

Showing Strength in the Presence of the Weak

I Corinthians 8

By [Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas](#)

Now turn with me to I Corinthians, chapter eight. Now we are looking at keys, twelve of them, of spiritual maturity. We've had a little break over the last couple of weeks, but now we've come to number nine, and that is "Showing Strength in the Presence of the Weak." And I thought this chapter would fulfill what I want to say in this regard. So, turn with me, then to I Corinthians, chapter eight. We'll read from the first verse.

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if any one loves God, he is known by Him. Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we exist through Him. However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble.

So far, God's holy and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, as we come now to a portion of Scripture that perhaps is somewhat unfamiliar to us, and on the surface looks a little difficult, we know that You have caused it to be inspired; we know that You have something here for us

to learn, and we are eager to learn it. We want to be Your disciples, and we want to grow in grace, and we do want to be spiritually mature. Hear us, and help us and bless us by Your Spirit for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Now, this sounds, doesn't it, like an argument for Christian vegetarianism. I was actually in the presence of a couple, indeed, an entire family, in a conference in South Africa just a few days ago now, that were vegetarians. And we were eating—I'm not sure quite what—but vegetables it wasn't. I think we were told afterwards, and I wish I hadn't known—I knew it wasn't anything that I'd eaten before. But it sounds as though Paul is saying in verse 13, "if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again." What in the world is this chapter about?

Cain (that is, Adam and Eve's son, Cain) said in an arrogant way to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" He was, of course, reflecting the 'me-ism' that's the fruit of the fall. His concern was about himself, about what pleased him, about what gratified him, his rights, his provisions. He wasn't concerned about his brother. He didn't want to be concerned about his brother. 'I couldn't care less about anyone else. It's me I'm concerned about.'

Well, that's what this chapter is about. The issue that is before us here is old. It's not an issue that you or I are ever likely to face. When you go into Kroger or Jitney Jungle, you're not likely to be faced with this particular problem: "Has this piece of pork been offered to an idol?" Well, in some senses, maybe it has...but not quite in the same sense as it is here. But Paul is concerned about a principle, and it's an abiding principle. It's a principle that we face every day of our lives as Christians. He's concerned about a spirit, an attitude; a selfishness, a carelessness about other people, and particularly about Christians — what they think, what their knowledge is, what their conscience is telling them. And Paul is telling them here, we trample on the consciences of others a great deal of the time. We can be the cause and the reason why other people stumble, why other Christians fall into sin.

We don't want that on our conscience. You don't want to be the reason why another Christian falls into sin. You don't want to be the mechanism whereby that Christian stumbles. Oh, the Corinthians were a self-centered bunch. That's part of the problem with the church at Corinth, no matter what issue Paul is dealing with, whether it's the gifts of the S

It's the same here, and a section now begins here in chapter eight that actually goes all the way through to the first verse of chapter eleven. Paul is dealing with Christian behavior. He's dealing with a practical issue. He's concerned about an attitude, a spirit that the Corinthian Christians have that is poisoning the fellowship of God. The Corinthians were very good at doing things with only themselves in mind; of behaving in such a way as though no one else was there. It was individualism at its worst: what pleases me, what suits me. They had little

realization that they were part of the body of Jesus Christ. That's why Paul says in connection with the Lord's Supper that one of the things that they must do is to discern the Lord's body. That is to say, discern the fact that they are members of the body of Jesus Christ, that they belong to each other; that we are brothers and sisters in fellowship and in relationship with each other.

Several centuries ago now, of course, John Donne, the Elizabethan poet expressed it in those famous words, "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main [and so forth]...never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee." No man is an island. Most of the problems that we face in church life have to do with that issue, because we are behaving selfishly. We're behaving as if we're the only ones in the picture. We're not thinking about our partner, we're not thinking about our wives or our husbands or our children, or other Christians; the strong ones, the weak ones. Most of our pastoral problems in the church have to do with this particular issue.

I want to look first at what that issue is. Secondly, I want to look at Paul's argument; thirdly, I want to look at Paul's answer; and fourthly, I want to say something by way of application.

