

1 Corinthians: A Letter to a Troubled Church
A Loving Conscience (1 Corinthians 8:1-13)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on April 2, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ In our study of 1 Corinthians, that we've been in since the start of the year, there's been a consistent theme running through these chapters. **It's the theme of division.** Various issues were dividing this church. Factions were forming. Sides were being drawn. Discord and disunity were rampant. The Corinthians were a troubled church.
 - **Now we've already noted that one underlying cause behind their division was their arrogance – their spiritual pride.** Paul already pointed out how the claim that some were making – to have achieved a higher level of spirituality than their peers – had driven a wedge between fellow church members.
 - In chapter 7, he brought up a letter they had previously written to him where they had raised various issues. It's likely to have come from a faction in the church trying to justify their positions. Chapter 7 related to their particular position on sex and marriage.

- ❖ Well, in today's text, in chapter 8, Paul responds to another matter they raised. This time, this faction was trying to justify their position on the contentious issue of eating meat that had been offered to idols. I know that sounds like a strange thing to be arguing over.
 - **But, in those days, there was a serious disagreement over whether a Christian can, in good conscience, eat food offered to an idol OR would that be inherently wrong and sinful?** Some saw it as a matter of Christian freedom, so it wasn't a problem. But others viewed the eating of meat sacrificed to idols as a participation in the idolatrous worship that it originated from.
 - So for some in the church, their consciences allowed them to eat the meat, even eating it in the context of a meal in an idol's temple. But for others in the church, their consciences prevented them from doing any of that.

- ❖ **You can imagine how both sides would've viewed the other as less spiritual.** You either think the other side is too legalistic – because their consciences are oversensitive on this issue. Or you think the other side is too permissive – because their consciences are too insensitive. **Either way, the main problem is that there are sides being drawn in the one body of Christ!** Division is the problem. And here it relates to the Christian conscience.

- ❖ So before we get into the details of their disagreement, let's first make sure we're on the same page in our understanding of the conscience. What is your conscience? **The conscience is often described as that inner voice, in every one of us, that bears witness to what is right or wrong.** Everyone has a conscience. Christians *and* non-Christians. It's part of the *imago dei* that we all share.
 - Now sadly, there are some in society with consciences so damaged, so seared, that they would be rightly called sociopaths. **But everyone else has a working conscience that will prick and prod; accuse or excuse; comfort or convict.** It's that inner voice telling you what is right or wrong.

- ❖ And that speaks to the conscience's limited function. **It only deals in the category of right and wrong.** Its job is *not* to help you make decisions about what school to apply for; who you should marry; where you should live; whether you should change your career, etc. Answering that is the job of Spirit-led, Scripture-informed wisdom.
 - **The conscience only has two speeds – right or wrong; sinful or not sinful; black or white.** It doesn't handle shades of grey very well. It'll either accuse you or excuse you. So if you consult your conscience to help you make a decision, make sure it's one that deals with an issue of right or wrong. If you're looking for advice on how to choose between good, better, or best – don't look to your conscience.
 - The conscience deals with good or bad; right or wrong. Now that sounds pretty straightforward and clear. But of course, we know it's far from that. **Matters of conscience are complicated because – even though we only have two speeds – we have different interpretations of the speed limit.** We all have different interpretations of what is right and wrong.

- ❖ In the 1st-century Corinthian church, there were clashing consciences over the rightness or wrongness of eating food offered to idols. **In the 21st-century American church, there are clashing consciences, between fellow Christians, over the rightness or wrongness of –** COVID vaccines; mask mandates; voting Republican or Democrat; using someone's preferred pronouns; behaviors like drinking alcohol, smoking, or recreational drug use, etc.
 - Now if any of those issues caught your attention and you're thinking, "How is that controversial? It's obvious what's right. Of course, a Christian should ...," – that just goes to show how important this topic is. **It's very likely that your conscience won't perfectly match with other Christians – even Christians here sitting around you.**

- ❖ If we want to preserve the unity of our church – to resist the kind of divisions that can form when consciences clash – then we must learn how to tend to our own consciences, while being sensitive to each other's. So to do that, I want us to consider three lessons to be learned: (1) A strong, informed conscience – without love – can be destructive; (2) A weak, misinformed conscience – without instruction – can be oversensitive; (3) A strong, informed conscience – guided by selfless love – can be truly free.

A Strong, Informed Conscience Without Love

- ❖ **First, let's consider how a strong, informed conscience – without love – can be destructive.** That is, it can tear down a church when the goal is to build it up. Now I think **Paul is clear in his preference for every Christian to develop a strong and informed conscience.** Back in chapter 1, he was commending the Corinthians for being a theologically-knowledgeable and spiritually-gifted church. And yet, as we'll see later in chapter 13, Paul is disappointed in how much they lack in love.
 - **A strong and informed conscience is better than a weak and misinformed one, but if you have not love, then you're just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.** If you have not love, you are nothing and you gain nothing (13:1-3). You'll just destroy your community.

