

# 1 Corinthians 8-9 – Chapter Study

## INTRO

We're in that section of the letter where Paul's is answering the questions they'd sent to him.

Last week in ch. 7 we saw his detailed answer to their questions about marriage & divorce.

Tonight, we address their question about eating food that had been offered to an idol.

The answer stretches over 3 chapters & becomes the opportunity for Paul to address several different topics.

## III. Main Body 1:18-16:18

### E. Idols Chs. 8-11:1

#### 1. Eating things offered to idols Ch. 8

**<sup>1</sup> Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.**

This is the same subject we recently covered in Romans.

In Romans 14 & half of ch. 15, Paul deals with the whole issue of scruples – or moral gray issues where the Bible doesn't give us specific instruction.

Paul's counsel there was that when believers have different convictions about these moral gray areas, they mustn't judge one another or get into heated arguments over them.

The example he used there was the eating of meat that had been sacrificed to an idol.

That the Corinthians had written to ask him about it *proves* this was indeed an important issue with which the early church wrestled.

Let me recap & add a bit of detail to what we looked at in Romans.

As a major *Greek* city in the Roman Empire, there were different guilds in Corinth.

There was the carpenters' guild, the masons' guild, the metal smiths' guild, the merchants' guild & a dozen others.

These guilds were an ancient form of labor union.

Each guild had its own patron god, an idol that sat in a shrine inside the guild hall.

Every so often each guild held a meeting of its members.

They'd talk about issues that concerned their trade or craft, set prices, decide policy, induct members, discipline errant members.

Then they'd all worship their patron idol by making sacrifices to it, then share a massive feast where they'd eat the meat that had just been offered the idol & the wine flowed freely.

As the Church grew & some of these guild members got saved, they stopped going to the guild meetings because they considered the guild hall a pagan shrine & refused to enter.

Some of them still went to the meeting but held back from worshipping the idol, though they might still eat the feast.

Tension grew between Christians as to what was proper.

You should know that several years after Paul wrote this the pagans in many places adopted a policy of kicking out of their guild anyone who *refused* to honor their patron idol.

Many Christians lost their jobs & couldn't get work.

Some see this as an early type or form of something that will be *repeated* in the last days in the mark of the beast.

Things had not yet gotten to that point in Corinth. The tension wasn't between Pagan & Christian. It was between the believers themselves as they had different convictions on eating food that had been offered to an idol.

But notice here Paul begins his answer of the issue of eating –

**We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.**

Remember that the *main problem at Corinth* was an arrogance that moved each of them to think they were *smarter* than others.

They ought not be rating themselves on smarts but on love.

Not doing so proved they weren't as smart as they thought they were!

**<sup>2</sup> And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. <sup>3</sup> But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him.**

The *knowledge* being referred to here is *awareness of the ways* of God.

At *best* our knowledge of God is partial & incomplete.

No matter how long someone's walked with God, there's still more to learn of Him & His ways.

But *knowledge* of God isn't enough. That knowledge must turn to a love for God that makes that knowledge helpful.

My wife really likes volleyball. I know that about her. She likes to play it & watch it.

Now, if I didn't love her, my knowing she likes volleyball wouldn't mean anything; it would just be an empty factoid floating round my cranium.

But because I love Lynn, knowing she likes volleyball means when I see it on the TV I TIVO it for her because I know she's going to want to watch it.

I suggest we go to the park & hit the ball around & even set up a court & play a game with the family.

Knowledge of God is good but without love it really doesn't accomplish much.

In v. 3 Paul says the one who loves God is known by Him – the word here carries the meaning of approved. What God is looking for is love.

And of course, as Paul's already made clear in the letter, those who love God *love others*.

**<sup>4</sup> Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that *there is no other God but one*. <sup>5</sup> For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), <sup>6</sup> yet for us *there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live*.**

The pagan world believed in *many* gods, each with its own idol to represent it.

But the fact is, there's only one God – the God of the Bible, perfectly represented by Jesus Christ in the Incarnation.

The Christians at Corinth may have at one time been idol-worshipping pagans who visited a half dozen different shrines, but faith in Christ had opened their eyes to the reality that there's really only one God.

**<sup>7</sup> However, *there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled*.**

Even though there really is only one God and idols are nothing more than hunks of wood or stone, some believers *remain bugged* by the remembrance they once *gave themselves so fervently* to the worship of those things.

Why, they may even have participated in some really heinous acts when caught up in the ecstasy that often attended the worship of idols.