I. What's the issue?

The issue is a very simple one. He tells us in verses one and three. In every city in the ancient world, there were many temples. You would walk down a street, you would walk down the high street, you would walk down side streets, and you would see temples: heathen temples. They were the restaurants of the ancient world. They were the places where people would gather together to eat. They were the places where civic functions were held. The mayor, if I can be guilty now of an anachronism...but, the mayor, if he wanted to hold a civic function, would often hire out the temple because the temples were places where food could be purchased and eaten. Festivals were often held in the temple. They didn't have the scruples—you know, the liberals didn't have the scruples in the first century about faith-based civic functions that would send people all over the city now, today—it would be in the temple that these things would take place. If you had a family occasion and your house wasn't big enough, you'd hire out the temple. If you had a wedding anniversary—Rosemary's and my anniversary, you know, we would have been in the temple. We were in South Africa, so I didn't have to invite any of you! But if we'd been here, we'd have had to hire out this temple if we were in the first century. Professional groups would meet—businessmen, the annual civic luncheon, the New Year's Eve party would be held in the temple. And all of those occasions would involve eating food.

Sounds great, doesn't it? Now here comes the problem. When you're told at a dinner party—you go to Kroger, you go to Jitney Jungle, you go to Piggly Wiggly, wherever—and you get your meat. You get your pork or your beef or your chicken

or whatever it is, and it comes in cellophane, and it comes in nice sanitized white plastic trays. And when you pick it up and it's sort of sloshing about in blood, you put it back and you take another one because you don't want to have to deal with all of that mess.

But in the ancient world, it wasn't like that. If you wanted to buy a piece of beef or some pork or a chicken, you'd have to go to the temple. And they would be selling that meat there. It would be out in the open, the flies would be buzzing all over it, but the problem was not the sanitaryness of it. The problem was that that meat had been an hour before offered up to some god or some goddess in some mumbo-jumbo of a religious ritual. And the problem is that by purchasing that meat and eating that meat, are you then yourself condoning that religious mumbo-jumbo? Are you becoming a part of it?

If you went to Apollo's temple, there'd be a section of the temple where you could buy meat, because they were sacrificing animals; and some of it would be burnt on an altar, as it was in Jewish customs. But a whole lot of it was there, ready for the taking, for the selling. It was a great business, and there were hawkers and butchers, and that's where you bought your meat. If you went to Apollo's temple, the meat would have been sacrificed, of course, to Apollo: part of it burned on the altar, and the rest given to the people to eat.

II. The problem: should Christians be present at functions in temples where the food had been offered to an idol. That's the problem.

Whether it is right for a believer to go to a temple and take part in that kind of meal. Was it right, say, if you were a member of a family, you'd been converted, you'd become a Christian but your family wasn't...they weren't Christians, and it was their wedding anniversary...your parents' wedding anniversary, and they said, 'We're having a party. It's our Golden Jubilee party. It's at the temple down on such-and-such a street. You're going to be there, aren't you?' What are you going to say? Can you sense some of the problem, the tension? Can I go there as a Christian? Can I be present in a temple, in a heathen temple? Can I eat this meat that's been offered to these gods?

And it was quite an issue, because supposing you decided not to go. Supposing you had a conscience about being in a temple. You can understand that. Supposing you had a conscience about not eating meat that had been offered to idols. You could understand somebody having a scruple about that. It was going to cause a whole lot of ruckus and offense. I mean, you can imagine that things between you and your parents weren't going to be good if you weren't there at that Jubilee celebration in the temple. No matter what kind of explanation you were going to give if you weren't there.

Supposing you belonged to the leather industry, and the leather industry trade

union was having their annual function in the temple—as they would—and you weren't there. There were consequences. There were consequences for evangelism; there were consequences for your relationship with your family; there were consequences for your relationship with other Christians, because some would approve of it and some would condemn it. There are always Christians ready to condemn everything that you do. It was a serious matter.

Now, the Corinthians had contacted Paul earlier about their problem, and Paul had said what we are to do about these meals offered to heathen gods—should we eat of these meals or should we not—Paul seems to have written back at some earlier time and said, “You should not be present in the temple at such times as when these meals are being served.” That's what Paul seems to have said. You shouldn't go. You shouldn't participate. You should have nothing to do with this. That's the issue.

Now, later on Paul deals with the issue of whether or not it's right to eat that meat if it's offered to you, say, in a private setting. And the answer to that question begins with the words, ‘Well, it depends.’ But that's not the issue we're dealing with here. Here the issue Paul seems to have answered by saying, ‘Stay away.’

III. Now let's look at the argument.

What is Paul's argument? And what was the argument that Paul was having to deal with in terms of what some Christians were saying? Now, some Christians seemed to be saying they didn't like what Paul had written. There were folk in Corinth who were argumentative. Whatever Paul said, they said the opposite.

