

Autumn Ridge Church Women's Bible Study
1 Corinthians: Unity in Love
Chapters 8 and 9: Unity in Freedom
March 8, 2017 ~ Jann Wright



Good morning/evening and welcome to Women's Bible Study. Last week we were on break for Ash Wednesday and now as we look toward Easter we are back to our study of 1 Corinthians. So far we have studied:

- The foundational truth of Christ's sacrifice on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins.
- Wisdom, distinguishing between worldly wisdom and godly wisdom
- Growing in our faith as we were admonished not to act as infants in adult bodies
- Our Role as Disciples
- Our Attitude towards sin, particularly sexual immorality
- Last week we talked about Unity in Marriage

Our topic today/tonight is Unity in Freedom. We will be tackling chapters 8 and 9. On the surface they look completely unrelated, chapter 8 deals with the issue of food offered to idols and chapter 9 addresses financial support to those in ministry. However, as we delve into the topic of freedom we will see that chapter 9 is a specific personal application of the principle Paul addresses in chapter 8. We will be only skimming the surface of these topics as each one could be a stand-alone lecture, but we will cover some central themes that you will have opportunity to further explore in your small groups.

1 Corinthians 8

If you have your Bible, please open it to 1 Corinthians Chapter 8. ¹Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that "We all possess knowledge." But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. ²Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. ³But whoever loves God is known by God.¹

Knowledge

That seems like a very odd way to address the questions the congregation has about eating food sacrificed to idols. The sequential in me is expecting a question and then an answer. However, Paul has a very good reason for his delay. He begins by saying, "we all possess knowledge", and perhaps that was a contemporary phrase in the culture. In fact, we could look across this group of women here and say the same thing, "We all possess knowledge". To some degree we have been reading our Bibles, we have been exposed to solid Biblical preaching by pastoral staff at this church, we have taken time

¹ *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version. 10th Anniversary Edition.* 1995. Zondervan Corporation. Grand Rapids p.1734.

to read Christian books, and listen to Christian speakers. So at some level we all possess knowledge about subjects related the Christian faith.

Knowledge is a good thing; Paul in several places in 1 Corinthians says he would not have us be ignorant (1 Corinthians 15:34, 10:1). However, knowledge has a shadow side. In church history some developed their knowledge to the point that they erroneously thought that only they had special access to God and an understanding of his commands. Such attitudes took the church to very unbiblical places.

Knowledge applied without love is another disastrous combination. It often disconnects us from realizing we are interacting with real people made in the image of God and loved by him. Those who possess knowledge also risk developing a prideful attitude towards those who do not.

Even those who are very knowledgeable do not possess all of the knowledge available. None of us has reached perfection, we need to continually cultivate a teachable spirit.

At the same time we can acknowledge that Christians are at different levels of maturity. We have not all had the same opportunities to learn about the Bible and faith. We have not all had the same life experiences which tend to mature us at different rates.

Knowledge is not the supreme goal. Love is the key characteristic. Paul feels it necessary to give this reminder before addressing specific questions about food. He is setting the stage for the difficult lesson on self-sacrifice and unity in the body of Christ.

⁴ So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one."

The Question: Can Christians eat food offered to Idols?

The core question in this passage is Can Christians eat food that has been sacrificed to idols?

The Problem

Cultural Context

While this may not sound like a huge problem to us, it was a major issue to the Christians in Corinth. It was the custom among non-Christians to make feasts of their sacrifices and not only to eat themselves, but to invite their friends to join them. These meals often happened in the temple, where the sacrifice was offered. Usually only part of the meat was burned. Of the remaining meat, a portion could be carried away from the table and given to friends. The portion that was owned by the priests could be taken by them and sold in the marketplace. Most all feasts, had food sacrificed to idols, even food offered at their private tables would have been sacrificed before they ate it.²

Historical Context

² Henry, Matthew. Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994. Print.