- ❖ **Now Paul begins, in chapter 8:1, addressing another matter that was dividing the church.** “*Now concerning food offered to idols.*” This was an issue raised in their previous letter. Those with strong consciences were likely trying to justify their eating of such food.
 - Now some historical background will help. **The Greek word (*eidōlothyta*) that’s translated here by the phrase “*food offered to idols*” refers to sacrificial meat.** When a worshipper offered an sacrificial animal in a pagan temple, part of it would’ve been burned on the altar – treated as the portion for that idol. But, then, some of that meat would’ve been eaten on temple grounds – either in an explicitly religious feast (as an extension of their worship) or in a non-idolatrous social meal with no religious sacrifice involved. And if there was anything leftover, the rest would be sold in the meat market for people to take home for personal consumption.

- ❖ So when dealing with this issue of eating meat offered to idols, we need to distinguish between three contexts. **First, there’s the context of a Christian purchasing this kind of meat from the meat market to eat at home, knowing it had previously been offered to an idol.** Does the origin of the meat – and its association with idol worship – necessarily taint it, making it unholy for Christians to consume? There were believers in Corinth who thought it was fine; while others considered it idolatrous and wrong. Paul addresses this particular context here in our text and later in chapter 10:23-33.
 - Then there’s the more contentious scenario where the meat is consumed in the temple itself. But even in this scenario, there are distinctions to be made. **The second context is where a Christian eats this meat while participating in one of those explicitly religious feasts that are an extension of idol worship.** Paul will directly address this in chapter 10:14-22, and there he’s black and white about it. He says it is wrong to participate because that is direct participation in idolatry. This should *not* be a matter of conscience but a matter of obedience. Flee that kind of idolatry (10:14).

- ❖ **But there’s a third context and that’s where a Christian eats this meat in an idol’s temple, but in one of those non-idolatrous social events – much like eating in a public restaurant today.** Back then, it was common for trade guilds to conduct their feasts in a temple. So if you’re a mason, you’d be invited to attend a feast put on by the local masonry guild. Well, it’s not like they had a booming restaurant scene in Corinth. You’d hold that meal in a temple because, back then, temples served as public dining halls.
 - It’s like if a non-Christian showed up at church today at 12:30 just to grab some lunch with friends. **Just because the man is eating in a church building doesn’t mean he’s participating in our worship of the Lord. So some, in the Corinthian church, saw it the same way.** To them, it was a non-issue. They could eat a meal in that context with a clean conscience knowing they weren’t there to worship the idol.
 - **But others in the church felt strongly that any kind of meal conducted in an idol’s temple would be religious by nature and would associate you with idolatry.** So their consciences could not allow them to eat in an idol’s temple. They saw it as sinful.

- ❖ If it helps to have a contemporary example, then think about eating in Chinatown. I'm sure many of you have had the experience of walking into a Chinese restaurant where – right at the entrance – the owners have placed a plate of oranges and incense in front of a statue of Buddha. They want Buddha to bless them with prosperity. **So if prayers to an idol are being made in that restaurant – would it be wrong for Christians to dine there?**
 - I assume most of you can eat in that restaurant with a clean conscience. But what if you were walking in with another Christian who immediately turns around and leaves the restaurant. **You ask why and they say, “Because of that Buddha. There’s idol worship taking place in there. We’re Christians – we can’t eat in there.”** Now let’s say you were really looking forward to trying out this new popular restaurant. Or just imagine if you two were there for a birthday dinner for a mutual friend, and everyone is already inside and seated. You would be really disappointed to miss out on the party, but your friend refuses to go in. In this hypothetical, what would you do?

- ❖ That question gets to the heart of our text. **Because Paul is mainly concerned to instruct those in the church with strong, informed consciences.** They apparently knew that others with weaker consciences were offended by their actions – with some reluctantly joining them in those meals but against conscience. Meaning they were led to do what their consciences were telling them was wrong.
 - But these members with stronger, informed consciences didn’t seem to care. **They did what they wanted because they knew the truth.** They knew that idols aren’t real. They’re statues of stone. They knew there is only one true God who eternally exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **They knew that every square inch on this earth ultimately belongs to the Lord, so even if they’re eating in an idol’s temple, they knew they can still enjoy that food in the Lord’s presence and for his glory.**
 - So even though it was potentially harming the faith of their brothers and sisters with weaker consciences, they just pressed on – justifying their behavior by an appeal to their superior knowledge on this matter.

