

## **1 Corinthians 8:1-13 N.T. 160 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup>Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. <sup>2</sup>Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; <sup>3</sup>but anyone who loves God is known by him.

<sup>4</sup>Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” <sup>5</sup>Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—<sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. <sup>8</sup>“Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. <sup>9</sup>But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup>For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? <sup>11</sup>So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. <sup>12</sup>But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. <sup>13</sup>Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

**1 Corinthians 8:1-13 N.T. Page 160**  
***“Right Hearted”***

**Opening Prayer:** Please bow with me in prayer. Almighty God, you have created us as people to love you and to love one another. Yet we don't always act according to your love. Forgive us we pray as we gather here today to be instructed by your Holy Word. May your Spirit cause your Word to be spoken, and heard, and understood in this place today. In Jesus' Name we pray, **Amen.**

**Introduction:** *“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are **life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.**”* With those words drafted by Thomas Jefferson, The United States of America declared its independence from Great Brittan on July 4, 1776. That was 89,330 days ago today. Yet Jefferson's poetic words about unalienable rights pop instinctively into all of our minds whenever we think of our individual rights. **The idea that individuals have rights that supersede the rights of the government** was revolutionary.

**Today we consider** such individual rights to be universal. We believe that all people everywhere should enjoy these unalienable Rights. **So, on December 10, 1948,** the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the *“Universal Declaration of Human Rights”* which opens with these words, *“Recognition of the inherent dignity, and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family, is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.”* Human rights have become the bedrock for forming a more perfect world. **Oh, how we cling to** our Rights of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

**PAUES**

**Move I.**

**All of us value having our individual rights. There is the right to free speech, the right to religious liberty, the right to a free press, the right to bear arms, the right to assembly, the right to a fair and speedy trial, the right to legal representation, the right not to have to incriminate yourself, the right to a jury of your peers, **and there** is even the right to have rights not explicitly set forth in “*Bill of Rights*.” In fact, no listing of rights can ever be truly exhaustive. Just because you may not be able to think of a right, doesn’t mean that you don’t have it.**

**These rights** are not ours simply because we’re Americans. No, these rights are ours because we are God’s creatures. Jefferson saw these rights **not as originating from governments**, but as originating from our Creator. The first amendment of the Bill of Rights opens with these memorable words, “**Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.**” That we can gather here this morning to worship the LORD our God without a government permit and without the threat of government interference is a right I know we all value.

**Our Bible lesson** today is about a controversy that raged within the early church about the rights we all share as Christians. **Do Christians have the right to eat food offered to idols?** In the first century all major cities had temples constructed to **various pagan gods** such as Zeus, Poseidon, Demeter, and others. The universal practice in the ancient Mediterranean region was to **partially sacrifice meat** to these gods before any meat was made available for human consumption. Meat for sale in the markets, or served at public banquets, or even served at a friend’s home, had more than likely been partially offered to idols. So you can see why this was such a pressing question for these early Christians.

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I'm sure many of you are thinking, "*That's fine, but what has this got to do with us today?*" The era of Greek mythology is long over. The meat sold in the butcher department of our local supermarkets hasn't been partially sacrificed to pagan idols. Yet it might surprise you that I actually came face to face with this very question a number of years ago right here in western Pennsylvania. I was taking a class at seminary called the "**Encounter of Christianity with World Religions.**" The key to the class was the word encounter. We actually went and encountered other world religions. We visited places of worship of other religions and talked with rabbis, priests, monks, and imams.

**One of the places** we visited was the Hindu temple in Penn Hills east of Pittsburgh. This is the most prosperous Hindu temple outside of India. **The temple's central god** is the highest deity in Hinduism, Lord Ven-ka-tes-war-a. While visiting the temple we asked the priest to show us a religious ceremony called a "puja" to Lord Ven-ka-tes-war-a. **The priest entered** the god's vault-like shire and began to chant Lord Ven-ka-tes-war-a's 108 names as he offered fire, water, and food to the stone icon. The ceremony last only a few minutes and then the priest approach us **carrying a bowl of nuts, dates, oranges, and raisins** that had been offered to the Hindu god and passed them around for all of us to eat. Should I be respectful and eat, or should I politely refuse? **The words of our Bible lesson today** (1 Corinthians 8:9, NIV) were what came to my mind. So I chose not to eat, not because it would be morally wrong to eat, but because my actions as a minister of Jesus Christ, must not create confusion. Others might see me eat, and think that that meant I was assenting to the faith and practices of Hinduism, which I was not. Only my teacher and I chose to politely refuse. The rest of the class exercised their freedom in Christ and ate. **We really do value having our individual rights.**

