



Chapter 4

Idol Meat and Evangelization

1 Corinthians 8-9

UNDERSTANDING

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DISCUSSION

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read 1 Corinthians 8–9

The Big Picture

As the Corinthians struggled with the problem of eating meat sacrificed to idols, St. Paul will use love and his own example to persuade them.

At first, it doesn't seem that the Corinthians' problem with eating meat sacrificed to idols has much to do with us in the 21st century. But St. Paul's words 2,000 years ago still have much to teach us today about care for fellow Christians and evangelizing others.

Love and Knowledge (1 Corinthian 8:1–6)

Continuing his responses to the Corinthians, St. Paul addresses the following question: Should Christians eat meat from animals slaughtered in the pagan temples during religious ceremonies?

First, we must realize how ingrained this practice was in the lives of the Corinthians. Because of the large number of temples, and thus animal sacrifices, in Corinth, most meat was bought from a temple.

Plus, the temples were the center of the social scene in Corinth. Weddings, birthdays, and other celebrations were celebrated in the temple with a meal. Business networking and success came through attending and hosting parties in the temple. To attend the party but not to eat the food offered would have been an offense to the host.

It is mostly likely that the ones who wrote to St. Paul were okay with eating idol meat. St. Paul begins by quoting some of their slogans—“an idol has no real existence” and “there is no God but one” (v. 4). St. Paul does not disagree with these statements (vv. 5–6), but as we will see in verses 7–13, he has a problem with the way they are applied.

Corinthian Idol (1 Corinthians 8:7–13)

While the statements above are true, not everyone in the community can clearly recognize them. Many in the Corinth church were once idol worshippers (v. 7; 12:2). By eating the meat dedicated to idols, the Corinthians could cause their fellow Christians to stumble (v. 10). It seems that certain members place being correct and eating what they want over the realistic needs of their fellow believers who are tempted by their actions. St. Paul really drives the point home here: Jesus Christ died on the cross for these people—can't you just refrain from eating meat (v.11)? St. Paul will continue to discuss this topic of idol worship in chapter 10, but he abruptly stops to talk about his own ministry and apostolic authority.

Application to Jesus

St. Paul uses the example of Jesus to show what we should be willing to do for the sake of another's salvation.

St. Paul's Ministry (1 Corinthians 9:1–18)

At first glance, this section appears to have nothing to do with the previous argument about idol worship; it illustrates St. Paul's own example of what he has given up for the sake of the salvation of others. He hopes that the Corinthians will be inspired and realize that giving up meat is nothing compared to what St. Paul has given up. This principle is called moral authority—the ability to instruct others because you are living out the principle in your own life.

At the same time, St. Paul feels that he needs to defend his apostolic authority. Some of the divisions discussed in chapter 1 might have arisen because some trusted the authority of Apollos, or even more so, the authority of St. Peter. In fact, some scholars have noted that because St. Paul worked as a tent maker, the Corinthians did not respect him as much. Greek teachers usually accepted money from those who they taught and did not lower themselves to this type of menial labor. While claiming to be an apostle, St. Paul did not have the look of an apostle or a sophisticated teacher. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, this distrust of Paul's authority would get worse (2 Cor 11:7–9; 12:13).

In St. Paul's defense, he points out the rights that he could take as an apostle if he wished (v. 3). He should have the right to food and drink (v. 4) and to be paid for what he does (v. 6). St. Paul also mentions a

right to be accompanied by a wife (v. 5). He confirms that, while he has these rights, he refuses to take them. Why? St. Paul does not want to put “an obstacle in the way of the Gospel” (v. 12). Even more so, St. Paul feels compelled to preach the gospel, believing he will face judgment if he does not (v. 16). Vatican II reiterated these words in its Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*):

A true apostle looks for opportunities to announce Christ by words addressed either to non-believers with a view to leading them to faith, or to the faithful with a view to instructing, strengthening, and encouraging them to a more fervent life. “For the charity of Christ impels us” (2 Cor. 5:14). The words of the Apostle should echo in all hearts, “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16). (5)

All Things to All Men (1 Corinthians 9:19–27)

St. Paul has not taken money for his work, and he conforms himself to whatever situation he is in to preach the gospel. In particular, while he knows he doesn't need to follow the Jewish law anymore, St. Paul continues to subject himself to it so that he can preach the gospel to the Jews. St. Paul hopes to use his own life as an example of why the Corinthians should abstain from meat. For a summary of what St. Paul was willing to go through to preach the gospel, see 2 Corinthians 11:21–29.)