To the Jews there was a deep historical context to this issue. Idols had been a problem since early Old Testament History. We are told that Israel's great patriarch, Abraham and his family worshipped idols. (Joshua 24:2)

In the Ten Commandments recorded in Exodus 20:2-5 we read:

*²"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.
³"You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴"You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, . . .*

When the Israelites were settled in the promised land, Joshua gathered them and said, *¹⁴"Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. (Joshua 24:14)*

The Israelites many times were reminded to leave the idols behind. Throughout the reigns of the Kings of the Old Testament this was a constant source of contention between the people and God. (2 Kings 17:12,16, 41; 2 Chronicles 24:18). Idol worship was one of the big reasons that the nation of Israel, both the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom were carried off into exile first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians. Idols were a longstanding problem.

Cultural Context Continued

This wasn't a minor issue to the Corinthian Christians either. The worship of other gods was rampant. The town contained at least 12 temples to various gods. Christians had to live in that culture. What were they supposed to do when they were invited by family and friends to dinner? What were they to do when they received invitations to social gatherings like weddings or other celebrations? Sure for a while they could make polite excuses, but that would only hold up for so long.

How were they to witness to their non-Christian friends and family if they never interacted with them? What would be the impact on those Christians who had recently turned to Christ from idol worship? This was not a theoretical theological exercise, these issues concerned very practical matters of everyday life.

Foundational Scriptural Principles

To answer the question, Paul begins by laying some foundational spiritual principles.

There is only one God.

The first is that there is only one God. The Egyptians had many gods, the Greeks had many gods. The Romans had many Gods. In fact, everyone seemed to have many Gods. It was the Christians who were unique in that they served only one God.

We live in a culture that serves many gods as well. We are in a world that has many religions and many corresponding deities. These however are imposters. There is only

one God. He is represented in three manifestations, God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. But these are three in one. This is a fundamental principle that we must understand as Christians. God is not one among many. He does not take his place alongside other gods. He is the one and only. There are no other gods.

This had great implications for the Christians in Corinth. They were surrounded by other religions and their worship. They might have been afraid of what would happen to them if they didn't worship or pay homage to these other gods. They might have still felt a bit superstitious. Would their crops fail? Would their businesses suffer? Would their animals reproduce? Would their families face ruin? Certainly in Israel's history they had fallen for these fears. (Jeremiah 44)

An idol is nothing.

The second foundational principle is that an idol is nothing. An idol was a physical representation of a god. When Jacob ran from Laban, Rachel took her father's household idols with her and hid them. During the Exodus when the Israelites fell into idolatrous worship, they built a golden calf. When David was fleeing from Saul, his wife Michal put an idol in his bed to make it look like he was there. An idol is not real, it is a physical representation of a god who is not real.

One of the clearest and humorous explanations of this is from Isaiah 44, where the process of crafting an idol is described.

¹⁶Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire." ¹⁷From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me! You are my god!" ¹⁸They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand.

¹⁹No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, "Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?"

²⁰Such a person feeds on ashes; a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?" (Isaiah 44:16-20)

Although an idol is nothing, demons are real. The famous American late 19th and early 20th Century preacher H.A. Ironside noted, "Idolatrous systems are the works of men energized by the enemy".³ Demons masquerade behind these other forms of worship and their props. Demons are not to be dismissed with laughter or put on the same level as God. They are dangerous and we need to be cautious, but they are not all powerful. Paul refers to this in chapter 10.

¹⁸Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? ¹⁹Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to

³Ironside, H.A., An Ironside Expository Commentary: 1 and 2 Corinthians. Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, 1938, page 136, Print.

God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. (1 Corinthians 10:18-20)

Food does not make you holy.

The third principle is that food does not make you holy. We have such an emphasis today on healthy eating, myself included. There are many books available on clean eating, low sugar, and other healthy eating guides, especially in these early months of the year. We do know that diet and exercise impact our physical health. We also know we are to care for our bodies because they are the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 19-20). However, food itself does not make us more holy.

Paul's answer to the Corinthian Christians is that they are free to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols because: there are no other gods, an idol is nothing, and food does not make you holy. Furthermore, they were not worshipping idols, they were not participating in temple worship as he forbids them to do.

However there are reasons not to exercise this freedom. For those Christians who felt it was wrong, forcing the issue, would be teaching them to go against their conscience, therefore dulling it, creating a very unhealthy cycle for them. Paul encouraged the mature believers to bear with the less mature, even to the point of sacrificing their own freedom.

Modern Day Applications

So what does this mean for us today? How can we apply this to our current context?

This is still an issue in many parts of the world.