**End I.**

**Move II.**

**But asserting our rights can sometimes be wrong.** Just because you have a right, doesn't mean that it's always wise to exercise that right. **Let's run through** a well-known example. You do have a right to free speech. You can say whatever you want whenever you want. But that does not mean that you have the right to shout "**fire**" in a crowded theater when there is no fire. You're right to free speech does not over rule others' right to public safety. As the old adage says, "*The right to swing my fist ends where the other man's nose begins*" (Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.). In the course of exercising your rights you do not have the right to trample all over other people's rights. So we must consider other people's rights as we seek to exercise our own.

**No one lives life** completely alone. None of us are islands unto ourselves. **There are always other people** in our lives: family members, school mates, co-workers, neighbors, and even fellow church members. Simply put, **there's more** to life than "me," **there's always** "we." Individual rights must always be balanced with the rights of others. There's a song by a contemporary Christian singer named **Joy Williams** that whimsically comes to terms with the reality that life is really lived together. Life is not simply me being me, and you being you. Love only begins when me and you become "**we**." Let me read you some of the lyrics of William's song from which it gets its title, "*We*:"

**We are not that different from each other.  
We just want somebody to discover.  
Who we really are when we drop our guard  
that love has gotta start with you and me — we-ee!**

Joy Williams sings those words with a playful joyfulness. So "we" becomes an outright gleeful "Wheeeee!"

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**As Christians** our lives are no longer our own. We should not think of “*me*” but must always think of “*we*.” Like the Apostle Paul we no longer live our own lives. **In Galatians 2:19b-20 (NIV)** Paul writes, “**I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.**” Jesus Christ was living through Paul, Jesus Christ is living through me, and Jesus Christ is living through you too. That’s what it means to be a Christian. Christ is living through you.

**Life can no longer be lived** for our own sake, but now must be lived for the sake of others. In a lot of courses about **human relations** you’ll hear the instructor use this cute run down of important words to drive home that we must think of others before thinking of ourselves. It goes like this:

The six most important words: “**I admit I made a mistake.**”

The five most important words: “**You did a good job.**”

The four most important words: “**What is your opinion?**”

The three most important words: “**If you please.**”

The two most important words: “**Thank you.**”

The one most important word: “**We**”

The least most important word: “**I**” (Author unknown)

**Please repeat after me: “I no longer live”... “but Christ lives in me.”**

We all have our rights. I have my rights and you have your rights. **But asserting our rights can sometimes be wrong.**

**End II.**

**Move III.**

**So, we need to consider how our actions will affect others.** What Paul is teaching us in our Bible lesson today goes deeper than simply trying to balance people's rights. **Sometimes your actions** can be completely within your rights without violating anyone else's rights, and yet still be wrong. Paul is pointing to a deeper principle for human relations. **There is more** to being a Christian than knowing your rights and living within those rights. Knowledge is a good thing, but knowledge isn't everything. **In 1 Corinthians 8:1b (NRSV)** Paul writes, "**We know that 'all of us possess knowledge.' Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.**" God isn't so much interested in what it is that we know, but in how we show love to the people we know. What are your actions doing to others? Are your actions building them up or are they tearing them down? **Is eating meat** sacrificed to idols, which is within your rights, building up the other people who see you, or is it confusing them about what to believe? **If acting within your rights** causes a brother or sister in Christ to stumble, it would be better to forgo your right to exercise your rights.

**In 1 Corinthians 8:9 (NIV)** Paul writes, "**Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.**" Those were the words that entered my mind in the Hindu temple as the priest passed the nuts, dates, raisins, and oranges offered to the idol to me. There was nothing morally wrong with eating that food. After all, all food is a gift from God and **that idol** is just a piece of stone caved by human hands. But on the chance that someone else might be confused, I choose not to eat. That's the deeper principle that Paul's trying to teach. **Rights are** highly valued, **but love is** even more valuable.

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When we strive to exercise our rights, we're living for ourselves. The central question should not be “**what are my rights?**,” but “**how can I rightly relate to others?**” Do I truly love them? Am I concerned for their well-being? Or I am I only in this life for myself?

