

“THROUGH THE BIBLE”

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1 CORINTHIANS 8-9

Rachel Ray and Bobby Flay – Paula and Emeril - Cupcake Wars and Iron Chef.. The Food Network was launched in 1993. Today it's seen in over 90 million American homes. *A single television channel devoted to food and cooking* - it just proves what an impact food has on our daily lives. *And the same was true in Corinth.* In fact, issues involving food had even crept over into worship. A major debate had erupted in the church over this issue of food and eats. I have no doubt if there had been a Food Network at the time, this controversy would've become primetime programming. *“Tailgate Warriors”* would've been live from Corinth. A messy food fight had started in the church, and Paul steps in to make sure it gets *chopped!*

Chapter 8 begins, *“Now concerning things offered to idols...”* Remember, at this point in 1 Corinthians we're listening to one side of a two-sided conversation. Paul is answering questions asked in a previous letter. And one of the questions involved meat that was sacrificed to idols. In the ancient world there were two places to purchase hamburger... You could go to the market and pay premium prices, or you could buy beef from the pagan temples. When an animal was sacrificed to an idol the priests ate a portion; then the leftover cuts were sold to raise revenues for the temple. Some of the Corinthian Christians purchased the bargain beef.

The Corinthians weren't idolaters, they were just shrewd shoppers, coupon clippers. They hated the paganism, and all that went with it, they just liked getting their ground round on the cheap. *But was this right?* How can a Christian eat meat he knew was sacrificed to an idol – used in idolatry? The idea of guilt-by-association had been firmly etched in their minds. If it was in the devil's freezer, how can you put it on the grill for God?

Understand, this isn't just an issue for the ancients. A recent article in World Net Daily, dated 11/21, had a headline, *“Has Your Thanksgiving Turkey Been Sacrificed to Idols?”* The author reported that America's most popular turkey brand, *Butterball*, is now processing their turkeys according to *“halal”* or Islamic standards. Millions of Americans might've eaten a Thanksgiving turkey that was blessed in the name of *“Allah.”* What if your were shopping for a Thanksgiving turkey and *the best buy was Butterball?* Would it matter if it had been blessed in the name of *Allah?* You're going fellowship at your table with other Christians, and eat the meat to the glory of Jesus. The money you save will even go to your church! Is it okay to buy Butterball, or would such a purchase make you a *turkey* in God's eyes?

This issue divided the church at Corinth. Some said “yes,” others “no,” but everyone was adamant, *“they were right.”* *Perhaps more important than the debate itself, was the haughtiness of their attitude. They were all proud.* Paul will deal with their beef, but first he addresses their arrogance... *“We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know.”* I love this... *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*

It's interesting, there was knowledge on both sides of this issue. People on the "don't do it side" understood the dangers of idolatry. Demonic forces were behind the worship of false gods... Whereas, folks on the "go to it side" knew that idols were nothing but sticks of wood. False gods don't exist, and the meat sacrificed on their altars, was just that, a piece of meat. The "don't do its" and the "go to its" each had valid points. The problem was that both groups failed to recognize the legitimacy of each other's concerns. They were all proud. They thought, "I'm right and you're wrong." Their knowledge went to *their heads* – not to *their hearts*.

The football helmet my son use to wear contained a rubber bladder you inflated with air. There was a nozzle on top where you inserted the needle. *I'm afraid most of us have a similar nozzle somewhere on our scalp.* We learn a little truth and it goes to our heads. Now we're right and everybody else is wrong. In chapter 5 Paul used "leaven" or yeast, as a type of sin. Why? Because yeast "corrupts by puffing up." Sin causes pride.

The most dangerous person in the church is the guy who knows just enough to think he knows it all! Be leery of the self-proclaimed expert who feels it his duty to roam the church and police the saints. I love the quote, "Some people drink at the fountain of knowledge, others just gargle." Beware of those who gargle. Paul says to both camps in Corinth, *let some air out of your head, and pump some love into your heart.* The Corinthians had *big-heads*, but *small-hearts*. It's been said, "Love without truth is hypocrisy, but truth without love is brutality." We won't always agree, but we can always show each other love.

