

# The Book of 1 Corinthians, Teacher's Guide

## Lesson 7: Food, Freedom, and Love for the Weak

### 1 Corinthians 8:1–9:27

#### Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

These two chapters teach how Christian freedom is to be governed by love, and they close with a sober call to disciplined perseverance. What is doctrinally at stake includes the confession of one God and one Lord Jesus Christ (8:6), the seriousness of leading a weaker believer into sin (8:11–12), and the genuine possibility that a Christian can fall away and be disqualified (9:27). The teacher should present the believer's freedom as real but never absolute: it is always subject to love for the brother and the advance of the gospel. Take care, at the close, to present 9:24–27 in line with the whole New Testament: salvation is preserved through ongoing faith, self-control, and obedience, and even Paul reckoned with the possibility of being disqualified. This guards against any notion that a believer is guaranteed final salvation regardless of how he lives.

At the same time, these chapters are richly formational. Paul confronts the pride of mere knowledge, the selfishness that insists on its rights, and the rigidity that hinders the lost from coming to Christ. He holds up his own example of surrendered rights and disciplined devotion as a pattern to imitate.

Aim, then, for a love that governs liberty and a discipline that perseveres. Send students home willing to lay down their rights for the weak and for the gospel, adaptable for the sake of the lost, and freshly serious about running the race with self-control toward an imperishable crown. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9.

#### Question 1

##### Student Question:

*Paul opens by contrasting two things: "this knowledge puffs up, but love builds up," and adds that "if anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know" (8:1–2). Why does Paul insist that knowledge alone, however correct, is not enough, and what does it mean that love, not knowledge, is what truly builds up the church?*

#### Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open up the contrast at the heart of chapter 8. The strong Corinthians prized their knowledge that idols are nothing. Paul agrees with the knowledge but exposes its danger: knowledge by itself inflates the ego, while love builds others up.

Explain 8:2. The one who thinks he has arrived at knowledge does not yet know as he ought, because true knowledge of God is inseparable from love. To know God is to love, since God is love.

Apply it to the church. A community can be doctrinally correct and still be cold, proud, and divisive if it lacks love. Right belief is meant to produce, not replace, love for God and neighbor.

Guard against a false conclusion. Paul is not against knowledge or sound doctrine; he is against knowledge divorced from love. The goal is truth held in love, which builds up the body.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Knowledge that puffs up versus love that builds up (8:1)
- True knowledge of God as inseparable from love (8:2)
- Doctrinal correctness that can still be proud and cold
- Truth meant to produce love, not replace it
- Building up the body as love's aim

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Why does Paul say knowledge alone is not enough?
- How can a church be correct yet unloving?
- What does it mean to hold truth in love?

### **Question 2**

#### **Student Question:**

*It is possible to be right and still be unloving, to win the argument and lose the brother. Where in your relationships are you more concerned with proving your point than with building the other person up? How might love change the way you handle a disagreement this week?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This self-examining question takes the knowledge-versus-love contrast into the student's relationships. We often prize being right above loving well.

Help students recall a specific disagreement where winning mattered more than the person. The aim is honest recognition, not shame.

Set love's aim before them: to build up, not to score points. Sometimes love withholds a winning argument for the sake of a relationship.

Aim for one changed approach. Ask each student to name a current disagreement and one way love could reshape how they handle it this week.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Valuing being right over building others up
- Winning the argument while losing the person
- Love that aims to build up in disagreement
- Honest self-examination in our relationships

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Where do you prize proving your point over building someone up?
- When has being right cost a relationship?
- How might love change a current disagreement?

### **Question 3**

#### **Student Question:**

*Paul affirms that “there is no God but one,” and that “for us there is one God, the Father ... and one Lord, Jesus Christ” (8:4–6), so that an idol has no real existence. How does this great confession of one God and one Lord free the believer from fear of idols, while Paul still takes seriously the weak conscience of a brother who does not yet grasp this fully?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Highlight the great confession of 8:4–6. Against the many so-called gods and lords of Corinth, Paul affirms there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things. This is a foundational statement of monotheism and of the deity and lordship of Christ.

Draw out the freedom it gives. Because idols have no real existence and there is only one true God, the mature believer need not fear that meat or stone has any power over him. The world belongs to the Lord.

Then note the pastoral balance. Not everyone has this settled knowledge. A recent convert from idolatry may still feel the pull and the dread of his former worship, and his conscience must be respected, not trampled.

Apply it. Sound theology frees us from fear, but it must never make us careless about a brother whose understanding is still growing. Freedom and tenderness go together.

#### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The confession of one God and one Lord Jesus Christ (8:4–6)
- The deity and lordship of Christ in Paul’s confession
- Freedom from fear of idols, which have no real existence
- Respect for the tender conscience of the weaker brother
- Sound theology that frees without making us careless

### Discussion Prompts

- What does Paul's confession of one God and one Lord affirm about Jesus?
- How does this truth free the believer from fear?
- Why must the strong still respect the weaker brother's conscience?