**In his commentary** on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, J. Paul Sampley, a professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Boston University, writes:

**Love is Paul's** most important concept in describing how believers rightly relate to one another .... Love works. Love transforms circumstances and people. The loved one is never again the same; the one who loves is never again the same. Love is thus a transaction but not a bartering; it is not susceptible to bargaining. Love, once under way, takes on a life of its own; like the grace on which it is built, it surprises. Love restores, love enlarges, and love makes whole.

Jesus says, “**This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you**” (John 15:12). **Life is not about** having and exercising rights, **life is about** rightly relating to those around you whom you are commanded to love. Living within your rights **may sometimes** cause those who are weaker in their faith to stumble. **So, we do need to consider how our actions will affect others.**

**End III.**

**Move IV.**

**And then we'll allow our heart to temper the actions of our head.** There are many things we can know with our head, but the most important things in life we know, we know also with our hearts. Like the pagans in first century, **the Hindus believe** that there are many gods. **In fact the Hindu temple** in Penn Hills has shrines to at least five of those Hindu gods. **And just as Ven-ka-tes-war-a** is called Lord, each of the other gods is called Lord too. **If you remember**, last week we learned that the title Lord means **“Master.”** So a Hindu goes through life with many Masters. **As a life-long monotheist**, I find polytheism confusing. Which god should you pray to for what? While I can learn about Hinduism with my head, it has only made me realize all the more **that I am purely Christian** within my heart. **In 1 Corinthians 8:6 (NIV)** Paul writes, **“Yet 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.”** To be Christian **is to say** that Jesus is Lord or master of your life.

**I titled today's sermon “Right Hearted.”** When you act from a right heart, your actions toward others will always be done out of love. Rather than acting strictly on the basis of the knowledge within your head, **you temper your actions** by the impulses of your heart. As Christians we are to think with our heads and act thorough our hearts. That's how we allow Christ to act through us. **In both Hebrew and Greek** the word heart rarely refers to that pump located in our chest. Heart in the Bible **refers to** our inner being, the center of our spiritual self. **To act** only with your head is to act from your intellect, **and to act** only from your heart is to act from your emotion, **but to act from** your head and your heart is **to act from Christ living within you**. We need to pray the Psalmist's prayer from long ago. In Psalm 51:10 (NIV) we read, **“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”** The psalmist longed to be right hearted.

**In the sixth of Jesus' beatitudes** from his great Sermon on the Mount, Jesus echoes the psalmist when he says, “**Blessed are the pure in Heart, for they will see God**” (Matthew 5:8, NRSV). When you act from a pure heart, not only will you see God, but others will see God living through you. **Psalm 51:10** inspired a hauntingly simple song by “*The Acappella Company.*” Let's listen:

**{Play: “*Short-Create in me a Clean Heart.mp3*” [0:24]}**

**When God creates** in each of us a clean heart, we become Jesus' righteousness. Jesus lives in and through our lives. **And then we will allow our heart to temper the actions of our head.**

**End IV.**

**Conclusion:** Thomas Jefferson set forth unalienable Rights that we believe extend to the entire human family today. **We really do value having our individual rights.** The first century Christians had the right to eat meat sacrificed to idols. **But asserting our rights can sometimes be wrong.** It's better to forgo our rights than to cause someone to stumble in their faith. **So we do need to consider how our actions will affect others.** God isn't so much interested in what it is that we know, but in how we show love to the people we know. **And then we will allow our heart to temper the actions of our head.** May we be a "*Right Hearted*" people. Oh Lord, create in each of us a pure heart, so that others **may see Jesus** living through us.

**Closing Prayer:** Let's pray. Holy God, by the work of your Son Jesus, we have become your righteousness. Let us not seek after our individual rights, but let us act rightly with pure hearts towards all of your people, at all times and in all places. **Amen!**

**10:30 Closing Hymn: "*Help Us to Accept Each Other*" Red Hymnal No. 560**  
Verses 1, 2, & 4

**Sending Forth:** Our unalienable Rights we're given to us by our Creator. But exercising our rights must never get in the road of Jesus' command that we love one another. Go forth and allow God to create a pure heart in you so that others may see Jesus living through you. **And all of God's people said...Amen!**