

# Freedom and Conscience (Because of the Gospel)

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| SPEAKER  | Matt Ryniker                                                |
| DATE     | Sunday, February 26, 2023                                   |
| PASSAGES | 1 Corinthians 8; 1 Corinthians 9; 1 Corinthians 10; Acts 15 |
| MESSAGE  | Begins at 0:31:11 in the service                            |

## THE BIG IDEA

Paul agrees with the strong. The idol is nothing, the meat is clean, and their knowledge is real knowledge. Then he tells them not to eat it — because a right you genuinely hold is not the same thing as a right you have to use, and the gospel matters more than either.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ The knowledge in 1 Corinthians 8 is not fake knowledge. It is true — which is exactly why Paul has to warn that correct knowledge can still wreck someone.
- ◆ Meat sacrificed to idols was not a fringe issue for the early church. Idolatry was front and center, listed ahead of sexual immorality in the Jerusalem letter.
- ◆ Chapter 9 is not a detour. Paul had every right to a wife and to financial support from Corinth, and used neither — that is what laying down a right looks like in practice.
- ◆ The weaker brother in this passage is not being precious about a preference. His conscience is pricked by some of the clearest commands in scripture.
- ◆ You cannot claim the weaker-brother position the way you call shotgun. Matt's pastoral concern is that being upset should not function as power in a church.
- ◆ Where scripture gives no clear command, three guiding principles remain: do it to the glory of God, seek your neighbor's advantage rather than your own, and aim at people being saved.

- ◆ The reason any of this is worth the trouble is that the gospel is bigger than our rights — and someone's first taste of it should not be blocked by us over something that does not matter.

► 0:31:11

This was the first Sunday of Lent, and Matt began where a lot of people begin Lent — with the discipline he is worst at. Then he spent the rest of the message on a question that sounds antique and turns out to be the one the church argues about constantly: what do you do when you are right, and someone else's conscience says no.

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## Lent, and the failure worth naming

► 0:32:47

Hope Chapel is not a heavily liturgical church, but it does read *Seek God for the City* through Lent, and fasting sits in the tradition alongside it. Matt's admission was blunt: “I think out of all the pastors in the whole world I might be the absolute worst at fasting.” He gets hungry. He eats extra meals for energy.

He tied it back to a challenge he had given months earlier on spiritual warfare — not naming demons or repenting for what a great-uncle did, but asking what one thing God might want to declare victory over in your life. His own answer at the time had been his phone: news, Twitter, unproductive worry about current events. He had failed at conquering it, a sister gave him a prophetic word over the phone, and he has walked free of it since. When he told that story at home, Mandy asked what would be next for him. The answer came easily: fasting.

► 0:35:42

His counsel was unhurried. Forty days is a long time; historically many people fasted only from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. It is not required. But if you have felt like a failure here, try it, and ask God for help. “Is there an area where I could walk in God's victory instead of a sense of failure and shame.”

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## Why meat mattered more than a fringe debate

► 0:36:19

The series is in 1 Corinthians, and chapters 8 through 10 are where Paul handles food sacrificed to idols. Matt noted how freely the modern church reaches for the weaker-brother argument — it came up constantly during the pandemic, in both directions. It offends my conscience that you are in here without a mask. It offends my conscience that you are putting a mask on me. “You can't just call weaker brother like you call shotgun,” he said. “I called it first, I'm the weaker brother, and I said it first, and I feel stronger than you feel, therefore you should do what I say.”

So the first job is to feel the weight of the original situation. Converts out of paganism had personally taken part in ceremonies where an animal was killed for a god. They knew they no longer belonged to that deity. They still could not sit down to that meat without something turning over inside them. This was not the Christian equivalent of arguing about violent video games or whether believers can dance.

► 0:38:50

His evidence was the Jerusalem council, where the leaders settled what to ask of Gentile converts — peacekeeping minimum standards, not a demand that they live like Jews:

“Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.”