There are still lots of places in the world where people worship idols. They face very real issues similar to the Corinthians of the first century. Apparently this will continue to be a problem even to the end of time, Revelation 9:20 says, *The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk.*

How far does Christian freedom go in areas not specifically forbidden by the scriptures?

This chapter begs the question just how far does Christian freedom go in areas not specifically forbidden by the scriptures. This has been an issue throughout generations in this country. At one time or another there have been concerns about Christians participating in: drinking alcohol, smoking, playing cards, attending movies, wearing certain styles of clothes, make up, rock and roll music, Halloween, watching the Super Bowl on a Sunday night, and yoga.

It becomes difficult when we have to make decisions regarding behaviors that are not mentioned in the Bible. For example, when you are visiting famous historical sites on vacation can you go tour one that is dedicated to another God? Can you visit the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, or the Abu Simbel Temples, in Egypt?

Legalism and License

This issue causes us to examine the delicate tension between Legalism and License. On the one hand Legalism is very restrictive, aspects of life are considered either black or white and there is almost no grey areas. Behavior tends to be very restricted, even in areas where the Bible does not give us specific prohibitions say regarding movies or dancing. Rather than look at some of the principles from scripture that might apply, legalists simply restrict behavior. There is a tendency to try to pair certain behaviors or abstinence from them as a requirement for salvation which is clearly not Biblical. We are saved by grace alone, we cannot earn salvation, it is a gift freely given to us by God.

On the other end of the spectrum is License. In this perspective there is little black and white and mostly grey. The tendency is to say most anything goes, even things that are specifically prohibited in scripture. For example, adultery, sex outside of marriage, stealing, and murder are all specifically and clearly forbidden.

We have to be aware of our tendency to drift to each end of this spectrum. Instead we must clearly understand what the Bible says, what areas are not clearly addressed, and what areas we choose to voluntarily limit our Christian freedom.

Paul explained that the Corinthian Christians were clearly within their rights to purchase meat in the marketplace that had been sacrificed to idols and he outlined the reasons for this. However, Paul further explains that not everyone has reached a level of maturity to understand this. Additionally, for those who had just left the sphere of pagan practices and idol worship it would be a hard environment to go back into even though they had the freedom to do so.

Paul instead of just telling the Corinthians how they should handle their freedom and voluntarily set it aside for the building up of other Christians, now is going to apply the principle in a very personal way. Paul could say as he does in 1 Corinthians 4:16, "Imitate me" because he lived out some very hard applications of the scripture in his own life.

Chapter 9

Let's look at chapter 9. We will begin reading in verse 1.

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? ²Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. ³This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. ⁴Don't we have the right to food and drink? ⁵ Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? ⁶Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living?

The Question

The overall question is, Does Paul have the right to be financially supported by the local church? He frames the question by asking three rhetorical questions:

1. Do we (meaning he and Barnabas) have the right to be given basic support, food and drink?

2. Do we have the right to take a Christian wife with us and have her basic support provided as well?
3. Do we have a right to not have to work to provide our basic living needs?

The answers to all of these questions is yes they do, but Paul did not take financial resources from the local church in Corinth. They may have wondered if he did not take financial resources because he really wasn't entitled to do so.

Let's look at six foundational principles, scriptural and otherwise why Paul had the right to be financially supported. I particularly like the headings that John MacArthur⁴ in his Commentary on 1st Corinthians gives to address this issue so we will use those.

6 Reasons Paul had the right to be supported by the local church:

Reason #1: He was an apostle

Paul was an apostle, but right away he has to defend and support this claim. An apostle was an eyewitness of Christ and his resurrection and specifically called to the work of an apostle by Christ. Paul was not one of the original twelve and so this may have been part of the issue.

However, Paul was specifically called by Christ. Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus and commissioned him as his special messenger of the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9) Perhaps not all of Corinthians were not aware of this dramatic appearance by Christ. However, Paul pointed to the fact that they only had to look at their own lives and his work on behalf of Christ in them. They were his seal of authenticity.

Reason #2: It is Customary to Pay Workers

Paul gives a second reason that he had the right to be supported by the local church. It is customary to pay workers. He gives three examples. A soldier does not serve at his own expense. Whoever heard of that? They are provided with food, clothing, housing, and tools they need to carry out their responsibilities. A farmer is paid from the harvest of his crops, he shares in the fruits of his labors. He does not work for free. Finally, shepherds are compensated for their work, minimally with the milk from the flock. In the same way, pastors of the church are to receive some of the resources from the people they serve.