Finally, St. Paul closes with an athletic example (9:24–27). This example would have hit home with the Corinthians: Every two years, Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games, an athletic event second only to the Olympics in the ancient world. The population of Corinth would quadruple during these events; it was the focal point of the Corinthians' social life and economic prosperity. (St. Paul's work as

a tent maker could have even been a reason why he traveled to Corinth.) The winner of each event would receive the admiration of the crowd and a victory wreath made of dried celery.

St. Paul is quick to point out that, if these athletes can push themselves for perishable vegetables, why aren't we willing to push ourselves for an imperishable crown? He continues to encourage the Corinthians to see the world not as their culture does but with an eternal perspective. They are called to be saints (1 Cor 1:2), not mere citizens of this world. This metaphor easily holds in our culture today; it is a great gut check for what we value and where we put our time and efforts.

Application to Our Lives

St. Paul's own life of evangelization is powerful. What are we willing to give up for the gospel?

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

1 Corinthians 8–9

STEP 1: OPENER

Have you ever spent all your energy on some important task or goal?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

Continuing his responses to the Corinthians' questions, St. Paul addresses the question: Should Christians eat meat from animals slaughtered in the pagan temples during religious ceremonies?

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STEP 3: PASSAGE

This week's passage is 1 Corinthians 8–9. Start by reading 1 Corinthians 8:1–13.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

1. If you haven't done it already, explain the backdrop to this passage about idol meat.

2. Who are the two parties in this debate that St. Paul is addressing?

Answer: One party is arguing that it is okay to eat meat in the temple because the objects of worship there are not real gods. The other party is a group of Christians who are still tempted to believe in idols. When their fellow Christians eat temple meat, this latter group can be led to believe it is okay to worship these gods.

3. For St. Paul, what is at the root of this issue?

Answer: Some in the community are putting knowledge ahead of loving their fellow believers (vv. 1, 7).

4. In what situations do we tend to care more about what we know than how we love?

Allow the group to discuss.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:1–23.

5. What is St. Paul trying to defend in 9:1-12?

Answer: St. Paul is trying to defend his apostleship and way of life.

6. What has St. Paul given up?

Answer: St. Paul mentions that he has given up receiving food and money to preach the gospel (vv. 4, 6). He has also given up the choice to have a wife (v. 5) and continues to live like a Jew to reach the Jews (v. 20).

7. The Corinthians continue to have a problem with St. Paul's sacrifices. Read 2 Corinthians 11:7-15. Why do you think this is a problem?

Answer: See the second paragraph in the "St. Paul's Ministry" section of "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?"

8. What is the connection to St. Paul's argument in chapter 8?

Answer: St. Paul is using himself as an example of how to sacrifice for the sake of the salvation of others.

9. Read 2 Corinthians 11:21–29 for an even better look at St. Paul's life. What strikes you about his example?

Allow the group to discuss.

10. Why was he willing to give up all of these things, even though he didn't have to?

Answer: St. Paul wanted to remove every obstacle in the way of preaching the gospel.

11. Read the excerpt from Apostolicam Actuositatem in the last paragraph of the “St. Paul’s Ministry” section in “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?” How can quotes like these change our understanding of our mission within the Church?

Allow the group to discuss.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:24–27.

12. Explain the Isthmian games, described in the last paragraph of “All Things to All Men” in “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?”

Answer: No answer is needed.

13. How does this analogy tie in to St. Paul’s larger argument?

Answer: If athletes are willing to do anything to win a perishable crown, we should be willing to do so much more for an imperishable one.

14. What keeps us from developing a greater zeal for sharing the gospel?

Allow the group to discuss.

15. What obstacles stand in the way of sharing our faith with others?

Allow the group to discuss.

16. What can you do or sacrifice to overcome these obstacles?

Allow the group to discuss.

17. Are you committed to overcoming these obstacles?

Allow the group to discuss.

