

A Study of First Corinthians

Week Eight

1 Corinthians 9:19-10:22

Day One

19 Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

v. 19 – Paul was a free man, having been liberated in Christ from the limitations of the Law that he had served so faithfully until his Damascus Road conversion. He was not about to become subject to any other human institution or teaching. Yet to accomplish his mission, which was to turn the Gentiles and some Jews to the gospel, he became subject to every man. But this was part of his freedom, and Paul became a servant to the Gentiles so that he may win as many to Jesus as possible.

Paul was steeped in Jewish heritage and tradition, but he was not bound by that background. He was a remarkable man, who was set free to fulfill his purpose. Are you bound by the past? If so, what do you need to do to get free?

v. 20 – Paul maintained his connection with Judaism, although he never had much success evangelizing his fellow Jews. In fact, he always stirred up tremendous opposition from his Jewish audience, and did not engender much warmth from Jewish believers either. Yet Paul was willing to put the results in God's hands and allow God to use him as bait to attract any who would be saved.

Notice how Paul wanted us to know that he was not under the Law. He willingly chose to submit to its regulations for the sake of evangelism, but not as a lifestyle. Paul truly was a convert to Christ. He abandoned everything he knew and allowed God to build on his past so he could be used in the present. Are you willing to do the same?

v. 21 – Paul was willing to behave more like a Gentile, not imposing his Jewish past on their relationship with Christ. But here he was clear that his freedom wasn't an opportunity for licentious living. He was bound by his obedience to Christ, and it was that obedience that led him to the work he was doing. So what Paul did, he did for Jesus to win men and women to Jesus.

As I've stated many times, it was all about Jesus for Paul. Christ was the focus, the beginning and the end. There was no other agenda where Paul was concerned. Is Jesus

your focus for what you do? Are you able to live your life in such a way as to work for him every day and in every way?

v. 22 – This verse is one of Paul’s most famous sayings: he had become all things to all men to win as many as possible. Paul became whatever bait would catch the fish. Paul wasn’t being dishonest or fake, he was simply doing whatever needed to be done to fulfill the urgency of his mission. You can’t argue with his results, for no one except Jesus had a greater impact on the early church. Are you fulfilling your purpose? Do you know what it is? What is your strategy to accomplish your mission in life? Do you have one (a mission or a strategy)?

Day Two

23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. 24 Do 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. 25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 26 Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.

v. 23 – Paul was focused for “selfish” reasons: he wanted to share in the blessings that come from doing the work that he was called to do. I know something of that feeling, the feeling when you know you are doing what God wants you to do and He is using you. There is no feeling like it.

v. 24 – Paul used several analogies from the sports world. I have been a “sports nut” since I was a boy. I accepted a while back that God put this love in me and wanted to use it to help me do my work. So I draw heavily on sports examples in my own speaking and writing. Why not? What are your interests? How can you use and incorporate them more effectively in the work that you do?

I also find that when I go to live sporting events, I am refreshed and very often “see” something that I can use later on when I speak or write. I guess I am urging you to be true to who you are and allow God to use you as He created you. Don’t try to be someone else.

v. 25 – As I write this, I am on a house boat on a lake in Zimbabwe. We went out fishing as a group this afternoon, but I almost stayed behind because I wanted to reconstruct this study, which was lost when my computer disk failed last week (don’t forget to back up your work!). I decided to go because my son is here with me, but part of me was back here writing.

There is nothing wrong with fishing or any recreational activity. But when you have something to do, you must stay disciplined in order to achieve it. Are you disciplined? Are you productive? Of course, here Paul was referring to our walk as disciples. It requires discipline and determination in the power of the Spirit if we are to endure to the

end. As I grow older, I find no less need for discipline. I will never “arrive” so I must maintain my diligence where prayer and the other spiritual disciplines are concerned.

v. 26 – There was purpose to what Paul did. Otherwise he likened himself to a runner who sets out and determines his own course, or a boxer who just pummels the air instead of his opponent. Both those images are ludicrous, and that was how Paul felt if anyone did not maintain the discipline and focus necessary to do the will of God.

