

The Book of 1 Corinthians

Lesson 7: Food, Freedom, and Love for the Weak -- 1 Corinthians 8:1–9:27

In Corinth, almost all the good meat came from the temples. Animals were sacrificed to idols, and the leftover cuts were sold in the market or served at banquets. So a brand new Christian, freshly delivered from a lifetime of idol worship, would stand at a dinner table holding a piece of meat and feel his stomach turn. Was he being dragged back into the old life? Meanwhile, the more mature believer across the table would shrug. He knew the idol was nothing, just a lump of stone, and the meat was just meat. He had the knowledge. What he did not always have was love.

That is the tension Paul steps into, and the principle he draws from it reaches far beyond ancient menus. “Knowledge puffs up,” he writes, “but love builds up.” Being right is not the same as being loving, and it is entirely possible to win an argument while wounding a soul. The mature believer was correct about the meat. But Paul tells him that if his exercise of freedom causes a weaker brother to violate his conscience and stumble back toward sin, then he has sinned, not against an abstract rule, but against the brother, and against Christ who died for that brother.

Then Paul does something remarkable. Instead of just telling the strong to limit their freedom, he turns the spotlight on himself. As an apostle, he had every right to be supported financially by the churches, to eat and drink at their expense, to bring along a wife. And he gave it all up. He worked with his own hands and preached free of charge, so that nothing would put an obstacle in the way of the gospel. He became all things to all people, flexing and bending and sacrificing his preferences, so that by all means he might save some. Here is a man who held his rights with an open hand because he held the gospel with a closed fist.

And he closes with the image of an athlete. The runners in the Isthmian games near Corinth trained with brutal discipline for a fading wreath of leaves. How much more, says Paul, should we discipline ourselves for a crown that lasts forever. He even admits his own holy fear: that after preaching to others, he himself might be disqualified. Read these two chapters and let them reshape your idea of freedom. Real Christian liberty is not the right to do as I please; it is the freedom to lay down my rights for the good of others and the glory of God.

Group Discussion: Paul says that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (8:1), and that being right about our freedom can still wound a weaker brother. Can you think of times when Christians have been technically correct about something yet harmed others by how they used that knowledge? Why is it so tempting to value being right over building others up?

Personal Reflection: Paul willingly gave up his rights, even good and legitimate ones, so that nothing would hinder the gospel or harm a fellow believer (9:12, 19). Is there a freedom, preference, or “right” you cling to that may be tripping up someone weaker or hindering your witness? What would it look like to lay it down out of love?

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Romans 14:13–23, not putting a stumbling block before a brother over food and conscience; Philippians 2:3–8, the mind of Christ, who emptied himself for others; Romans 15:1–3, the strong bearing with the failings of the weak; Hebrews 12:1–2, running with endurance the race set before us; Galatians 5:13, using our freedom to serve one another in love