

1 CORINTHIANS 8-10 FOOD OFFERED TO IDOLS; SERVANT LEADERSHIP



We continue in **1 Cor. 8**, where Paul is covering the topic of meat offered to idols. He says this pagan ritual does *not* contaminate the meat itself. (The term "meat" from the Gk. *broma*, in this particular context means, "meats permitted by the Mosaic Law," *Word Study Dictionary*).

Remember, *the Jerusalem Council, years before this epistle*, had decreed that *the food laws were still binding on Gentile converts*, and they would learn more on this from *the Law of Moses that was read to them every Sabbath* (Acts 15:20-21). Paul later took this decree *to the Gentile-majority churches to be kept* (Acts 16:4). In fact, in Rom. 14:14-15 Paul uses the same Gk. term *broma* for food which was *clean according to God's law* but might cause a "weaker brother," who eats only vegetables, to stumble. As a final proof that unclean animals *were still unclean*, we see in Rev. 18:2 that John, 40 years later (A.D. 95), talks about "every *unclean* and hated bird."

Barclay has good background material on this issue: "*Sacrifice to the gods was an integral part of ancient life*. It might be of two kinds, private or public. In neither case was the whole animal consumed upon the altar. Often all that was burned was a mere token part as small as some of the hairs cut from the forehead.

"In private sacrifice the animal...was divided into three parts. First, a token part was burned on the altar. Second, the priests received as their rightful portion the ribs, the ham and the left side of the face. Third, *the worshipper himself received the rest of the meat*. With this meat he gave a banquet. This was specially the case at times like *weddings*. Sometimes these feasts were in the house of the host; sometimes they were *even in the temple of the god* to whom the sacrifice had been made.

"The problem faced by the Christian was, 'Could he take part in such a feast? Could he possibly take upon his lips meat that had been offered to an idol?' If he couldn't, then obviously he was going to cut himself off almost entirely from social occasions.

"In public sacrifice, that is, sacrifice offered by the State, and such sacrifices were common, after the requisite symbolic amount of the meat had been burned and after the priests had received their share, the rest of the meat fell to the magistrates and others. *What they did not need, they sold to the shops and the markets*; and therefore, even when

meat was bought *in the shops*, it might well have been already offered to some idol. A man never knew when he might be eating meat that had formed part of a sacrifice to an idol...

"It therefore followed that a man could hardly eat meat at all which was not in some way connected with a heathen god. Could the Christian eat it? That was the problem; and, clearly...to the Christian in Corinth or any other Greek city, it was one which *pervaded all life, and which had to be settled one way or another*."

As a result, there were brethren in Corinth for whom the matter was not a problem, since they now understood pagan gods didn't really exist and could not contaminate the meat. However, other brethren believed the idol was something real and that it did contaminate the meat.

Paul thus explains to them: "Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, *we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one*...However, *there is not in everyone that knowledge*; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now *eat it as a thing offered to an idol*; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse. But beware lest somehow *this liberty of yours become a stumbling block* to those *who are weak*. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge *shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died*? But when you thus *sin* against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, *you sin against Christ*. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, *I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble*" (1 Cor. 8:4-13).

Hence, this whole topic deals with the principle of taking into account the conscience of other brethren before doing something that may be misunderstood and offend the spiritually weaker member, putting a stumbling block before him.

Then, in **1 Cor. 9**, Paul answers his critics about his decisions and the right to be supported by the congregations, just as others in the ministry.

So, he asks them: "Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? Are you

not my work in the Lord? If I am not an apostle to others, yet doubtless I am to you. For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

“My *defense* to those who examine me is this: Do we have no right to eat and drink? Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas [Peter]? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working? Who ever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock?

“Do I say these things as a mere man? Or does not the law say the same also? For it is written in the law of Moses, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.’ Is it oxen God is concerned about? Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? If others are partakers of this right over you, are we not even more?

“Nevertheless, we have not used this right, but *endure all things* lest we hinder the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? Even so the Lord has commanded that *those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel*. But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void” (1 Cor. 9:1-15). We thus see that Paul had many complainers despite the tremendous effort he gave--and sometimes the same is true for ministry today.

What were the accusations?

1. That he did not have the ministerial authority to have them follow his decisions (9:1)
2. That he didn't have the right for financial support from the Church for what he ate and drank (9:4)
3. That the financial support shouldn't include the wife if he chose to marry (9:5).
4. That Barnabas and Paul should continue to work and pay for their own expenses while preaching the gospel and not be financially supported by them, for they were very sensitive and suspicious about this.

