



Rev. Frank Wang
1 Corinthians 8:1-13

November 26, 2017
English Standard Version

“Cross Word: Stumble”

The 13th Sermon in the series on 1 Corinthians entitled
Cross Words

Good morning. It is good to be in the house of the Lord this morning. My name is Frank Wang. I'm an assistant pastor here at Potomac Hills, and if you're new this morning, as I expect many of you are, what with the holidays and all, I'd love to meet you after the service, if nothing else but to extend a warm welcome to you. Since we likely have family, friends, and visitors with us this morning, a bit of context is in order. We have spent the last 12 weeks in 1 Corinthians. We've talked about divisions in the church, the centrality of Christ crucified, and applied the Gospel to the practical issues of church discipline, lawsuits among believers, sexual immorality, marriage, and the spiritual nature of our transformation in Christ. And this morning, it seems fitting that, the Sunday after Thanksgiving, we will talk about food. A word of note, we're going to be taking a break from 1 Corinthians, starting next week. Advent season is upon us, and as the whole world starts counting down the days until Christmas, we're going to be doing a special series in the Minor Prophets to prepare us to celebrate the wonder of God becoming man in the person of Jesus. So now, if you would turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 8, grab your sermon outline, and let's turn our attention to God's Word.

8 Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. ² If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

⁴ 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.” ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—⁶ 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.

⁷ 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. ⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹ But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For 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? ¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.¹

If there's one thing that we've learned in this series on 1 Corinthians, it's that the presenting issue is often not the root issue. The topic this morning, eating food sacrificed to idols, is not actually the main point of the passage. Rather it's the occasion to talk about something much deeper. And with that in mind, I want to start this morning by telling why leaders don't play ultimate frisbee at Modgnik anymore. For those of you that are not familiar with Modgnik, it is a youth retreat where about 500 students and leaders and 25 or so churches get together to think about the backwards nature of the Kingdom of God. Hence the name Modgnik, which is the word "kingdom" spelled backwards. Now, this was probably about 2008 or 2009, and I had recently graduated college. I was young, proud, and absolutely loved playing ultimate frisbee. It was, and still is, hands down, my favorite sport to play. When I arrived at Modgnik, I was beside myself with excitement when I heard that an Ultimate tournament would be held. Back then, I was pretty intense about Ultimate and about playing games in general. Some of that has changed, but some of it hasn't. My thought process was that the Lord had called us to excellence in all things, and so we were to play **hard** and **well**, no matter the context. I had a distain for "church" rules. The idea of not playing strictly by the rules and playing to win were laughable. Now you can see where this is going. I approached this tournament at a **middle school** church youth retreat like I approached the tournaments in the regional adult league I was playing in at the time. Mind you that I'm a year or two out of college at this point, and so I was going to be bigger, stronger, and faster than any middle schooler. I was chomping at the bit to get into the action and dominate. And that's exactly what I did. I subbed in and took charge. I tossed dimes and soared over 4 foot 5 sixth graders to catch long bombs for scores. Sheesh. Imagine what it must have been like for middle schoolers to watch their adult leader laying waste to opposing teams. Sure, my team enjoyed the winning, but everyone else probably didn't. Now imagine that you're an adult leader from another church, watching this unfold. You've got an adult that is running roughshod over middle schoolers. What are you thinking? You're probably thinking, "This jerk is trying to relive his glory days. Can't he see that he's completely missing the point of being a youth leader?" Thankfully, the leaders at the retreat were really gracious people. They pulled me aside and quietly asked me what I was there for. That's all. They asked me for what purpose I had given up a weekend and spent 4 hours on a bus with 50 crazy middle schoolers. Apparently, this wasn't an isolated incident, because at the planning meeting, we

¹ The background and exposition of this text is adapted from the sermons [Forbidden Lawsuits](#) by Alistair Begg on 9/13/92 and [The Gospel in a Litigious Society](#) by David Strain on 6/4/17; and from the commentary [First Corinthians](#) by Kim Riddlebarger pp. 135-149

unanimously agreed that adults should no longer play in the games, and that we should tone down the competitiveness of the games too, lest an overcompetitive adult lose his cool.

