



Topic

Christian liberty

Theme

Genuine Christian liberty operates within the bounds of love for others and God.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will seek to glorify God and encourage his fellow believers with the choices he makes.

Materials

- Resources 1 and 11

One Goal

LESSON 8

Scripture Focus

1 Corinthians 8–10

Summary

The Corinthian Christians held contrasting opinions about eating food offered to idols. Writing by inspiration, Paul gave them principles that would help them handle these situations. The principles help us understand how to use Christian love to guide our Christian liberties.

Outline

I. Addressing Christian Liberty Problems (8:1–8)

- A. Knowledge is inadequate (8:1, 2)
- B. Love is necessary (8:3–8)

II. Applying Christian Liberty Principles (8:9–10:33)

- A. Be considerate of weaker Christians (8:9–13)
- B. Exercise self-control (9:1–27)
- C. Separate from sin (10:1–22)
- D. Edify others (10:23, 24)
- E. Keep a clear conscience (10:25–30)
- F. Glorify God (10:31–33)

Memory Verse

*“Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God”
(1 Corinthians 10:31).*

GETTING STARTED

Ball Hog

In basketball, a ball hog is a player who won't give up the ball. He prefers to dribble around incessantly until he finally forces up a shot or runs out of time. The opposing team guards him like a hawk, meaning his shots are heavily contested and usually off the mark.

ASK: What motivates a ball hog? (Q1) *To bring glory to himself instead of his team.*

ASK: Why might playing with a ball hog be so irritating? (Q2) *The ball hog cares more about padding his score total than he does about winning. He will often cause his team to lose so he might be his team's leading scorer.*

Church members sometimes have a ball-hog-like attitude as they live and serve. They forget they are on a team and responsible for supporting and working with their teammates. Their goals are personal rather than team oriented. This lesson encourages us to use selfless love to guide us to the one goal of glorifying God, particularly when dealing with questions about exercising Christian liberties.

Now I Can Sin!

"Free from the law, Oh happy condition, now I can sin with Jesus' permission!" So goes a twisted version of a classic hymn. Unfortunately, many believers have adopted this outlook for their lives, claiming to be free in Christ to do as they please. When it comes to gray areas, they do what they want without regard for a weaker brother.

ASK: What is wrong with such an outlook on life?

ASK: What could be the consequences of such an outlook?

Paul addressed how to address questionable activities on which believers disagree. Following his instructions should strengthen and unify a church.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

The issue of determining who is in the right in a struggle over Christian liberty is not an easy one. First, we must determine if the issue is truly one of liberty or one of righteousness and sin. God ultimately determines what is sin, not any individual believer. But not all believers have the same convictions about what is an acceptable practice and what God considers sin. Since differing believers are part of a team, they must be sensitive to each other's convictions. Paul helps us understand the need to be a sensitive member of team church. Therefore, we need to study 1 Corinthians 8–10 carefully before attempting to exercise our Christian liberty.

I. Addressing Christian Liberty Problems (1 Cor. 8:1–8)

A. Knowledge is inadequate (8:1, 2)

Romans 14:1–15:21 is the other major passage in the New Testament that discusses Christian liberty.

The Corinthians had written to Paul about a difficult question: Was it right or wrong to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols (8:1a, 4a)? Some of the Corinthian believers reasoned that it did not make a particle of difference if they ate food that had been offered to idols. After all, they knew that the idol gods did not exist. Some of their Christian friends, however, held a different opinion. Having worshiped idols before trusting in Christ as their Savior, these Christians felt that it was wrong to eat meat that had been sacrificed for idols; their consciences would not let them do it.

Knowledge alone could not solve the problem and unite the church. It merely puffed up some Corinthians (8:1). Thinking they knew much, the Corinthians failed to comprehend how much they still had to learn in skillfully applying that knowledge in their relationships with others (8:2).

ASK: What temptations might confront someone who has a solid knowledge of the Bible but not a lot of experience in applying that knowledge?

(Q3) Pride, a faulty sense of spirituality and maturity or impatience with those who do not know as much.

To understand this entire section, it is essential to recognize the value that Paul placed on the individual conscience. The conscience is like an alarm system that alerts a person to the fact that a thought or action is violating the standards set for the conscience. A weak conscience, which Paul discusses in 8:7, 10, and 12, will malfunction by alerting a person to wrongdoing too easily. A seared conscience (1 Tim. 4:2) is one that no longer works correctly because it has been violated repeatedly. Paul wanted to avoid that at any cost in his own life (cf. Acts 24:16).

