

Week 6: Freedom, Responsibility, and Mission - 1 Cor 8:1-9:27

Pre-Work

- One of the many issues that comes up in Chapters 8 and 9 of 1 Corinthians is this idea of being “under” the Law/Torah. What does that mean? Are we supposed to follow the Old Testament Law, not follow it, follow some of it, or is something else going on entirely? This is a SUPER complex but also fascinating subject that we will just touch on in our 1 Corinthians class, but to introduce the concept that the New Testament offers a compelling way forward, please watch this video from the Bible Project on Jesus “fulfilling” the Law. It’s not comprehensive, but will show some of the issues at stake:

<https://bibleproject.com/videos/jesus-fulfills-the-law>

- Please read 1 Corinthians Chapters 8 and 9 in the translation of your choice with these three concepts in mind: Freedom, Responsibility, and Mission

Class Notes

1. The Acts 15 letter (Gentiles should not eat meat sacrificed to idols, blood, strangled animals, and they should refrain from sexual immorality)
2. The poor (lower social classes) and access to meat
3. Romans 14:14-15

14 *I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.*

15 *If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.*

Chapter 8

1 Now concerning food sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes *one* conceited, but love edifies *people*.

- **Freedom:** food isn't morally good or evil in itself
- "Knowledge" of our freedoms leads to self-focus (my rights)
- **Responsibility:** we are responsible to love
- **Mission:** a big part of our mission is to build others up - love is others-focused

2 If anyone thinks that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; **3** but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.

- Those in Corinth who think they have "knowledge" of their freedom and rights are ignorant as to the *purpose* of their freedoms and rights
- Isn't it true to say God "knows" (in the sense of relationship) those who love Him? Being known relationally by God is of paramount importance, and this is activated by love. Implication: love is the catalyst of meaningful knowledge.

4 Therefore, concerning the eating of food sacrificed to idols, we know that an idol is nothing at all in the world, and that there is no God but one.

- **Corinthian claim of freedom:** idols are nothing and there is only one God (this is true), so it should not matter if we eat food sacrificed to idols (which is technically true)
- Paul is not going to contradict the objective truth of these claims. His objection is that the way some of the Corinthian elite are using these facts is unloving.

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 *only* one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we *exist* for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we *exist* through Him.

- This is how Paul agrees with the claim that “idols are nothing, and there is only one God”, which is likely something Paul himself taught them. But here Paul clarifies that there are indeed many corrupt spiritual beings being worshiped as gods and many “lords” who are images of the power and authority of those gods, “for us” there is only one God (the Father) imaged by one Lord (Jesus), and by the Father/Son all things are, and through.

7 However, not all people have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat *food* as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

- There are people in the church for whom this knowledge has not yet fully saturated their consciences. For these people, eating meat sacrificed to Aphrodite or Zeus is equivalent to worshipping these false gods and the corrupt spirits masquerading as gods.
- “Weak” conscience is not an insult any more than recognizing a disability is an insult. (think disabled permit parking)

8 Now food will not bring us close to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. **9** But take care that this freedom of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

- Knowing we are morally “free” to eat whatever we want should not be used as a weapon against those who have weak consciences.

10 For if someone sees you, the one who has knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will his conscience, if he is weak, not be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?

- Example: if you eat where high class people go to honor false gods (because you know those gods are nothing) and are seen by a weak brother or sister, might you be inadvertently tempting them to idolatry?

11 For through your knowledge the one who is weak is ruined, the brother *or* sister for whose sake Christ died. **12** And so, by sinning against the brothers *and* sisters and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

- Your “right” to eat temple meat (even in the pagan temple) can bring ruin to the faith of someone who struggles with that. If you sin against the weak, you sin against Christ.

13 Therefore, if food causes my brother to sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to sin.

- Paul himself is willing to forego all meat if that is what is needed to prevent a stumbling block to weaker believers. To Paul, freedom is useless when it is used to bring harm to others.

Chapter 9

1 Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?

- Paul, who has taught the Corinthians extensively about the abundance and freedom mindset of the believer, uses himself as an example for this teaching on service to others.
- Paul is one of the apostles and has had a post-resurrection meeting with Jesus...and he has planted the very church in Corinth!