Remember, the wine flowed freely at those guild feasts & it was not uncommon for people to enter an altered state of consciousness as they engaged in bizarre & extreme forms of idol worship.

So they wanted nothing at all to do with idols! It sent a shiver down their spine whenever they thought about it.

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I've often said that the most determined & vocal opponent of a cult is an ex-cult member.

Ex-Mormons, ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, even ex-Catholics are often the most vociferous in attacking their old affiliation because they feel cheated, betrayed.

They feel like they have to *compensate* for their prior devotion to the group by more fervent opposition now.

Such was the case for some with idols in Corinth.

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Paul now seeks to put this question on eating food that had been offered to an idol in its proper context -

**<sup>8</sup> But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse.**

Whether or not we eat food sacrificed to any idol *ought not be the defining issue*.

That's not the real issue.

HOW WE RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER ABOUT THIS ISSUE IS WHAT'S IMPORTANT.

**<sup>9</sup> But beware →**

Be on an intense, earnest lookout →

**lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak.**

As in Romans 14, Paul again uses the word "weak" to describe those who do NOT have liberty to eat food sacrificed to an idol.

But he addresses this to those who have that liberty,

And he *urges* them to such caution in using it that they don't stumble the weak → **SOMEHOW**.

Now – a couple things to note here.

1) Paul does NOT tell those with liberty NOT to exercise it!

On the contrary – he seems to assume they will.

We just urges them to great caution that they do their best to make sure it's exercise doesn't cause others a problem.

2) Note Paul's use of the term stumbling here.

If we couple this with what we find in Romans 14 & 15, we realize that stumbling is when the person without liberty is emboldened to sin by the example of someone with liberty.

So they do the same, then feel guilt for having done that which their conscience did not permit.

All too often, people will use the term "stumble" for their being *offended by the mere behavior* of another.

They don't actually fall into sin; they're not emboldened or tempted; they just don't like the other person's display of liberty because they think it's wrong.

Actually, what they're doing is *judging* the other person; the very thing Paul says we're *not* to do in Romans.

IMPORTANT: Remember here – we're talking about morally gray issues; things that aren't spelled out in black & white in Scripture.

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Paul gives an example now -

**<sup>10</sup> For if anyone sees you who have knowledge →**

that an idol is really nothing more than a hunk of wood or stone →

**eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? <sup>11</sup> And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?**

The word "perish" means to render something useless.

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The idea here is that someone who doesn't have freedom to eat would see a believer *with* that freedom to eat doing so, even there at a feast in a pagan temple, would feel emboldened & so eat, then their conscience would be so burdened with guilt, they'd feel condemned & useless.

The question is – is that a good use of one's liberty in Christ? Obviously not!

**12 But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.**

A careless flaunting of liberty that exercises no caution or concern for others – well, Paul calls it nothing less than sin.

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But now watch Paul's own personal application of all this . . .

**13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.**

Though Paul had laid out *the principle of caution & carefulness* in the use of liberty in v. 9. here he shares his personal application –

He reins back his liberty to eat meat all the way.

His decision is that he'll forego meat altogether if eating it might cause someone else to stumble.

Remember as we saw when we began Romans 14 that nearly *all the meat* sold in Greek & Roman cities had been offered in one of the many idols' shrines.

And because it was questionable where meat had come from, some believers had become vegetarians in order to avoid contact with idols.

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Now, while Paul says this here, **TO** the church at Corinth, & writing **FROM** the pagan city of Ephesus, did this mean he *didn't* eat meat when he returned to Jerusalem?

Did this mean he refused to eat the Passover meal with its lamb? I doubt it!

Meat eating was a *non-issue* in Jerusalem & I doubt seriously Paul would adhere to a useless vow when it's relevance was no longer in play.

**No one** was going to be stumbled by his eating meat in Jerusalem.

So, even his strong affirmation of eating no-meat in v. 13 has to be kept in its proper context & perspective as a principle of behavior.

We don't live by rules – We walk in grace.

## **2. An example of self-denial 9:1-18**

The subject so far has been *narrow* – eating food sacrificed to an idol.

But that's only illustrative of the *larger issue of liberty* in regard to scruples.

The principle that must guide us in that larger issue of liberty is love for others & what's best for them.

Paul now gives a personal example of how he'd employed this principle.

**1 Am I not an apostle?**

One of the recognized *leaders* of the Church.

**Am I not free?**

Don't I have liberty?

**Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?**

He saw the Lord at his conversion outside Damascus when he first came to faith and was commissioned by the Lord to be an apostles to the Gentiles.