Every believer should endeavor to strengthen his or her conscience by building it up on the Word of God so that it functions properly under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

ASK: What would you predict about the accuracy of a believer's conscience if that believer is not living in submission to the Holy Spirit? *(Q4) It would become increasingly inaccurate by either alarming too often or not enough.*

ASK: In addition to studying Scripture, what are some other ways we can build a strong conscience? *(Q5) By listening to its alarms and then submitting to the Spirit's direction. The more we pay attention to our conscience, the louder the alarms will seem.*

Since no Christian's conscience is infallible, no one should attempt to force his or her views on another person unless those views are based on Scripture (cf. Rom. 14:22). Every Christian, as a believer-priest under Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9), is given the dignity of determining his own mind on questionable matters.

This takes us to the heart of the tension in 1 Corinthians 8. What do we do when Christians differ on matters that seem important to them?

B. Love is necessary (8:3–8)

The proud Corinthians needed to learn the importance of love (8:1b). Love for

God is essential, and God knows those who love Him (8:3). Love helps us as believers to exercise our Christian liberty in ways that honor God.

The Greeks worshiped numerous false gods, but Paul and the Corinthian believers knew there was only one true God (8:4) and that the false gods were energized by demons (8:5; 10:19, 20). The Corinthian believers also knew that the one true God controls everything and created everything through Jesus Christ (8:6). But these knowledgeable Christians needed to exercise love toward new believers who still imagined the idols were real and therefore could not with a clear conscience eat food sacrificed to those idols (8:7).

Since the Corinthian Christians' relationships to God were not affected either by eating food or abstaining from it (8:8), they needed a set of principles to guide their dietary decision in light of its effects on other believers.

II. Applying Christian Liberty Principles (8:9–10:33)

Even if the Bible does not specifically name a questionable activity, we can apply a number of principles in deciding our position on it. Paul encouraged his Corinthian readers first to be considerate of spiritually weaker believers.

A. Be considerate of weaker Christians (8:9–13)

Although a believer in Corinth might claim Christian liberty in eating food offered to idols, Paul advised him to consider how this would affect weaker believers (8:9). If a weaker believer observed him in the act of eating sacrificed food, the weaker believer might *be emboldened to eat* the sacrificed food in violation of his own conscience, which would be sin (8:10).

Although the knowledgeable believer would not be ensnared by the pagan beliefs and practices associated with the eating of sacrificed foods, the weaker believer, having already violated his conscience, might be tempted to go even further into active disobedience (8:11). The knowledgeable Christian would be sinning against Christ by injuring the weaker believer (8:12). Paul's appeal to the knowledgeable believers, then, was to be considerate of weaker believers and control their use of liberty in order to avoid deterring the spiritual progress of others (8:13).

ASK: Is a believer with a legalistic approach to Christian living a weak or a strong believer? Why? (Q6) *He is a weaker believer, as he does not fully understand the freedom he has in Christ. This may be counter-intuitive to the way that we sometimes think.*

ASK: Without naming people, describe a time when you had to apply the principle of consideration to avoid offending a weaker Christian. (Q7)

B. Exercise self-control (9:1–27)

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul used several illustrations to make one basic point at the end of the chapter: managing Christian liberty through self-control will help the disciplined believer to run like an athlete toward his eternal reward. But before Paul could lay out his arguments that led to this conclusion, he needed to address the fact that some believers in Corinth questioned his apostleship and his motives for preaching.

Paul carried genuine apostolic credentials—Jesus personally commissioned him. And the Corinthian Christians themselves were evidence that the Lord had blessed his apostolic ministry (9:1, 2). As an apostle, Paul could claim the same liberty and privileges as other Christian workers. He was free to marry and to receive financial support from those to whom he ministered (9:4–14). Nevertheless, for the sake of the gospel, Paul applied the principle of self-control and set aside these privileges (9:12).

Rather than have someone accuse him of preaching only because he was paid to do so, Paul adopted the policy of preaching without pay (9:15). He did not preach to live; he lived to preach (9:16). He preached because the Lord had commissioned him to preach. He believed the Lord would supply his needs (9:17, 18). Obviously, Paul's motives as an apostle were pure.

