

1 Corinthians

Bible Study

Idols

1 Corinthians 7:20—8:13

Beginning with chapter 7 through the end of the book, Paul is answering questions given to him by the members of the Corinthian church. They were trying to understand how this new way of life under Christ was supposed to work in everyday life. How were they to live lives according to grace? Paul has been assuring them that they are saints who have been washed, sanctified, and justified (1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11). They have no need to worry about their eternal future (1 Corinthians 1:8), however, they need to worry about living a life that is pleasing to the Lord.

Instead of living for the Lord and watching out for the needs of other believers, they were self-centered, doing things that they thought would only be beneficial to themselves. This caused divisions within the church as each group was looking out for themselves. They had let go of Paul's doctrine, which was given to them during the 18 months he was with them during his second apostolic journey, and they were following the personalities that appealed to them. They were babies who could only accept the milk of the word (1 Corinthians 3:2), and thus were only capable of using human reasoning and wisdom in evaluating spiritual concepts.

Their carnality prevented them from getting along with each other, hindered them from being able to deal with sexual sin within the church, gave them a false view of their spiritual condition, led them to follow various people instead of the correct doctrine, and drove them to sue each other over things that should have been handled within the church. These are the issues that Paul confronted them with in the first six chapters, asserting his authority as an apostle by making it clear that he is the masterbuilder of their faith (1 Corinthians 3:10). If anyone disagrees with what he is teaching, then that person is not to be followed. Paul speaks spiritual truth that does not make sense to the natural man.

Beginning with chapter 7, Paul begins to answer questions posed to him by members of their congregation. They are trying to understand how to live according to their new way of life under grace. The first 20 verses address how married couples are expected to live. Those who are married should not leave or divorce their spouse. If one should leave their spouse, they are not to get married because they are already married. If one is put away by the other spouse (divorced) then they would be free to marry. The believer is not to initiate a divorce, but is allowed to grant a divorce if the spouse desires it. There should be no reason for two believers to divorce if they are walking in the Spirit. Paul continues by explaining how believers are to interact with each other.

Stay in the circumstance you have been given (verses 7:20–40)

A general rule of thumb is that a believer is to remain in the circumstance that he was in before becoming a believer. If a husband becomes saved, he is to stay with his wife. If a wife becomes a believer, she is to stay married to her husband. In both cases, the believing spouse may be able to lead the other spouse to Christ. However, if the unbelieving spouse wishes a divorce, then you are free to allow that divorce to happen.

Along these same lines, a man who is circumcised is not to become uncircumcised. Although most believe Paul is referencing a painful medical procedure to undo a man's physical circumcision, it is also possible that he is thinking in terms of a spiritual condition (Romans 2:25), although the context and wording seem to be speaking of a physical undoing of being circumcised. Likewise, a slave is not to seek to be free, but to live as a slave, becoming a testimony of Christ. However, the servant is free to seek his freedom if the opportunity should arise.

Paul now turns his attention to those who are virgins. He states that in this present distress a virgin would be wise to remain a virgin, unless they would be too tempted so as to fall into fornication. We see Christians were persecuted everywhere Paul traveled, and being “burdened” by a spouse may bring on more hardship than not being married. Those who are unmarried would most likely have more time to serve the Lord than a husband and wife would who are more concerned with family issues.

The believer and idols (verses 8:1–8)

Another question that the Corinthian church had concerned how they were to interact with the unbelieving world. Since they had all grown up in an area that worshiped idols, they were wondering how grace principles should be applied to eating meat offered to idols. They erroneously thought Paul had told them in an earlier letter that they should not interact with unbelievers when Paul was actually speaking of not tolerating open sinning within the church. Thinking that Paul was directing them to not interact with the world, they naturally were wondering if they should eat meat that had been dedicated to a false god.

Paul’s answer is that idols are meaningless objects made out of materials created by the one true God. Our very existence is dependent upon Him, something powerless objects of worship could not accomplish. With this in mind, Paul assures them that there is nothing wrong with eating food that has been offered to idols. They have no power, and not eating the meat because it was offered to an idol would be admitting there was some supernatural power involved in giving this food to a “deity.” There are restaurants today who pay homage to their gods while slaughtering their animals or preparing food. Who cares? Their gods are impotent creations of man.

However, Paul warns that if eating meat dedicated to an idol would cause another believer to fall, then we are to refuse to eat. I believe this is the point of the letter that was sent to the church at Antioch in Acts 15:19–31. They weren’t commanded not to eat, only that it would be wise not to partake of things contaminated by idols. The overriding principle is that we are not to cause another brother to sin.

Liberty (verses 8:9–13)

What Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:20 seems to conflict with what he said in 1 Corinthians 8:4–8, that the Gentiles are sacrificing to demons, and that we are not to become sharers in demons. Here, it seems Paul is warning us not to participate in pagan practices by eating food sacrificed to idols. However, the paragraph is actually about fleeing from worshiping a false god, not avoiding food that has been offered to idols (1 Corinthians 10:14). We are not to worry about eating food that may have been sacrificed to idols, but we are prohibited from becoming involved in idol worship. It is also wise not to eat meat sacrificed to idols because it may cause a weaker Christian to stumble and fall. It may be biblically permitted for me to do something, but it may be wise for me to abstain from certain actions because it may cause another believer to go against his conscience. Living the Grace life means we have a great amount of freedom, but it also means that we have a much greater responsibility. Like Paul wrote to Timothy, God has supplied us with all things for our enjoyment (1 Timothy 6:17). We are to use all things that God gives to us to edify each other and to give glory to God.