

**Know the Word**  
**The Book of First Corinthians**  
**Lesson 4 – Paul’s Response to Letter (Chapters 7-10)**

**Introduction**

After discussing disorder, disunity and the state of sexual immorality in the church, Paul moves further to the list of questions that the Corinthians had sent him, including subjects of marriage, singleness, eating meat offered to idols, propriety in worship, orderliness in the Lord’s Supper, spiritual gifts and the resurrection. In this lesson we will attempt to look into Paul’s teachings on two aspects, firstly: marriage, divorce and singlehood and secondly: Christian liberty with specific relevance to eating food sacrificed to idols.

**Marriage, Divorce and Singlehood Problems (1 Corinthians 7:1-40)**

In studying Chapter 7 it must be remembered that sexual immorality or fornication was an evil threatening the survival of the Corinthian church. That problem must have had much to do with how Paul answered the questions about marriage. Also, the Corinthians’ former heathen exaltation of celibacy could have prompted them to ask Paul if celibacy for Christians was not the state that all Christians should cherish. To which Paul’s reply was: *“Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband”* (7:1-2)

Chapter 7 is not a treatise on marriage but Paul answers six questions on the subject with a general governing principle in verses 17-24, namely: *“... each man ... should remain in the situation God called him to”*. The problems posed by the Corinthian Christians would be prompted by the different cultures represented in their church – Jewish, Greek, Roman and many others. Each of these peoples had an accepted approach to marriage. Paul had to address his answers to the questions raised as he saw fit in the setting of the Corinthian church.

**Question 1 – To the Married (or Formerly Married) Stay as You Are (7:1-7)**

**Are couples to continue normal sexual relations after conversion?** Yes, they owe it to one another to do so. Some in the church were probably urging complete abstinence. Having opposed sexual immorality in 6:13-20, Paul now opposes asceticism. Paul argues that marriage is the norm. Celibacy is good, but temptation to immoral acts abounds in the Corinth setting. Marriage is the divinely appointed safeguard.

### Question 2 – To the Unmarried and the Widows Stay Unmarried (7:8-9)

Should the unmarried marry? Paul commends celibacy, but only for those with that gift. Paul states that if anyone lacks the gift of celibacy, he should marry. Sexual desire is natural and marriage is provided for its fulfilment. Paul is not so much offering marriage as the remedy for the sexual desire of those burning with passion, but as the proper alternative for those who are already consumed by that desire and are sinning.

### Question 3 – No Divorce for Christian Partners (7:10-11)

Is divorce permitted to a Christian couple? An emphatic No! Paul emphasises that these are simply not his views but the Lord's (cf. Matt 5:32; 19:9). However, Paul makes an exception "*but if she (the wife) does*" (vs. 11), that is, if she does separate, she must continue to follow the dictum "Stay as you are" meaning "Remain unmarried". And if she desires to remarry, it should be to her husband. Remarriage is excluded while the other spouse is alive (cf. Rom 7:3)

### Question 4 – No Divorce for Mixed Marriages (7:12-16)

When one partner gets converted, should marital relationship continue with the pagan spouse? Yes, the Christian is not to leave the unbelieving partner unless the latter desires separation. God's call is to "*live in peace*" (vs 15), which means further that one should maintain the marriage in the hope of the unbelieving spouse's conversion. "*How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*" (vs.16) Paul argues that by continuing marital relationship with the pagan spouse, the believer is not defiled. Rather, the unbelieving spouse is sanctified in his or her relationship with the believing spouse. This does not mean that they have acquired salvation or holiness. But from Paul's perspective, as long as the marriage is maintained the potential for their realizing salvation remains.

### The Guiding Principle: Stay as One Was When Called (7:17-24)

A Christian is to continue to lead the life he was living when God's call to become a Christian came to him; that is, he is socially to stay put. No violent changes should be made simply because of conversion. This applies to differences of racial custom and social status. Paul was making reference to the great dividing factors in religion and society in his day, namely, circumcision and slavery. He states, "*Keeping God's commands is what counts*" (vs.19)

#### Question 5 – Singleness is Preferable but not Required (7:25-38)

Is remaining single of lower significance to being married? Not in the least! Paul commends the unmarried state because a single person can give himself wholly to the “*Lord’s affairs*” (vs. 32). The married man must of necessity concern himself also with the needs of wife and children. So his interests are divided, that is, he wants to please both his wife and the Lord. A similar difficulty faces a woman. If unmarried, she can serve the Lord wholeheartedly and without family distractions. In Paul’s day, marriages were arranged by parents. The perils in Corinth for an unmarried girl would weigh with a Christian father; that the father is not doing his duty by leaving his daughter unmarried. Similarly for a Jewish man, in his culture, marriage is not only normal but viewed as next to obligatory. So Paul judges that he who marries “*does the right thing*”; but he who refrains from doing so, having in mind the contemporary situation, “*does even better*” (vs. 38).