ACTS 15:19–21 ↗

Idols come first in that list, ahead of sexual immorality. And that ordering fits everything the church had just been reading in the Old Testament, where the kings are graded not on revenue or military readiness but on faithfulness against idolatry. “You should feel tense about this,” Matt said. “They felt really tense about this.”

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## Knowledge that is correct and still destroys

► 0:41:39

“Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ This ‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.”

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1–3 ↗

The knowledge in question is that the idol has no power. Paul grants it flatly — an idol has no real existence, and there is one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. Matt paused on the phrase “for whom we exist”: not as employees, since God has no need and has angels besides, but for his pleasure. Then the point that gives the whole passage its edge — this is not so-called knowledge, it is real knowledge, “which just goes to show that real knowledge can still destroy.”

Because not everyone possesses it, and a right can become a stumbling block. Paul's language escalates fast, and it is aimed at the people who are correct:

“And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”

1 CORINTHIANS 8:11-13 ↗

Being right, Matt summarized, is not necessarily the end of the story. The question is whether this right of yours is building anyone.

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## Chapter 9 is not a bunny trail

► 0:47:37

This is where Matt made his sharpest structural argument. Chapter 9 reads like Paul wandering off into his own résumé, and it is not.

He has the right to take a wife, as Peter did, and the right to be supported financially by the church he fathered — he even argues the Lord wants it that way. He takes neither. He works with his own hands so the gospel stays front and center and he is no burden to them.

Then he circles straight back to idol meat and lands the whole section with

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” Imitate what, exactly? A man declining rights he actually holds. Paul is not bluffing when he says he will never eat meat again.

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## Back to the wilderness

► 0:48:09

Chapter 10 opens with another apparent detour —

our fathers under the cloud, through the sea, drinking from the rock that was Christ — and Paul's point is the golden calf. They all had the same spiritual food and the same spiritual drink, and most of them fell anyway. Idolatry, immorality, testing Christ, grumbling — Matt noted in passing that “put Christ to the test” in the wilderness is an easily overlooked line about Christ's divinity. The application is not that those people were unusually weak:

“Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

1 CORINTHIANS 10:12-13 ↗

We do not have new spiritual technology. Nobody is immune.

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## Communion is why the weak conscience makes sense

► 0:53:38

Then Paul asks the Corinthians to reason from their own table.

The cup of blessing is a participation in the blood of Christ; the bread we break is a participation in his body.

We do not treat that as a ceremony performed for no reason. It is not just bread, and it is not casual — it is communion with the Lord himself.

Which, Matt argued, is precisely why a former pagan cannot shrug at a feast in the temple of Dionysus. He is reading that meal the same way we read ours: food as an intimate act of loyalty. “These aren't dumb thoughts they're having.” The people with sensitive consciences here are not morons sensitive about something dumb, and Paul's warning that food shared at an altar makes you a participant is the same logic pressed further:

“You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?”

1 CORINTHIANS 10:20-22 ↗

Are we the alpha in this relationship, dictating terms? No — we fit into his schema. Two loyalties is not on offer.

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## The practical rule: do not go asking

► 0:57:49

“All things are lawful,' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful,' but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.”

1 CORINTHIANS 10:23–24 ↗

What follows is plain pastoral advice.

Buy what is sold in the meat market and raise no question of conscience, for the earth is the Lord's and the fullness of it is his meat. You need it for a recipe. Do not go poking around.

► 0:58:49

“If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, 'This has been offered in sacrifice,' then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience — I do not mean your conscience, but his.”

1 CORINTHIANS 10:27–29 ↗

Matt worked the scene out loud, and it is worth following. Sit at their table, eat what is served, ask nothing — and do not volunteer the information yourself either, because it is fine, it is just meat. But the moment somebody says *this is Artemis's pork, we sacrificed it to her*, the situation has changed. You have been called on to make a statement, and now it is a hard no — not mainly for your sake but for theirs, so that the gospel is not confused in front of the person who told you. Anywhere a confession is requested, or compliance with something pagan, the answer is simply: I am a believer in Christ and my loyalty is only to him.