And they had two points. First they say, Paul, you know that Apollo doesn't exist. You know that. You know that these gods that they sacrifice to, they don't exist. There's only one God, our Father in heaven. Through Jesus Christ we have come to know and to worship Him. The Trinitarian God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—there's only one God. These other gods, these heathen gods, they may sacrifice to whoever: Zeus or Apollo or Aphrodite or whoever it is, but they don't exist. They are figments of their imagination. They're idols. And you know what an idol is. You remember what Isaiah said about idols. You know, you chop down a tree and you cut half of it and you chop it into wood, and you put it in the fire and you warm your hands and you do all the cooking; and the other half you shape into an idol, and you bow down and you worship it. It's as stupid as that. Idols are nothing. There's no such thing as another God, so they're not actually worshipping other gods. They're not actually devoting this meat to other gods, because there are no other gods. There's just one.

Sounds plausible, doesn't it? And not only that, but there's a second part to their argument. And their argument is God doesn't mind what we eat.

Now, you may be a vegetarian, but don't you try and convince me of vegetarianism from the Bible! You can be a vegetarian for all kind of reasons, and you're perfectly entitled to be a vegetarian. Hope I'm not trampling on any toes now! But you can't argue from the Bible that you must be a vegetarian. Actually, I'll take you to Acts 10 and that vision that God gives to Peter, and the abolition...or perhaps better, the fulfillment of the food laws of the Old Testament: that there's nothing clean and unclean any more. You can eat whatever. It's OK to eat beef, and it's OK to eat pork. You understand that. No big deal for you, but for converted Jews it was a big thing. It's OK now to eat pork. It's OK to have a rasher of bacon. Doctors mightn't agree, but it's OK on an ethical level. It sounds plausible.

That's a powerful argument: the gods don't exist and you're no more holy because you eat nuts and tofu than eating beef and chicken. That doesn't make you any mature, doesn't make you any more spiritual, does it? They're powerful arguments. 'Listen, Paul,' they seem to have been saying, 'If there are no gods and it doesn't matter what we eat, what's the harm in going to the temple and eating the food that's been offered to these heathen gods? It doesn't mean anything to us. You know, we're not taken in by all this mumbo-jumbo. They may say all the incantations they want to say, but so long as they don't say it in my presence, so long as it was said, you know, an hour earlier, and we go there afterwards when the food has been cooked—and the aroma of that roast beef is there—I don't have any scruples about it, I'm just going to tuck in and eat it!'

Sounds a very powerful argument, and you can see how persuasive it was. They're saying, 'Paul, you're making a fuss about nothing. It's so typical of you, Paul.' And in making this argument, they were bringing their friends, their newly converted friends, along with them to the temple. And these newly converted friends whose consciences were all astray and weak, they were confused. They didn't understand what was going on. They were condemning themselves, and others were condemning them, and they were becoming more and more confused.

So these Christians were eating in the temples. They were encouraging others to join them with disregard to their scruples, and they were eating food that had been offered to idols. And there's the issue: should we eat food offered to a god in a heathen temple. And they argue 'Wait a minute, the idols don't exist and it doesn't matter what we eat. There's no harm in it.'

IV. So what's Paul's answer?

Paul starts off by agreeing. That's always a good way in an argument, isn't it? You start on the negative, they get all defensive; they get a little ratty; you know, you don't get anywhere. So you start by agreeing. That's what Paul does. He starts by agreeing. He agrees with their theology. He says in verse four through

six that they're actually quite right: an idol is nothing. There is no god but one. And then he agrees, he says in verse eight, food will not commend us to God. We are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. If you want to be a vegetarian, that's fine. If you want to eat meat, well, that's fine, too. But don't say that one is more holy than the other. He agrees with that. Your philosophy is fine. Your doctrine is sound, it's correct. So where's the problem?

The problem is in verse seven. Not everyone in the church knows this, that's the problem. Not all men have this knowledge. Now, what does he mean by that? He means that not everyone knows it in their heart; not everyone knows it in their emotions; not everyone knows it in their feelings. And much more important, not everybody knows that in their consciences. There are believers in your church, and in their minds they know there's only one God. Intellectually, they know that Apollo and Aphrodite and Zeus don't exist. They know it in their intellect. They know it in their heads. But people are more than intellect. And some of these Christians have worshiped in Apollo's temple for years and years and years, and ever since they were little children; and they trusted him, and they sacrificed to him, and they were afraid of him; and for them Apollo is still a reality in their hearts.

