

1 Corinthians Session 6: Laying Down Your Rights (1 Cor 8:1 – 9:27)

(Scripture references based on NIV)

1. Key Learning Objectives

Key pointers to keep in mind as you prepare and lead the session.

To understand that:

- The exercise of our Christian freedom/rights is grounded in loving God, and loving others.
- Christians are called to live sacrificially, and to lay down our rights for the sake of the Gospel.

2. Warm-up activity / Starter Question

These questions are meant to establish a baseline level of understanding. You may pick one of the two. There is no need to hear from everyone or correct any opinions here.

- Imagine what your life would be like if you are “free” to do anything you want. What would you do?
- What are some examples of what you think are your “fundamental rights” as a youth living in Singapore. How strongly will you defend those rights? Are there some rights that you are willing to give up?

3. Opening Prayer

Thank God for bringing each member to church and to the small group today. Thank God for His valuable Word that contains great truths for us to live by. Ask Him for the desire to dig into God’s Word, and that it will change our hearts and lives.

4. Context

This context is to give an overview of 1 Cor 8-9.

Link to the previous study

- From 1 Cor 7 onwards, Paul starts addressing various matters that the Corinthians raised in their letter to him. In the previous study, we discussed Paul’s teachings on marriage and singleness.
- Here, Paul addresses the question, “Can Christians eat food that has been sacrificed to idols (“idol food”)?” Paul’s answer spans across 1 Cor 8-10.
- This study covers only 1 Cor 8-9. In answering this question, Paul lays down the principles relating to the exercise of Christian freedom and rights.

Regarding food offered to idols

- In ancient Roman Corinth, pagan worship was rampant and pervaded all aspects of their daily lives in the city.
 - Many of the business and social activities in the city were connected to temples and idols.
 - Pagan worship usually involved the slaughtering and eating of sacrificial animals in the temple as part of the pagan rites of worship.
 - Some of this meat was sold in the market, and people bought the meat for their meals at home.
- Many of the Corinthian Christians were Gentiles who used to worship pagan idols, and they had participated in temple rituals such as eating food sacrificed to idols.

5. Scripture Reading

Assign two or three youths to read the passage aloud.

6. Discussion Questions

- 1) In 1 Cor 8, Paul uses the weak/strong contrast to describe two groups of believers as he did earlier in the letter (e.g. wise/foolish, and weak/strong).**

a) What do you think differentiates the “strong” from the “weak” in 1 Cor 8?

Hint: What do v4-7 tell us about the differences in their spiritual maturity and knowledge about God?

- “Strong” refers to mature Christians.
 - They know that idols are nothing and do not contaminate the food sacrificed at their altars (v4-6).
 - Christians have the freedom/right to eat such idol food.
- “Weak” refers to new or less mature believers who used to worship pagan idols.
 - They might still associate the eating of idol food with pagan worship, which is inconsistent with their new-found faith.
 - They may also be unsure whether this is a sinful act (v7) and feel guilty should they eat such meat. Having a guilty conscience would hinder their communion with God.

b) In 8:9-13, what does Paul say to the “strong” about the eating of idol food in consideration of their “weaker” brothers?

- Paul tells the “strong” to be mindful that the exercise of their freedom does not stumble their “weak” brothers (v9) and cause them to be destroyed, or to fall (v12-13).
- Paul considers this stumbling of their “weaker” brothers as sin (v12).
- The “strong” are to show love and care to the “weak”, and in this situation it involves not exercising their freedom/right to eat idol food. In love and action, the “strong” refrain from stumbling the “weaker” believers while helping them to mature in their faith so that they may one day become “strong.”.

2) What is Paul’s answer to the question, “Can Christians eat food that has been sacrificed to idols”? What is the basis of his argument?

Paul’s answer to this question is spread over three chapters (1 Cor 8-10). This topic will be explored in the next study as well.

- To summarise, Paul’s answer is - it depends:
 - If idol food is eaten in the context of pagan worship, then “No” (8:1-10:22)
 - If it is bought in the meat market without knowing where it comes from, then “Yes” (10:25-26)
 - If eaten in private home, then “Yes”; but if your eating harms the conscience of anyone present, then “No” (10:27-11:1)
 - If your conscience disturbs you (“weak conscience”), then “No” (8:7)
- The key principles Paul teaches are encapsulated in these verses:
 - Let your action be grounded in love for others (8:9 “Be careful that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak”; 10:24 “seek the good of others”)
 - Let your action be for the glory of God (10:31 “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”)

3) In the first part of 1 Cor 9, Paul highlights his rights/freedom as an apostle, and yet in v19, Paul says he is “free”, and he is a “slave”. How could one be both free and a slave?