- ❖ Look at v1 and notice how the ESV translators put that phrase in quotations, “*all of us possess knowledge.*” I think they’ve accurately identified that phrase as a quote from that previous letter to Paul. **It’s like they were saying, “Look, Paul, I’m sorry these people are offended, but come on, you and I know they just don’t know better.** We know it’s not a sin. All of us possess this knowledge. You know, maybe, from time to time, we need to provoke our friends with weaker consciences in order to lead them to the same knowledge.”
 - Listen to Paul’s response to that kind of justification. “*We know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. ²If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.*” (8:1-3)

- ❖ **Notice how Paul doesn't disagree with their knowledge. Their theology doesn't need correcting.** He goes on to affirm, in vv4-6, their grasp of the theological facts. Look at v4, *“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.”*” Again, these quotations are likely coming from the stronger brothers, and in vv5-6, Paul suggests that he agrees with them.
 - **It's not their theology he's trying to correct – it's their attitude.** He disagrees with their prideful contempt for weaker brothers. He's saying, “Your knowledge is correct, which is why your conscience is strong. **But a strong, informed conscience – without love – fails to build up others in their faith. It just puffs up your ego.**”
- ❖ Paul goes on to warn that your correct knowledge might *“become a stumbling block to the weak.”* (v9) **You might lead a weaker brother to follow in your steps and act against conscience – committing what his conscience tells him is a sin.** Your correct knowledge will damage – perhaps even destroy – his faith (v11). You will have sinned against your weaker brother and wounded his conscience. Ultimately you will have sinned against Christ (v12). He who died for both you and your weaker brother.
- ❖ This is a word of correction that many of us need to hear. In that scenario, standing outside that Chinese restaurant, many of us might try to correct that brother on the spot. And tell him, “It's no big deal. Stop being so sensitive. Let's go inside.” **Many of us would probably grow frustrated with that brother, and it's no surprise if we begin to grow relationally distant because we feel like he's too prudish, too legalistic. He's no fun to be around.** That's how relational cracks begins to form. That's how those of us with strong, informed consciences can grow puffed up in pride and contribute to the collapse of a community.

A Weak, Misinformed Conscience Without Instruction

- ❖ Now even though Paul's main focus is to correct the attitude of those with strong, informed consciences, he also has something to say to weaker brothers. Here is our second lesson to learn: **A weak, misinformed conscience – without instruction – can be oversensitive.**
 - Paul goes on, in v7 to address those who don't recognize that eating food offered to idols is permissible – even eating it in an idol's temple in a social dinner. He describes those who don't have this knowledge as having weak consciences. *“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.”*
- ❖ **Now at first glance, it seems like Paul is using labels of weak and strong to make value judgments – declaring some Christians to be more spiritual than others.** But that doesn't fit the context of the letter. Remember, the problem of division in the Corinthian church stems from this arrogant attitude of seeing yourself as more spiritual than fellow Christians. **So Paul is clearly not siding with the stronger ones. He's trying to correct them.**

- ❖ So when Paul says someone has a weak conscience, that's not an insult. **By weak, he just means a conscience that's easily wounded** (v12). It's oversensitive and easily pricked. That person sees most issues in black and white – as matters of sin and disobedience. Now Paul is not suggesting that we should never be black and white about things or that there aren't clear matters of right and wrong. But he is asking: **Where are you drawing your convictions?** What's informing your conscience to determine what is right or wrong?
 - **Paul is suggesting that those with weaker consciences should consider the possibility that they're being stricter than God.** What if you have more rules burdening your conscience than God has in Scripture? When you have more convictions than God himself, then your conscience will be easily pricked or wounded. That's what Paul means by having a weak conscience.

- ❖ Here's another example. **Imagine a Christian whose conscience tells him it's wrong to drink coffee.** Because coffee is a stimulant with addictive qualities. That's not a farfetched example. There are religious groups that prohibit the drinking of coffee like the Mormons or Muslims. Well, didn't Paul say in chapter 6:12 that all things are lawful for me but I will not be dominated by anything? **So this Christian draws the conclusion that it would be wrong to partake of anything that's addictive – that could have dominance over your impulses.**
 - Now I think most of us would consider this an example of a weak conscience. We don't think drinking coffee is a sin. We'd say this brother is misinformed about what God's Word permits or restricts. **We'd try to help him calibrate his conscience, so it more closely aligns with the Word.**

- ❖ **Now for that to happen, he's going to have to shed some rules.** Rules that he has probably been living by for some time. Rules he has strictly held himself to and probably held others to. Letting go of those rules can be hard to do, but that's how you strengthen your conscience.
 - In our example, you can try to help that brother develop a more theologically-informed position – that would permit him to drink coffee if he wanted. He doesn't have to drink coffee. Maybe he doesn't like the taste. **But what's important is that he doesn't judge or condemn anyone who does enjoy a cup of coffee.** What's important is that our consciences don't clash and that our unity is preserved.