#### Question 6 – Marriage for a widow is no sin (7:39-40)

May a Christian widow marry? Yes, but with certain qualifications.

Marriage is dissoluble until death. The Christian widow is free to marry when she wishes, but only to another Christian. Yet in Paul’s judgment not remarrying will make her happier, that is, with fewer troubles, anxieties and distractions from serving Christ.

#### Concluding Remarks

Paul’s judgments in this chapter have often been a source of concern. Does Scripture say that singleness is better than marriage? No. What Paul states here reflects his concern in the setting of the Corinthian church. Verses 36-38 are not a judgment on marriage or singleness at all. Paul states that marriage is not to be condemned on the basis of asceticism. On the other hand, marriage is not to be contracted out of social pressure. Single Christians can often lead fuller, richer, and more productive lives than married Christians. Throughout, Paul stresses the critical nature of the period and situation in which Christians are living. One can only guess what Paul might have said in a different setting.

**How to keep your Christian liberty from becoming  
a stumbling block to others (8:1-11:1)**

As for Chapters 8 to 11, this long section of the letter concerns Christian liberty. The Corinthians' question must have been about buying meat and eating food sacrificed to idols. It is important to understand the background of Paul's discussion concerning food associated with the worship of idols. In the ancient world pagan shrines were the main suppliers of meat for human consumption. Thus, most of the meat in butcher shops had come from animals sacrificed to idols. The gods received a token portion, usually not a choice cut, burned on the altar. After priests and priestesses took their portions and the worshipper and family consumed further portions, the remainder of meat went up for sale to the general public. Thus the question put forward to Paul by the Corinthian Christians. Jews however, purchased their meat in Jewish shops, where they could be sure that it had not come from an animal sacrificed to a pagan god.

Question: Should Christians be as scrupulous as the Jews? 1 Cor 8:1-11:1 provides the answers from Paul the apostle.

**Breakdown of Chapters 8-11:1**

		ATTITUDES EXEMPLIFIED IN PAUL'S MINISTRY				ADMONITIONS				
8.1	8.7	<u>9.1</u> Selflessness	9.15	<u>9.19</u> Subservience	<u>9.24</u> Subjection	<u>10.7</u> Flee from Idolatry	10.11	10.14	<u>10.23</u> Forego your Liberty	11.1
PROBLEM STATED AND SOLUTION IDENTIFIED IN GENERAL	SOLUTION SPELLED OUT SPECIFI- CALLY	ATTITUDES WHICH ARE BASIC TO THE SOLUTION				ACTIONS WHICH ARE THE SOLUTION				
PRINCIPLES STATED		PRINCIPLES ILLUSTRATED				PRINCIPLES APPLIED				

Above chart taken from Jensen's Survey of the New Testament, page 275

*“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (8:1b)*

In 8:1-11:1 Paul deals with the issue of buying and eating food associated with pagan worship, obviously one of the matters raised by the Corinthians in their letter to him. It is clear that some members of the congregation felt that their new found spiritual independence, which Paul titles “knowledge”, gave them quite a bit of latitude in the Christian life.

In dealing with the problem, Paul makes the point that we cannot function independently of a brother's, or sister's welfare. Love must motivate our actions.

Paul sets out to examine a position argued by libertine members of the Corinthian congregation, namely, that eating food associated with idols is not a problem for a believer, given that the idol-gods are no gods. These Christians claim to have acquired a spiritual independence that guides their Christian life.

Paul begins by stating, “We know that we all possess knowledge.” The problem is, the Christian walk is not one of self-sufficiency controlled by some special gift of spiritual insight, but is one of love, of the up building of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and this is only shaped by a growing knowledge of the revealed will of God.

As far as Paul is concerned, those who claim to have acquired “this knowledge” have not even begun to know the wisdom of God in Christ. True knowledge is reflected in the way love is expressed toward our believing brothers and sisters.

*“We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world” (8:4b)*

Paul asserts that an idol is nothing, but many converts who are new in the faith may not think so. Being accustomed all their life to the idea that an idol is a god (something real), such converts think that, if they eat the food offered to an idol it means eating it as a thing offered to something that is real. And because their conscience is weak, they feel defiled.