Do you understand that? It's a bit like ghosts. Now, am I stirring up a hornet's nest now? You know ghosts don't exist. In your head you may know that. But you know, you're lying in bed at night, and your wife says, 'What's that noise?' You know, she says, 'Look under the bed. There's something under the bed.' And there's nothing for it, you have to get out and look under the bed. You know, you're driving...Rosemary, do you remember?...you know, you're driving to France, you're going on a holiday of a lifetime. And you park the car, and you know, you've done all that stuff and locked the door. And you've gone to the car and you're driving away, and thirty minutes down the highway she says, "Did you turn that oven off?" Now, you *know* you've turned the oven off, but there's nothing for it, because your head says, "I know I did it, I see myself doing it." But your heart says, "Oh, perhaps I didn't!" And there's nothing for it. Once those words have popped out, you've got to go home and check! There's no way round it!

These Corinthian Christians, some of them, the weak ones, they knew it in their heads. If you asked them a catechism question, "How many gods are there?" They'd say, "One." Or, "Who is God?" "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Or, "Are there any other gods but this one God?" They'd say, "No!" But you pop them into Apollo's temple...you know, with all of the incense and the music and the atmosphere, and oh! Something comes over their hearts! All the history and the background, it all comes back to them. You take a person who's been converted from Roman Catholicism, and then suddenly they find themselves back in a celebration of the mass with all the incense, especially if it's in Latin, and all that singing and so on...their heads might be saying one thing, their hearts might well be saying something else.

When you take these people, weaker brothers, weaker Christians, Paul is saying...when you take them into the temple and they're eating this roast pork...well, let's not bring pork into it, because that's another issue. Let's say roast chicken. Or ostrich, as Rosemary and I had a few days ago. Tasted like chicken. You're eating this roast chicken and you know in your head it's OK, but in your heart you say, "This was offered to Aphrodite just an hour ago, and here I am eating it as I did all those many decades ago. I'm back where I was again!" Do you understand, Paul is saying? The weaker brother may well know things in his head, but he doesn't know it in his heart, and he doesn't know it in his conscience. His conscience is weak. His conscience is destroyed, Paul says. Look at what he says at the end of verse seven: "...their conscience being weak..." —that's the problem!—"...is defiled."

Do you know what a defiled conscience is? You know, having to live with a conscience that's condemning you. They're going about for the rest of the week saying, "I did something terribly wrong."

Now, conscience is a problem, isn't it? You know there are people with consciences, as Thomas Boston says, that are "too picky." You know, is it Pinocchio who sings "Always let your conscience be your guide." Well, the problem with that is that our consciences need to be trained, and our consciences need to be educated. People have all kinds of consciences. Jehovah's Witnesses have consciences about blood transfusions. They have sincere conscience issues about blood transfusions, their blood transfusions. Now, we think they're wrong, but they have a conscience about it.

All of us need our consciences educated by Scripture, by the word of God. It's like a sundial. You know what a sundial is. Maybe you've never seen one, you know...modern age. Maybe you don't know how a sundial works. If you look at a sundial at night, you know, on a perfectly moonlit night, you look at the sundial and you look at the time, and it will tell you the wrong time. Because it's not a "moon dial," it's a sundial. You understand the difference. And our consciences can sometimes be like that. Our consciences need to be educated, need to be taught. And *The Shorter Catechism* has it, "The word of God is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him."

Now there's no point in saying, well, people shouldn't be illogical. They are! Christians can be illogical. You say, well, Christians shouldn't be influenced by the past. But they are influenced by the past! If you've worshiped in a heathen temple for forty years, you can't go back there and not be influenced by it again. They're shaken in their faith. Look at what he says in verse eleven: "Through your knowledge [the strong ones] he who is weak is *ruined*...*is ruined*!"

Some Christians are saying—do you understand?—some Christians are saying, well, what's wrong with it? What in the world is wrong with eating a piece of meat? Who cares where it's been? Who cares who it's been sacrificed to? Who

cares where it's been eaten?

