



Lesson Five

FOR THE GOOD OF THE COMMUNITY

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 8–10

MAIN IDEA

Paul invited the Corinthians to show gratitude for Christ through their self-sacrifice. When individual members remember Jesus' gift of himself on the cross and behave accordingly, the whole community benefits.

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious God,
in Jesus Christ you have set us free,
free to worship you and to love one another.
Enlighten our minds and warm our hearts,
that in studying your word and learning from each other,
we might better understand
what you would have us do
to glorify you.
Amen.*

INTRODUCTION

In chapters 8–10, Paul instructs the Corinthians in appropriate behavioral boundaries in a multicultural society where most of their neighbors, and possibly their family members, do not share their faith. In their letter, the Corinthians had stated that, being free in Christ, “all things [were] lawful” for them. As he did in chapter 6, Paul again replies that even if that were true, “not all things are beneficial.” They need to take care, not only against falling into sin themselves, but also against leading other Christians astray. Instead of assuming their freedom in Christ means they can do whatever they want, they are invited to let their gratitude for Jesus’ self-sacrifice lead them to self-restraint for the sake of others.

The question stumping the Corinthians was whether or not Christians could legitimately eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. This issue seems puzzlingly foreign now. But substitute drinking alcohol or using cannabis legally, sharing a room with an unmarried partner on a family vacation, or displaying national flags in church, and twenty-first-century Christian debates over such questions might help us understand first-century conflicts. Paul points to himself as an example of one who has forgone rights to which he is entitled, for the sake of those he serves. He is not engaging in self-aggrandizement. Rather, in seeking to model his behavior on Jesus Christ’s, he calls his friends also to imitate their Lord’s generous self-giving.

LESSON

Claims to specialized knowledge or insight seem to have contributed to the Corinthian congregation splitting into factions. In 8:1, “All of us possess knowledge,” Paul quotes a statement from them

to introduce his argument about food sacrificed to idols. He moves directly into a warning against relying on knowledge as opposed to love: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Love is Christians’ true guide to action; specifically, the love we see in Jesus Christ’s self-sacrifice and God’s raising him to new life.

The Corinthians rightly assert that “no idol in the world really exists” and “there is no God but one” (8:4). Yet in a Christian community, Paul reminds them, those truths are not an excuse to disregard the effect one’s behavior might have on a sibling in Christ. Someone whose faith is not yet firm might quickly move from the idea that idols aren’t real; to thinking that therefore, distinctions between pagan and Christian behavior are arbitrary; and then to believing that ethical restraints on Christians are unnecessary. Paul argues throughout the letter that this is precisely the problem with the Corinthian church: many people are behaving as they like, without considering the effect their actions might have on others. “So by your knowledge”—your insistence on living by carefully reasoned arguments that give you license to live as you please—“the weak brother or sister for whom Christ died is destroyed” (8:11). Paul’s message is clear: Remember the cross, remember Jesus Christ’s sacrifice for all of us, and govern yourselves accordingly, for the good of the whole community.

Consequently, Paul offers rules for the Corinthians to follow: buy whatever is sold in the market and eat whatever a pagan host offers you, because everything in the world belongs to God anyway (10:26, quoting Psalm 24). But abstain from meat that someone tells you has been sacrificed to idols, in case by eating it you would appear to be engaging in, or condoning, a pagan ritual, and so lead someone else astray.

Is there anything you hold dear that you fear might become an idol for you? How could you discern this? Whom do you trust to help you in this discernment, who will love you no matter what?

Today's Stumbling Blocks

While idol meat is not an issue that currently divides Christians, we certainly debate, disagree, and discern over different matters.

In cultures that venerate ancestors, such as many in Asia, may Christians participate in activities like making offerings at family altars?

Is it right to serve alcohol at a dinner party when some people present are in recovery? How do we discern whether to offer wine, or grape juice, or both, at the Communion table? Many adult Christians feel free to drink alcohol if they want to, but in some cases, might the presence of alcohol be a “stumbling block” (8:9) to some? What about using cannabis, where it is legal?

Extended family members may disagree about whether unmarried adult couples may room together on a vacation where younger relatives are present. If different adults’ Christian ethics disagree, how might they come to an agreement?

What are appropriate boundaries between patriotism and Christian faith? Christians debate whether or not national flags should be displayed inside church sanctuaries. In a similar vein, in my Episcopal tradition, the Fourth of July is a “major feast,” on par with the feast of St. Joseph or St. Mary Magdalene. This makes me uncomfortable. To me, observing Independence

Day as a feast day aligns the church too closely with one nation, and blurs the boundary between love of country and love of God in ways I see as harmful. Others, however, appreciate having a day set aside to thank God for their country and to pray God’s guidance for its citizens. Paul’s words to the Corinthians can be a helpful resource as Christians work through these questions together.

How do you, your family and social groups, and your church discern which practices, while not inherently sinful, might be a stumbling block to some? How do you negotiate different points of view and find workable practices?

Paul’s Actions Point to Christ

Paul points to himself as someone who has forgone benefits to which he was entitled, for the sake of sharing the gospel. He reminds his friends that their very existence as a Christian community validates his call: “you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord” (9:2). Just as a wax seal attests to the authenticity of a document, the Corinthian church attests to God’s anointing of Paul to teach the gospel.

Paul notes that he would be within his rights to ask for the church’s material support—“food and drink” (9:4)—not only for himself, but also for a spouse like the wives who accompany Peter and other apostles (9:5). He appeals not only to common-sense evidence—“Who tends a flock and does not get any of its milk?” (9:7)—but also to “the law of Moses”: “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain” (9:9;

from Deut. 25:4). Yet, Paul has, as he says, “made no use of any of these rights” (9:15), and he is not requesting material help from his Corinthian friends now. He is committed “not to make full use of my rights in the gospel” (9:18) precisely to be free and not indebted to anyone, and even more importantly, to demonstrate his commitment to Jesus Christ.

