

A Study of First Corinthians

Week Seven

1 Corinthians 8:4-9:18

Day One

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. 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), 6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. 7 But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. 8 But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

vs. 4&5 – Paul stated what should be common sense: the things that some people worshipped in Corinth were nothing but wood, metal or stone. Yet the ancients attributed living, even godlike attributes, to these inanimate objects. Today we tend not to worship before material things, but rather immaterial things: fame, money, relationships, and success. Even though we cannot see some of the things that we moderns worship, we are just as prone to idolatry as the Corinthians were. Whether material or immaterial, idols take a toll on those who idolize them:

The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them (Psalm 135:15-18).

There are many lords and gods, as Paul explained, but they are only so because men and women attach honor and position to them. So when the Lord is declared “King of kings” and “Lord of lords,” the author wasn’t declaring that there were other legitimate gods. He was only saying that among those who are purported to be gods, our God is the only legitimate contender.

v. 6 – Paul wrote that the Father is *for* whom we live and Jesus is *through* whom we live. This is an early indication of the reality of the Trinity, without a mention of the Spirit. While each person in the Trinity is distinct, they are all of the same substance—one God, three persons. This has been a difficult concept for many to grasp and because of that, some have rejected or modified it. I would expect, however, that the God I worship would be bigger than anything or anyone I could comprehend.

v. 7 – Not everyone in Corinth had grasped the concept of one God. They had been conditioned to think that idols were gods and the food sacrificed to them was somehow special. Therefore Paul had to deal with the reality of where people were at and what

they were thinking. And they were thinking that idol food somehow had spiritual meaning.

v. 8 – Paul knew the truth that food, whether eaten or avoided, had no spiritual meaning. I would think that the only activity that involves food that has some spiritual value is fasting. But to eat something that was even somehow “dedicated” to our God would not in any sense have any spiritual value. The ancients, trying to somehow partake of their gods in such a way as to have them live inside them, sacrificed food to their gods and then consumed the food. Paul was certainly right to point out that this was absurd.

Day Two

9 Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? 11 So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. 12 When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.

v. 9 – Yet Paul reminded the readers that they were living in a real and not ideal world. Since so many were steeped in idolatry and the idolatry involved sacrificing food to those false gods, eating that food could cause some to stumble. So Paul introduced a more important principle than spiritual freedom of eating; he was teaching the Corinthians to be mindful of their fellow believers.

v. 10 – Today there are many who believe that drinking alcoholic beverages is wrong and improper. There are others who believe there is nothing wrong with it. If someone who doesn't think it's wrong is insensitive to those who do, then he or she will partake and offend the weaker more sensitive believer. Paul was saying that this is wrong because one brother caused another to stumble and be offended.

We are to be sensitive to those around us, especially our fellow believers. That means that I may even have to ask another whether they would be offended if I did something and then not do it if their answer is yes. That includes being sensitive to what movies I watch and what places for food and entertainment I visit. While I cannot allow others to control my life by what their preferences, I must be mindful that some of my choices may needlessly offend. I can avoid the offense by limiting my options for the sake of my brother's conscience. **Can you think of any other examples of what Paul was trying to say here?**

v. 11 – I have often said that I can be driving and have a green light, yet strike a pedestrian who is crossing against that light. In a sense, I am “correct” if I keep on driving, for the light is green. But if I see that person, even though they may be in the wrong, I step on the brake and limit my progress to acknowledge that there is a higher principle involved. I limit my freedom so as not to cause them harm. I even have to

apply this where doctrine is concerned, limiting my worship preferences at times so I can maintain my fellowship and friendship with someone who believes differently than I do.

For me, the basic principle is not to assume that others believe like I do in every area. I must be sensitive to watch and listen in order to discern clues that will help me maintain peace with my brethren.

v. 12 – Paul wrote that when I don't do this, I sin against Jesus. Ouch! That is a serious charge. When I am insensitive to my brother and wound the other person who is part of Jesus' body just like I am, then I have "missed the mark" where my relationship with Jesus is concerned. I have sinned, even though I may not be involved in any activity that is wrong. But someone else may think it's wrong and if I proceed and offend them, then I have sinned against Christ.

