

VCBC SLG Fall Term 2023
The Book of I Corinthians
Lesson #9
Answers to Their Letter (II)
Chs. 8-9

I. Introduction:

In chapter 7, Paul addresses the first matter raised by the Corinthian Christians in a precious letter that they wrote to him. Now he turns to the second matter which is “to eat or not to eat food sacrificed to idols”.

Chapter 8

8: 1 -13 Food Sacrificed to Idols

The Context:

As someone who grew up in Hong Kong in the 50’s surrounded by relatives, friends and neighbors who worshipped idols—having a small wooden shrine in front of their doors and perhaps another shrine high up on the wall inside the house, all lit with incenses and adorned with fruits (like mandarin oranges)—and at times sharing with them food sacrificed to these idols every 1st and 15th of the lunar months and during special Chinese festivals, I do understand to a certain extent how some of the Corinthian Christians struggled with eating food sacrificed to idols. However, according to historians, the temples for the idols in the city of Corinth were also places for social gathering and business transactions, accompanied not only by food sacrificed to idols, but by prostitutes.

Since Paul teaches them (in his previous letter) not to associate with sexual immoral people, he is quick to point out that he does not mean that they should stop associating with non-Christians, just the sexually immoral brothers in Christ, or they “would have to leave the world” (I Cor. 5:10). In other words, Paul appears to understand and accept the inevitability of the Corinthian Christians socializing with non-Christians even in meeting and eating with them in their temples, as part of their normal life.

8: 1-6 –Eating food sacrificed to idols— the principle of knowledge

“Now 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. 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.”

Vv. 1-3—The principle in dealing with this issue involves both

- The use of knowledge, coupled with
- The use of love (*agape*)

The reasons why knowledge alone is not sufficient to deal with this issue are:

- The exercise of knowledge without love will cause them to “puff up”, the same word used in 4:6 to warn them against being proud (and Paul would into a full-blown attack on exercising gifts without love in chapter 13),
- And, as much as Paul says, “We all possess knowledge”, he qualifies this statement by saying that without love, it is not true knowledge—**“Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know”**.

So, how then can one know as one ought to? The answer is:

“But whoever loves God”. Why then?

- Because God does not only know about the one who loves him, he is **“known by God”**.
 - Which is a deeper expression than “God knows him”, but conveys a deeper knowing (intimate communion with and by God)
 - This person’s love for God allows him to enter into a mutual communion with God that results in God “confiding with him” (Psalm 25:14) and allowing him to see through His lens, knowing His heart.
- Thus, it is true knowledge—or “we know as we ought to”.

With that understanding, Paul says we are ready to deal with the issues at hand:

Vv. 4-6—First, based on knowledge

- There is only one God
 - “there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live”**
 - God is the Creator God, no one else is—not idols, not angels, not men.
 - He is our Father in Heaven.
- and one Lord
 - “there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.”**
 - Jesu is equal with the Father and together is the Creator of all things and
 - In Him is life—our eternal life! (John 1)

Thus idols are no gods or lords—In the use of these two terms by Paul, “There is probably no great difference between *many* ‘gods’ and *many* ‘lords’. ‘Lord’ was a common way of referring to deity in the cults of the time.” (Morris, 122). In fact, they are **“nothing!”**

Then based on knowledge, we can argue that

- Food sacrificed to idols, is food that is sacrificed to nothing!

8: 7-13 –Eating food sacrificed to idols—the principle of love

Vv. 7-13—Second, based on love

“7 But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, 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. 9 Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? 11 So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. 12 When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.”