**Are you not my work in the Lord?**

The existence of the large & thriving church in Corinth was proof of his calling.

**2 If I am not an apostle to others, yet doubtless I am to you. For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.**

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Even if others in other places wanted to contest Paul's apostleship, there was no doubt of it in Corinth since he's the one who'd *started* the world there.

**<sup>3</sup> My defense to those who examine me is this:**

Now – in the NKJ, that ends with a colon, making it *introductory* to what follows.

In the original Koine Greek, there's no punctuation & the translators ought to have made v. 3 the *conclusion* to vs. 1-2 rather than the *lead in* to v. 4.

You see, Paul's critics were questioning his apostleship because he was not one of the original 12 who followed the Lord.

He presents vs. 1-2 as his credentials & the proof of his calling.

So, because he IS an apostle, he then asks →

**<sup>4</sup> Do we have no right to eat and drink? <sup>5</sup> Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as *do* also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas? <sup>6</sup> Or *is it* only Barnabas and I *who* have no right to refrain from working?**

By "we" Paul means his ministry team; he & Barnabas & the other members of their team that included Titus, Timothy, Luke & others at different times.

Most of the apostles had itinerant ministry where they traveled around from place to place building up the Body of Christ a& planting churches in new places.

Since they were employed in this full-time, they were supported by the gifts & contributions of believers.

Their expenses were taken care, not only theirs but those of their wives who traveled with them. As apostles, Paul, Barnabas & their team had the same right to support but it seems they'd not taken advantage of it.

**<sup>7</sup> Who ever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock?**

The soldier is paid for waging war by the State who collects taxes from the citizens that soldier is protecting.

The farmer gets to enjoy the fruit of his labor in the produce born.

The shepherd gets to enjoy the milk of the goats he leads.

The point is obvious – Paul & his team HAVE A RIGHT to enjoy support from those they serve by leading.

**<sup>8</sup> Do I say these things as a *mere* man? Or does not the law say the same also?**

Is this just human reasoning or is there support for it in the Word of God?

**<sup>9</sup> For it is written in the law of Moses,**

Then he quotes Deut. 25:4

***"You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain."***

Get the picture?

**Is it oxen God is concerned about?**

Yes, God does care about oxen – but He cares about people even more, so . . .

**<sup>10</sup> Or does He say *it* altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, *this* is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope. <sup>11</sup> If we have sown spiritual things for you, *is it* a great thing if we reap your material things?**

Paul is simply justifying the idea that those faithfully employed in full-time ministry ought to be supported in doing so by those who benefit from that ministry.

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Some time ago, I had a young man speak to me about how the church, & he meant the *whole church*, wasn't doing enough to help people.

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He said that the church ought to help people financially more.

When I asked what he meant, he said the church ought to pay peoples utility bills, put new ties on their vehicles, pay their kids tuition to private school, & just generally help people more.

He was pretty angry & when I pressed a bit it became obvious he was upset because we'd not let him use some of the church's property for his own purely personal use.

When I tried to explain why he would hear nothing of it.

That conversation bothered me for several weeks so I did a little follow up.

You see, we *do* help a lot of people with bills & things when they're legitimate needs.

And I remain *oblivious* as to who gives what here.

Giving is between the giver & God and we try to honor that to the best of our ability.

Offerings go into the computer but we don't pay attention to them beyond the moment of hitting the keys.

We have good people taking care of all that under tight supervision & safety.

But I have no idea who's giving what.

But I asked Eric to look up that guy's record & simply to let me know if he gave here.

Nope! He didn't. And he attended here regularly for a few years, worked a regular job.

Yet he expected the church to take care of him & everyone else.

Where, pray-tell, did he think the church gets its ability to help others?

He was like those who think it's the government's job to take care of everyone from cradle to grave by don't want to pay any taxes.

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The church is a spiritual field. As Paul says here, if people are growing in spiritual things by the ministry of those who are serving them, they ought to support them in their material things so they can continue to minister.

**<sup>12</sup> If others are partakers of *this* right over you, are we not even more?**

Certainly! But now Paul gets to his point in all this.

First he establishes their *right* to support – then he sets it aside.

**Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ.**

Paul & his team didn't base their ministry on the condition they got paid.

They remained faithful to their call to work even when others didn't support them.

**<sup>13</sup> Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar?**

In the Law of Moses, a large portion of the priests support came from the offerings people brought to the temple to be offered on the altar.

What meat & bread they could not eat they sold to the marketplace at wholesale.