And Paul says, "You can't think like that." That's selfishness. That's me-ism. You've got to think about others. You've got to think about other Christians. You've got to think about other Christians whose consciences are weaker than yours. Your conscience may be trained; your conscience may be educated; your conscience may be guided by principles of Scripture, but his conscience may not be. He's weak, he's frail. He's like...oh, I don't know what...you know, just something that you hold in your hand and you're frightened to close your hand around it, because you don't want to squash it. It's so fragile. So he says in verse nine, be careful, take care! You've got your liberty. You have the liberty to go to these temples and eat this pork and beef and chicken or whatever. But you've got to be careful. You've got to be so careful, because there are other Christians who won't understand what you're doing.

Now, I hear what you're saying. You know, does that mean we can only do what the lowest common denominator of a Christian's conscience will allow me to do? And there are Christians whose consciences are so weak that they blather every other Christian into doing what they themselves want to do, or don't want to do. And you can't do that, either. No, that's not the issue Paul is dealing with here, that's the issue Paul deals with in Romans 14. We'll come to it in about February, so hold your horses on that one! Paul has something to say about weaker brothers who are trying to lord it over the whole church. They're just as wrong. They're controlling, too. They're not understanding, they're not instructed, either. But that's another sermon for another time and a different preacher!

Here, Paul is dealing with the strong Christian, and he's saying to the strong Christian, "You have got to think about others."

V. So what's the application?

You know, that's what you're waiting for, isn't it? You know, it's all very well, all this I Corinthians 8 business. It has nothing to do with me. What is the application? I know that's what you're thinking!

All kinds of things. Public Schools. Yes, there are Christians who will condemn you if you send your children to public schools. Or the Cinema or Theater. If you were in the Middle East, the amount of clothing—especially you women—the amount of clothing that you wear and the amount of flesh that you expose...big problem in the Middle East. You have your rights, you have your liberties, but you've got to think about the weaker Christian.

Let's take alcohol. Here I get fired. Let's take alcohol. It's the issue. It's I Corinthians 8. It's the obvious one. Christians in the New Testament consumed alcohol. There's no gainsaying that. Jesus drank alcohol. You can't gainsay that.

The Book of Psalms says that it's a blessing. Timothy is urged by Paul to take a little wine for his stomach's sake. Medicine. Is there anything that forbids a Christian from consuming alcohol? And in one sense, the answer is, "No" Absolutely not.

So what about this passage? What about the thousands of lives that are destroyed by alcohol? What about the marriages that come apart because of alcohol? I don't need any lectures now about the abuse of alcohol, I know it all too well in my own family. I know what it can do. Suppose another Christian was led by your example to fall into sin. How could you live with that? That's why some...some Christians...will say the answer is abstention. I'll become a teetotaler. For the sake of my weaker brothers, I'll become a teetotaler. And that's fine. That's a perfectly laudable position to take.

That's why some Christians will come to a slightly different conclusion. They, too, are concerned about their weaker brothers, so they will be very careful about where they partake of alcohol. They won't do it in a context where there are weaker Christians who have scruples about it. They won't be the cause of their stumbling. But in private, with moderation—hear me: with moderation—they will partake. They may even partake in the presence of other Christians, so long as they are not weak Christians with scruples about alcohol. And if they don't know whether they have scruples, then they don't. And that position, too, is a spiritually mature position. It's a position that is concerned about others.

And you know, at the end of the day—I know you'll go out talking about alcohol, I know that—but the real issue is not that. The real issue is: do we have sufficient love for our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ that we are prepared to forego our rights, that we are prepared to deny ourselves what is our right for their sake.

Now go to verse eleven, and the end of verse eleven, because I want you to see how in all of this argumentation Paul brings it right down to the cross, because that's the issue. These weaker brothers and sisters with their scruples are brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. And that's the issue. And the issue is, are we going to have a Christ-like spirit in our attitude towards other brothers and sisters? And we're going to have to ask ourselves all kinds of difficult questions, questions to which we might come to different answers—and that doesn't worry me so much—but the fact that we're asking questions is what worries me. Are we asking the question, "Am I the cause of my brother's stumbling?" Because if we're not asking that question, we're spiritually immature.

Let's pray together, and after I've prayed and pronounced the benediction, on your bulletin we're going to sing the first stanza (and the words are printed on your bulletin), *Gracious Spirit, Dwell with Me*. Let's stand and pray together.

Our Father in heaven, this extraordinary passage of Scripture affects each one of us in various ways and in various situations as we encounter issues dealing with

our brothers and sisters, and we pray for the love of Christ to be shed abroad in our hearts, and that we might come to spiritually sound and mature decisions about our way of life. And grant us that blessing, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Now receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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