Are you running with purpose and boxing according to the rules? Do you take your discipleship seriously, or does your discipleship consist of attending Sunday service only? Are you growing in wisdom and the knowledge of God? I hope you are. If you’re not, what can you do to improve or get back on track?

Day Three

[27] No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. 10:1 For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. 2They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. 3They all ate the same spiritual food 4 and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

v. 27 – Paul realized that God would use him and honor the gift that he had bestowed on him to preach and teach. He also realized that he could easily be disqualified personally after he had helped so many other people. He referred to this possibility in Romans 11:29:

For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.

God will not take back His gifts but He will judge the one to whom the gifts were given if they are found to be negligent or wayward.

v. 1 – While Paul did not expect his converts to walk in Judaism, he did expect them to know the Old Testament. Why? He expected this because they were the fulfillment and continuation of God’s work to establish a people for Himself. So the experience of those in the Old Testament was for their instruction as he stated in another letter:

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Romans 15:1).

So in this verse, Paul compared the Jews deliverance from Egypt to the Christian’s deliverance from sin. This is fascinating, for Paul took the story of the exodus through the Red Sea and made it a part of every Christian’s heritage. Any Jew would have held this story as exclusively theirs, but Paul was a new man and he thought in new ways. Christians were now God’s people, so the past experience of God’s people was a shadow of what God would do in Christ.

v. 2 – Paul then saw a correlation between Christian baptism and the passing through the Red Sea of Moses and the people. I notice here that the people were baptized into Moses—they were to follow and obey him. The parting of the Sea was the sign that God was with Moses, and thus the people were to be with him as well. Now we are baptized into Christ, to follow and obey him.

vs. 3&4 – The people of Moses' time were united around their food that God provided. This food was really spiritual food, although it met their practical nutritional requirements. Why was it spiritual? Since they were obeying God as they went, God was committed to provide for their needs. The fact that God did this supernaturally, however, made this food and drink spiritual. Furthermore, since they were all fed in the same supernatural way, this provision united them as one people.

Paul then made a stunning statement. The rock that followed the Jews in the wilderness was really Christ! Jesus was present in the Old Testament! I wonder if some people thought of this when Jesus made statements like:

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified (John 7:37-39).

Do you understand that your spiritual heritage doesn't go back to your salvation or even the New Testament? Your heritage goes back to Moses and the people who left Egypt for the Promised Land. You are the fulfillment of God's promise to have a people for Himself. I personally find this important, otherwise I will see God's work beginning anew in the New Testament and may not appreciate or understand my spiritual roots in Moses.

5 Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. 6 Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. 7 Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry." 8 We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did--and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died.

vs. 5&6 – It is interesting that God did great things for Moses and the people. He saved them, set them free and provided for them, just as He has done for us. Yet God was not pleased with those people. Paul was subtly reminding his readers that just because God blessed them by His goodness did not automatically indicate that He was pleased with them, nor was it a sign of their superior spirituality. Those people died as they made their pilgrimage. I would assume the same thing could happen to us.

I don't think this is necessarily a sign that we can "lose" our salvation. I do think it means that we are no earthly good to the Lord due to our disobedience, in spite of His grace that is on us.

v. 5 – Paul described why those things happened to those people—they served as bad examples to us of what we shouldn't do. They set their hearts on evil things such as idolatry and disobeyed the Lord's commands to them. We must take pains not to follow in their footsteps, for our entire being is prone to wander. I think there are many prayers in Psalm 119 that indicate our need to seek God's help so that we don't wander. Some examples are,

I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands (Psalm 119:10).

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you (Psalm 119:11).

What are you doing to keep yourself obedient in the midst of God's blessings? Are you memorizing the Word? Do you have others to whom you are accountable who will help you do what you say, to help you do the Lord's will? Why not at least read Psalm 119 and pull out the short prayers included therein that can help you stay on track.

v. 7 – Paul then got specific concerning the problems encountered by the people of the exodus. First he referred to Exodus 32:6. The context there indicated that the people did more than "eat and drink." The pagan revelry would have been sexual immorality. The more you study the Bible and the more you observe human behavior, the more you realize that there is nothing new under the sun. The problems of humanity then are the problems humanity faces now.

v. 8 – Paul then referenced another example of sexual immorality as described in Numbers 25:1-6. Here the Israelite men intermingled with the Moabite women. This involved not only immorality, but worshipping the god Baal as the men indulged their sexual impulses. The story culminated with Phineas killing a man and his mistress after 24,000 men had been killed by the judges among the Israelites.