- While **“all have knowledge”** (v,1), but **“this knowledge in not in all men”** (v.7, literal translation)
- Fee is right in his explanation: *“Even though ‘all have knowledge’, not all believers share that ‘knowledge’ in an experiential way.”* (Fee, 378)
- However, I prefer putting it like this: *even though all have such an objective knowledge, but some might have an experiential knowledge of idols according to their “ethos”.*
- Indeed, idols are **“made by the hands of men. They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel...”** (Psalm 115: 5-6)
- However, they can become instruments through which the devil uses to deceive people. That is why when former idol-worshippers turn to Christ, we would advise them to throw away or destroy the idols that they used to worship,
 - for one to alleviate the fear that formerly enslaved them,
 - but also, to prevent them from falling back into idol worship.
- The second point is taken up by Paul here:
 - **“For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.” (vv. 10-11)**
 - Paul’s reasoning goes like this:
 - Those who formerly worshipped idols consider the act of sacrificing food to idol and the eating of such food are one the same (part and partial of the worship), and so
 - As they see stronger-faith believers (the more spiritually knowledgeable) eat food sacrificed to idols, they would consider that it is also okay to continue the act of sacrificing itself—kind of a syncretized faith.
 - The result is: **“this weak brother for whom Christ dies, is destroyed by your knowledge.”** (v.11)
 - This is how syncretism destroys the faith of many so-called Christians as the missionaries compromise the gospel message in allowing the new converts to maintain their traditional spirit-related culture and customs.

It is not unlike former alcoholics who should stay away not only from bars, but from the presence of any alcoholic beverages, lest they fall back into their addiction. I once heard on the radio a confession by a pastor who was dining with a newly-baptised couple and without knowing that they were former alcoholics, ordered wine for the meal. It did not only startle the couple that the pastor would drink wine but sent a wrong message to the couple who exercised their freedom in Christ to drink again. But soon they returned to their former addiction and the marriage ended in divorce.

- Paul's passionate plea in this respect includes:
 - **“But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.”** (v.8)
 - Within the context of the city of Corinth, if the believers need to transact business within the temples, do so with out eating the food. They would likely be considered “strange” by their friends (1 Peter 4:4). Still, why not abstain from eating them!
 - **“When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.”** (v.12)
 - Yes, our brothers and sisters **“for whom Christ died”** are precious to Him.
 - Just as Saul was persecuting the followers of Christ, and Christ took it personally and confronted Saul, **“Why do you persecute me?”** (Acts 9:4)
 - Handle our brothers and sisters with care!
 - **“Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.”** (v.13)
 - This is the way of love, God's love
 - We should be wiling to abstain from certain food, to refrain from certain healthy pleasures or to postpone or withdraw any sound idea, if it might cause our brothers and sisters to fall.

The Corinthian believers' response appears to be:

- “Are we not free in Christ? Are we still under the law?”
- Perhaps: “Let's educate them!”
- Perhaps, “Why would their lack of faith or their ignorance prevent us from doing what is our right?”

These seem to be what Paul expects them to respond and thus he begins the next chapter with:

- **“Am I not free?”** (9:1)

Chapter 9

9: 1-6 Paul's defense of his Apostleship

“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. 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[Peter]? ⁶ Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living?”

As Paul fully expects the Corinthian Christians to challenge what he instructs them about exercising love in consideration of the “weaker” ones in refraining from eating food sacrificed to idols, he feels compelled to address the core reason for their opposing his teachings in this respect, and that is their opposing against his claim of Apostleship—“why should we listen to you. You are not one of the Twelve!”

Vv. 1-3: I am at least “your apostle”

- Paul insists: I am indeed an apostle, meeting the criteria set by Peter in Acts 1: 21-22
 - **“Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?”**
 - Likely referring to his vision of Jesus in the Arabia desert (Galatians 1:17), if not his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).
- But to the Corinthians believers, he is their spiritual father (I Cor. 4:15) and thus they are “the seal” of his apostleship, referring the demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit as promised to the apostles in Acts 1:8.

Vv. 4-6: The judgment by the Corinthians Christians

It appears that Paul is not just imagining how they would oppose to his teachings in the immediate, preceding chapters (marriage and food), but must have heard of their judgment or criticism behind his back, thus he now, uses the principle of freedom in Christ, to defend himself. More than that by using his own example (in ch.9) and the example of the “people of Israel” (in ch.10)—one positive and one negative—to answer their objection to “loss of freedom” for the sake of others, especially the “weaklings” in Christ, ending with his urge for them to **“follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”** (I Cor. 11:1)

The judgments against Paul are reflected by these rhetorical questions:

- **“Don't we have the right to food and drink?”**
 - The answer is of course, “yes”, but Paul willing forgo that right, when it comes to food sacrificed to idols.
 - Their criticism is likely that, “you can do as you please and abstain from food, but why do you have to impose the same on us?”

