

“Domine, volumus Jesum videre,” John 12:21.

“Credo, Domine; adjuva incredulitatem meam,” Mark 9:24.

1 CORINTHIANS 8

¹Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ²If anyone supposes that he knows something, he does not yet know the way he ought to know. ³But if anyone loves God, this person has been known by him.

⁴So, concerning the eating of food from idol sacrifices, we know that an idol is not anything real in the world and that there is no God but one. ⁵Indeed, even if there are so-called “gods,” whether in the heavens or on earth (as in fact there are many “gods” and many “lords”), ⁶nevertheless for us there is one God—the Father, from whom all things exist and we exist for him—and one Lord—Jesus Christ, through whom all things exist and we exist through him.

⁷However, that knowledge is not in everyone. Instead some, who are still affected by their former habit with the idol, eat the food as something sacrificed to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

⁸Food will not bring us closer to God. We do not lack anything if we do not eat, nor are we better off if we do. ⁹And be careful that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For if someone sees you, a person who has knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will not the conscience of this man, weak as he is, be emboldened to eat food from an idol sacrifice? ¹¹You see, the weak person is being destroyed by your knowledge—the brother for whose sake Christ died! ¹²And when you sin in this way against your brothers and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. ¹³Therefore, if food causes my brother to sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I do not cause my brother to sin.



People do strange things with their freedom. “Mr. Twister” was a street clown in Santa Cruz who made headlines in the mid-1990s for feeding expired parking meters. This was against the law in Santa Cruz, but when Mr. Twister’s case was publicized, the courts let him off and the city changed the rule. Mr. Twister was just being kind—odd, but kind. He was just using his freedom thoughtfully.

EXERCISE YOUR FREEDOM THOUGHTFULLY

1. God gives you Christian freedom ... treasure it!

At least twelve temples were devoted to a variety of gods in Corinth. Not all the meat of their sacrifices was burned up. Typically, what these temple priests did not burn or eat was taken to the public meat market. There was no Food and Drug Administration inspecting the markets, to demand any labels. Imagine the newly converted Christians, who used to sacrifice to those false gods, now shopping for food. Some of it they probably knew had come from this or that temple. Some of it they could not know. How confusing!

Add to that the kosher diet of Christians who were formerly adherents of Judaism. Many of them had just learned they had freedom to eat whatever they wish. Previously, their strict dietary code from the Old Testament kept them from complicated questions of freedom. Now, what food should / should they not eat?

Here we have a good example of how CONSCIENCE is a big part of our faith. Summarizing the conscience is not as simple as looking at God's Law. In a conscience-heavy writing of Paul, Romans 2:15, three statements side-by-side: 1) The law is written in the heart. 2) The conscience testifies to us. 3) The conscience gives accusing and excusing thoughts. It is clear that the conscience is distinct from God's Law, as well as from the accusing and excusing thoughts.

So CONSCIENCE relates to the KNOWING of faith before as well as after our behavior. A good conscience happens when it agrees with God's Law. "*Whatever is not of faith is sin*" (Rom. 14:23). Only through faith does the evil conscience become a good conscience. "*Baptism now saves you ... the guarantee of a good conscience before God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*" (1 Peter 3:21).

The Son of God does our conscience a favor: He frees it.

Jesus Christ took the burdens of our conscience away to an instrument of death called a cross to die with them. He did not do this half-heartedly. In so doing He won complete, universal satisfaction in His obedience for all. His work of salvation is perfect. It is in itself sufficient to redeem all sinners. The death of Christ happened for the world, even for those who are condemned.

This is the work of Jesus; He unburdens the conscience, takes our burdens on Himself, and frees our conscience of all sins. He frees us of sins we know and

feel in our heart as well as sins we are yet unaware of. He frees us of the guilt of iffy things, behavior we weren't sure was or was not sin, especially ... if it bothered our conscience.

So Luther said, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (LW 31.344).

So can I eat meat that someone may have sacrificed to an idol? Yes. No problem. Can you drink coffee, although God has neither commanded it nor forbidden it? Yes. Can you wear skirts that are higher than ankle-length? Can you leave the tie at home? Can you wear this or that style of glasses? Can you come with no shirt, no shoes? Well, now we are getting into what is wise, what is beneficial, and what is constructive ... what is loving?

2. God gives you fellow believers ... love them!

When it came to food, some knew the right answer. There is one true God—the triune God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is one God and one Lord. Idols, or false gods, are nothing but human imagination. Some, if not most, knew that; but as for being comfortable with it? No, not right away. Knowing something is okay does not always make us feel right about doing it. Head and heart are not always in tune. The enlightenment of a sinner to the saving knowledge of Jesus occurs gradually, just as it gradually increases in those who already believe.

So there were believers in Jesus Christ who felt uncomfortable going into the market to buy and eat food. This is known as weak faith. If this is so, then those who knew better had better be nice. They had better show love. Romans 13:10 states, "*Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*" James even calls it the "*royal law.*" This is far better than the incentives of the world, because legal requirements do not give us a choice to show love. Choosing to show love through Christian freedom comes from the heart.

This too cannot come from an unregenerate, unbelieving heart. It can only come from heart of faith in Jesus Christ alone for eternal salvation and eternal security. Saving faith is a "*faith working through love*" (Galatians 5:6). Christians show their faith by their loving actions towards one another. The wiser and more knowledgeable Christians must not shame the others or force them into behavior against their conscience. Nor can we afford to gossip when others are weak.

In Corinth, sometimes a Christian would respectfully decline to eat food out of love for her weaker newfound Christian friends. For example, Paul would change his diet and become a vegan if it would mean showing love. The mature Christian knows what can feel offensive even if it does not conflict with God's Word. Even though a person is not sinning, it can harm faith for them to do something against her own conscience.

So if we had a person here, new to the faith, who felt that drinking coffee is a sin, would we remove the coffee maker? If a family came from a distant country where dogs are understood to be dirty and outdoor animals, would you invite them over and let the dog go after them? How would we handle a person who believes that Christmas trees are witchcraft? These would all be case-by-case scenarios. We'd have to sort them as they come. The point is that we follow Peter's advice, "*This is favorable, if a person endures sorrows while suffering unjustly because he is conscious of God*" (1 Peter 2:19).

More realistic is the pandemic with its current masking situation. We have vulnerable parishioners as well as medical and scientific professionals 'on both sides' (as it were) to these ongoing debates, it is more than confusing. The Lord has not spoken. Our consciences are in different places. But it is an act of Christian love to withhold judgments on those who feel differently.

Some believe there are almost no situations we should take a mask off inside a building. Others are hard-pressed to have masks on at all. However, you trust God and withhold judgment despite the personal conclusions you have drawn. This probably takes some real patience. This is mature, helpful, wise, and, honestly, very much an act of love. Some have done this by not losing their temper if they see someone take off a mask at church. Others have done this by actually wearing a mask, although they have a feeling it tramples their freedom. Don't you see how good this is? God has blessed us with healthy, loving disagreement. But woe to you who have gossiped, one way or another, and not approached those you feel are sinning. The devil, who brought disease on Job, would love to tear us apart and divide us permanently over these circumstances. Repent! Learn forgiveness in Christ. Believe in Him who is stronger than us all.

Why fight the devil on this one? The answer is that we belong to each other. We belong to each other, because by faith we each belong to Christ. This Christ has made us His own. We who are strong ought to bear with the weak (Romans 15:1), just as He who is our Strong Man bears with us; in Jesus' name, Amen.