Paul asked: “Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything?” Obviously the answer to both parts of Paul's question (10:19) is — “No”. However, Paul pointed out a fact that the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons. Now, this remark, together with the statement of verse 21, has been taken by some Christians to mean that Paul was saying that a Christian is forbidden to eat food offered to idols. On the contrary, Paul was saying that he did not want believers to have fellowship with demons. (See Appendix 1 for the local Chinese context)

Food does not bring us closer to God, whether or not we eat them. It does not make us any better nor does it make us any worse. It is how we exercise our freedom in the things we do that we do not become a stumbling block to the weak.

Paul further warns that if a weak brother sees a believer, who has the knowledge, sitting and eating in an idol's temple, he will be upset and confused in his mind and

his conscience weakened, perhaps his faith may even be destroyed. In such a case the offending believer is deemed to have sinned against the Lord.

In exercising our liberty we must remember never to offend a weaker brother. Our liberty must not be taken for granted such that we make ourselves stumbling blocks to others. Paul even said that if eating meat offends a brother, he would be careful never to eat meat again to offend him. (Read more in Appendix 2)

*“These things happened to them (Israel) as examples and were written down as warning for us” (10:11a)*

In the same epistle, Paul warned the believers not to commit the same mistake as Israel did. Under the mighty hand of God Israel went out of Egypt. They tasted the many blessings of God throughout their journey. But they tempted the Lord several times and were dealt with accordingly.

They had drunk of the spiritual blessings of God and had eaten from the table spread out for them in the wilderness. But at Horeb they made and worshipped a gold-moulded calf. They worshipped it and offered sacrifices to it, and then sat down and ate the sacrifice. Israel had committed spiritual fornication by worshipping the idol (as the god who brought them out of Egypt); thus, fellowshiping with demons. Read Exodus 32.

*“Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.” (10:24)*

With that Paul once again brought up the care of another person's well-being. A believer should realize that not all things are helpful and beneficial even if they are lawful.

Now, Paul gave the very best advice possible concerning food:

*“Eat anything sold in the market without raising questions of conscience” (10:25).* If this is the true advice of an Apostle of the Lord, then the eating of anything is not contrary to the Christian faith. If conscience troubles you about eating certain food, then avoid eating it. Paul states in Romans 14:20-21

*“Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.”*

Christian freedom is inseparably tied to Christian responsibility. New believers are often very sensitive to what is right or wrong, what they should or should not do. Sometimes it is hard to know when to deter to the weaker believer. Paul gives a simple rule of thumb to help in making the decision -- we should be sensitive and gracious.

## Concluding Remarks

From the concluding text of Paul, we can see that it's not what we eat, as is also evident by Paul's epistle to the Romans (Chapter 14). But it's how we use our liberty without becoming stumbling blocks to those around us, believer or unbeliever, who are without the true knowledge of the Word and are uninformed concerning the Truth.

Paul advocates freedom to eat, but cautions his audience against inflicting spiritual damage on people with uninformed consciences. Christians who understand that an idol has no real divine existence may eat meat dedicated to the idol without damage to their conscience. BUT if people who think that idols have real divine existence happen to be present, better-informed Christians should then refrain from eating such meat.

As Bible believers living under the Grace of the Lord, we know that we are not under bondage to the Law but to the Spirit of the Living God. Therefore, *"if we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit"* (Gal.5:25) to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Group Discussion**

### The Believer's Freedom

*"Everything is permissible – but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible – but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others".* (1 Cor 10:23-24)

The above dictum by the apostle Paul was also stated by him in 1 Cor 6:12 in relation to sexual immorality. When Paul mentions this statement twice in his letter within a space of 4 chapters, it shows that he must have been really firm about what he was telling the church at Corinth.

Discuss in your group what Paul meant in the verses 23-24 with regards to the following:

- a) eating food sacrificed to Idols
- b) the rights and freedom of a believer

And how it applies to us in our multicultural and multiracial context

## **For self examination**

Making Choices in Sensitive Issues (Ref: Life Application Bible, NIV, pg. 2069)

If I choose one course of action

..... does it help my witness for Christ? (9:19-22)

..... am I motivated by a desire to help others to know Christ? (9:23; 10:33)

..... does it help me do my best? (9:25)

..... is it against a specific command in Scripture and would thus cause me to sin? (10:12)

..... is it the best and most beneficial course of action? (10:23, 33)

..... am I thinking only of myself, or do I truly care about the other person? (10:24)

..... am I acting lovingly or selfishly? (10:28-31)

.....does it glorify God? (10:31)

.....will it cause someone else to sin? (10:32)

All of us make hundreds of choices every day. Most choices have no right or wrong attached to them – like what we wear or what we eat. But we always face decisions that carry a little more weight. We don't want to do wrong, and we don't want to cause others to do wrong, so how can we make such decisions?