Now, did I have a right to play hard? Well I guess so. Was I right in saying that the Lord wants us to do things well and with excellence? Well, sure! There's nothing inherently wrong with playing a game well or hard. But had I completely missed the point of being a youth leader on a church youth retreat playing in a friendly game of ultimate frisbee? Absolutely. I was focused on me, my fun, and my glory, when my whole purpose for being there at all was to serve not only our kids, but also the kids from the other churches. And so it was with the Corinthian church. They were exercising their freedoms, but they completely missed the point when it came to the exercise of those freedoms. They were misusing their freedoms, and ultimately, they were hurting their fellow believers and by extension sinning against Christ. And so this is what Paul wants to really talk about. He wants to talk about our inward orientation toward other believers. How do we approach treating each other?

Now before we get into the text, a word of context. We have a passage before us today about food sacrificed to idols. In America today, the issue of food sacrificed to idols is almost nonexistent. But we shouldn't dismiss this as a 1st century Grecian problem. Folks around the world still struggle with this very issue. And so, what do we know about the world that the Corinthians were living in? Corinth was a bustling Greek town in the first century. It was an important economic hub, and with that wealth came all the temptations the world had to offer. It was also renowned for its pagan culture, with its pagan temples being at the heart of social life. The food offered to idols here almost certainly refers to meat sacrificed in the temples. Meat in that day would have started on an altar to some idol. A portion would have been given to the priests, some would have been served in the temple, and the rest would have been sold at the market. In that era, meat was a treat. Only the rich would have been able to afford to eat meat on a regular basis. As a result, the only time the poor would have been able to enjoy meat would have been when they were attending an idol festival. If you take all of this into account, eating meat would have been closely tied with pagan worship. It's like eating candy corn or pumpkin-flavored treats and thinking of Fall. Eating meat would have gone hand-in-hand with those pagan experiences. Furthermore, eating in the temples was woven into the very fabric of Corinthian social life. To refuse to eat in the temples would essentially cut you off from a huge part of community life. Now we wouldn't be talking about this unless the Corinthian church had problems agreeing on this issue of meat offered to idols. Many of the Corinthians would not have wanted to give up eating meat because it was a delicacy and a treat. Others wouldn't have wanted to give up the social aspects of eating in the temples. For some, they would have been able to eat without a second thought about somehow participating in idol worship through eating. But for others, they couldn't separate the food from their previous pagan experiences. And so, the church divided into two camps. Those that permitted eating meat and those that did not.

Now, we see in Chapter 8, Paul divides his thoughts into 3 parts. First, he identifies the issue, the Corinthians are not using their knowledge in a loving way. Then he works through each part of that issue. Verses 4-6 deal with the knowledge. And verses 7-13 deals with the love. Let's dive in.

So what's the issue here? Well the issue is that the Corinthians have missed the point. Paul quotes their claim that "all of us possess knowledge". But what is the knowledge that the Corinthians claim to possess? Well, we find out down in verse 4. The Corinthians have deduced that since idols are really nothing at all, and that all Christians know that idols are nothing, then we are free to eat. But then he immediately skewers their argument. Their so-called

“knowledge” does nothing but puff them up with pride and selfishness. Paul has already used the word that is translated “puff up” back in 4:6: “I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.” Paul is calling them on their self-absorbed pride. It’s the relational aspect of their so-called knowledge that Paul criticizes. The folks that can eat meat without a second thought think of themselves as better Christians. They are using their abilities to pat themselves on the back. “Look at me, I’m so strong in the faith that I can eat amid the idolatry without a single sin.” It’s just like me on the ultimate field. “Look at me, I’m so good at this game. I’m so much better than all of you!”

The selfishness, self-absorption, and disregard for others is blatant and obvious. It makes you not want to be friends with me because it’s clear that in this area, I care only about myself. Paul goes on to deny that this Corinthian group truly knows as they ought to know. Verse 2 is fairly blunt. You think you know something about what it means to be a strong Christian, but you in fact have completely missed the point. For them, knowledge was self-serving. It freed them to do what they wanted to do. But a Christian’s knowledge is rooted in grace. If we call ourselves Christians, we were first known by God while we were still in our sin. This is verse 3. True Christians understand that we have been saved because God’s knew of us. Being known by God is really the only thing that matters. Think back to Matthew 7 where not everyone who says “Lord, Lord” will enter heaven. The Lord will declare to some that “I never knew you”. Everything a Christian is comes out of this gracious knowing, this gracious union with the Lord Jesus. And for Christians to puff themselves up because they think they know right doctrine clearly misses the humility and sacrifice of Christ on the Cross to open their eyes in the first place. Now it’s important to know that Paul doesn’t throw the baby out with the bathwater. Knowledge is important. Right doctrine is important.