Regarding the first complaint, he defends himself by saying Christ Himself named him as an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Gal. 2:8).

Regarding the Church financial support, he said he had a right to be provided for just as the rest of the ministry.

It's vital to understand that the tithing system in those days enters into the equation since *the Temple and the Levitical priesthood were still functioning* (until A.D. 70) and *the tithes still belonged to the Levitical ministry*.

It would take time to apply the understanding that the tithes and other functions had been transferred to the priesthood of Melchizedek, with Jesus Christ as the High Priest and his ministers as the new administrators. As Heb. 7:12 clarifies: “For when *there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law*.” It is talking about the Levitical law which deals with the Old Testament priesthood, ministry and tithes which Heb. 7-10 explains are now changed to the Melchizedek priesthood of Christ and His ministry.

Now, the law of tithing dates back before the time of Moses and *was not a ritual law* but a *spiritual* law between the person and God. Lev. 27:30 says, “And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the Lord's; it is holy to the Lord.” It does not belong to the Levites or priests, *but to God, and to those to whom He assigns these funds to carry out His work*. It is something between a person and God, and therefore, not doing it *is robbing Him* (Mal 3:8-11).

Paul has to explain his motives for what he does, “What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, *I may present the gospel of Christ without charge*, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel. For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you” (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

Notice Paul says he “may present the gospel of Christ *without charge*.” That is why we don’t sell our publications with God’s truths, but give them away free of charge. As our publications say, “This publication is not to be sold. It is a free educational service in the public interest, published by the United Church of God, *an International Association*.”

Paul then mentions he is now *free from man’s judgment*, but this does not mean *he is free to offend others* when presenting God’s truths. Instead, he must be *compassionate and understanding* of others’ deficiencies in biblical knowledge. Therefore, he must be wise, patient and not offensive. As Paul said in Col. 4:6, “Be *pleasant and hold their interest* when you speak the message. *Choose your words carefully and be ready to give answers to anyone who asks questions*.”

Thus, to the Jewish people, he adapted to their customs and respected their viewpoints to avoid offending them. In this way they could hear the gospel—that additional and vital knowledge they lacked to follow God’s path more perfectly.

To those who were “under the law,”-- a technical term coined by Paul which meant being *under the harsh Pharisaic legal and oppressive system*. Jesus said of them, “For they bind *heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders*; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers” (Mt. 23:4). Yet, this doesn’t mean Paul rejected them; on the contrary, he treated them with patience and respect. Remember some Pharisees did convert to the faith (Acts 15:5).

Regarding the Gentiles, Paul also adapted to the Greek and Roman culture so as not to offend them, and thus he could respectfully be heard and deliver the gospel. When he says he was “under the law of Christ,” it means being *under the law of God as magnified by Christ*. This makes it more demanding, not less, for it means keeping *not only the physical aspects of the law but also the spiritual ones* (Mt. 5:17-20). Paul adapted to those “weak” in the faith or spiritually immature so as not to offend them. In this way, he left us an example to follow today. That is why our literature strives not to offend, but to convey the truth with grace, but also, with firmness.

Paul then warns them they must strive to the utmost to please God and reach the goal of entering His kingdom, for they had many shortcomings. He uses an analogy very familiar to them, the Isthmian

Games held there in Corinth: “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore, I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus, I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

These games were held every two years and were only second to the Olympic Games. Paul says just as these athletes trained so hard to win, they also must strive mightily to attain the kingdom of God. He admits that if he became complacent, he could be disqualified. He compares himself to the *herald* of the games, who usually was a past champion who also competed and announced the rules, the start of a game and then encouraged them. Paul warns the Corinthians not to become lukewarm and think they have already won the race toward the kingdom of God.

In **1 Cor. 10** he then gives them an example of this with the failure of the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. He says: “For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, *and the rock was Christ*. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we should not crave evil things...Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:1-13). Notice here *that it was Jesus Christ as the Word who interacted with the Israelites and not God the Father!*

The Israelites serve as a lesson to us of what can happen if we repeat their mistakes—by becoming worldly (v. 6) or being discontent and grumbling against Church leaders, as they did against Paul (v. 10). The Corinthians thought they were very “firm” in their faith, but Paul warns them not to be overconfident, as it would be easy to become vain and fall away. As Pr. 16:18 says, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”