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This extract is taken from Handbook for Christians by Rev Daniel Tong

**Practices Associated with Ancestral Veneration**

**Food** (Pages 37-38)

- Food is often offered as a sign of the continued inter-dependence between the living and the dead. It is often offered today in an attempt to “bribe” the spirits (i.e. the hungry ghosts, so they would not harm us; the spirits of the “Ying World”, so as to win merit for our ancestors; and our ancestors, so they would bless us.

- **Christian Response:** The above stated reasons for the offering are contrary to our Christian belief in the sovereignty of God. We need however note that some who adhere to this practice do so simply out of a remembrance of the dead. With regard to partaking of these food, Christians need to apply the principles laid out in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. These two chapters speaks not of there being any danger nor demonic efficacy in the offered food itself.

Rather, 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 speak of the need to separate oneself from any and all participation in pagan feasts and worship. Christians living with those who practise ancestral worship should therefore avoid eating of the offered food which, having been offered to the ancestors, are often served during meals. This serves as a sign of our commitment to Christ, and separates from idolatrous worship.

(Note: Once having accepted their offspring’s change of faith and stand against eating any food which had been offered to the ancestors, most parents would lay aside certain dishes of food, not offered to the ancestors, for Christian members of the family.)

- **Christian Alternative:** As a means of remembrance, the food best loved by the deceased may be prepared for the family on the anniversary of that individual’s death. Memory of the departed may then be revived and imparted to the next generation as the significance of the food cooked may be explained. The food should not be placed before any representation of the deceased, to avoid any allusion to a worship of that worthy.

An article from [www.GotQuestions.org](http://www.GotQuestions.org)

**Question: "What does the Bible say about eating food/meat that has been sacrificed to idols?"**

**Answer:** One of the struggles in the early church concerned meat which had been sacrificed to idols. Debates over what to eat might seem strange to most of us in modern society, but to the first-century believers, it was a subject of great consequence. As the apostles dealt with the issue, they gave instructions on several broader topics with application for today:

**Unity within the church.** In the early years of the church, as Gentile converts began joining Jewish believers in local fellowships, an issue arose concerning the eating of meat. Greco-Roman society was saturated with idol worship, and it was common for meat sold in the marketplace to have been consecrated as a sacrifice to false gods prior to its sale. The Jews would have nothing to do with such meat, wary of "unclean" food-handling practices and believing that to partake of consecrated meat was to give tacit approval of idol worship—kind of a "second-hand" idolatry. The Gentiles rejected the notion that such meat was tainted and held that they could eat meat sacrificed to idols without endorsing idolatry—they had not actually offered the sacrifice, after all. The matter was becoming a point of contention within the church. The church in Syrian Antioch, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, struggled with this issue (Acts 15). The Jerusalem Council settled the matter by urging Gentile converts to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:29). This decision was made not to promote legalism but to keep peace within the church. Since eating meat offered to idols was a divisive issue—carrying the possibility of scandalizing fellow believers—abstinence was expedient. Compliance with the council's directive assured that, at the next church potluck, a Jewish believer could eat the brisket he was served with confidence, knowing it had never been part of a sacrificial cow. And the Gentile believer could not be accused of participating in idol worship. With its ruling, the Jerusalem Council affirmed the need for deference, or consideration for the scruples of others. The principle is one of self-denial; we should be willing to lay down our personal rights for the sake of maintaining unity in the body of Christ. Spiritual growth takes priority over personal preferences.

**Causing a weaker brother to sin.** In 1 Corinthians 8:4-13, Paul clarifies the teaching on this subject. First, he says that eating meat offered to an idol is not immoral, because "an idol is nothing at all." An idol is an inanimate object. "Food," he says, "does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do." The meat itself is amoral. However, there is more to consider, namely the brother with a weak conscience. Some believers, especially those with a background of idol worship, were still very sensitive concerning this issue and considered it morally wrong to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Under no circumstances, Paul says, should a believer encourage another believer to violate his conscience. To the pure, all things are pure (Titus 1:15), but to one with a weak conscience, meat taken from pagan temples was spiritually defiled. It would be better never to eat meat again than to cause a believer to sin against his conscience. The "weaker" brother is not

