we realize how little we actually know. I’ve been a Christian now for 31 years and I can tell you I had more answers and knowledge and things all figured out back at the start than I do now. It’s been like peeling layers of an infinite onion. When God brings revelation and knowledge in one area, it uncovers ten other areas I haven’t even considered yet.

To have and hold knowledge properly also produce love as Paul explains in the great chapter of love Ch. 13, where he says in v.2 “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

But Paul has a very specific love in mind in his slogan: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up”. He says love literally -οικοδομεῖ (oikos, "a house" and domeō, "to build"). Love builds a house. In contrast to the boasting baby believers who know all the stats on all the flying trapeze performers under the Carnival Big Top, love produces humble, maturing sons and daughters who have said “Carne Vale” to the Big Top and have moved into The House; the spiritual equivalent of Frank Lloyd Wright’s “Falling Water”. They are committed to Him in whom, “...the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord...being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” (Eph. 2:21-22). In love, they are building a house and they themselves “like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering

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spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Pet.2:5). In other words, facts and knowledge are only of value if they are applied and applied to the right objective: Building The House.

In v. 4 Paul clearly affirms the truth and validity of the knowledge that idols are nothing at all in the world and that there is really only One God who as Father created all things and who as Jesus Christ is our Lord, Savior and Sustainer. These are critically important truths and Paul says WE KNOW this to be true. But there is a catch...v. 7 “But not everyone knows this.”

What Paul is saying is that not everyone has grown enough in their knowledge of what is in fact true, and therefore their consciences remain weak. As a result they are easily offended and in fact defiled by the issue of eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols.

**2. Principle of Conscience (V. 7b-8)** *“Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. 8But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.”*

There were some in Corinth who’s knowledge that there is really only One God who as Father created all things and who as Jesus Christ is our Lord, Savior and Sustainer, was not yet strong enough to re-educate their consciences to hold with conviction the fact that idols were nothing at all in the world. They had weak consciences. The word weak, used five times in the next five verses, and the word conscience, used three times in those same verses, is the principle Paul is addressing.

What is the conscience? How does it work? What are its limitations? Why is it important to educate it? These are all important questions and ones we need to be reminded of, particularly if we are going to understand Paul in this chapter and apply it to our lives.

What is the conscience? Conscience is that God created wiring in us all that tells us that we ought to do or not do something; it tells us to do the right that we know. What it does not tell us however is what that right is; it doesn’t tell us what the right is that we should know. And for that reason a conscience must be educated; it must grow in the knowledge of truth from God’s perspective and then hold that truth with conviction. The importance of listening to our conscience can hardly be overestimated when we remember that Paul said in Rom. 14:23, in the context of eating certain foods “But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin”. To violate one’s conscience means not to act in faith with conviction and that is to sin.

How does the conscience work? The conscience works like sharp square peg in our hearts. If we are confronted by a questionable situation, something we don’t have faith for or are convictionless about, it starts to turn and its corners cut into our hearts, warning us with an inward sensation against doing whatever it is confronting us. If the conscience is ignored time after time, the corners of the square are gradually worn down, and it becomes virtually a circle. When that circle turns in our hearts, we are left without any sensation of warning and we are left without a conscience.<sup>1</sup>

Paul described a person left without a conscience as “shipwrecked”. 1 Tim. 1:18-20 “Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, 19holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some

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<sup>1</sup> Michael P. Green; *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*; Baker Books; 1982; p. 78

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have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. 20Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.”

The conscience is important, but it is also fallible, and biblically can be either good, clear, guilty, corrupted, weak, or even seared. In Rom 2:15 Paul describes the fickleness of conscience that made the Gentile’s “...thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.” In other words, one minute your conscious will accuse you and the next minute it will let you off the hook...FOR THE EXACT SAME THOUGHT.

You see our conscience is good, but it’s not totally reliable. One trusted expositor says “When it rebukes us and tells us we are wrong, we should obey it. However, our conscience can also approve our easy going ways and can appeal too our vanity and flatter us. Then we need to beware of it.”<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, it is important that our consciences be strengthened and educated. And that is only accomplished by the renewing of our minds with the truth of God’s word and the wise help of mature believers.