I love Paul's conclusion, verse 3, "But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him." The key to knowing God is ultimately *the heart*, not *the head*. It was Blaise Pascal who wrote, "Man's wisdom must be understood to be loved, but God's wisdom must be loved to be understood." Head knowledge has a place. It's important to our faith. But academic knowledge is not enough to save us. Saving faith requires heart-felt faith.

"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.*" There's only one God. Idols are nothing but chunks of wood or stone. "For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us *there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.*" Other deities don't exist, but even if they did, our Father God and our Lord Jesus Christ would still reign supreme. *The Father created all things. Jesus sustains all things.* If pagan gods did exist they would bow and obey the Christian God.

"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.*" In other words, *we're right with God through faith not food.* A right relationship with God is won through the work of Christ, not our own efforts. *Eat or don't eat...* makes no difference in your standing before God.

Just because Satan uses an object, doesn't make it intrinsically evil. Satan inspires songs. Some songs promote evil and lead people astray. But the chords and instruments that make the music, are the same chords and instruments used to praise God. An "A Chord" is amoral in and of itself. Whether it ends up good or evil is based on the motive behind its use. The same is true with dancing, or tobacco, or fashion, or

alcohol, or gambling - or a thousand other issues that cause controversy in the church. Some matters aren't black or white... they're gray matters.

In 1928 Donald Barnhouse spoke at a Bible conference attended by 200 young people, and some prudish counselors. One afternoon an older woman approached Barnhouse about an "appalling, sinful, wicked" practice going on among the girls. You won't believe this, but they were walking around the camp *with no stockings*. These petty old ladies wanted the good preacher to rebuke this supposed "spirit of compromise" in the church. Dr. Barnhouse writes about the incident, "Looking them straight in the eye, I said, 'The Virgin Mary never wore stockings.' They gasped and said, 'She didn't?' I answered, 'In Mary's time, stockings were unknown. So far as we know, they were first worn by prostitutes in Italy in the 15th century..." His answer stifled their protest, and made them rethink the issue.

A Christian from America may take offense when his German brother drinks a beer. While the German is appalled when an American sister wears a two-piece on the beach. I know Christians who would never feel right about wearing shorts to church, but don't mind lighting up a cigarette. Like meat sacrificed to idols, cultural taboos are a moving target – they alter from place to place, from tribe to tribe, from generation to generation. We need to remember that meat is nothing but meat. It's the attitude behind the use of it that varies from conscience to conscience. My conscience is not your master – nor is your conscience my master. Jesus is the only Master, and we all should follow His Spirit in these gray matters.

I like what Mark Twain once said, "The trouble with the world is not that people know too little, but they know so many things that ain't so." This applies to the church. So many of us have been trained by legalism. People-imposed rules and rituals govern our conscience. *Rather than love God and love people – and be led by the Holy Spirit - and do the thing that brings God glory - it's easier for us to just do what somebody told us.* Paul doesn't encourage the Corinthians to violate their conscience. He wants them to retrain it, so it's no longer governed by *tradition*, but *truth*.

Verse 9, "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?" Remember verse 1, "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies..." We should live by love not legalism. But we should also live by love, not some reckless version of Christian liberty. Logically, you know that meat is just meat. But to a younger Christian with a weaker faith what he eats may still be at issue. *Logic* shouldn't be your only guide. What about *love*? You can be so right you become wrong. If you insist on your liberty knowing it'll lead a brother astray, what was right for you, has become a sin.

It might be fine for you to drink a beer - or go dancing - or listen to certain types of music... you've grown in Christ. You've gained discernment and restraint. But what you're doing might lead the weaker believer who's been watching you down the wrong path. If so, it's a sin for you to take the risk. Here's the test: *You're free to pick it up, only if you're free to put it down.* If what you do harms a brother – then love says "Don't do it!" I have to admit, for years I tried to make a point of my freedom in Christ. I loved to shock people. I was "a Christian shock jock." But I've learned the one thing more important than *making a point* - is *winning a brother*.