Paul chose to limit his liberty for at least three reasons: (1) to set an example devoid of criticism (*lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ* [9:12b]); (2) to place a check on his own motives to ensure that he would be qualified for heavenly reward (*if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward* [9:17a]); and (3) to discipline himself from going beyond that which he was actually at liberty to do (*that I abuse not my power in the gospel* [9:18b]).

ASK: Why was it so important for Paul to be concerned about the example he presented to the early church? (Q8) *Considering his past transgressions (cf. Gal. 1:23), Paul's work as an apostle and author of New Testament Scripture would be highly scrutinized. Any perceived hypocrisy or weakness would give his enemies cause to discredit him.*

READ: 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. **ASK:** What three words would you use to describe Paul's actions in this passage? (Q9) *Perhaps humble, sincere, and selfless.*

Paul ministered with a servant's heart among Jews and Gentiles alike (9:19). Although his Christian liberty had extricated him from the demands of the law, he became as a Jew in order to win Jews to Christ (9:20). Among Gentiles, he lived apart from the Jewish law in order to win Gentiles to Christ (9:21). In a spirit of self-control, he was considerate of all because he wanted to win people to Christ (9:22, 23).

Some have used Paul's summation in 9:22, *I am made all things to all men*, as an excuse to employ bizarre behavior that will supposedly enhance the ministry or make it appear culturally relevant to unbelievers. In context, however, Paul is clearly considering limiting his liberty—not extending it—for the sole purpose of proclaiming the gospel (cf. 1 Cor. 2:2).

In fact, Christian liberty functions best within the bounds of self-control. We are not free to do whatever we feel like doing. Unchecked fleshly impulses would surely wreck our testimony and Christian service record. Knowing this, Paul disciplined himself. Like a dedicated and well-trained runner, he kept his eye on the finish line and the winner's crown (9:24–26).

READ: 1 Corinthians 9:27. **ASK:** What did Paul's disciplined life preserve? (Q10) *The ability to continue to serve God and influence others.*

ASK: What disciplines strengthen a believer in his walk with the Lord? (Q11)

These include daily Bible reading and study, meditation, prayer, and worship—both private and public.

C. Separate from sin (10:1–22)

Having raised the sad possibility of becoming disqualified for a reward, Paul reflected upon what had happened to the Israelites who lacked spiritual discipline in Moses' era.

Although God had redeemed all the Israelites from Egypt and directed them in the wilderness (Exod. 13:7–14:31), fed them and given them water from the rock (Exod. 16:11–16; 17:1–6), He overthrew them there (1 Cor. 10:1–6; cf. Num. 14:1–38; Num. 20). Why? Because they failed to practice self-control in obedience to God. They reveled in golden calf idolatry and committed fornication (1 Cor. 10:7, 8; cf. Exod. 32; Num. 25). Also, the unfaithful Israelites put God to the test and *mur-mured* that He was unfair. Again God responded with judgment (1 Cor. 10:9, 10; cf. Num. 21:4–9; Num. 16).

What happened to the Israelites teaches Christians to stay close to God and far from potentially harmful situations (10:11). These Corinthians who felt they could exercise their Christian liberty by participating in the idol feasts were running the risk of falling into sin (10:12). If they fell, they could not blame it on God (10:13). So the wise course of action was to separate from idolatrous situations (10:14).

READ: 1 Corinthians 10:20. **ASK:** What sobering connection did Paul make in regard to idol worship? (Q12) *Those who sacrificed to idols were sacrificing to demons.*

The idol feasts in Corinth reeked of demonic influence and were not fit for the presence of those who fellowshiped with Christ (10:15–21). The pagan Corinthians who thought that they were offering sacrifices to their false gods would have been in terror if they had truly understood the connection they were forming with demons.

Those of the church who ignored this principle of separation would face the judgment of a jealous God (10:22).

D. Edify others (10:23, 24)

Apparently, some Christians pushed their liberty to the point where they felt free to do anything. Paul differentiated for them between what is *lawful* and what is *expedient* (profitable) and between what is *lawful* and what will *edify* (10:23). An important guiding principle in deciding a course of action is not, *Do I have the right to do this?* but, *How will this impact someone else?* (10:24).