Paul stated that the number was 23,000. Why the discrepancy? There is always the chance that Paul was referring to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The other reason is that exact numbers were not as important to the ancients as they are to us. The issue isn't the exact number; the lesson is that a lot of people died due to their sexual encounters with foreign women and their gods.

It is not coincidence that idolatry and sexual immorality were the two major sin issues faced by the Corinthian church. Paul obviously chose these stories to educate the Corinthians as to the seriousness of their sin in God's eyes. Just because God didn't judge them the way He judged the Israelites didn't mean that their sin was not as serious. It was. And we must remember that it is just as serious today as it was 2,000 years ago when Paul wrote his letter.

Day Five

9 We should not test the Lord, as some of them did--and were killed by snakes. 10 And do not grumble, as some of them did--and were killed by the destroying angel. 11 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. 12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

v. 9 – The people tested the Lord in Numbers 21:4-8 and complained about the hard life they had encountered in the wilderness. They accused Moses of leading them to a place where they would die. They questioned God's faithfulness and the integrity of His servant Moses. For that, God sent poisonous snakes among them and many died.

Notice that they didn't see these snakes as simply a hazard of desert life. They knew that the snakes were from the Lord. Do you recognize God's hand in your circumstances? When something unexpected or unpleasant happens, do you at least stop and ask, "God, are you trying to get my attention? Is there something you need to say to me? Are you addressing some lack or even sin in my life?"

v. 10 – Here we see the story from Numbers 16:41-50. Even though God had chastised the people for their grumbling, they complained again. This time a plague broke out in their midst and almost 15,000 men died before Moses and Aaron could stem its course by offering incense.

So there we have four Old Testament examples of how God dealt with four sins: idolatry, sexual immorality, testing God and grumbling. God could deal with these sins in a like manner today, but He chooses not to. That doesn't mean those sins aren't as offensive today to Him as they were then.

I heard a man say once that God doesn't have to give anyone a second chance after they've sinned. It is only due to God's grace that He doesn't act in anger at the sin of mankind, whether they know and serve Him or not. Do you have a healthy balance of understanding between grace and sin? If you don't then you will either harsh or easy on sinners, depending on your perspective and theology.

v. 11 – Paul reiterated that those things happened to those people so that God could instruct us concerning sinful behavior and His attitude toward it. Just because the Gentiles weren't a part of God's people then didn't mean they were exempt from God's judgment now. Paul had to educate them where sin was concerned and teach them that the God of the Old Testament was now their God as well. While they walked in the grace of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, they still had to avoid sin and be accountable to God and one another for their behavior.

v. 12 – Paul did confront a measure of arrogance among the Corinthians. They thought they were special people because they had been blessed with all spiritual blessings and gifts. They aligned themselves with certain leaders, creating divisions in the body. They tolerated behavior that was not consistent with Paul’s teaching. All this caused them to think that they were somewhat special. They thought they were standing firm, but they were weakened by sin, the same kinds of sin that incurred God’s wrath in the time of Moses.

Be careful that you aren’t hardened to the deceitfulness of sin. I try regularly to do a check and confess my sins to God. At times, I have to confess my sins to another believer. Because I teach and write, it would be easy to think that I am standing firm when I am not! *Deliver me, Lord, from the subtle clutches of sin and sensitize me to Your work in my life.*

v.13 – This verse is good news! First of all, temptation isn’t sin. It is only when I surrender to temptation that I have sinned. Then I can never encounter a temptation that is beyond my means to resist it. God will never allow that to happen. Along with the temptation, He gives the grace needed to resist it! So I can never say when I sin, “It wasn’t my fault!” or “I just couldn’t resist it!” This verse removes every excuse when I do sin. More importantly, this verse gives me the confidence that I can resist sin, for God’s grace is always present to help in times of temptation. Hallelujah!