Paul agrees, verse 12, “But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.” That’s a serious issue. “Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” See the extent to which love takes Paul. He’ll never again eat meat... *steak, barbeque brisket, pork tenderloin, juicy ribs...* Paul is prepared to give it all up for the faith of another believer. Do you really want to *stumble* a person, Christ died to make *stand*? To sin against a weaker brother is to sin against Christ!

Chapter 9 continues the discussion, but on a different topic. Paul points to how he curtailed his freedom to keep the Corinthians from stumbling. He begins, “Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?” Here Paul proves his apostleship, and apparently one of the qualifications was being an eye-witness of the risen Christ. *Acts 1:21 confirms this requirement.* Paul met Jesus on the Road to Damascus!

He continues, “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.” Paul points to the church in Corinth as evidence he’s an apostle. A thriving church was born in a wicked city – obviously, God had blessed Paul's efforts. The Church was a testimony to the legitimacy of his ministry.

Verse 3, “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?” Paul had not taken advantage of all the prerogatives afforded an apostle. An apostle got food and lodging – even travel benefits. It was common for an apostle to travel with his wife. “Cephas” or *Peter* was an example. Paul too, could’ve demanded apostolic rights, instead he kept a low profile. And notice verse 3... Here’s is a big problem for Roman Catholics who believe Peter was the first pope. If so, then you’ve got a *married pope*.

Which reminds me of the newspaper tycoon with three sons. He wanted to select a successor, but wasn't sure which son would make the best newspaper man. He posed a test. He asked each boy to compose the most shocking, sensational three word headline he could imagine. The first son composed the headline, "*Pelosi turns Republican.*" That was sensational, but the second son bested him. His headline read, "*Ahmadinejad becomes Jewish.*" But it was the third son who won the prize. His headline had just two words, "*Pope Elopes.*" That’s over the top! Paul's point is that as an apostle he had rights he had willingly forfeited. Other guys were married and traveled with their wives. Paul stayed single.

He writes in verse 6, “Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working?” From its earliest days the Church supported its leaders financially so they could devote themselves to fulltime leadership. Paul was entitled to such support, but in Corinth he waived the privilege. Acts 18:3 tells us he lodged with Aquila and Priscilla, and helped make ends meet by working with them in their tent-making business.

But here he questions of the wisdom of this strategy, verse 7, “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?” Paul worked at secular employment out of necessity. It wasn’t ideal... Soldiers are supported by the folks they defend. If a soldier in battle is worried about his family back home - whether they’re starving, or getting evicted - how can he focus on the fight? A *distracted soldier* is a *defeated soldier*. He’s better on the *battlefront* if doesn’t

worry about the *home front*. And the same is true for a pastor. How can he give himself to the study of God's Word, and prayer for God's people, if his own needs aren't met.

Paul says, you won't find a thirsty vinedresser - or a dairy farmer with brittle bones. Obviously, a farmer gets fed from his crop – and likewise, a pastor should be supported from the financial support given to his ministry. I'm not saying a pastor should draw an exorbitant salary. But so many churches pay a bare minimum. They pray, "Lord, you keep him humble, we'll keep him poor." *A church with that attitude may get what they pay for!* Paul rebukes the Corinthians. They need to pony up and pay the pastor.

Verse 8, "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..." Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 – a verse you wouldn't associate with paying the pastor. Apparently, the Holy Spirit's application of Scripture can be quite broad. Here's Deuteronomy 25:4, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain." Warning all pastors... Paul compares you to an ox – plodding but faithful. Any good farmer allows his ox to munch as he works. A weak ox is worthless!... Paul is saying, just as feeding the ox is an expense of the harvest, supporting the pastor is an expense of the spiritual harvest.

He concludes, "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." Years ago we had a church member who suggested capping my salary. I resisted. Not because I wanted a lot of money, but because I knew I needed a lot of hope. Why kill a man's incentive to work? I told the elders, "You can raise my salary, or cut my salary, but don't ever put me in a situation where there's nothing I can do about my salary." That produces a hopeless pastor. Paul understood men, and pastors, and what motivates both. He says, "he who plows should plow in hope."