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## Free to do, and free not to

► 1:00:39

Then comes the line that makes Paul look like he is contradicting himself, and Matt refused to smooth it over:

“For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?”

1 CORINTHIANS 10:29–30 ↗

“It feels like he's arguing all over the place,” Matt said, “but really he's fairly consistent.” Both halves stand. Those with the strong conscience are correct, and no one else's conscience gets to become the rule for mine — and I will still put the fork down for the sake of the man who just told me where the meat came from. The right survives; the use of it is surrendered.

► 1:02:02

That is also where the three guiding principles land, in verses 31 and 33: do everything to the glory of God, do not seek your own advantage, and live so that others may be saved — there is an evangelistic bent to all of it. And it is why the long bunny trail of chapter 9 ends where it does. Paul simply did not take advantage of them, and “that's part of what it means to be free actually. I am free to do or not do.”

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## How to use this argument without abusing it

► 1:04:27

Here Matt made the point he most wanted the room to keep. In this passage the weakness of the weaker brother is rooted in some of the clearest commands in all of scripture, not in a feeling. Generalize it to every sensitivity anyone happens to have at any moment and life becomes impossible to manage — and he named the reason it matters, which is that in the wider culture offense already functions as currency. “The more offended you are, the more powerful you become.” We have pearl clutchers on every side.

► 1:06:27

So if he were ever asked to adjudicate who the weaker brother is, he would expect the pricked conscience to trace back to a sincere desire to obey Jesus from his word — not to a color preference or a music preference. And the guardrail runs both directions: if we are going to be the kind of humble people who lay down our rights, we cannot also let offense be used as a tool, or we will spend our lives abusing the humble. “It should not be the case that being upset is power.”

► 1:07:45

His examples of the genuinely grey were pointed, and the best of them was aimed at his own stage. What kind of music can we use in worship? “We use the kind of music that I guess 60 years ago would have been thought as devil's music” — drums and guitar, and Elvis shaking his hips was a scandal. Now it is contemporary soft rock on a Sunday morning and nobody blinks. Same with dancing: Hope has a dance ministry, and there was a time the question was whether Christians could dance at all, let alone call it a ministry. Then the greyer ones that may actually bother you — what shows you can watch, whether a Christian can drink in his own home, and where he would stop.

► 1:08:58

Where there is no clear command you are left with discernment, honesty and a desire to obey Jesus — and Matt handed over the questions he uses. Go back to the three principles Paul ends with: to the glory of God, not seeking my own advantage but another's, so that people may be saved. Then work it the way Paul teaches the church to weigh a prophetic word or a visiting prophet — the same test John puts to the spirits, and the one early Christian literature like the Didache applies to a travelling teacher. Is this voice prompting godliness in me, or serving the advantage of self? Is it based on anything scriptural at all? The weak person's conscience is pricked — but is it pricked for a reason, and what is that reason? Would laying this down be good for our community, and would it promote godliness among us as a group? Why do I want my own way; why does this person want theirs; do I actually need this, or could I lay it down anyway just for their sake? And apply the Lord's own test — you will recognize them by their fruits. What is the fruit of all this?

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## The nativity with no baby in it

► 1:11:13

His test case was small and perfectly chosen. A friend had told him — news to Matt, and to most of the room — that there are Christians who object to nativity scenes: sometimes a doll with no face (“I don't see how that's much better, it's creepy and weird”), sometimes just a crèche with hay and no child at all. “But aren't we celebrating the birth of a real baby?” We have zoomed backwards fourteen hundred years, he said, and we are doing the iconoclasts all over again.