Reason #3: It is according to God's Law

Paul gives an Old Testament example that an ox should not be muzzled while he is threshing the grain. He is entitled to eat from his labors. Paul applies this principle to Christian leaders who are providing something even more important.

Reason #4: Other Leaders Exercise this Right

Apparently the Corinthians had supported others in their spiritual work, likely Apollos and Peter. Paul was the founder of the church there and an apostle, so certainly he had the right to be supported.

⁴ MacArthur, Jr. John, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians. Moody Bible Institute, Chicago. 1984, pages 200-205. Print.

Reason #5: It is a Universal Pattern

Since the priesthood of the Old Testament the pattern was set that those who performed the functions of the priests were to be supported. This came in the form of tithes and sacrifices.

Reason #6: Jesus ordained it.

In Luke 10:7, Jesus ordained this principle of paying church leaders, when he sent out the 72.

Modern Day Application

The application from this chapter is pretty straightforward. We have a responsibility to provide financial support to our church leaders. Further, it looks like we have a responsibility to provide reasonable financial support for our church leaders' wives to accompany them in the ministry.

The main point; however, that Paul is making is that while he had every right to be materially provided for by the local church, he choose to give up this right. He did so because he did not want to hinder the gospel. He did not want to create reasons for people to turn away from the message of salvation. He did not want people to think he was doing it for the money.

Stumbling Blocks

That is the main point that we want to take away from this passage as well. In the name of our freedom are we a stumbling block to others? Remember Paul does not want us to be ignorant so he is not saying that those who are uninformed have the right to subject others to whatever non Biblical rules they make up. Rather he is saying there are times when mature believers who know the truth are to voluntarily set aside their freedom so as to not create a stumbling block for others in their journey.

Ironside tells this story in his commentary⁵:

Some years ago I was preaching in a gospel hall in Detroit. A former Muslim from India was there who was at the head of a tea business, and he had been brought to know the Lord Jesus Christ. On one occasion when holding a meeting there, the Sunday school had its annual outing and we all went over to a beautiful spot, and spent the day together. I was chatting with this brother, Mr. Mohammed Ali by name, when a young girl came by passing out sandwiches.

She said, "Won't you have a sandwich?" "Thank you," I said, "what kind have you?" "I have several different kinds." "I will help myself to several of them." And then she turned to Mr. Ali and said, "Will you have one?" "What kind are they?" he asked. "There is fresh pork and there is ham." "Have you any beef?" "No, I do not." "Have you any lamb?" "No." "Fish?" "No." "Thank you, my dear young lady, but I won't take any."

⁵ Ironside page 139-140.

Laughingly she said, "Why, Mr. Ali, you surprise me. Are you so under the law that you cannot eat pork? Don't you know that a Christian is at liberty to eat any kind of meat?"

"I am at liberty, my dear young lady, to eat it," he said, "but I am also liberty to let it alone. You know I was brought up a strict Muslim. My old father nearly eighty years of age now, is still a Muslim. Every three years I go back to India to render an account of the business of which my father is really the head and to have a visit with the folks at home. Always when I get home I know how I will be greeted. The friends will be sitting inside, my father will come to the door when the servant announces that I am there, and he will say, "Mohammed have those infidels taught you to eat the filthy hog meat yet?" 'No, Father,' I will say; 'pork has never passed my lips.' Then I can go in and have the opportunity to preach Christ to them. If I took one of your sandwiches, I could not preach Christ to my father the next time I go home."

Running the Race

We have freedom in Christ. Let us use that freedom wisely, as Paul says to run the race so as to win the prize.

²⁴Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.

In the games the runners were not running to gain their citizenship. It was a law that no Greek young man could compete in the games unless he could prove he was of pure Greek parentage⁶. They were already citizens. They were running for a reward, for a laurel crown that would fade in just a few hours.

Paul is telling us to run, not for our salvation, that is already secured, but run as one who makes every effort to please and honor his lord, not for a crown that will wilt, but for a crown that lasts forever.

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⁶ Ironside page 150.