Verse 11, "If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things?" Paul capsulizes an important spiritual principle. If a pastor or church helps you spiritually, then support them materially. If a church is adding to your life spiritually - helping you focus eternally - then its a minor trade-off for you to help the church pay a few bills.

And if this applies to all pastors, it certainly applied to Paul in his dealings with the Corinthians. He tells them, "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." Paul founded the church. He was the pastor most entitled to a salary. But he laid aside his right, lest someone accuse him of selfish motives. Paul was not above accepting a church's financial support. On occasion he gladly received it, but not in Corinth. Perhaps, the Corinthians were suspicious of crooked clergy. Maybe they'd been burned by someone else. Paul wanted them to know he cared about their soul, not their money.

And this is how CC has patterned our approach to money. Sure, we have needs. Don't think the power company donates the electricity... I think we would be well within our God-ordained right to be bolder in our comments about giving – but for 30 years we've waived those rights. We've realize how often the subject of money has been abused, and people have been manipulated. So for the sake of the Gospel we've limited our appeals. CC exists to meet your needs - not the other way around. We believe God will take care of His church if we're faithful to the ministry He gave us.

Verse 13, “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?” When an OT worshipper brought his animal to the altar, the priest who administered the sacrifice got a choice cut of meat. He was paid in beef. The OT priest was supported by the worshippers. “Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.” What was true of the OT priests should be true of the NT pastors. Pay them from the monetary sacrifices offered to God.

Verse 15, “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.” Paul would rather have died than run the risk of anyone casting him as a money-hungry preacher. It reminds me of Billy Graham. Early in his ministry, after an Atlanta Crusade, a newspaper ran a photo of Graham leaving the stadium with bags of money. He was innocent of any wrong doing, but it looked bad. From that day forward Graham separated himself from the money. He put himself on a modest salary, and set up strict guidelines for how others would handle the ministry’s finances. He wanted everything above board. He eliminated any appearance of impropriety. This was Paul’s attitude!

He says, verse 16, “For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!” I tell young men who want to be pastors, “If you can do anything else in the world other than pastor - and be happy doing it - then don’t pastor.” Being a pastor isn’t just a career move. It’s a calling from God. Paul had no choice. Of necessity it was laid on him. Woe to him if he didn’t preach. Paul would’ve been successful at whatever he tried – *but satisfied?* I doubt it! God called him to preach and he’d be happy doing nothing less.

“For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship. 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.” In short, the ministry wasn’t a job to Paul. He didn’t serve for a paycheck. His goal was an eternal reward. Paul viewed his ministry as a *divine responsibility* – a “*stewardship*.” Once, I watched a TV special on the first 50 years of the NBA. One of the Old-timers said, “The team owners were the dumbest people on earth. They paid us a salary, but they didn’t have to - we would’ve played for free.”

Don’t misunderstand, I appreciate my salary - *and rather than dumb, you’re being biblical for paying me* - but I’ve said this from the start, “If you guys didn’t pay me to pastor this church, I’d pay you for the opportunity.” “*Pastor*” is the most demanding, taxing, challenging, intense job I know. But I wouldn’t trade it for any other job in the world. I thank God everyday for the opportunity to communicate His Word and pastor His people.

Verse 19, “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more...” Paul’s freedom in Christ was far-reaching - *he was free from the Law, free to eat meat, free from money. He was also free from the opinions of men.* Paul didn’t care one iota what people thought of him. Paul’s only desire was for the approval of his Lord! But he did care deeply about what people thought of Jesus, and the Gospel. He was an ambassador for Christ. His goal was to lead people to Jesus. This is why he was always building bridges, and forming platforms. He elaborates on this strategy in verse 20, “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.” Paul was always *faithful* – but also *flexible*. If his audience were Jews he observed Jewish customs. He ate kosher food, and kept the Sabbath rules. It wasn’t the time or place to flaunt his freedom. Why try to prove a point, and lose a soul who needs Jesus? But while speaking to Gentiles he downplayed his Jewishness. Paul knew if he could *fit in*, he’d be in a better position to *speak up*.