- **“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[Peter]?”**
 - The answer again is “yes”.
 - But, what Paul preaches in chapter 7 (it is better not to marry) contradicts what most of Apostles are doing; they are married, like Peter and the Lord’s brothers, meaning James and Jude;
 - Because of Paul’s apparent lack of a handsome appearance (II Cor. 10:10), they might say that “It is not because you want to serve the Lord without distraction; you simply can’t find a wife like Peter!”
- **“Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living?”**
 - The answer of course is another “yes”.
 - But the fact that Paul and Barnabas are both ‘moonlighting’ on the side, they judge that they either “love money”, or at the least, are distracted from serving the Lord with undivided devotion (I Cor. 7:35)

Vv. 7-14 : Paul’s defense from three angles

“⁷ Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink the milk? ⁸ Do I say this merely from a human point of view?

Doesn’t the Law say the same thing? 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 whoever plows and threshes should be able 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.

¹³ Don’t you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that 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.”

Paul’s defense seems to focus on the last point, about he and Barnabas having the rights to receive financial support from the churches (including the church in Corinth) and yet they refuse to:

#1 Based on (human) common sense:

- Although he frames his defense in the form of a question, it is really a rhetorical question the answer to which is, “yes”!
- Whether serving as a soldier or planting a vineyard or tending a flock, the right to derive food, drink or income therefrom is simply common sense.

#2 Based even on the Law of Moses

- This common-sense is also well supported by the Law of Moses (Deut. 25:4).

- However, Paul says this principle should be ever truer of the reapers of a spiritual harvest and that is not only understood but practiced among the first churches.
- And with the church in Corinth, Paul is not shy to say that he and Barnabas should even have more right in this respect.
- But Paul he quick to point out that
 - It is their conscious choice not to exercise their right which he will elaborate in vv. 15-18 later; and
 - Such a giving up of their right, presumably has led them to “put up with” or suffer many things, for the sake of not hindering (the spread and the message of) the gospel!

#3 Based on the command of the Lord

- Finally, he uses the authority of the words of the Lord to seal his rights to receive financial support from the churches as Jesus tells the seventy-two disciples, “**Do not move around from house to house...for the worker deserves his wages.**” (Luke 10: 7), equating all who preach the gospel as priests who serve in God’s temple!

Vv. 15-18: Paul’s reasons for “giving up” his rights

Essentially, Paul answers what he says in v.1 “Am I not free?” with these words, “But I have not used any of these rights” and now he shares his reasons for so doing.

“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, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast. ¹⁶ For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since 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 full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.”

Paul’s “heart-brokenness” towards how the Corinthian Christians have treated him has now come into the open, as he uses very strong language to express his feelings

- I would rather die, and
- Let no one deprived him of his boast.

If Paul were using a computer to type this letter, I wonder whether he would delete these words once he cools down. But this is his true feeling.

However, the main point he wishes to share with them is that his ultimate goal is

- **“To offer the gospel free of charge”**

And, having said that he would not let anyone deprive him of this boast

- He quickly qualifies it by saying that there is really nothing to boast of, because
 - Not preaching the gospel is not an option—**“Woe to me”**

- I do not think Paul is really expecting great calamities or destructions (Rev. 18:10) but is simply expressing how awful it would be for him to disobey this heavenly calling.
- As a result he explains that
 - If he preaches voluntarily, he would receive a reward,
 - If he preaches out of only a sense of duty, at least he does so without any ulterior motives, especially that of greed!

Vv. 19-23: Apart from “obligation”, another reason why Paul would give up even more rights

“¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made 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 people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

Beyond the rights mentioned previously, Paul explains that beyond financial rights, he basically is willing to forsake all rights (and freedom):

- **“for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings”**
- The more literal translation: *“for the sake of the gospel in order that I may become a joint-sharer of it”*
 - The immediate, preceding words are about his determination to preach the gospel, so that he **“might save some”**;
 - And this blessing of salvation, has to be something he needs to share with others—one cannot be saved for oneself, but has to share such a blessed salvation with others!
 - Blessings are not to keep, but to share!

Because of this intense desire: he is willing to make himself a “slave”, in the sense that he considers himself not a freeman but be bound by the goal of having people saved unto eternal life and forgiveness, to the extent that he is willing to become **“all things to all people”**.

- What does that mean?
- What freedom is he sacrificing as at result?