Glorifying God Through Our Actions

Paul implicitly yet clearly compares his sacrifice to Christ’s. While writing, he may have thought of his letter to the Philippians, which he wrote around the same time. There, he quoted what we now call “the Christ hymn.” This poem, or song, calls Christians to adopt a posture of humility, remembering Christ Jesus who “did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . . and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6–8). The Corinthians might, in many instances, be entitled to do as they liked. But would it not be better to follow their mentor in modestly discerning which actions would most glorify God, and best demonstrate their gratitude to and for Jesus?

Remembering Paul’s focus on unity in Jesus Christ helps us understand his statement, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (9:22). Through Christ, anyone can join God’s covenant people. The gospel, however, must be communicated in ways different people can understand. Paul knew his fellow Jews might be moved by arguments that Jesus was the fulfillment of the law and prophecies. Gentiles, on the other hand, might be reached by explanations that the God of

Israel is the one to whom their worship of many gods has actually been addressed. The good news for them is that God sent Jesus to bring them into the divine covenant with Israel. Paul’s approach still resonates in debates about how churches can reach people of no faith (often called “nones”), retain younger members, and support parents in teaching the faith to their children.

How does your church engage in discernment about whether a practice—either a new one that’s being proposed, or one that might need to be abandoned—is of God, or possibly idolatrous?

The Community Holds Fast When Tempted

Most of the Corinthians are former pagans, and so Paul devotes chapter 10 to calling them away from idolatry and toward what New Testament scholar Richard B. Hays calls the “radically *exclusive*” monotheism of Israel. As Hays notes, “The ‘knowing’ Corinthians were seeking to work out some sort of ‘sensible’ compromise on this matter, but Paul would have none of it.”¹ The entire congregation, both baptized Gentiles and baptized Jews, are all now spiritual descendants of those Paul calls “our ancestors” (10:1): the covenant people whom God freed from slavery in Egypt. When those ancestors were tested in the wilderness, many fell short. Now, those who fell short serve as an example and a warning for Christians “on whom the ends of the ages have come” (10:11) (although the end is coming more slowly than Paul expected).

1 Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 170. Italics in the original.

Temptations and testing are part of the life of faith, living in between enslavement—in Egypt for the Israelites, to sin for Gentiles—and a promised future of freedom. In experiencing temptations, the Corinthians are not unusual; nor are you and I, today. In the midst of their trials, Paul reassures his friends, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength” (10:13). Therefore, they need to trust God and practice the faith as they have been taught.

It’s important to note that here, as in the entire letter, Paul is speaking to the whole community. “You” here is “all of you” or “y’all.” They will not be tested beyond their strength *together*. Conversely, if one of them is tempted to abandon their faith, the community needs to support that person.

Today, these words of Paul are often repeated to church members who are undergoing some hardship, like a chronic or life-threatening illness. Such trials are not really what this passage is about. It’s about holding fast to Christian faith when one is tempted to abandon it. Still, it is possible that suffering could threaten a believer’s faith, and these words might offer comfort to someone in that position. Nevertheless, the fact that Paul is addressing the whole community should not be forgotten. Anyone who is experiencing suffering, or a trial of any kind, should not be expected to meet that difficulty on their own, without the support of their siblings in Christ. God will provide what the community needs, together, to meet its challenges and those of its members.

Choosing the Right Partners

Writing bluntly, presumably trying to avoid misunderstanding, Paul says, “Flee from the

worship of idols” (10:14). Building on his earlier arguments that Christians’ actions affect each other, and foreshadowing the points he will soon make about the Lord’s Supper and the church as Jesus Christ’s body, he reminds the Corinthians that their ritual communal meal makes them one. “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (10:16–17). Consuming ritual meals has consequences. Jewish Christians who partake of the Passover meal are “partners in the altar” (10:18) of their Gentile siblings in Christ. Conversely, knowingly participating in pagan sacrifices would make the Corinthians “partners with demons” (10:20). The Corinthians should not be foolish enough to willingly partner with forces opposed to God, possibly to their own destruction.

The consumption of idol meat isn’t an issue for Christians anymore, but the metaphorical consumption of media can be. How does your faith factor into decisions about what to watch and listen to? How does your faith inform whether, or how, you engage with social media? How does your church guide adolescents, and/or their parents, around using social media and developing reading, listening, and viewing skills to engage critically and faithfully with mass media?

TAKEAWAY

Christians' actions affect other people, and we need to take care not to dishonor Jesus Christ or lead others astray. When we are discerning what to do, we are invited to ask, "What is the most loving path forward? What is the action that will most glorify God, and show gratitude for God's saving action in Jesus?" Jesus is with us in our disagreements, and he will guide us if we listen carefully, with love and humility.

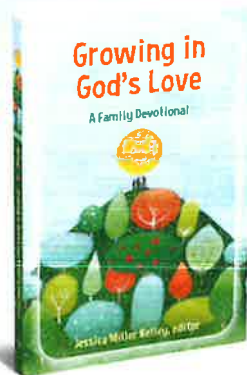
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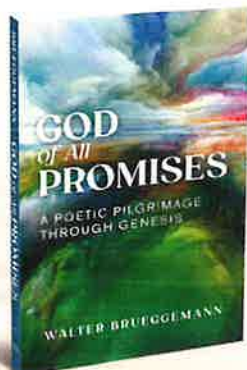


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