

WHITE MEMORIAL

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

WMPC - Men's Bible Study

First Corinthians - Winter-Spring 2017

Lesson 5

Read First Corinthians 8 and 9

Three Sets of Questions:

Q1: 1 Corinthians 8 is one of the “now concerning” texts which we identified in our scriptures as a larger pattern in 1st Corinthians last week. Each of these sections pertains to a specific issue confronting the Corinthian church. What is the issue at stake for chapter 8? How does the issue relate to the Jewish laws - especially the 1,2, 3 commandments of Moses (Exodus 20)? What do you make of 1Corinthians 8: 8 - 9? If you had to interpret that for a first time reader, what would you tell him? Further, what do you make of verse 13? What does it say about our own personal choices relative to the needs of others? How are we supposed to act?

Q2: There was, during the Reformation, no more pressing question than Christian freedom. Was the Christian free to follow the full measure of his or her convictions even if those convictions defied the church? And if we are free in Christ, then to what must we still be loyal and obedient? How free are we? Is freedom limited in a biblical sense? Chapter 9 verse 1: “Am I not free?” How would you answer this question relative to the free unmerited grace given to us by Jesus Christ?

Q3: You will quickly note that Chapter 9 is a tour-de-force of rhetoric - all about the freedom we have in Christ. As Q2 above suggests, the right of Christian freedom is both sacred and complicated. We think that the apex of Chapter 9 is found in verses 18 - 23. In these verses you will note the “proud” elasticity of the apostle. He says it out loud: the gospel was my message and I changed the presentation and the tone of my message according to my audience/congregations: “I have become all things to all people.” (Chapter 9, verse 22) So, what do you make of this? Do you expect leaders (inside the church, but perhaps outside of the church) to be chameleons who change the delivery and emphasis of the message relative to the particular audience, or do you admire leaders (especially inside the church) who are consistent regardless of the context? You may only choose one answer for the sake of this exercise. Write your thoughts and be prepared to present your opinion.

Three Insights:

I1: There are parts of the Bible which are “more” ancient than others. To wit: the parable of the Good Samaritan translates over 2000 years readily and well. The first main concern of Chapter 8— food sacrificed to idols — is not a common part of our lives (if it is part of your life, please see the pastor as he has dozens of questions for you!). To allow such ancient matters make sense to us, it takes an interpretive move on the part of modern readers. And yet, even though the specific issue might be ancient and take some work to understand on our part, the broader issue beneath the surface is current and real for us at this very moment. N.T. Wright, or Tom Wright, frames it well:

“The individual conscience really matters for the Christian. This is one of the key in which each individual maintains responsibility before God for his or her own actions. Keeping a clear conscience before God is part of basic Christian living. If one Christian behaves in a way which shocks or distresses another, or leads them to do something their own conscience is telling them is wrong, they are taking away their responsibility, and forcing them to disobey what they

are convinced is God's will for them. At that point, the 'stronger' Christian is actually making the 'weaker' one sin. And at that point we should all realize that something has gone badly wrong." (Tom Wright. Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians. Page 103)

12: Approaching chapter 9, we turn to the venerable William Barclay.

"At first sight this chapter [Chapter 9] seems quite disconnected from what goes before but in fact it is not. The whole point lies in this — the Corinthians who considered themselves mature Christians have been claiming that they are in such a privileged position that they are free to eat meat offered to idols if they like. Their Christian freedom gives them — as they think — a special position in which they could do things which might not be permissible to lesser men. Paul's way of answering that argument is to set forth the many privileges which he himself had a perfect right to claim, but which he did not claim in case they should turn out to be stumbling-blocks to others and hindrances to the effectiveness of the gospel." (William Barclay. Daily Bible Study Series: Revised Edition. Pages 77-78)

13: Robert A. Bryant titles his chapter about chapter 9 in his study of 1st Corinthians, "Responsible Freedom." That may be the most Presbyterian title of a chapter ever conceived. In his conclusion to the chapter Bryant shares this insight:

"Disciples of Jesus must exercise discipline in the "game" of faithfulness. It is not works righteousness aimed at becoming acceptable to God. Rather, it is the appropriate response of thanksgiving to the freedom God gives to be the best 'athlete' one can be for the 'sake of the gospel.' The freedom that believers have in Christ is not freedom to do whatever the believer chooses but is instead the freedom to do as God chooses, which is revealed in Jesus' self-offering: Jesus lay down his life freely for others on a cross, yet God raised Jesus in power and glory. This epitomizes the paradox of Christian freedom. Those who know we are not our own and that we are bought with a price — who accept the gospel that Jesus Christ is Lord and act accordingly — will also glorify God with their bodies. Moreover, united with Christ in one spirit, they will receive power to live for others as Christ lives for others. The famous Roman statesman Cicero declared decades before Paul that freedom is participation in power. The apostle Paul, however, has argued that true freedom is participation in service." (Robert A. Bryant. Kerygma: First Corinthians, One in Christ. Page 81)

Links for Further Study:

L1: 500 years later (how many of us will ever write something that is remembered and studied for 500 years?), Martin Luther's *Treatise on Christian Liberty* (sometimes called the *Treatise on Christian Freedom*) remains the classic and authoritative text on the subject raised by 1 Corinthians in Chapters 8 and 9. Chapter 9, verse 1: "Am I not free?"

Luther's work begins with two seemingly opposite statements:

A Christian is an utterly free man, lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is an utterly dutiful man, servant of all, subject to all.

Read more at this excellent submission from the site Lutheran Reformation:

<http://lutheranreformation.org/theology/on-the-freedom-of-a-christian/>