Is there any area where you have been enjoying your freedom—food, drink, speech, or entertainment—that is causing someone else a problem? Even though you aren't involved in any sinful activity, your insensitivity to that other person may in and of itself be sinful.

Day Three

13 Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall. 9:1 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? 2 Even 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. 3 This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me.

v. 13 – Paul came to a startling conclusion: He would limit his own freedom in any situation for the good of others, even though there is nothing intrinsically wrong with what he was doing! That is love! That is placing the highest priority on fellowship and unity. As an American who values personal freedom, this is an extraordinary statement to me. Paul was more than willing to limit his rights so that others may not stumble and sin. Paul was not only a good pastor and apostle, he was a good brother.

v. 1 – Here Paul made a sudden transition, probably once again caused as he followed the outline and questions of the letter he had in front of him from Corinth. It appeared that someone was questioning why Paul did not take any financial support while he had ministered in Corinth. Some were questioning whether he was really an apostle if he didn't take support as was the custom of other apostles. For the next few verses, Paul addressed this issue. If we look carefully, however, we will see that the issue is closely related to the subject he had just addressed of eating when it offends someone else.

vs. 2&3 – Paul was pointing out how foolish it was for anyone to question his apostolic credentials. He had seen the Lord, probably referring to his conversion on the Damascus Road. And if he was an apostle to no one else, he was an apostle to the Corinthian

church. How could they question his credentials, when he done what they were questioning in their very midst!

Notice here that Paul did not go quietly, so to speak. He didn't back down from criticism here, but made his case in light of the questions and accusations. He trusted the Lord, but he was stating the truth where his work and position were concerned. I admire that. On one hand, Paul was willing never to eat meat again if it offended a brother. That is meekness and gentleness. On the other hand, he was willing to talk about himself to establish his apostolic calling. Why submissive on one hand and aggressive on the other?

In both cases, he was doing what was best for others. For anyone to undermine his apostolic authority would have hurt the church. For him to eat meat and offend someone would also have hurt the church. Paul was always doing what was best for the church. It was never about Paul, even when he was talking about himself. It was always about Jesus and His church. Paul was selfless even when he referred to himself, but being selfless didn't equate with being weak or lacking confidence.

Have you found this balance? I have found that I can take one negative comment about me and fret over it. Then at other times I can get my feelings hurt and sulk when someone questions what I did or why I did it. I need to discern when to assert myself and when to back off, when to say "This is who God made me to be" and "I am this way but I won't act it out for the good of others." *Help me, Lord, do what is best for your church. Help me to know when to defend and when to back off. Help me to not be sensitive or selfish when I am doing Your work.*

Day Four

4 Don'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? 6 Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? 7 Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? 8 Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing?

vs. 4&5 – It seems that Paul was referring to the right of a visiting minister to stay in someone's home and have their food provided for them in return for their work. The answer here appears to be yes that he had this right. As we will see, Paul was building a case for surrendering his rights, yet not having anyone think less of him or his work because he chose to do so.

Some have read into the statement that Paul had the right to take a believing wife to mean that he was married. From what I have read, it was unusual but not unheard of for a Pharisee to be unmarried. Others have speculated that Paul had a wife who left him after his conversion. I think those kind of ideas are healthy, for they cause us to look at Paul as a human being as opposed to a saint with a halo around his head as depicted in a

stained glass window. But we must always recognize those possibilities for what they are: pure speculation without any biblical substantiation.

I find it interesting that Paul referred to Peter as Cephas, his Aramaic name given to him by Jesus (see John 1:42). I'm not sure that has any significance but I find it interesting nonetheless. Also, it is of note that Peter traveled with his wife as did the brothers of Jesus when they ministered "on the road." One could safely assume then that their wives were all believers as well.

v. 6 – Paul asked whether somehow he and Barnabas were exempt from or singled out as the only apostles who could not make a living from the people among whom they worked. He is being a bit sarcastic here, which gives me great comfort since many say I am sarcastic. I can now point to Paul and say that I am in good company!

v. 7 – I am glad I am on Paul's team, so to speak. He would have been a formidable opponent! Here he rattled off three examples of workers who were paid from the fruit of their labors: soldiers, farmers and shepherds. His point was clear: it is common practice for workers to derive their livelihood from the field in which they labor. Apostles were to be no exception.