Day Six

10:14 Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. 15 I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. 16 Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? 17 Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

v. 14 – The final exhortation is to flee from idolatry. Idolatry was the key issue in the Old Testament—people holding allegiance to gods that were not really gods. Paul continued this struggle as he walked out and wrote the New Testament.

Let’s see: The major issue of the Old Testament was idolatry; the major issue in Paul’s day was idolatry. What do you think the major issue is today? Why would it be anything else but idolatry? Just because we don’t set up stone or wood statues and bow down to them doesn’t mean that modern man isn’t idolatrous. We worship money, possessions, prestige and intellectualism. The gods have changed or perhaps disguised themselves, but they are still there and the major source of opposition to the Lordship of Jesus.

This should encourage us, for if Paul confronted and established churches in the midst of his world, then we can do the same. That is why we should study Paul’s strategies and apply them to our work today.

vs. 15&16 – Paul could have ordered the Corinthians to “do this” and “don’t do that.” Yet he took every opportunity to educate and persuade his readers to do what was right, what was the will of God for them and their community. He remembered that they were Greeks and the Greek world valued logic and reasoning. It seems to me that Paul accepted the people in their own terms and brought his wisdom to them in terms that they could understand.

How relevant are you to your current generation? Do you speak a language they understand? Have you made the gospel relevant to your world? Are you seeking to understand your world and further seeking wisdom for ways to reach it?

v. 17 – Paul returned to an earlier theme here—unity. Our unity is not an idea or a philosophy, or even something we can all agree on. Our unity is in Christ, period. And when we partake of the Lord’s supper with one loaf and one cup, we are united around a common cause and that cause is the good news that Jesus died and rose again. We can debate our differences and hold onto our diversity as much as we want, but at the end of the day, we all belong to Jesus. And anything which we try to use to unite us except for the supremacy of Jesus Christ is worthless.

Day Seven

10:18 Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? 19 Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20 No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. 22 Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

v. 18 – The priests of Israel fed themselves and their families with the sacrifices made in the Temple. They were the ones who actually performed the rituals that offered the animals on the fires of the altars. And here Paul was alluding to the fact that to eat of a idolatrous sacrifice was to participate in the sacrifice itself if one believed in the legitimacy or reality of the god to whom the sacrifice was made.

vs. 19&20 – Paul was quick to point out that an idol sacrifice is meaningless, for the idol is empty and nonexistent. But there were still some who weren’t convinced that the idol was insignificant. For them to participate in the eating of the sacrifice was wrong. But as Paul stated earlier in the letter, for someone to eat of food sacrificed to an idol when they knew that the idol was nonexistent was *not* wrong.

v. 21 – Someone participating in idol worship was participating in demonic activity. Paul was trying to help them understand that there was spiritual power in idol worship, but only if the worshipper entered into the sacrifice with worshipful intent. If someone bought food in the marketplace that happened to be sacrificed to the idol, but the purchaser did not believe or participate in the sacrifice, then the food was permissible. Does that make sense? Am I clear or clear as mud?

We cannot have one foot in both camps. We cannot worship the Lord and demonic idols. The idols are false but there is spiritual danger in their worship. We as believers must be clear that there is only one God and we serve Him. Therefore any other god is an imposter. Yet those other false gods hold people in bondage and we must be mindful of that reality.

v. 22 – For someone to participate in the Lord’s communion table and then to also participate in idol sacrifices was wrong and dangerous. That sort of double-mindedness was and is dangerous and subject to God’s wrath. Paul had already given four examples earlier of God’s ability and propensity to judge sin, especially idolatry.

The lesson here is simple: My allegiance must be to Jesus. Any other system that opposes Him, that is part of the anti-Christ movement, is my enemy. I recognize that there is no other power or god but the God of heaven and earth, and I reject the claims of any other god as bogus. Yet I recognize the reality of the kingdom of darkness and pledge my allegiance to the Kingdom of light. I will not participate in the dark kingdom’s practices, but I acknowledge that the power of those practices is demonic. I am free from their hold. I participate in the Lord’s table and not the table of demons. I hope this summarizes what Paul was trying to say. Let me know if you think I succeeded, or perhaps how I could be even more clear.