This question serves as a lead-in to the discussion in Q4, so you need not arrive at concrete answers nor get everyone to share. The notes below are for your understanding; you can choose to use them later in the discussion of Q4. Do focus more time on Q4b and the discussion on Paul’s sacrificial love.

In 1 Cor 9, Paul uses his ministry as an example to illustrate the points he made in 8:9-13 about how believers are to exercise their Christian freedom/rights. As an apostle, Paul has the rights to financial support (9:5), and to have a wife (v6); however, he gave up his rights for the sake of the Gospel of Christ (v12).

Paul declares that though he is “free”, he made himself a “slave to everyone, to win as many as possible” (v19). This imagery of “slavery” illustrates Paul choosing not to exercise his freedom/rights for the sake of the Gospel. In the same way, the Corinthians can choose not to exercise their freedom to eat idol food for the sake of their brothers and sisters.

Christian freedom is not freedom to do whatever you like, but freedom from all the things that stop you being the person God really wants you to be, which is freedom for the service of God and the Gospel. *

* NT Wright “Paul for Everyone - 1 Corinthians”

4) In 9:22-23 Paul says “To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

a) In 9:22, what does Paul mean when he says, “I have become all things to all men”? How is this different from being a people-pleaser in a negative sense?

- He is affirming that his life and ministry is centred on promoting the gospel through his words and deeds (v19), rather than on promoting himself, his rights (e.g. to take a wife, or receive recompense for his work, 9:4) and his own desires.
- Paul is not suggesting that he is trying to please men (as also seen in Gal 1:10).

b) From Paul’s words in 1 Cor 9, what do you think is Paul’s primary goal of his life and ministry? How much do you think Paul is willing to give up/sacrifice to achieve that goal?

Supporting question: What is the outcome of Paul’s ‘people-pleasing’?

Try to focus on the concept of “sacrificial love” - a love that costs us something.

- Paul’s primary goal of his life and his ministry is to know Christ and make him known.
- The outcome of his people-pleasing is that more would be won for Christ (v19)
- This passage shows us an example of “sacrificial love” - when loving God and others costs us something. Paul is willing to give up his personal rights/freedom, endure hardship and suffering, sacrifice immediate gains/pleasures for eternal rewards and joy, and even his own life.

Additional thoughts (optional):

- *Phil 3:7-11 also tells us that he considers everything as loss/garbage for the sake of knowing Christ and is willing to suffer all things.*
- *Jesus Christ demonstrates the ultimate sacrificial love when He gave His life at the Cross for all of us - so that we might have life. In Matt 16:24-25, Jesus commands all His followers to deny themselves and take up His cross and follow him. This is an on-going spiritual process called sanctification which we cannot accomplish by our own effort/strength but is a transformation by the Holy Spirit who dwells within all believers who are surrendered to the lordship of Jesus Christ.*

7. Main Discipleship Takeaway

Ask the youths how they would summarise everything that has been discussed today with one sentence.

Exercising our Christian freedom and rights must be grounded in our love for God, our love for others, and may require sacrifice and lead to hardship.

8. Application / Reflection

Split up into smaller groups to share. Leaders are encouraged to have prepared their own thoughts and sharings for the application questions.

- 1) Discuss one situation where you could apply the principles regarding the exercise of Christian freedom/rights while being considerate towards the consciences of others.

The purpose of this exercise is to help your members consider how to apply the principles in real-life situations. You need not worry about getting the right answers, as different situations may be differently complex. Allow your members to suggest discussing situations relevant to them.

- 2) In 9:24-27, Paul uses the imagery of an athlete running in a race to get a prize, a crown that will last forever. Reflect on how you are growing in your faith journey.
 - Share some habits/disciplines that have helped you grow closer to God. From each other's sharing, pick one habit/discipline that you would like to cultivate this week.
 - What are some things that distract you from growing spiritually?
 - Pray for each other and plan to hold each other accountable.

- 3) Paul was willing to sacrifice his all for Christ and the Gospel, just as Christ sacrificed Himself at the Cross for us. What are some things that you find difficult to give up for the benefit of others and for the furtherance of the Gospel?
- Bring one thing before the Lord and talk to Him about your struggle. You can pray individually, or if you are comfortable to share with your prayer buddies, pray for each other.

9. Closing Prayer

Remain in your smaller groups and take turns to pray for each other. Where there is time, encourage members to share about specific areas for prayer in their lives.

- Thank God for His faithfulness and His love that never changes.
- Ask God for the desire to grow in love for Him, and for the people that God has placed in your life.