- ❖ **I'm sure that was Paul's hope for the Corinthian church. I'm sure he wanted those with weak consciences – when it came to the issue of food offered to idols – to develop a more theologically-informed position.** He would want their consciences to be less burdened by so many rules and more calibrated to Scripture.
 - They don't have to eat in an idol's temple. They don't have to buy meat that was used for idol worship. They don't even have to like meat. What's more important is that they don't judge or condemn any Christian who does. **What's more important is that they maintain the unity of the Spirit by tending to their own consciences.**

A Strong, Informed Conscience Guided by Selfless Love

- ❖ But, as we've said, in this passage, Paul is more focused on those with strong, informed consciences. Between these two factions divided over the issue of eating food offered to idols – Paul expects those with strong, informed consciences to take the initiative. To make the first move towards their weaker brothers and sisters.
 - Yes, Paul would prefer all believers to develop a strong and informed conscience – but one that's guided by love. That leads to our third lesson to learn: **A strong, informed conscience – guided by selfless love – can be truly free.**

- ❖ Look at v8. Here Paul makes it clear that – on the issue itself – he agrees with those with strong, informed consciences. *“Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.”* **So if your conscience is free and allows you to eat food offered to idols – then eat to the glory of God!** You are free in Christ. You have that right to eat that meat. But...
 - Look at v9, *“⁹But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For 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? ¹¹And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹²Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.”*

- ❖ Paul's message – to those with strong, informed consciences – is that, yes, you're free. **You have Christian freedom. But that's not a freedom to do whatever I want and nobody better judge me!** No, that's the attitude Paul was trying to correct among the Corinthians.
 - **In this letter, he's explaining how that understanding of Christian freedom is short-sighted and selfish.** It fails to appreciate the full extent of our freedom in Christ. Listen to v9 again, *“But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”* **So if the exercise of your Christian freedom causes a brother or sister in Christ to stumble in their walk – and you don't care about that – then you're not as free as you think yourself to be.**

- ❖ What do I mean by that? When we think about Christian freedom, we tend to think of that in terms of being free from legalism; being free from a rules-based religion; being free to live according to your conscience – as long as you're not violating Scripture.
 - But that falls so short of what it means to be truly free in Christ. **Freedom in Christ doesn't mean you're free to do whatever you want as long as it is not sin.** Christ didn't die to free you to live a self-centered life where you're only concerned with being able to do what you want – as long as it's not sin – even though it might be a stumbling block to others.
 - That was our condition *before* Jesus died for us. We were born enslaved to self-centered desires. **Without Christ, we were *not* free to seek the good of others.** We were sinners with selfish hearts.

- ❖ But when you turn to Jesus and trust in him, the enslaving power of sin is broken, and you're truly free! **True Christian freedom means you're finally free to act in whatever way is needed to better love others – even if that means laying aside certain freedoms.**
 - That was Paul's sentiment in v13, "*Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*" Paul is saying, "Sure, I love meat. I love eating meat in those social dinners in an idol's temple because of all the non-Christians I get to reach out to. But, in the end, I love my brothers and sisters in Christ far more. So if eating this meat will make them stumble, then pass the vegetables! I care about other Christians way more than I care about meat."

- ❖ That's how Paul understood Christian freedom. Being free in Christ is fundamentally about freeing you from the grips of sin and selfishness. **Where you're now free to do whatever it takes to better love others – even if that means limiting your freedom or laying aside your rights.** That is the fullest extent of Christian freedom.
 - **If you think about it, that's what Christ did for us. He limited his divine freedom. He laid aside his divine rights.** He emptied himself by taking the form of a servant and humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:7-8). Why? So that he could better love us. So he could redeem us and unify us as the church – as one family, one body, one bride.

- ❖ Church, let's be thankful that we are free in Christ. **But more than that, let's be selfless and loving – knowing that we're free enough to lay down our freedoms and rights.** We don't have to cling to them anymore. We're free in Christ!
 - Let me conclude by returning to that hypothetical scenario – standing outside that Chinese restaurant with that Christian friend who refuses to go in. Yes, you would be free in Christ to walk in and enjoy a meal without giving a moment's notice to the statue at the entrance. You would *not* be committing idolatry.
 - But neither would you be loving your friend. **As a Christian, you are so free in Christ that you're free enough to die to your own self-interest.** To die to your disappointment in missing out on that dinner with friends. Christian love calls you to lay aside your Christian freedom and suggest another restaurant that the two of you can enjoy together – in good conscience. **Christ died and rose again for you to become *that* kind of selfless, loving friend.**