Well, he explains what it means in very practical terms:

- **²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.**
 - Of course, Paul is a Jew; he does not have to “become like one”.
 - But since as the Apostle to the Gentiles, he has already “forsaken” what was previously of profit to him—especially “being a Hebrew of Hebrews” because of Christ (Phil. 3:5), many Jews do not consider him one of them anymore.
 - But in order to be able to share the gospel with the Jews, he is willing to gain their acceptance, likely by observing many of the Jewish traditions.

- **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.**
 - But beyond Jewish traditions, there are ritualistic laws prescribed by the Law of Moses many of which have been fulfilled by the death and resurrection of Christ.
 - We know that Paul totally refutes those laws that have been superseded by the gospel, like circumcision, Sabbath and Passover, however, there are others that are not directly contradicting to the gospel. So we read in Acts 21 that at the advice of James and the Jerusalem elders to join in the purification rites for four men and even paid for their expense in Jerusalem.
 - What's more, in Acts 16, Paul was willing to have Timothy circumcised, in order to be able to take him along in his missionary journey.
 - Paul does all these in order 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.**
 - And with Gentiles who are not under the law, Paul fights hard to keep them from having to be enslaved by the Law of Moses.
- **²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak.**
 - And all the above examples seek to demonstrate what he teaches in chapter 8 about abstinence from food sacrificed to idols: do not just seek simply to maintain theological correctness, but as much as possible, without compromising on the gospel truth, share and live out the gospel in love.

What freedom is he sacrificing as at result?

- I think, the greatest suffering comes from being misunderstood and criticized by legalistic believers: as if he were not practicing what he preaches,
- More practically, it is never easy to adapt oneself to a custom, thinking and culture which is quite foreign to ours; and
- While one is not necessarily compromising the gospel truth, one still wishes the "weak" will grow out of their ignorance and that takes a lot of patience and love.

Vv. 24-27: Giving up his rights—from external circumstances to inner discipline

So far, all the rights mentioned by Paul that he is willing to give up are merely external. Now, Paul admonishes the Corinthian Christians with his own example of giving up his rights to freedom in all aspects of his life, including how he lives his life in Christ.

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 someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. ²⁷ No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

Again, the goal remains the sharing of the gospel, but here he shares that he yearns for its prize (or the reward that is mentioned in v.17).

- We may sneer at the thought that Christians should be so mindful of whether we can earn a reward as a motive for serving or even loving the Lord.
- But Paul does not hide his desire to earn his reward from the Lord—e.g. the “crown of righteousness” in I Timothy 4:8.
- In fact, the Scriptures are full of promises of rewards (Math. 5:12, 10:41, 16:27, Col. 3:24 etc.), not to mention the wonderful rewards promised to the “overcomers” in the seven letters to the churches in Asia Minor in Revelation.
- If such rewards are to be desired, the Bible would not have mentioned them over and over again. Our problem is our inability to appreciate the glory and magnitude of these heavenly rewards in the here and now.
- But ultimately, if our heavenly rewards are not accompanied by the praise of our Master, they will lose their meaning totally.
- So, do realize that whatever rewards we may get from heaven, it is epitomized necessarily by the praise of our Lord Jesus Christ (Mat. 25: 21, 23)
- THIS is what Paul is after!

In order to reap such a reward, Paul encourages us to live a life of discipline, like

- An Olympic runner
 - Run like only one can get a prize
 - Do not be content with a silver or bronze medal
 - Not talking about competitiveness
 - But about striving for our best to please the Lord
 - Run a designated route, without straying aside
 - No distraction
 - No detours
 - Must go into strict training constantly
 - Willing to sacrifice everything in order to get the prize
 - The prize is a lasting crown of gold, as compared to a laurel crown, meaning no earthly reward is comparable!
- Like a boxer
 - That has a clear target to beat—our opponent
 - But our opponent is our body—which entails more than our sinful nature
 - But anything that seeks to
 - Discourage us from this fight
 - Distract us from this goal, or
 - Weaken us from this commitment.
- Paul knows that he is obligated to keep preaching, but if he only does it out of a sense of duty, without being willing to do everything possible, especially in subjecting himself to vigorous training and discipline, he will be disqualified from getting the prize—the praise from his Lord Jesus Christ!