On this one he sides with the people who keep the baby, and his reason was that the church has already digested this and moved on more than a thousand years ago — read Maximus the Confessor. When the Son took on flesh it became appropriate to assume he looked like a human being, because he was one: a nose, ears, eyes, real flesh and not fake flesh, an infant who cried and drank milk. He embraced humanity, not in a pretend way. “So he had a face. Yeah, so you could put a baby doll in there. Relax.”

That sounds harsh until you notice what he was protecting. Matt does not want a church of docetists or Arians — people who say Jesus only *seemed* human. Is he all the way human, all the way God? That question is such a big deal that he will interrupt for it: do not hassle the people who have a baby in their crèche, because you will get in their heads and damage them christologically. Paul does the same thing elsewhere — he tells people teaching fringe error to stop. But it is their conscience. Stop anyway: you are not only wrong, it is damaging to the community.

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## Why it is worth the trouble

► 1:14:12

Why care about any of this — we are in America, we are free in Christ, do what we want. The close was the reason for all of it.

“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.”

1 CORINTHIANS 10:31-33 ↗

The gospel, Matt said, is more important than we are. That someone for whom Christ died might never taste union with him — never feel a soul purchased completely by his blood — because we were standing in the way pointlessly over something that does not matter is a serious problem. The gospel takes precedence even over our rights. And it is a two-edged sword: sometimes you must risk giving offense to preserve that same message, which is exactly why none of this is cut and dry and why nobody gets to win by crying first.

► 1:15:24

He finished on what is actually at stake. We were enemies, he said — frothing mad in our hatred toward God, wallowing in sin and celebrating it — and Christ died for us to give us not a fresh start but his own: “his start, his middle and his ending.” Many of us long for a day when we will stand in the courts of heaven. “Surprise — in Christ you are already seated in heavenly places, at the ooey-gooey center of glory itself.” That is worth shouting from the rooftops, worth not being a stumbling block over, and worth protecting once someone is there.

► 1:15:54

Then, before anyone could pick up the questions and aim them at someone else, he turned them around. We do not want to be weird religious moralists either; it is all about the gospel, “and it's worth fighting over day in and day out.” So ask yourself: why am I doing this, why do I fight for this, what is this based on, is this good for other people or just good for me — “am I sounding real spiritual when I'm hassling people about their babies in the nativity scene? What's going on on the inside of me when I do that, and why?” He ended by praying that the church would take Paul's conclusions about laying ourselves down to heart and learn to walk in humility, and sent people forward for prayer.

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**FOR FURTHER STUDY****SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Acts 15:19–21
- 1 Corinthians 8:1–3
- 1 Corinthians 8:4–6
- 1 Corinthians 8:7–9
- 1 Corinthians 8:11–13
- 1 Corinthians 9:4–12
- 1 Corinthians 11:1
- 1 Corinthians 10:1–5
- 1 Corinthians 10:6–11
- 1 Corinthians 10:12–13
- 1 Corinthians 10:14–17
- 1 Corinthians 10:20–22
- 1 Corinthians 10:23–24
- 1 Corinthians 10:25–26
- 1 Corinthians 10:27–29
- 1 Corinthians 10:29–30
- 1 John 4:1
- Matthew 7:16
- 1 Corinthians 10:31–33

**FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP**

1. Matt started by naming the discipline he is worst at. What is yours, and what has kept you from trying it again?
2. Where have you been correct about something and used that correctness in a way that did not build anyone up?
3. Paul had a real right to support and a real right to marry, and used neither. What right of yours would be the costly one to set down?
4. How do you tell the difference between a conscience pricked by scripture and a conscience pricked by preference — in someone else, and in yourself?
5. Run one live disagreement through Matt's questions this week: is this to God's glory, is it my advantage or my neighbor's, is it good for our community? What changes as a result?

**ABOUT THE SPEAKER**

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

**Watch the full message:**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBkgsmn\\_-yY&t=1871s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBkgsmn_-yY&t=1871s)

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.