If you are involved in any activity that you cannot do with a clear conscience, conviction and faith based on knowledge, then it is sin to YOU; maybe not to me or to someone else, but to YOU it IS sin. As Warren Wiersbe has said, “No Christian can “borrow” another Christian’s convictions and be honest in his Christian life. Unless he can hold them and practice them by faith, he is sinning. Even if a person’s convictions are immature, he must never violate his conscience.”<sup>3</sup> So, why is conscience and conviction so important? Because everything we do is done “unto the Lord” (Rom. 14:5-8). Whether eating and drinking or abstaining; whether living or dying, we are to do all things as unto Him with a conviction, energy and the whole heartedness that comes from the Spirit.

**3. Principle of Liberty (V.9-13)** *“Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. 10For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, won’t he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? 11So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. 12When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.”*

What was happening in Corinth was that the mature believers whose consciences were educated and knew that idols were nothing in the world at all, were eating meat at the temples or buying meat there that had been previously sacrificed to idols. They understood what the Apostle Paul declared in Rom. 14:20 that “All food is clean”. But what these mature believers failed to grasp was the rest of that verse, which says “...but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. 21It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.” The weak conscience believers saw this happening and were being emboldened to violate their consciences.

Here is where Paul places his big red Give Way sign (yellow YIELD) sign. While each weak conscience and immature believer is responsible before the Lord for his own actions, it is also true that the

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<sup>2</sup> J. Vernon McGee; *1 Corinthians; Through The Bible Books; Pasadena Cal; 1977; p. 52*

<sup>3</sup> Warren Wiersbe; *Romans- Be Right; Victor Books; p.168*

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mature members of the body of Christ have a responsibility to live in such a way that they do not cause the weak to violate their conscience.

Paul’s YIELD sign says in v. 9 to “be careful” (βλέπετε). This is a command. It means to be observant; beware; be alert. It carries the idea to see something physical with spiritual perception and act accordingly.<sup>4</sup> While the mature and conscience educated believers had freedom; liberty; rights to eat meat sacrificed to idols, they were to yield those rights for the sake of their weak brothers. They were to approach every intersection in life, where a weak brother might be coming the other way, and they were to yield; to give way. In doing so they would avoid five disastrous accidents:

1. **Avoid Becoming A Stumbling Block.** Lit. πρόσκομμα –proskomma; that over which the soul stumbles, by which it is impelled to sin. Last year, I got up in the middle of the night to get a drink of water. As I came back to bed, in the pitch dark of my bedroom, I stubbed my toe on the corner of the foot of the bed. Yes, I was impelled to sin with a few choice expletives, but I managed to bite my tongue to keep from waking the whole neighbourhood up. The next morning my toe was purple and I could hardly walk, much less get it inside my shoe. This seriously hindered my ability to keep up my walking exercise schedule for a week or so and that was seriously depressing.

You and I need to be careful that we don’t become that kind of “toe-stubber” to the weak consciences around us. Some people’s consciences are totally “in the dark” about your Christian liberty. And they may seriously injure their walk if you become a careless stumbling block to them in the exercising of your rights. “Some people have the false notion that the *strong* Christians are those who live by rules and regulations and who get offended when others exercise their freedom in Christ; but such is not the case. It is the *weak* Christians who must have the security of law and who are afraid to use their freedom in Christ. It is the weak Christians who are prone to judge and criticize stronger believers and to stumble over what they do. This of course, makes it difficult for the strong saints to minister to their weaker brothers and sisters.”<sup>5</sup>

The sign says yield; give way to the oncoming brother... be a stepping stone for him rather than a stumbling block. If you are careful, observant and alert and there is no oncoming weak conscience traffic, then you are free to proceed in full freedom, liberty and rights.

2. **Avoid Destroying Your Weak Brother.** The word destroy used here in v. 11 often refers to physical death. The idea is not that you shouldn’t kill your brother. Rather, that you should not cause him to violate his conscience to the point that he may eventually so unrepentantly sin against his own conscience that he may undergo the sever discipline of death. 1 John 5: 16-17 “16If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. 17All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.” The picture here is of the accident you cause when you blow past the give way sign right in front of a “P-plater” who over corrects to avoid you and winds up dead in the ditch.
3. **Avoid Sinning Against Your Weak Brother and Christ.** To not “be careful” and to stumble weak consciences, is actually to sin against Christ Himself. For all of us, mature and immature, are

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<sup>4</sup> HELPS Word Studies; Copyright © 1987, 2011 by Helps Ministries, Inc.