**<sup>14</sup> Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.**

Though the sacrifices have been concluded by the work of Christ, the principle of support for those in ministry lives on.

**<sup>15</sup> But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it *would be* better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void.**

Paul had neither demanded support in the past nor was he writing this to lay claim to it now.

Rather, he lays it all out here to show how though he had every right to *expect* support, he'd not taken it so that no one could ever charge him with ministering just for the money.

**16 For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!**

Paul was called to preach – not to make a living by preaching.

Hey, if support came, great – but his preaching would not be conditioned on support.

When he stood before God to give account for how he'd fulfilled his calling, he would answer for how faithful he'd been to preach, not receive support.

**17 For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship.**

Whether Paul ministered willingly or unwilling didn't effect his call – only his reward.

**18 What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel.**

He says the same thing a different way – He was called to preach, not to make a living by preaching.

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If this was all we had we might assume Paul REFUSED support so that he could maintain a special claim but this isn't all we have.

Other passages, most notably in Philippians, we find that he did receive support from those he'd ministered to.

His point is that he never, ever demanded it, not did he in any way condition the *quality* of his ministry on the support.

Support was a bonus that had no effect whatsoever on his faithfulness.

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Paul's whole point here has been how he'd not asserted a **RIGHT** he had, the right to support, in order that others would be blessed.

Its not that they were blessed **BY his NOT** claiming the right to support.

He just wouldn't let a *lack of support* hinder his ministry.

### **3. Paul's attitude: 9:19-27**

Now he takes us a bit deeper into his inner thoughts about all this . . .

#### **a. a servant vs. 19-23**

**19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more;**

Paul personally owed no one anything.

When it came to personal relationships & responsibilities, Paul's account was clear.

Yet he saw himself as called to serve everyone he met.

**And the goal of the servant is to make life better for others.**

**20 and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; 21 to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law;**

If Paul was dealing with an Orthodox Jew, he adopted a lifestyle & behavior that would present no barrier to the person's coming to faith in Christ.

Conversely, if he was dealing with a Gentile, he'd adopt a posture that would facilitate his/her faith.

But notice the caveat he mentions; he would never make a moral compromise that would place him in sin.

Identifying with sinners does not mean partaking in sin.

The believer can be a friend of sinners without indulging in sin – Jesus did & the Holy Spirit can enable us to as well.

**22 to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak.**

And weak in this context refers to what? Those who lack liberty.

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**I have become all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some.<sup>23</sup> Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with *you*.**

Paul's summation here has been used as justification for some really bad stuff.

People have gone with the crowd from work to happy hour & justified it under the rubric that they're being all things to all men.

They've toked a joint, snorted a line of coke, & done all kinds of obviously sinful things, passing them off under this excuse.

But they weren't doing it for the Gospel's sake as Paul says here.

They were doing it because they wanted to & wanted to fit in with the sinners they were hanging with, not fit them into the Kingdom of God.

#### **b. an athlete vs. 24-27**

**<sup>24</sup> Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain *it*.**

In others words, if the Christian life was a race, run to win!

**<sup>25</sup> And everyone who competes *for the prize* is temperate in all things. Now they *do it* to obtain a perishable crown, but we *for an imperishable crown*.**

Every athlete who seeks to excel at their sport knows there's stuff they need to steer clear of or they'll be disqualified or unable to compete at the level they need to, to win.

I wrestled in high school.

Do you know what some of those kids go through in order to make weight?

Yet at best all they can hope for is a medal and a record that's forgotten next year.

Our reward for loving & serving God is eternal.

**<sup>26</sup> Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty.**

That is, all over the place, willy-nilly, here & there.

He runs on the course set by God, with the goal is sight at all times.

**Thus I fight: not as *one who beats the air*.**

Picture a boxer dancing around the ring, swinging at air, bobbing & weaving with his back to the opponent.

No – Paul is focused and intent. Each jab is purposeful and setting up the next punch.

**<sup>27</sup> But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.**

This is an important & honest admission Paul ends with.

He knew how easy it is for fleshly desires to invade on his convictions and carry him away into a bad place.

If he didn't keep his desires in check, they could easily maneuver him into a place where he himself had become disqualified anymore to preach – which was his divine calling.

Since This lies in the context of the use of liberty, he means that if he doesn't keep a close eye on his flesh, what he calls a liberty in Christ might actually be a lust or desire of the flesh.

#### **CONCLUSION**

There's one more chapter in this subject that we'll have to leave for next week.