It is common knowledge that church workers are underpaid given the pressure and importance of what they do. And for the most part, people permit this to happen since they believe those who "work for the Lord" shouldn't be concerned about money. It is permissible for everyone else in the church to negotiate the best economic return for their work, but somehow pastors and other ministry workers should not do so.

I am also intrigued that churches will pay whatever they must pay to the electric company, mortgage company, phone company or office supply store. I like to say that we have million-dollar faith for buildings and ten-cent faith for staff. We can build multi-million dollar buildings and think nothing of it. At the same time, we will put families and workers under tremendous pressure by underpaying them since this is how we think God wants it, according to some kind of warped reasoning.

How about you? You do have ten-cent faith toward those who minister among you? Do you do what you can to repay those who work hard among you to serve on God's behalf? We all need to take to heart what Paul wrote to Timothy:

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages" (1 Timothy 5:17-19).

The double honor to which Paul referred was money to make a living, nothing more, nothing less.

v. 8 – Lest anyone think that Paul was simply talking in secular terms, he then assured the reader that his philosophy in this area of finance was derived from the Law itself. So Paul took the opportunity here to connect his Gentile readers to the Law and one of its stipulations where financing God’s work was concerned. Paul would have much more to say to the Corinthians about this topic of giving, generosity and supporting God’s workers. Paul knew that his churches had a lot to learn about what God expected of them where finance is concerned. I would say that the need is still there among God’s people 2,000 years later.

Day Five

9 For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? 10 Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. 11 If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? 12 If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.

v. 9 – Yesterday I quoted the place in Timothy where Paul also alluded to this verse from Deuteronomy 25:4. It appears that some farmers muzzled their animals as they worked so that the animals could not bend down and eat what they were treading. Moses forbid this practice and then Paul applied this agricultural guideline to the work of the Lord among humans. I love Paul’s insight, given by the Holy Spirit. How practical it was! How practical God is!

v. 10 – I am in Nairobi as I write this and I am meeting with people to discuss their purpose. I charge money for each session and some cannot pay, so they cannot have a meeting as they request. Something in me wants to provide such meetings free of charge, but I cannot do that. I must receive some return for what I do. There are times when I choose to give it away, but no one can expect me to do that. I do it of my own free will.

I have also found that people often don’t value what they don’t pay for. So I have learned to charge for my services and make my expectations clear. That has taken some adjustment on my part, but I would rather come home and work on these Bible studies than give things away to people who probably can afford my services but just don’t want to pay.

v. 11 – Paul made such convincing arguments. I love how he did not impose his will, but rather persuaded the reader so that they could come to the logical and correct conclusion. Paul didn’t write, “This is how I want it and that’s that.” Rather he made his case so that people, if they wanted to, would know where he was coming from as he instructed. I think this is critical where money matters are concerned.

Paul’s argument at this point was simple. Those who sow spiritual things should reap material things. This makes sense. The more in line I am with God’s will where spiritual

things are concerned, the more He will bless me materially. I should then share some of those material blessings with those who helped me get my life right spiritually.

Are you sharing material things with those who have blessed you spiritually? Can you do more?

v. 12 – Now that Paul has made this magnificent case for the Corinthians sharing material blessings with spiritual leaders, he mentioned that he had foregone this right in his own work. Paul didn't want them taking his sacrifice or decision for granted, so first he made a strong case that it was his right to receive support. Then he made his case for why he refused to take advantage of his right.

Keep in mind that some were undoubtedly criticizing Paul over his refusal to take support. Isn't that crazy? Their line of reasoning must have gone something like this: "All real apostles have a right to support. So if Paul is refusing that right, it must be because he isn't a legitimate apostle after all!" Religious people can be crazy at times!