<sup>5</sup> Warren Wiersbe; 1 Corinthians - Be Wise; Victor Books; 1984; p.89

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members of His Body. Paul learned this on the road to Damascus. “He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” 5 “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. 6 “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. (Acts 9:4-6)

Is there anything you would not yield to Christ if He asked you to? If Jesus Himself came to you and personally told you that something you were doing was actually sinning against Him, wouldn't you humbly and quickly give it up? Verse 12 tells us Christ and the weak brother are the same person.

4. **Avoid Wounding Your Weak Brother.** The word wounding here is τύπτοντες from tupto which means a strengthened form of to “thump” or pummel properly with a stick or bastinado—“*Foot whipping or bastinado is a method of corporal punishment which consists in hitting the bare soles of a person's feet. Unlike most types of flogging, this punishment was meant to be more painful than it was to cause actual injury to the victim*”<sup>6</sup>), but in any case by repeated blows; thus differing from paio and patasso, which denote a (usually single) blow with the hand or any instrument, or plesso with the fist (or a hammer), or rhapizo with the palm; as well as from tugchano, an accidental collision); by implication, to punish; figuratively, to offend (the conscience) -- beat, smite, strike, wound.<sup>7</sup>

The image of bastinado or foot whipping is a powerful warning about the effect we can have on a weaker brother's walk with the Lord if we ignore the YIELD sign and have our way. We are actually pummeling the soles of his feet, making a weak brother's walk with Jesus impossible.

5. **Avoid Scandalizing Your Weak Brother.** In v. 13 Paul says “Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.” The word he uses here is to scandalize σκάνδαλον- meaning “the movable stick or trigger (‘trigger’) of a trap;<sup>8</sup> it stresses the method or means of entrapment; how someone is caught by their own devices like their personal bias or carnal thinking.<sup>9</sup>

To scandalize your weak brother is like the old stick and box rabbit trap. What is liberty for you is bait for them and their weak conscience blunders into the stick triggering their entrapment. They did it to themselves, yes. But you provided the bait by running the Give Way sign.

Paul says if what he ate risked scandalizing and entrapping his brother, he would never eat meat again. And I dare say he would have said the same thing about any other potential scandalon.

As we come to the close of this message, and by way of **application** let me pose a couple of questions to us all:

**First**, I haven't seen any idol meat temples around here, so that can't be an application for us. But what kind of freedom, liberty or rights do you model on social media in regards to your drinking, eating, possessions, dress, and the stewardship of your God given time, talents and treasure? I'm amazed at how many images I see of professing believers on Facebook who in almost every post or

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<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot\\_whipping](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot_whipping)

<sup>7</sup> Strong's Exhaustive Concordance <http://biblehub.com/greek/5180.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Thayer's Greek Lexicon

<sup>9</sup> HELPS Word Studies; copyright © 1987, 2011 by Helps Ministries, Inc.

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picture seem to either have an alcoholic beverage in their hands or else pictures of bottles of wine or something else prominently displayed. I went back through my own Facebook posts over the past several years and found a couple of my own. Now, don't get me wrong here. I am NOT commenting or questioning the freedom of a Christian to drink alcohol (provided drunkenness is not the result), nor am I suggesting a legalism about ever being seen enjoying a drink...but I am questioning whether the folks **who make a habit of this display** have actually considered the potential stumbling, destroying, sinning, wounding and scandalizing impact they could have on a weak believer's conscience...and never even know it. But God does. He knows. He sees it all and one day every believer will stand before Him and give an account of his or her stewardship....social media included. Be careful.

**Second**, how clear is your conscience about the freedom or liberty of rights you exercise regarding any and every area of your life? Is there any check in your spirit as that sharp square peg turns in your heart warning you that you are not living up to what you know is right? If so, don't ignore it. Stop and regain an edified conviction about it through prayer, the study of God's word and in discipleship with a mature brother or sister. To continue to violate your conscience is to risk shipwreck of your faith. Be Careful.

**Finally**, when you are with other Christians, is it knowledge or love that drives your encounters? Is it “duelling banjos of Christian trivial pursuit” that puffs you up or is it seen as an opportunity for Building the House together with honesty and reality? Be Careful.

At these key intersections where Paul's Give Way and YIELD sign is clearly visible, let us slow down and yield our liberty in love to our brothers and sisters and to Christ Himself.

Lets pray...