### Question 4

#### Student Question:

*Paul recognizes that not every believer has the same maturity or understanding, and that some have tender consciences. Where might you be the more mature one who needs to be patient with a weaker brother, and where might you be the weaker one who needs to grow? How can you grow in understanding without despising those who see things differently?*

#### Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question helps students locate themselves on the strong-and-weak spectrum, which shifts from issue to issue. We are mature in some areas and immature in others.

Encourage honest placement. Where am I the strong one called to patience, and where am I the weak one needing to grow? Both postures require humility.

Warn against the two temptations: the strong despising the weak as uptight, and the weak judging the strong as lax. Paul forbids both (compare Romans 14).

Aim for one step of growth or patience. Ask each student to name one area where they will either bear patiently with a weaker brother or seek to grow toward maturity.

#### Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Recognizing where we are strong and where we are weak
- Patience from the strong, growth from the weak
- Avoiding both contempt and judgment (Romans 14)
- Humility in both postures

### Discussion Prompts

- Where are you the more mature one called to patience?
- Where are you the weaker one who needs to grow?
- How can you grow without despising those who differ?

### Question 5

#### Student Question:

*Paul warns that exercising your freedom can become “a stumbling block to the weak,” wounding their conscience, and that “sinning against your brothers ... you sin against Christ” (8:9–12). Why does Paul take the wounding of a weaker believer’s conscience so seriously, even calling it a sin against Christ himself, and what does this teach about how love must govern our liberty?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Bring out the gravity of Paul’s warning. To use my freedom in a way that emboldens a weaker brother to act against his conscience and stumble is not a small thing; it can ruin the one for whom Christ died (8:11).

Stress the climactic statement of 8:12: wounding a brother’s conscience is sinning against Christ himself. The Lord so identifies with his people that harm done to them is harm done to him.

Explain the logic. Love must govern liberty. A right exercised without regard for its effect on a brother becomes an act of selfishness, however technically permissible.

Apply it. The question is never only is this allowed, but is this loving, given its effect on others. Mature freedom voluntarily limits itself for the good of the weak.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The seriousness of leading a weaker believer into sin (8:11)
- Wounding a brother’s conscience as a sin against Christ (8:12)
- Christ’s identification with his people
- Love as the governor of Christian liberty
- Freedom that voluntarily limits itself for the weak

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Why does Paul call wounding a brother a sin against Christ?
- How should the effect on others shape the use of our freedom?
- What is the difference between is it allowed and is it loving?

### **Question 6**

#### **Student Question:**

*Paul says he would gladly give up eating meat forever rather than cause a brother to stumble (8:13). Is there something you have a right to do that you would be willing to give up entirely for the sake of a weaker believer? What makes that kind of sacrifice hard, and what would make it worth it?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This question takes Paul's vow in 8:13 personally. He would give up meat forever rather than trip a brother. What would we give up?

Help students name a specific right or freedom, a habit, a liberty, a preference, that might wound or trip a weaker believer.

Name what makes it hard: we feel entitled, the right is legitimate, the sacrifice seems unfair. Acknowledge this while pointing to the worth of a soul.

Aim for one concrete willingness. Ask each student to name one freedom they would lay down for a brother's sake and, if applicable, a situation where they should.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Willingness to surrender a legitimate right for the weak (8:13)
- The worth of a brother over the exercise of a freedom
- Honest reckoning with what makes sacrifice hard
- Love expressed in concrete self-denial

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What right would you be willing to give up for a weaker believer?
- What makes that kind of sacrifice hard?
- Is there a situation where love calls you to lay a freedom down now?

### **Question 7**

#### **Student Question:**

*Though Paul had every right as an apostle to be supported by the churches, he chose to give up that right so as not to "put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ" (9:12, 15–18). What does Paul's voluntary surrender of his legitimate rights teach us about the difference between having a right and insisting on it, and about putting the gospel ahead of our own privileges?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Show how Paul makes himself the prime example. As an apostle he had clear rights: to be supported financially, to eat and drink at the churches' expense, to be accompanied by a wife (9:4–6). He defends these rights as legitimate.

Then highlight the surrender. Paul refused to use these rights, working with his own hands and preaching free of charge, so that nothing would put an obstacle in the way of the gospel (9:12, 15–18).

Draw the key distinction. Having a right and insisting on a right are two different things. Love and the gospel may call us to lay down what we are fully entitled to.