Obviously, we're not talking about compromising on moral, or spiritual, or biblical, or ethical values - we're simply suggesting we adapt to culture. Most likely, the biker will win the biker to Jesus – the salesman will win the salesman – the housewife wins the housewife. Paul identified with the person he wanted to reach. He found common ground and built a bridge. Traditionally, the church has approached prevailing culture in two ways: **isolation** or **imitation**. We either **separate** or **integrated**. But there's a third option - **infiltrate!** Paul became all things to all men in order to win some!

I’ve had some church folks say, **"I just can't stand rock-and-roll music."** That's alright, but don't grumble when young people no longer come to your church. What do you want? A cozy environment for the *dignified and sanctified* - or a place where lost people can relate to the Gospel? An expert on evangelism, Donald McGraven, once said, **"The world has more winnable people than ever before... but it's possible to come out of a ripe field empty-handed."** That's what's happening. The world is hungry for the Gospel, but the Church doesn’t always present it in a compelling way.

When Hudson Taylor, landed in mainland China he struggled in his efforts to spread the Gospel. One day the Lord told him to give up his Western clothes and customs - dress like the Chinese. He even cut his hair. This offended his fellow missionaries, but it built a bridge to the locals that yielded a spiritual harvest. *He didn't go to China to reach missionaries*. The founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth, once said, **"I'd stand on my head, and play a tambourine with my feet if I thought it would help me win one lost soul to Jesus."** That's how I feel. I'll try anything - other than sin - if it'll help me reach someone for Jesus. *I'd even get a tat... maybe!*

Chapter 9 ends with a trip to the stadium. Corinth was the site of the **Isthmian Games**. At the time the competition in Corinth eclipsed the Olympics in Athens. The Greek peninsula was a hotbed for athletic events. And Paul was a sports buff. Here he compares the Christian life to an athletic contest. Verse 24, **"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."**

Thirty-five years ago, US Olympic coach, Brutus Hamilton, compiled a list of what he thought would be ultimate achievements in track-and-field. No one would ever run a 9.2 second 100 yard dash - or a 3 minute 57 second mile - or throw a shot put more than 62 feet - or high jump more than 7'1" - or long jump 27 feet - or pole vault more than 16 feet. Today, everyone of these barriers have been shattered.

And spiritually speaking, you too can *go higher, last longer, be stronger* than you once thought possible. All that holds you back is a lack of faith. Paul tells the Corinthians to stop toying with their faith. Get serious, and be determined. Don't give up the first time you get knocked down. This past season Maurice Jones-Drew, a Jacksonville Jaguar, rushed for more yards than any other running back in the NFL, 1,606 yards. But what you don't realize is he got knocked down every 4.7 yards, and had to get back up and do it again 343 times. That total yardage didn't come easy. Nothing of any real value comes easy. If you want to rack up some yards for Jesus, and score a few touchdowns... your faith needs to toughen up.

“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.*” When an athlete is training for an event there’s foods he won’t eat, and activities in which he won’t participate. Training requires discipline. The athlete does it for a flimsy wreath. Whereas a Christian is after eternal rewards. How much more determined should a believer be...

“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.” In the Greek the phrase translated “*discipline my body,*” literally reads, “*I blacken my eye.*” Paul goes to severe measures stay focused on the prize. He pushes his body. He does whatever it takes to make his body do what it doesn’t want to do. That’s “*training.*” And the Christian needs this mindset... The difference for the Christian is that we have it in our heart to obey. We discipline our bodies to make them do what we really want to do. Jesus transforms our heart, but we still have to discipline our bodies.

And this all requires such stringent effort because so much is at stake. Paul worries that he could disqualify himself from ministry. That “*after he’d preached to others, he would be DQ’d.*” His soul would be saved, but his life would be unusable. What a tragedy. We all should share this fear... Life is short. Let’s not do anything stupid that would limit our usefulness.