2 If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

- To the Corinthians, because their believing in Jesus is proof of Paul’s apostleship, they should have no doubt that he has this high “status” and freedom in Christ.

3 My defense to those who examine me is this: **4** Do we not have a right to eat and drink? **5** Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?

- These rhetorical questions show that Paul and his companions can eat and drink whatever they want, and have the right to bring wives and families (just like the other apostles, Jesus’ brothers (James, Joses, Jude, and Simon), and Cephas (Peter)). But Paul has surrendered these rights.

6 Or do only Barnabas and I have no right to refrain from working? **7** Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not consume some of the milk of the flock?

- Most of the Apostles and Pastors receive salaries (which is lawful and good, as Paul will say next), but Paul and Barnabus do secular work and do not draw a regular salary or patronage from the churches they start. Why not?
- Scholars and religious leaders who do not have to work = status. Paul works a trade to lower his social status as an example to the believers in Corinth.

8 I am not *just* asserting these things according to human judgment, am I? Or does the Law not say these things as well? **9** For it is written in the Law of Moses: “YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE IT IS THRESHING.” God is not concerned about oxen, is He? **10** Or is He speaking entirely for our sake? Yes, it was written for our sake, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher *to thresh* in hope of sharing *in the crops*.

- Paul affirms that the Christian minister has every lawful right to a living wage. Just as it is cruel to muzzle the ox while it treads grain, it is cruel to deny a wage to a worker for the gospel.

11 If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? **12** If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ. **13** Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat *the food* of the temple, *and* those who attend regularly to the altar have their share from the altar? **14** So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.

- Paul is driving home the point that he has abundant rights to material support from them

15 But I have used none of these things. And I have not written these things so that it will be done so in my case; for it would be better for me to die than *that*. No one shall make my boast an empty one!

- To be clear, he is not writing these things so they will start paying him. He has lowered his social status as a “boasting in weakness”.

16 For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast *about*, for I am under compulsion; for woe to me if I do not preach the gospel. **17** For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a commission *nonetheless*. **18** What, then, is my reward? That, when I preach the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

- The surrendering of his rights to be paid and have an elevated social status is actually a reward and, for Paul, makes him free to become a slave

19 For though I am free from all people, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may gain more. **20** To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might gain Jews; to those who are under the Law, *I became* as *one* under the Law, though not being under the Law myself, so that I might gain those who are under the Law; **21** to those who are without the Law, *I became* as one without the Law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might gain those who are without the Law. **22** To the weak I became weak, that I might gain the weak; I have become all things to all people, so that I may by all means save some. **23** I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

- **Mission:** On the non-essentials of the faith, he has submitted his rights to the consciences of those he serves. He does not allow liberty or restriction to close the ears of those who need to hear the message of the gospel.
- “All things to all people” in the context of what wisdom teaches, not that he becomes an “idol-worshipper for idol-worshippers” or a “murderer to the murderers”. In other words he will not allow social status, ethnicity, or pet religious or political peeves or preferences build a wall between him and those who need Jesus.

24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only* one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. **25** Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. So they *do it* to obtain a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. **26** Therefore I run in such a way as not *to run* aimlessly; I box in such a way, as to avoid hitting air; **27** but I strictly discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

- The Isthmian games
- The real race is the Kingdom of Heaven spreading, not the spreading of our personal kingdoms (status, life goals or indulging in our rights). We can only win at one, not both.
- Seeking my kingdom first is like landing punches in the air; only by fighting for the bottom will we win the fight to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe Jesus’ teachings, and baptizing them through the waters of death into new creation life.

This Corinthian group's view might be summed up as "knowledge is power and power gives freedom and rights." Paul counters with his own slogan: "Love builds up the ekklēsia and gives opportunity and power for service to others." As Willis points out, for Paul freedom is not the first and fundamental cry, which then is crimped or limited by love. Rather, love is the fundamental thing, and it indicates how one's power ought to be used. A Christian's power and authority are to be expressed in and by love. Paul does not see freedom as liberation from obligations or from the restraints of interpersonal relationships, which was the common view in some parts of Greco-Roman society and still is today. For Paul, freedom is freedom from sin, from fear of death, from the law, and for service to Christ and his people. This is what Christians have been saved and empowered for — freedom to do what pleases God, not what pleases self. ~Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth, a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*

Reflections