Apply it broadly. The mature Christian holds his rights with an open hand, ready to surrender any of them when the gospel or a brother's good is at stake.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Legitimate apostolic rights that Paul defends (9:4–14)
- Voluntary surrender of rights for the gospel (9:12, 15–18)
- The difference between having a right and insisting on it
- The gospel and the brother placed above personal privilege
- Holding our rights with an open hand

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What rights does Paul give up, and why?
- What is the difference between having a right and insisting on it?
- How does Paul put the gospel ahead of his privileges?

### **Question 8**

#### **Student Question:**

*Paul became “all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (9:19–23), flexing his preferences to reach others for Christ. How adaptable are you for the sake of reaching the lost? Where might your own comfort, preferences, or rigidity be getting in the way of someone coming to know Christ?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Open up 9:19–23. Paul made himself a servant to all and became all things to all people, adapting to Jew and Gentile, strong and weak, in everything except sin, that by all means he might save some.

Clarify what this is and is not. It is not compromising the gospel or pretending to be what he is not; it is flexing his preferences and habits to remove needless barriers between people and Christ.

Turn it onto the student. Our comfort, preferences, and rigidity can quietly become obstacles to the lost. A willingness to adapt, to meet people where they are, reflects Paul's missionary heart.

Aim for one adaptation. Ask each student where their own inflexibility might be hindering someone, and one way they could become more adaptable for the sake of the gospel.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Becoming all things to all people to save some (9:19–23)
- Adapting preferences without compromising the gospel

- Comfort and rigidity as barriers to the lost
- A missionary heart that meets people where they are
- Removing needless obstacles between people and Christ

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What does Paul mean by becoming all things to all people?
- How is adapting different from compromising?
- Where might your preferences be hindering someone from Christ?

### **Question 9**

#### **Student Question:**

*Paul compares the Christian life to an athlete who exercises self-control in all things, runs to win, and disciplines his body, lest “after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (9:24–27). What does this passage teach about the necessity of self-discipline and perseverance in the Christian life, and why does even Paul take seriously the possibility that a person can fall away and be disqualified rather than presume he cannot?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson. Paul turns to the image of the athlete (9:24–27), drawn from the games held near Corinth. Runners compete to win; athletes exercise self-control in all things; and they do it for a fading wreath, while we run for an imperishable crown.

Press the call to discipline. The Christian life is not a casual stroll but a race requiring training, self-control, and effort. Paul says he disciplines his body and keeps it under control. Grace does not make discipline unnecessary; it empowers it.

Handle 9:27 with doctrinal care. Paul says he does this lest, after preaching to others, he himself should be disqualified. If even the apostle Paul reckoned seriously with the possibility of being disqualified, then no Christian should presume that final salvation is automatic regardless of how he lives. The New Testament teaches plainly that believers can fall away and must remain faithful (Hebrews 3:12–14; Galatians 5:4; 2 Peter 2:20–22).

Guard against two errors. On one side is presumption, the idea that once saved, a person is guaranteed salvation no matter what; Paul’s words exclude this. On the other side is anxious works-righteousness, the fear that we must earn our standing; that too is wrong, for salvation is by grace. The truth in between is that salvation is preserved through ongoing faith, repentance, and obedience, an obedient faith that perseveres to the end.

End with encouragement, not dread. The race is run not in fear of a harsh judge but in love for a gracious Lord who supplies the strength and holds out an imperishable crown. The call is to run with purpose and discipline, all the way home.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The Christian life as a race requiring training and self-control (9:24–25)
- Discipline empowered by grace, not opposed to it (9:27)
- The genuine possibility that a person can fall away and be disqualified (9:27; Hebrews 3:12–14; Galatians 5:4)
- Salvation preserved through ongoing faith and obedience, never presumed automatic
- Avoiding both presumption (once saved, always saved) and anxious works-righteousness
- Running toward an imperishable crown in love, not dread

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What does the image of the athlete teach about the Christian life?
- Why does even Paul take seriously the possibility of being disqualified?
- How do we avoid both presumption and anxious striving as we persevere?

### **Question 10**

#### **Student Question:**

*Look back across these two chapters. Paul moves from food and conscience to the surrender of his rights, to the disciplined pursuit of an imperishable crown. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth you most need to carry into this coming week?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This capstone asks students to gather the two chapters and name one way Christ is forming them. Let them speak first.

If needed, recall the movements: knowledge versus love, freedom governed by love for the weak, the surrender of rights for the gospel, and the disciplined race for an imperishable crown.

Notice the unifying thread: a love that lays down its rights and a devotion that disciplines itself. Both flow from valuing Christ and others above self.

Push toward the specific and close in prayer that students would run with discipline and love this week, holding their rights with open hands.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Personal formation through love-governed freedom and disciplined devotion
- Laying down rights for others and the gospel
- Perseverance in the race
- Moving from general agreement to a specific, named response

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Which part of these chapters pressed on you most, and why?
- What is the one truth you most need this week?
- What named step is God asking you to take in response?