someone who simply objects to a certain practice, but one who is in danger of falling into sin. To illustrate, let's say there are two 1st-century Christians named Demetrius and Clement. Both are former idolaters, now saved by faith in Christ. Demetrius shuns everything to do with his old way of life, including the meat sold in the marketplace, because, for him, eating such meat would constitute a return to paganism. Clement avoids the temple and refuses to participate in the pagan festivals, but he has no problem eating the meat from the market. He understands (correctly) that an idol has no power to corrupt good meat, and, for him, eating such meat is a non-issue. Then one day, as both men are in the marketplace, Demetrius sees Clement eating meat that was sacrificed to idols. Demetrius is horrified, but Clement laughs it off and encourages Demetrius to eat some, too. When Demetrius hesitates, Clement cuts off a piece and hands it to him. Demetrius—emboldened by Clement's confidence—eats the meat. Biblically, both believers have sinned. Clement sinned by violating the conscience of a fellow believer. Demetrius sinned in that he essentially returned to idolatry—at least, that's what his conscience is telling him. More importantly, Demetrius is learning how to ignore his conscience—a very dangerous thing to learn. The principle here is that the conscience of a weaker Christian is more important than individual freedom. Doing something “permitted” should never hinder the spiritual health of someone else.

**Maintaining a pure testimony.** In 1 Corinthians 10:25-32, Paul again emphasizes the believer's liberty and what should limit that liberty. If you buy meat for your own use, don't inquire where it came from; it doesn't really matter whether it was sacrificed to an idol or not. “The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it” (Psalm 24:1). However, if you are invited to dinner and someone there says, “This meat was offered to idols,” then graciously refrain from eating. Since your associate obviously considers the meat to be “tainted” by the idols, do not eat it for his conscience's sake—even though your own conscience is fine. The Christian glorifies God when he limits his freedom for the spiritual benefit of others.

### **Compromise with the world.**

In the letter to the church of Thyatira, Jesus rebukes them for tolerating a prophetess who “misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols” (Revelation 2:20). This is a different situation from what Paul was dealing with in Corinth. It seems that members of the church of Thyatira were partaking of the pagan “love feasts,” celebrated with gross immorality and feasting. These believers were not simply buying meat in the marketplace; they were actually attending idolatrous festivals and joining in the sin of the idolaters. (See verse 14 for a similar rebuke of the church of Pergamos.) Here is a summary of the Bible's teaching on eating meat sacrificed to idols: Eating meat offered to an idol is not inherently wrong. Meat is not “defiled” because it was taken from a pagan sacrifice. God “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Timothy 6:17). However, some Christians consider meat offered to an idol to be defiled, and for them it is, since they must follow their conscience. Their scruples should be respected by other Christians with a stronger conscience. Love dictates that all Christians make allowances for their weaker brothers.

There are certain cultures today where idolatry is still practiced and where the specifics of the Bible's teaching about sacrificial meat are still timely. For the rest of us, here are the principles which should govern our participation in the "gray areas" of life:

- 1) Having the "right" to do something does not mean we are free to do it in every circumstance, regardless of its effects on others.
- 2) The believer's liberty in Christ can and should be voluntarily limited in order not to cause a weaker brother to sin by violating his conscience. Liberty is limited in love.
- 3) Maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of love may require a believer to give up his personal "right" to a thing. "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1).
- 4) We should avoid anything that would make a weak Christian think less of his faith or that would make an unsaved person feel more at ease in his sin.

<http://www.gotquestions.org/Printer/food-sacrificed-idols-PF.html> 27/07/2011

## Group Discussion question and suggested answer

### The Believer's Freedom

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- d) the rights and freedom of a believer

And how it applies to us in our multicultural and multiracial context

### Some suggested answers (for use by group facilitators)

1. Paul is probably quoting “everything is permissible” as would be mentioned by some of the Corinthian congregation who were boasting that they had the right to do as they pleased.
2. They must have felt that as long as there is salvation in Christ, they have the freedom
3. Personal freedom and desire for one's rights are not the only considerations. One must also consider “the good of others” (10:24)
4. In verse 23, Paul concedes that all things may be lawful, but does not concede that what is permissible is necessarily advisable
5. It is a principle closely linked with his advice to the strong and the weak, and reminds us that the strong must be prepared to waive what is lawful if it would cause a stumbling block for the weak. Refer to Romans Chapter 14: *The Weak and the Strong*
6. Paul's approach will not permit anyone's liberty to ride roughshod (bulldoze) over the sensitivity of others.