**ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE  
1 Corinthians 8:1–9:27**

**“*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*” (9:22)**

So far in 1 Corinthians, Paul has addressed a number of problems in the Corinthian church, including divisions, lawsuits, and sexual immorality. Now he handles the problem of food sacrificed to idols. In Roman culture at that time, temples played a similar role to restaurants today. High quality meat would be offered to idols, and a portion would be burned, another portion given to the priests, and the rest sold at a reasonable price either inside the temple of in the meat market. People would enjoy merry social gatherings with tasty food and drink at the temples. Such meat offered to idols may have been the only meat that poor believers could afford. Instead of laying down a law, Paul sets forth the general principle of exercising freedom in love. Through today’s passage, we can learn about our rights as Christians: how not to use them from the example of food sacrificed to idols, and how to use them based on Paul’s example as a self-supporting gospel worker. Thank God that Christ has set us free by ransoming us with his blood! Let’s learn from Paul how to make the very best use of our freedom for the gospel to win others to Christ in love.

1. **Knowledge Puffs Up but Love Builds Up (8:1–13)**

Paul begins treating the next problem the Corinthians were facing with a general principle. Look at 8:1: “***Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that ‘We all possess knowledge.’ But knowledge puffs up while love builds up.***” Are there any sophomores here? The word sophomore comes from Greek “*sophos*”—wise—and “*moros*”—fool. This probably doesn’t apply to you, but many sophomores, after one year of college, start thinking they know a lot, when they don’t even know that they don’t know. The Corinthians were the same way. They had received theological instruction and Bible teaching from Paul and Apollos, who were wise servants of God, and they thought they were wise also. However, their knowledge puffed them up, and their pride was ungrounded, like someone wearing an inflatable sumo-suit thinking he’s a sumo wrestler.

Paul says in 8:2, “***Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know.***” “Ought to know” implies that we have a moral obligation to know. Truly growing in knowledge of God leads to humility, not to pride. As we study Scripture, we can understand how limited our knowledge is compared to God’s. Job was a wise and learned man, who thought he understood justice, but after God questioned him, Job confessed, “*Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know*” (Job 42:3b), and he repented of his pride and presumptuousness.

Knowledge of God without love leads to being puffed up with pride over others, but love for God leads to real spiritual growth and intimacy with God, as Paul writes in 8:3: “***But whoever loves God is known by God.***” Of course, God knows everything about everyone, but to be known by God means that he knows you as a friend. God said to Moses, who had prayed for God’s Presence to accompany Israel, “*I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name*” (Ex 33:17). God reveals himself to those who love and obey him (Jn 14:21). But Jesus sternly warned that he will tell those who disobeyed his Father’s will, “*I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!*” (Mt 7:23). To be known by God is a matter of life and death.

Paul addresses what theological knowledge the Corinthians were misapplying in verse 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.’***” Paul had taught that the Greco-Roman gods and goddesses didn’t actually exist but were manmade myths. Even though there are many idols and evil spirits, Paul declares, “***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***” (8:6). These are amazing truths: God the Father is the source and purpose of our lives, and his Son Jesus Christ is the agent of creation and the sustainer of our physical and spiritual life.

However, the Corinthians misapplied their knowledge that there is only one God to consider pagan idolatrous practices as insignificant. The problem was that many people, including new believers, were so accustomed to idols that they thought of eating food sacrificed to idols as participating in idol worship. Paul envisions a problematic scenario in 8:10: “***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?***”

What does it mean to have a weak conscience? The conscience is our innate moral sense. It starts out weak—i.e. uninstructed and unable to correctly judge difficult moral issues. But it can be strengthened to make better moral judgments through instruction and practice. Repentance can be considered as “*the pledge of a clear conscience*” (1Pe 3:21)—that is, a resolution not to do what our conscience tells us is wrong, so violating one's conscience is sin (Ro 14:23). Paul’s concern was that if a new believer having just come out of pagan idolatry saw a mature believer eating in an idol’s temple, the new believer would associate such eating with idol worship and then would feel emboldened to return to idol worship, which would violate his conscience and be spiritually devastating.

Paul describes the consequences of applying knowledge without love in 8:11–12 “***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.***” Jesus himself also warned of the seriousness of causing a young believer to sin in Mark 9:42: “*If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.*” It is better to die than to lead others into sin. In order to avoid this at all costs, Paul was willing to curtail his freedom drastically, saying in 8:13, “***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.***” Paul made a firm decision of self-denial for the sake of others, not to harm them but to build them up in love. Love involves caring for others and building them up through words and actions. This attitude is based on the love of Christ. Christ didn’t have to limit his freedom, but he made himself a servant and gave his life as a ransom to save our souls and build us up as his beloved, holy church.

