

The Christian Use of Liberty

1 Corinthians 8:6-9

How should the Christian use his or her freedom in Christ?

In John 8:34-37, we read Jesus' explanation about the bondage to sin and freedom in Christ: ³⁴ Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. ³⁵ And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. ³⁶ If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that ye are Abraham's seed; but ye seek to kill me, because my word hath no place in you. Those who commit sin are the servants of sin – as illustrated by their murderous intent in verse 37. But by His gracious finished work, the Son of God has made believers free indeed.

How to Think about the Christian Use of Liberty

Have you ever asked someone a hard question and received what you thought was a shallow or "surface" answer? Why was that? Was it because the person you asked wasn't willing to think too deeply about the issue? Or perhaps they just didn't know where to go for answers? Or maybe they were trying to figure out if you were ready to think deeply about the issue? To the church at Corinth, Paul had written, "I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able" (1 Corinthians 3:2)

When we ask hard questions, we have to be sure that our hearts are ready to receive God's answers. The Christians in the church at Corinth had asked Paul about the meat that was offered to idols. This included both the meat was for sale and the ceremonial meal where it was offered to idols. So far in our study on the Christian use of liberty, we have studied the way Paul answered the question. Rather than merely giving a "yes" or "no" answer, the apostle reviewed a number of principles. This approach is very helpful to us today. We may not wrestle with the same issues the Corinthians did, but we still confront questionable issues. If we desire to "cut to the chase" (just get a "yes" or "no" answer), we will miss the principles with which to make decisions. Here are some of the principles we have studied thus far:

- Paul agreed that "we know that we all have [some] knowledge" (v.1), but see verse 7.
- But he also cautioned that "knowledge puffs up," but love builds up (v. 1).
- Actually, if a man proudly imagines that he knows anything, he does not yet know as he ought to know (v. 2).
- If a man truly loves God, then he is intimately known by God (v.3).
- We know that an idol is nothing, and there is no other God other than the true God (v.4). (Paul will later qualify this first phrase with his discussion in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22).
- The one true God is God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 5-6)
- We are in Him – the one true God – by the gracious work of the Son of God (v. 6). Verse 6 is especially important in that it reminds believers that we are part of the new creation. The only way to get to heaven is to become part of Christ's new creation. This does not come about by human effort but by the divine work of Christ. And becoming a new creature in Christ changes everything for us. Now we are free in Christ, the Lord of our liberty.

We could analyze Paul's answer to these hard questions with the three words "what," "why" and "who." Paul laid the foundation for deciding "what to do," by first reviewing "why to do it" and thinking carefully about "Who gets the praise?" Paul frequently raised questions and expressed answers in this manner. For instance, in 2 Corinthians 6:14-17, when he appealed to the believers to separate from worldliness, Paul used this approach. **"14 Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: [what to do] for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? [why to do it] 15 And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? . . . 17 Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, 18 And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" [Who gets the glory and praise].**

So as we turn to 1 Corinthians 8:6-9, let's consider what it means to say that we are "in Him," the one true God. And we are "in Him" by the work of the Son who set aside His rights and privileges in order to serve us.

More Principles to Consider

■ Some Brothers and Sisters Are in Danger.

Consider 1 Corinthians 8:7: **⁷Howbeit *there is* not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat *it* as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.**

Principle: Not every man understands that "an idol is nothing" and he defiles his conscience when he eats meat offered to idols (v.7).

Some of the Corinthians believers were conscious of the very real spiritual issues involved with idols. This consciousness defiled them. Paul himself pointed to the reality behind these issues two chapters later in 1 Corinthians 10: 19-20:

¹⁹What say I then? that the idol is any thing, or that which is offered in sacrifice to idols is any thing? ²⁰But I *say*, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils.

Paul had agreed that "an idol is nothing" (8:4). But in verse 7, Paul taught that all men did not fully comprehend that. How should compassionate believers respond to other conscientious believers?

It would be a mistake to call these conscientious believers "weaker brothers." "We should not confuse the weak-wavering-in-faith Christians in Rome, who needed to act out of conviction rather than community pressure (Rom 14), with the Corinthian weak, who could not eat sacrificial food except with consciousness of an idol's presence."ⁱ These believers were conscientious (a good thing), but the result was that they saw iniquity in actions which God viewed with indifference. "So serious was this *stumbling block* that Paul refers to *the weak*, as a result of their stumbling back into idolatry, as in the process of being *destroyed* (*apollyomai*, perish, ruin, damage).ⁱⁱ

But did eating certain meats or abstaining from certain meats draws one closer to God?

■ The Gray Areas

Read verse 8: **⁸ But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse.**

Clearly the answer is “no.” We are not more acceptable to God by eating or abstaining from meats offered to idols.

Principle: Meat does not commend us to God in any spiritual manner, so we are not better or worse for eating or not eating (v. 8).

This verse helps us to understand the kinds of issues under consideration. This enlightens us in how to apply these principles today. The action of eating the idol’s meat or not eating the idol’s meat was a matter of indifference to God. In our modern culture, we like to call this a “gray area.” So in our gray areas – not black and white – is there anything else to consider, or are we free to do as we choose? Verse 9 helps us with a greater consideration:

⁹ But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak.

■ The Stumbling Block

Principle: There is the very real danger that the believer’s use of liberty could become a stumblingblock to other believers (v.9).

The word translated “liberty” here is a word which can be translated “power,” “authority,” or “freedom to choose.” A stumbling block is “any thing over which a person stumbles and falls; here, an occasion to sin by awakening an inclination to imitate conduct that is in conflict with conscience.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“Liberty” refers to the Christian’s “right” to choose. As Westerners, we are well-acquainted with our rights under the law. We have liberty; we have freedom. This July 4 here in the States, we will celebrate our Independence Day. One of the big questions on the national scene is this: how should citizens use their constitutional rights? Should our freedom cause us to constantly insist on our rights? Or should we use our freedom to build a better America? On this Memorial Day weekend, we must remember the sacrifice that so many made to build a better America. If they had been self-serving instead of sacrificial, ours might be a very different country today. In America, it has often been said, “my liberty ends where your nose begins.” This is a way to try to express the limits of liberty. In this text, the limit of Christian liberty is my neighbor’s conscientious approach; if he sins when he imitates my actions, then I must not act in this manner. If my fellow believers fall when they follow my ways, then my ways must change.

Here the apostle Paul made a specific application of the general principles he laid out in verse 1: **Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.**

Yes, knowledge would say “an idol is nothing,” and “meat does not commend us to God.” But is that the end of the story? “No,” love would say, “But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak.” Remember: knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. We should not allow our example to lead others to act against their conscientiousness. Paul made the same point in Romans 14:13: **Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way.** As we shall see in 1 Corinthians 9:22-27, this

takes tremendous discipline; this is very different from the way some people think of “Christian liberty.”

As one author wrote, “‘True wisdom’ is seen in Christ’s concern for the “weak” and the less secure, to the point of renouncing his own rights, even to the death of the cross. Paul’s own lesser example will appear in ch. 9. 8:11–13 confirms this.”^{iv} To be like Christ, we must also be willing to set aside our rights in order to serve others.

Today, we are tempted to insist on our rights. So, like some at Corinth, we might be tempted to sneer at the consciousness of the weak. But dismissing the concerns of others means that we miss the opportunity to grow in Christlikeness.

In the next few verses, we will be looking more carefully at our influence on other believers.

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ⁱ Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, vol. 7, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 139–140.

ⁱⁱ Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, 141.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Peter Lange, Philip Schaff, et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: 1 Corinthians* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 174.

^{iv} Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 651.