

# Biblical Ethics in the Age of COVID

*A sermon on 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 by Nathan Nettleton, 31 January 2021.*

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## Message

Science, theology and reason can often lead to a sound set of ethical behavioural conclusions which then need to be set aside because, in reality, love demands something else.

## Sermon

Tonight's sermon is about ethics, about how we choose between right or wrong. But I immediately feel the need to preface it by saying that whether you get your behaviour right or wrong is not the most important thing about you in the eyes of God. Way too much Christian teaching seems to boil down to "Jesus died for you, so behave!" This is not one of those sermons. When God looks at you, it is because God really really likes you, not because God wants to tally up the ticks and crosses on your behavioural balance sheet. For God, knowing you and being known by you, delighting in you and being delighted in by you, are far far more interesting than assessing your behaviour. So please keep that at the forefront of your minds as we now ask some questions about ethics.

The Apostle Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth is a reply to the Corinthians' first letter to Paul. History hasn't preserved that letter for us, but we know about it because several times in his letter, Paul says, "Now, about the next thing you asked me, here is my response."

The passage we heard tonight began with one of those, "Now concerning your question about food sacrificed to idols ..."

Paul's doesn't give a simple solution, but his answer provides us with some super important guidelines on how to go about working through complicated ethical questions. And I think that our experience of COVID lockdown in the past year has given us some new practical experience of his approach, so I want to look at what that has taught us about ethics, about how to choose the right course of action.

But before I get there, I need to start with the example Paul himself was addressing. The question the Corinthians were asking was whether it was okay for Christians to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols in the pagan temples, or whether that would corrupt them by involving them in the worship of idols. This was not an obscure or trivial question. In the ancient world, the temples supplied the butchers. Temple sacrifices were pretty much the only source of meat in most cities. If you lived in Jerusalem, the butchers were supplied by the Jerusalem temple, but in Corinth and in any other major city of the Roman world, it was pagan temples that functioned as the abattoirs to supply the local butchers. You either ate meat that had been offered to the Greek and Roman gods, or you went vegetarian.

Questions about the ethics of eating meat are starting to become quite prominent again, but usually when preachers speak about this passage, we assume that pagan sacrifices do not feature much in the lives of our people these days, and so we immediately start looking for analogies and possible applications to other more pressing issues in our local context. But I [read a story the other day about a pastor in Canada](#) who took that approach to preach on this passage, and then at the end of the service, a young university aged woman shook his hand at the door and said:

“So, thanks for the sermon and all. But I was just wondering: I am dating this Hindu guy and go with him sometimes to the Temple on Friday nights. They have all this food laid out on a kind of table in front of pictures of Vishnu and stuff and after dedicating it all to the gods, they then have a potluck meal. So I was just wondering: is it OK that I eat that food or not?”

Sometimes the issues we face in today’s world haven’t changed nearly as much as we think! She was facing the exact same scenario, two thousand years later.

If you were to listen to many Christians today, you might imagine that what Paul would do when presented with a question like this would be to say, “Well, what does the Bible say?” and then to proceed to pull out one or two bible verses and to assert that they give us a precise and specific answer which settles the question for all time.

But that is precisely what the Apostle does not do. It doesn’t appear to even come onto his radar as a possible approach, which is quite surprising given that the Bible has an awful lot to say about idols and about what foods you should and shouldn’t eat. We barely bat an eyelid when Paul says, “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,” but that’s actually an earth shattering statement from someone who grew up as an orthodox Jew in the devoutly religious Pharisee party. Despite all those pages and pages of food laws, Paul is saying that what you do or don’t eat is of no consequence at all for your relationship with God.

Now if that is true of things that get as much biblical attention as food and idols, then you can be pretty sure that if you switched to questions about slavery, or capital punishment, or family structure, or sex, or economics, Paul would not suddenly change strategies and just look up a proof text to remove all need for further thought. The Bible contains commandments on all of them, but Paul doesn’t suggest looking up relevant commandments as a useful methodology for thinking through ethical questions.

Now just before you all throw out your Bibles, let me point out that having been raised and formed as an orthodox Pharisee, Paul had an intimate working knowledge of all those Biblical laws, so when he turns his mind to new ethical questions, it is a mind steeped in scripture. Unless you can match Paul’s biblical knowledge, then I suggest that reading the biblical material still needs to be part of your research as you think through new questions.

So, when Paul turns his mind to the question at hand, how does he tackle it?

Well, the first part of the approach he advocates and demonstrates here is what we might call biblically informed logical reasoning. Starting with the principles that emerge from his intimate knowledge of God and of the Bible, he logically works his way through the question of whether this particular behaviour can do you any harm. In a nutshell, his argument is that since these so-called gods are actually non-existent, offering meat to them can’t harm the meat, and therefore the meat can’t harm you. You will do no damage to yourself or to your relationship with God by eating the meat, or not eating the meat. If there is nothing else to take into account, you are free to eat it if you wish.

Up to that point, Paul is in agreement with the conclusion that a bunch of people in the Corinthian church had already reached. They were apparently quite confident that they

could go ahead and eat, but this was upsetting some other people who weren't so sure, and that's why they were seeking Paul's opinion.

But at this point, Paul suddenly changes tack. *If* there is nothing else to take into account, you are free to eat it as you wish, but, but there usually is something else to take into account. There is the impact on other people around you.