How should we apply this principle today? Does anyone here worry about eating food sacrificed to idols? Actually, halal food, which Muslims eat, is offered to Allah, who is not the same as the God of the Bible, but an idol. So we can follow Paul’s recommendations in this chapter and chapter 10 (1Co 10:25–28). We can also apply Paul’s principle of applying knowledge with love to a broad range of practices that the Bible doesn’t explicitly forbid. For example, the Bible doesn’t forbid drinking alcohol, though it forbids drunkenness. I am free on this issue, but since it leads many into sin and addiction, I choose not to drink so that I might not cause any to fall. Another example is modesty. The Bible doesn’t set a regulation on skirt length or showing skin. But for the sake of weak believers who might fall into sinful thoughts, the loving thing to do is to limit one’s own freedom and dress modestly.

Paul was willing to curtail his rights well beyond anything required by the law in order to avoid causing another believer to fall into sin. Strong believers are constrained by the law of love to be considerate of their weaker brothers and sisters, for whom Christ died. Having addressed the specific example of how the Corinthian believers should restrict their freedom, Paul gives an example of how and why he chose to restrict his own.

1. **All Things to All People to Save Some (9:1–27)**

Paul askes a string of rhetorical questions in 9:1: “***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?***” The answer to each is obviously affirmative. Before Paul met Christ, he was a legalistic Pharisee, subject to the restrictions of the Old Testament ceremonial laws and enslaved to sin and death. But Paul wrote about our new Christian freedom in Romans 8:2: “*through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death*”, and Romans 6:14b, “*you are not under the law, but under grace*”, and Galatians 5:1a: “*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.*” Jesus fulfilled the law that condemned us, so we are no longer bound by sin or obligated to fulfill the ceremonial law.

Not only was Paul free, but he was a genuine apostle. Even though he hadn’t followed Christ during his earthly ministry, the risen Christ had appeared to Paul and commissioned him as an apostle to the Gentiles. The Corinthian Christians were themselves proof of God’s power at work through Paul’s apostolic ministry.

Why was Paul compelled to defend his apostleship to the church he had founded? Apparently, some of the Corinthians thought that since Paul hadn’t taken wages while he ministered among them, he didn’t have the right. Paul defended his right to material support based on the common practice of the other apostles (9:5), familiar illustrations from daily life (9:7, 10b, 11, 13), Scriptural principles (9:9-10a), and the command of the Lord Jesus himself (9:14), who decreed, “*the worker deserves his wages*” (Lk 10:7).

Having established his right to material support, Paul explains that he didn’t make use of it for the sake of the gospel and for the benefit of others. First, he says in 9:12, “***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.***” Paul put up with having to work hard with his hands as a tent maker to support his ministry rather than to hinder the gospel of Christ. This way he would not be mistaken for a paid lecturer or open to the slander that he was preaching out of greed. People could see that his motive was sincere love when he wasn’t gaining anything material from his work.

Second, he says in 9:15, “***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.***” Paul took pride in being able to offer the gospel free of charge. Jesus had freely given Paul the grace of forgiveness and the mission of apostleship, and Paul was happy to pass on freely what he had received.

Paul’s pride wasn’t merely in preaching, for he says in 9:16, “***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!***” Since Jesus had commanded him to preach, he had no other choice. In 9:18 Paul proclaims, “***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.***” As a Bible teacher and messenger, I thank God for the privilege to be able to offer one-on-one Bible teaching and preaching free of charge, so that my reward can be from God. There’s nothing wrong with being paid to teach or preach the gospel, as Paul already proved, but it is a blessing to be able to offer such service freely.

Having discussed his example of foregoing the right to support, Paul teaches how to use our freedom positively in the best way for eternity. Let’s read together 9:19: “***Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.***” Paul was willing to lay down his freedom, his rights, his comfort, his pride in order to win souls to Christ through the gospel. What motivated Paul to do this? He knew God’s heart; he knew how valuable one soul is in God’s sight.

Jesus taught about the value of one soul. When Jesus exorcised the Gerasene demoniac, he valued the man’s soul more than the 2,000 pigs he allowed the legion of demons to enter instead. In Matthew 16:26a, Jesus taught the surpassing value of the soul, asking, “*What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?*” Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son vividly shows that God's heart toward each sinner is like a Father toward his runaway son, mourning for him during his absence but overjoyed at his return, exclaiming, “*For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found*” (Lk 15:24).