Day Six

13 Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? 14 In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. 15 But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast.

v. 13 – Paul continued his logical argument for ministerial support, this time pointing the Gentile reader to his own world of temple worship. When I grow up, I want to be like Paul. He was so thorough, so intelligent, so gentle yet firm. He knew where he wanted to go and what he wanted to establish in the minds and hearts of the people with whom he worked. Lord, give me the same wisdom as I work with the message of purpose and productivity that You have given me. Help me to know how to build the capacity in people to understand Your will and then to carry it out. Help all of us, Lord, to walk in the legacy of Paul—a legacy of equipping others to walk in the truths of Your kingdom.

v. 14 – This is the final point in Paul's attempt to instruct the Corinthians in how to care for workers of the gospel: the Lord has commanded that His workers be supported from the people among whom they work. Paul could have started with this command, but instead he built his case and then gave the last word: It is God's will. As I mentioned earlier, I appreciate Paul's style. He could have used all the authority at his disposal, but instead he wrote in a persuasive, convincing style. May I learn to do the same in the sphere within which I work.

This issue of ministerial support must have been a big issue for the Gentile world, for Paul addressed it here, in 2 Corinthians, 1 Timothy and Galatians:

Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor. Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers (Galatians 6:6-10).

My sense is that if this issue was so critical then in Paul's mind, then it is that critical now. If he spent a lot of time talking about it then, we should do the same now. Yet there has been so much controversy and warfare around the subject that most avoid it. I think that is a mistake and serves only to play into our enemy's hands who wants to see God's servants poor and beleaguered. **Do you agree or not? If not, why not?**

v. 15 – Paul abandoned his right to such support, choosing rather to work to meet his own needs. He did not want to do anything that would cast a shadow over his work among the Gentiles, lest someone say he was doing what he did for the money. He made it clear as well that he wasn't writing this so that the Corinthians would feel guilty or a sense of responsibility to do something for him. As someone said once, "The righteous shall live by hint!" I have known some leaders and saints who do that regularly, dropping hints as to what they need and how you could help them.

Do you get the idea that Paul was passionate about his decision not to take any financial help from his churches? Paul knew what he believed was right and he stuck to it. May we have the same focus and tenacity!

Day Seven

16 Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! 17 If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. 18 What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.

v. 16 – Paul boasted about his decision to work, but he could not boast about his decision to preach, for he had to do so. He chose not to receive support; he had no such choice in preaching. He had seen the truth and there was nothing else he could do but share it with the world. Paul saw things that no one else could see and it would have been to his detriment to keep them to himself. He preached and wrote for others to come into what God had shown him. You and I must do the same. That is why I am so passionate about people writing and "broadcasting" what God has shown them.

v. 17 – There were two options for Paul: Preach voluntarily and receive an added reward and bonus or preach non-voluntarily and fulfill a duty.

v. 18 – Since Paul could not receive a reward, so to speak, for preaching, since he had to share what he saw and knew, then he would pursue a reward or bonus by giving it away, working to support his needs. Paul was always looking to fulfill the words and teaching of Jesus:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21).

What are you doing to deliberately and consistently store up a reward for yourself? I mentioned that I charge for my meetings here in Kenya, but I charge half of what my fee is in the United States. Why? I am storing up a reward.

I have often said that God has a big book and a sharp pencil and He writes down everything you for Him. He never forgets and He always rewards, which is portrayed so beautifully in the story below:

That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. "What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" the king asked. "Nothing has been done for him," his attendants answered. and as they were drinking wine on that second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." The king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows he had erected for him. His attendants answered, "Haman is standing in the court." "Bring him in," the king ordered. When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" Now Haman thought to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?" So he answered the king, "For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'" "Go at once," the king commanded Haman. "Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended." So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!" (Esther 6:1-11).

God knows how to reward those who have done things for Him, on His behalf. Do you believe this? If you do, then act on it!