Which brings us to verses 4-6: the knowledge part of the issue. And this will be super quick. It is important to note that Paul doesn’t immediately start in on where the Corinthians are wrong. Rather Paul affirms the knowledge that they profess. The error is not in the doctrine. Verses 4-6 make it clear that Paul agrees with them. They have a right to eat in the temples and to not worry about participating in idolatry. It is also important to note that Paul doesn’t condemn them for thinking about these things. Some folks would hear Paul’s admonition that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” as a push toward an “all you need is love” ideal. That’s not true. Paul is clear that they have freedom in Christ because their eyes have been opened to the truth. It is because they know that idols are nothing that they have freedom. What we have here are elementary doctrines of God. God is only god if there is only one of Him. He can’t be God unless He is supreme over all things, and so thus idols are not gods. Again, **What** they know is not wrong. What is wrong is what they **do** with that knowledge.

Which brings us to part 2: the love part of the issue. Looking at verse 7, we see that Paul again plays on the very words that the Corinthians used to try to rationalize their actions. Instead of going after the word “knowledge”, Paul reinterprets the word “possess”. Here in the church, we talk a lot about the heart. We talk a lot about heart issues and working things into our hearts. And that’s what Paul means. While Christians should know that there isn’t anything to an idol, that they have no real existence, that truth might not be fully **possessed** in both head and heart of **every** Christian. It hasn’t sunk down deep in the hearts of every believer. But verse 9 is the key here. “But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.” Paul clearly acknowledges that there are some that are weaker and some that are stronger. His word to the weak is clearly implied. Get stronger. You ought to live in light of the

freedoms that you no-doubt have in Christ. But his word to the strong is far more than implied. It's explicit, and it lands like a hammer. His word to the strong is, "How can you possibly be doing this to your brother?" Paul argues in verse 10 that "if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in a idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?". The idea is that the weaker believers would be pressured either externally or internally to be like everyone else, even when their conscience tells them that they shouldn't.

Probably the best example of this recently in my life has been what to do about the show Game of Thrones. Some Christians love the show for its depth of characters and unpredictable plot. Other Christians loathe it for its gratuitous violence, in-your-face sexual content, and perversion. Some Christians claim to be able to watch it without sin. I can't. I tried and failed. So I just watch YouTube clips of it. You'd be surprised what you can piece together from minute to two minute clips that cut out all the bad stuff. But that's beside the point. I'm not going to lie, when I hear that someone I look up to in the faith enjoys the show, I think a couple of things. First, I think, "Pssh, yeah sure you watch that without sin." And following a close second to that dismissive and probably sinful first thought is, "Man, I wish I could watch that show without sin. It's only a TV show. As a Pastor, I should be able to handle a TV show." And so you see the temptation that is set before me, a weak one, and that's about a TV show that I'm not really desperate to watch. Watching others do something that they are able to do in their freedom in Christ that I'm not able to do, I begin to pressure myself to be like them. Now, think about the context for the Corinthians. Many of the weaker brothers would have desperately wanted to eat the meat available to them. It would have been really nice, a treat even. It would have not isolated them from the social life of the city. Following their conscience which is weak would have been profoundly costly to them. They would have felt out of step with the prevailing culture, like a misfit toy. And really why do they feel this way? They feel this way because their brothers and sisters in Christ set before them an example that ended up becoming a temptation. And the temptation to rationalize doing something against your conscience because you think that you ought to be able to as a Christian is a timeless one. It was a stumbling block back then just as it was for me today.

And the charge that goes along with Paul's argument is that if this becomes a stumbling block (spoiler alert: it did, which is why he's writing about it), then the Corinthians care more about eating meat (or in my case Game of Thrones) than they care about their brothers and sisters in Christ. Now before we get upset that this sets a bad precedent, and that we aren't responsible for what other folks do or don't do, I want to say that we act this way almost reflexively. This principle that Paul is putting out there is almost second nature to us. Would we serve alcohol at a family dinner if one of our family members was an alcoholic? Would we take a vacation to Vegas or go to a casino if one of family members had a gambling problem? Neither of those are even remotely loving because we know what they struggle with. And so we often constrain ourselves for the sake of the ones that we love simply because we don't want to tempt them with sin or pressure them to sin by going against their consciences. And this is no different. This is the no-adults-playing rule at Modgnik. Leaders who can keep their competitiveness in check are giving up their right to play for my sake, so that I might not be tempted to do something stupid.