Sin separates people from God, who is the source of life, so it results in spiritual death and leads to the just penalty of eternal condemnation in hell—the second death. However, God doesn’t want “*anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*” (2Pe 3:9). God loved the world and each sinner therein so much that he sent his only Son Jesus to offer his own life on the cross in our place, so that whoever turns from their sin in repentance and trusts in Jesus for forgiveness can be eternally set free from sin and death. God waits longingly for his lost children to return to him and stands ready to embrace with open arms each sinner who comes home in repentance and faith.

Knowing this, Paul made it his purpose in life to win as many souls to faith in Christ as he could. C.T. Studd was a rich and famous cricket player in England, but he left it all to become a missionary. He wrote, “I cannot tell you the joy it gave me to bring the first soul to the Lord Jesus Christ.  I have tasted almost all the pleasures that this world can give…, but I can tell you that these pleasures were as nothing compared to the joy that the saving of that one soul gave me… I found that I had something infinitely better than cricket.  My heart was no longer in the game; I wanted to win souls for the Lord.” The way to maximize our joy for this life and eternity is to invest our lives in Christ and his gospel work of winning souls.

So how did Paul win as many as possible? First, he became all things to all people. Let’s read 9:22 together: “***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.***” Paul lists three groups of people for whose sake he limited his freedom and adapted his behavior. Paul mentions the Jews in 9:20: “***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.***” When Paul ministered to Jews, he kept the Jewish law without flaunting his Christian freedom so that nothing would hinder them from receiving his gospel. Next, Paul summarizes his ministry to Gentiles in 9:21: “***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.***” Paul adopted a Gentile lifestyle inasmuch as it didn't violate Christ's teachings, and he didn't impose Jewish restrictions on them. Finally, Paul explains his approach toward those with a weak conscience: “***To the weak I became weak, to win the weak***” (9:22a). Paul didn’t exercise his Christian freedom but acted in loving consideration of their weak consciences.

Thus Paul removed every possible barrier between the people he served and the gospel so that the maximum number of them might be saved. This was especially important for the cross-cultural mission work he engaged in.

Hudson Taylor, while serving as a missionary in China, realized that his European attire was comical and undignified to the Chinese and was distracting them from his message. Since it was the Chinese he wanted to win, he went to a barber to have the front of his head shaved and his hair dyed to match a long black braid. As he went around in the loose gown and satin shoes of the scholarly class, doors were opened as never before: the crowds were more respectful and open, women and children were bolder to come and hear, and he was invited into Chinese homes. By becoming like the Chinese, Hudson Taylor could win more Chinese than ever before.

Second, Paul ran to win. Let’s read 9:24: “***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.***” Paul treated his Christian life not as a leisurely walk or a jog but a race. He was not content to be outdone; instead he pushed himself to the max, comparing himself to a professional athlete in 9:25: “***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.***”

The PyeongChang Winter Olympics finished last Sunday. Olympic athletes are known for their rigorous training, since they face the toughest competition in the world and have one shot every four years. American skier, Mikaela Shiffrin, regularly pushed herself to the limit during her strict high-intensity training. She said, “We have a grading scale that I fill out for every workout. Ten is dying or passing out. I rate nine fairly often.” Her grueling training won her a gold and a silver medal this year.

Still, even Olympic medals and world fame don’t last forever. However, we have the opportunity to win a heavenly crown that will last forever. Paul shares about his spiritual training to win that crown in 9:26–27: “***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.***” Paul was not aimless or half-hearted but focused like a laser on the prize. Instead of fighting against people, he fought against his own flesh. He battled against sinful and selfish impulses to deny himself and follow Jesus to the end.

God has provided us as Christians with spiritual disciplines for training, which are means of grace by which we can grow in faith, wisdom, and holiness by the power of God’s Spirit. Spiritual disciplines include Bible reading, prayer, fasting, reflection writing, and Scripture memorization—to name a few. As we train ourselves in godliness like apostle Paul, we will be well equipped to fight the spiritual battles, overcome temptations, win souls, and share in the eternal blessings of the gospel.

I am free. I have the right—and by God’s grace the ability—to work and make money to go on vacations, buy expensive things, and live the American dream. However, I quit my good engineering job and now live frugally in order to maximize the time I can spend reaching and teaching students on campus. I become like a college student to win college students, wearing a backpack and a hat on campus—last week someone thought I was a sophomore. Now that God has given me this opportunity and mission, I pray that I might maximize my usefulness for his kingdom by denying myself to grow as a disciplined prayer warrior, Spirit-filled evangelist, and Christ-like disciple-maker—like the apostle Paul.

In this passage, we learned that though we are free in Christ, we have an obligation not to use our freedom selfishly without regard for others. Instead, we have the opportunity to use our freedom for eternally significant endeavors. Now that we know the surpassing value of one saved soul—worth more than the treasures of this world—let us focus our lives accordingly, become like those we would save, and run to win the eternal prize.