

Knowledge, Rights & Love

1 Corinthians 8:1-9:27

Background

In Corinthian culture, eating food sacrificed to idols¹ was very common. Such food was served in pagan temples, sold in the marketplace, and eaten in homes. Dinner parties, business and trade association meetings, and other social events were often held at the temple where “idol food” was served. It was not easy for a Christian (especially one of high social status) to avoid such occasions. Yet Christians had been instructed, “You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols” (*Acts 15:29a*). Apparently, the Corinthian Christians had questioned Paul about this issue.

Our “Rights” ... or Love

❑ Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-13.² Paul writes, “We know that we all possess knowledge.³ Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”⁴ This is a key statement in this passage.

1. What do verses 2-3 indicate concerning our self-evaluation of our knowledge? What is more important than our own knowledge? (8:1-3)



- ❑ Knowledgeable believers know that there is only one God, and the “gods” represented by idols do not really exist (though the worship of “false gods” is a *real* problem) (8:4-5). However, not everyone knows this. So while the “knowledgeable” ones feel free to eat “idol food,” others are adversely affected by such thoughts and actions.⁵ Some have a “weak conscience”⁶ (8:7).
 - ❑ While the “knowledgeable” ones in Corinth feel that they are free to exercise their rights concerning idol food,⁷ Paul warns them that their actions can cause great problems (8:9-12).
2. What problems might be caused by their “exercise of freedom?”⁸ What is wrong with their attitude?

¹ “idol” – in the Corinthian context; an image (e.g., a statue or figurine) used as an object of worship; a false god

² It is commonly taught that 1 Corinthians 8 concerns two categories of Christians – the strong and the weak. The strong have knowledge, while the weak lack knowledge. The strong know that idols are nothing. Thus eating food sacrificed to idols is okay. However, the weak cannot accept this, and such behavior adversely affects them. So Paul tells the strong to limit their freedom out of love for the weak. Bible scholars Fee and Garland do not entirely agree with this interpretation, which reads Romans 14:1-15:13 into this passage. While the principle of love over knowledge is certainly taught, the “knowledge” of the “knowledgeable ones” is deficient. In 1 Corinthians 10:14-21, Paul makes it clear that eating food sacrificed to idols *can* be very wrong, which shows that the supposed “strong” (a term never used in this passage) have some serious weaknesses in their own knowledge, which can lead to terrible consequences (8:9-12). The acceptability of eating food sacrificed to idols will be addressed in Lesson 9 (1 Corinthians 10).

³ All Christians have knowledge (γνῶσις, *gnōsis*) concerning the basic facts of Christianity. The Christians in Corinth were “enriched ... in knowledge” (1:5). However, their self-evaluation needed correction.

⁴ “puffs up” (φυσιοῦ) – makes people proud or arrogant; “builds up” (οικοδομεῖ) – builds up in a positive way

⁵ This does not mean that the “knowledgeable ones” are entirely correct. See footnote 2 above.

⁶ “conscience” (συνείδησις, *syneidēsis*). Conscience may be “moral consciousness” (Fee) or “moral compass, for making judgments about what is right and wrong.” A “weak” (*asthenēs*) conscience has difficulty making appropriate moral judgments because it lacks knowledge (David Garland, *1 Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 383-384).

⁷ Εξουσία (*exousia*) in verse 9 is translated either “freedom” (NIV), “liberty” (NASB), “authority” (Garland), or “right” (ESV), and refers to the actions they believed were justified based on their knowledge.

⁸ It can be a “stumbling block” (πρόσκομμα) to the weak, “wounding” their conscience, and possibly “destroying” them. Their exercise of freedom can influence former idolaters to fall back into idolatry. The consequences are more serious than merely offending someone or causing emotional pain. They are sinning against others, and against Christ.

3. Read 1 Corinthians 8:13. How does Paul's attitude reinforce his earlier statement, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up?"⁹
4. How does this passage apply to us today? Does it mean that we must always avoid offending others? What should govern our actions? What are some specific applications?

Paul's Rights (as an Apostle)

❑ Read 1 Corinthians 9:1-14.¹⁰ In verse 1, Paul asks four rhetorical questions, each anticipating the answer "yes," to establish the validity of his apostleship. In verses 3-14, he establishes his "rights" as an apostle.

5. What "rights" does Paul have as an apostle?¹¹ What right has Paul given up? (9:12)
6. How do verses 7-11 and 13-14 apply to Christians today?



Paul's rights ... or Love

❑ Read 1 Corinthians 9:15-23.¹²

7. Why has Paul waived (given up) his right to support? (9:12; 9:15-18)¹³ Why does Paul preach? (9:16-17, 23).
- ❑ Though Paul is "free," he makes himself a "slave" to bring as many people as possible to Christ (9:19-22). He says, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." This does not mean Paul is inconsistent or accommodating (in a negative sense), but as far as possible, he identifies with those whom he seeks to win for Jesus Christ.

Reflection & Application

- What do *you* know? Where is your knowledge taking you? The most important thing in life is to be "known by God" – that is, to have a loving relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Do you need to enter into a relationship with God through faith in Christ?
- Are you driven by knowledge, freedom or rights? Or are you driven by love? Are you willing to set aside your rights for the sake of the gospel of Christ? What might those rights include?

⁹ Knowledge without love can be destructive. Knowledge without love "puffs up" the "knowledgeable ones" who insist on their "rights" and "freedom." However, when love takes control, people are more able to use their knowledge in positive ways rather than negative ways. The exercise of their "rights" and "freedom" is constrained by love.

¹⁰ Many commentators say that Paul's main purpose in these verses is to defend his apostleship, being questioned by some of the Corinthians. Others minimize his defensiveness, saying these verses primarily serve as the premise of his argument in 9:15-23 concerning the waiver of his rights for the good of others, to further his point in 8:9-13.

¹¹ Paul makes his case in numerous ways, including illustrations from life (9:7), the Scriptures (9:8-10; Deut. 25:4), temple practices (9:13), and Jesus' teaching (9:14; Mark 6:7-11; Luke 9:1-15; 10:1-12).

¹² This lesson skips over verses 24-27, where Paul uses an athletic metaphor to emphasize the need for "strict training" (discipline) in the Christian life. See the earlier ICF lesson called *Running the Race*.

¹³ Paul wants to offer the gospel "free of charge," in contrast to the itinerate philosophers who sell their wisdom. Paul supported himself through tent making (Acts 18:3), but also received support from other churches (2 Cor 11:9).