Paul never thinks of us as independent individuals whose decisions involve only ourselves. It's not all about me, or even all about me and God. On the contrary, Paul thinks of us first and foremost as people enmeshed in a network of relationships that connect us to others in the community, in the body of Christ. It is the impact of our behaviour on these relationships that is the ultimate criterion for Paul. I might theoretically have the freedom to do this, but sometimes it's more loving towards others to choose not to exercise my freedom. For the sake of your sister here who's on the twelve step program with Idolaters Anonymous, and struggling to stay clean and establish herself in her new idol-free life, it might be far more sensitive, caring and loving to stick to the salad whenever you're with her.

A little qualification here though: Paul's method does not give anybody license to blackmail the church by claiming that they will be wounded and distressed if we depart from their particular rigid morality code. The people who claim that it would be wrong for the church to ordain women or bless same sex marriages or whatever because it would cause them moral distress are not the vulnerable ones that Paul was looking out for. They are almost invariably in no danger of having their consciences damaged, or being 'led astray'. They are quite sure of their own correctness and are using their so-called offence as a weapon to wield power over the rest of the church. And if it was universally wrong to ever offend such people's religious sensibilities and moral codes, then Jesus was the biggest sinner of all and deserved to be crucified.

Back to these principles that Paul is talking about, if I jump from first century Corinth to just about anywhere in the COVID ravaged world of the past twelve months, I think we have been unknowingly having a massive experiment with Paul's approach. So let's review what has been happening and see what we can learn from our experiment.

Trying to keep ourselves safe from a pandemic might not seem anything like eating meat offered to idols, but bear with me. In first century Corinth, they didn't know what a virus was, and their concern about idolatry was that the food from the sacrifices might contaminate you or infect you with something evil and dangerous and do you harm.

In the past year, the fear of being infected by something dangerous has been the defining reality of our lives. Here in Melbourne we spent four months in hard lockdown to avoid it. But we varied hugely in how personally we felt that fear. Some of us were not very fearful, some were extremely fearful.

I'm one of the ones who wasn't very fearful. My confidence was almost certainly a bit overblown, and nobody should take it as a model, but this is how it worked in my head. Although I'm getting close to sixty, I've always enjoyed robust health and I hardly ever get sick. I'm not at the highest risk. But there is more to it than that, and this is where it becomes a bit like the Apostle Paul's reasoning. The worst COVID outbreak in Australia was here in Melbourne, and on the very worst week of it, the total number of active cases here equated to

about 1 in every 925 people. So even if no one was self isolating and all the active cases were roaming the streets, which of course wasn't the case, I could have gone out on the worst week, mask free, and hugged 900 strangers, and probably still not caught COVID, even if I found the one. So the logic of the first half of Paul's argument would conclude "Yes, Nathan, knowledge tells you that there is no significant risk to your own health, so if it is all about you, you are free to leave your house and go about your business as if nothing was wrong."

But then, even if my grounds for confidence were perfect which they probably weren't, the second half of Paul's argument kicks in and pulls me up short at the front gate. Would going out as though nothing was wrong be the loving thing to do? Would it be an expression of love and care for the feelings and wellbeing of those around you? Clearly the answer is no, it wouldn't. And as we have learned this year, taking that seriously is more complex than just calculating whether I am a risk of spreading the infection myself.

Even if I could know with certainty that no one could catch it from me, hugging 900 strangers in the middle of the worst week of a pandemic is not a loving thing to do. It is a terrifying thing to do. It would cause serious distress and anxiety to many of those 900 people. So we don't do it. The right thing to do is lay aside my freedom out of care for others.

And, beyond concern for other people's fears, the only way we were going to beat this thing was to make sure that we kept the number of people circulating in the streets to an absolute minimum, and to do that, we all had to play our part. If I had exempted myself because I thought I could know with certainty that I wasn't carrying the virus, why shouldn't everyone else who thought they didn't have it go out and about too? Again, the right thing to do is to lay aside my personal freedom out of love for others and a consequent desire to play my part in defeating the virus and making everyone safe.

And remarkably, as a nation, we proved ourselves capable of laying aside our own sense of entitlement to personal freedom in order to cooperate with one another in defeating the virus, and we succeeded. There hasn't been a single case of community transmission detected in Australia for two weeks now. So theoretically you could go out in the street and hug all 25 and a half million of your fellow Australians, and you almost certainly wouldn't catch the virus. But we're not going to do that, because we know that fear is not nearly as simple and logical as that, and it will take lots of us a long time and a vaccine to feel that safe again. So love and care demand that we continue to respect people's fears and act in ways that help them feel safe.

So, much to our own astonishment, the overwhelmingly non-religious Australian population would probably get the thumbs-up from the Apostle Paul for our behaviour in the last year, and for the way it demonstrated the application of his approach to ethical decision making. We've learned a lot about ourselves, and about good ethics, and I suspect that the lessons are clear enough that I don't need to now translate them back into Paul's idol meat question, or any other curly morality questions for that matter. This method doesn't always make the answers obvious and we know that – we argued over the details of the COVID restrictions too – but it does give us a clear method with clear principles. If you want it in a nutshell: love is more important than your personal freedom, and acting with love and care is more important than knowing you are right.