READ: 1 Corinthians 10:24. **ASK:** How does this verse speak to the idea that we need to be true to who we are and to feel free to express ourselves without any inhibitions? (Q13) *The verse reminds us that we have a responsibility as believers to edify others. Our primary focus in life should not be on ourselves and being our own person. God calls us to be part of a community of believers and gives us the responsibility to help others in the community to grow.*

Lesson 9 will consider
10:16 and 17 again in
the context of the Lord's
Supper.

E. Keep a clear conscience (10:25–30)

If a believer purchased a cut of meat in a Corinthian butcher shop, he should eat it with a clear conscience and not investigate its origin (10:25). After all, the Lord owns the whole earth, including the food supply (10:26). Similarly, if a believer sat at a Corinthian's table as a dinner guest, he should not ask where the food came from, but rather eat it with a clear conscience (10:27). However, if the butcher or the host volunteered that the meat had been offered to idols, the believer should not eat lest he set a poor example of indifference to the significance of pagan religious symbols (10:28, 29). If a stronger Christian ignored others' concerns of conscience, his Christian liberty might be interpreted as license to sin. Any time a believer eats, he must do so in a manner that would cause himself and those around him to *give thanks* (10:30).

F. Glorify God (10:31–33)

Though Paul has given us some principles that may be complicated both to understand and to practice, he concludes these three chapters with an unmistakably clear command.

READ: 1 Corinthians 10:31. **ASK:** What does it mean to glorify God? (Q14) *It means to reflect His greatness and thus bring praise to His character.*

ASK: How does the context of this verse affect your understanding of it? (Q15)

In deciding questionable activities, a Christian ought to ask how he can best glorify God (10:31). If his planned course of action would dull his testimony or hurt a fellow believer's walk with the Lord, he would glorify God by relinquishing his liberty out of love for others. If his planned course of action would enhance his testimony and edify a fellow believer, he would glorify God by pursuing it.

If a Christian conducted himself in a way that glorified God, he would not purposely offend Jews, Gentiles, or the church of God—the three classifications of humanity from God's perspective (10:32).

Paul's goal was to strengthen Christians and to bring non-Christians to Christ (10:33). May we, like Paul, be so consumed with the spiritual needs of others that our trifling preferences will fade in comparison.

Verses 27–30 are difficult and may be read and interpreted in more than one way. The main point is clear: a believer must not abuse his or her Christian liberty at the expense of becoming a poor testimony before those with less knowledge and experience.

All believing Jews and Gentiles are united in the church during this church age (cf. Eph. 2:16). Unbelieving Jews and Gentiles are still somewhat distinct in God's program, however (cf. Rom. 1:16; 11:25). God will continue to work out His unique plan for Israel and the Jewish people in the coming Tribulation, in the Millennium, and even in eternity future (cf. Rom. 11:1, 2, 26; Rev. 7:4; 21:12). At the same time, God will extend His grace and perform His plan toward the Gentile nations as well (Rev. 21:24).

MAKING IT PERSONAL

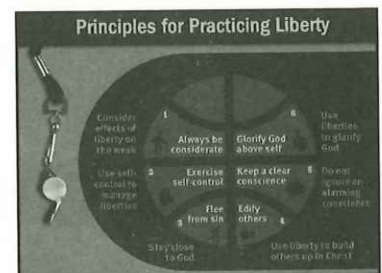
Attitude Change

ASK: What was your attitude toward exercising Christian liberty before you studied 1 Corinthians 8–10? (Q16)

ASK: What is your attitude toward Christian liberty because of this study? (Q17)

Exercising Christian Liberty

RESOURCE: Display resource 11 as a review of the principles for exercising Christian liberty. **ASK:** What changes might you need to make to practice



your Christian liberty within the bounds of love as part of team church?
(Q18)

Encourage your learners to consider whether they have been the *weaker* believer in certain situations. Have them evaluate their convictions in light of the Scriptures. (Q19)

Be cautious. You don't want weaker brothers to simply abandon convictions because someone else doesn't share the same ones. You want them to grow in their understanding of God's Word and to direct their lives accordingly.

Summary and Memory Verse

Use resource 1 to review the response for this lesson: Exercise liberty within the bounds of love.

Encourage your learners to memorize 1 Corinthians 10:31. Give them an opportunity to quote the verse in class next week.