And if a simple care for your brother isn't enough, let's consider Paul's move to connect this to Christ. At the end of verse 11 and in verse 12, Paul reminds the Corinthians, and us, that this weak brother that we are throwing temptation before was bought with the precious blood of

Christ. This is a big deal! Paul calls what the Corinthians are doing by eating in the temples a sin not because it's wrong for them to eat there, but because it causes their brother to stumble. And it's an intentional action. It's not a situation where some believers don't know that some of their brothers and sisters in Christ are potentially tempted to sin by their actions. No, it is a blatant disregard or even disdain for those that are weaker. Again we come back to the Modgnik ultimate field. It would have been worse if I had thought about what it would look like from another perspective and then gone out and played all out anyway. Thankfully, I was too self-absorbed to have that kind of awareness. The Corinthians have no such excuse, even if mine is pretty lame. Paul calls what they're doing a sin because they cause or lead their brothers and sisters in Christ to sin against their consciences. And so Paul is calling the Corinthians, and by extension, us, to something radical. He's calling us to lay down our rights and freedoms because Christ died for our weaker brothers and sisters. Plain and simple. And just so we're clear here, this is not going to be easy. In fact it's going to be maddeningly frustrating. We're going to feel a lot of "Really? You think that?! Come on! It's really not that hard to <fill in the blank>!" These are the people that from our perspective can't seem to apply basic Christian doctrine to their lives. It's frustrating! But to that I ask, "How valuable is this person to you?" We often measure what we think something is worth by what we're willing to give up for it. Is your brother or sister in Christ worth your discomfort? Is he or she worth the headaches upon headaches they seem to produce? Is your brother or sister worth putting up with their ability to make a dumpster fire of their lives on a regular basis? When do you decide that your desires are worth more?

Christ thought that this person was worth dying for. Do you see it the same way? What about Christ? Is He valuable enough to you to stop doing whatever may be a stumbling block for this person? Do you think that Christ is more valuable than your freedoms that Christ himself gave you?" Let's take this back to Matthew 25:41-45.

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' When they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

When we see our brothers and sisters in Christ struggling with something that we do not struggle with, do we see it as an opportunity to love Christ by loving them?

On a side note, this requires us to know our brothers and sisters in Christ intimately. We need to know what they struggle with lest we put stumbling blocks before them unintentionally. Do you know the people in this room that would process faith in Jesus Christ well enough to know what they struggle with? Do you know anyone in this room well enough to be able to say what they struggle with and what potential stumbling blocks may be? We don't do life alone. Everything you do will have an impact in some way on someone in the church. The best way to get to know people is to spend time with them. That's why we have community groups. If you don't like groups of people or don't think that they're doing enough to build relationships, guess what, you need to spend the time to get to know them. And it comes back to what you think is valuable. Your priorities reflect what you value. If you value the body of Christ, if you value

those whom your Savior died for, and if you value Christ, then you will value getting to know His bride, the church.

You know, when we're concerned about our rights, we inevitably are self-centered. It becomes about getting what is owed to us. It can be by getting payment. It can be by setting the record straight. It can be in any number of ways. But this passage challenges us to not be primarily about rights and freedoms, but loving our brothers and sisters in Christ by laying down our lives for them. Embedded in verse 11's reminder that Christ died for the weak brother is the implication that you, strong brother, are a weak brother too. Christ could have demanded his rights. He could have refused to give up anything for us. Remember what I said we were going to feel like when dealing with weaker brothers? Can you imagine what it must have been like for God to look upon us? "Really? You're going to choose sin? Come on! How hard is it to choose me instead of sin? Am I not worthy enough?" And yet Christ did this for us. From Philippians 2:6-9 "[Christ Jesus], who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." We are able to give up our rights because Christ gave His up for us first.

I want to close by returning to the Modgnik ultimate field in the following years. I am now super happy to stand on the sidelines cheering my students on. I am happy to give up my freedom to play because I look at both the game and the students differently. I see the game not as something that I myself can enjoy, but as an opportunity to serve my students. And I see my students not only as valuable in themselves, but as valuable because my Lord and Savior paid His life for them. And so are you willing to step out of the game that you love so much? Are you willing to give up that thing that you enjoy? Are you willing to lay down your rights and freedoms for the sake of your brothers and sisters in Christ? Why do we willingly, happily, and joyfully give up our rights and freedoms for the sake of our brothers and sisters in Christ? We do it because we are excited to serve our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for one such as this.