

1 Corinthians Part 3

Love Builds Up

BIG IDEA Christian freedom and spiritual gifts must be governed by love and used to build up the gathered church.

Purpose and outcome

By the end of the lesson, the class should be able to:

- trace 'love builds up' through Paul's teaching about freedom, worship, and spiritual gifts;
- distinguish participation in idolatry from morally neutral food and explain why love may limit a legitimate freedom;
- explain how social division contradicted the Lord's Supper and what receiving it in an unworthy manner means;
- describe spiritual gifts as the Spirit's varied provision for the common good rather than marks of spiritual rank; and
- apply Paul's tests of love, intelligibility, edification, gospel witness, and order to the church today.

Lesson at a glance

TIME	MOVEMENT
0:00-5:00	Opening question, prayer, and connection to Lesson 10
5:00-17:00	Freedom shaped by love - chapters 8-10
17:00-26:00	The Lord's Supper and one body - 11:17-34
26:00-39:00	Many gifts and the more excellent way - chapters 12-13
39:00-43:00	Intelligibility and order in worship - chapter 14
43:00-48:00	The Gospel Then and Now discussion
48:00-50:00	Summary, homework, and prayer

Before class

Write on the board: When can exercising a Christian freedom become unloving?

Controlling question: How does love govern Christian freedom, the Lord's Supper, and spiritual gifts in the gathered church?

Mark 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1; 11:17-26, 33-34; 12:4-13; 13:1-7, 13; and 14:26-33a, 39-40. Use one reader and participants' own Bibles.

PROTECT THE SPINE Required: the freedom tests, the divided Lord's Supper, gifts for the common good, and love as the governing way. Summarize: Israel's warning and Paul's surrendered rights. Leader notes only unless asked: head coverings, cessationism, and the principal interpretations of 14:34-35. Safely omit: extended debates over hairstyles, detailed gift inventories, and speculation about demons behind particular modern products or institutions.

The whole lesson in one claim

The Corinthian question was often, 'What am I free to do?' Paul repeatedly asks a better question: 'What will build up another person and honor Christ?' Knowledge without love becomes pride. Rights can be surrendered for the gospel. The Lord's Supper cannot coexist with contempt for poorer believers. Gifts matter only when they serve the body through love.

CENTRAL LINE Christian freedom is not permission to ignore others, and spiritual gifts are not badges of status. Love uses freedom and gifts to build Christ's body.

1. CORE Freedom shaped by love

Summarize chapters 8-10. Corinthian believers knew that an idol was nothing and that food did not bring them nearer to God. Their knowledge was correct but incomplete. Some recent converts still associated sacrificial meat with their former worship. Watching confident believers eat in a temple could draw them back into idolatry. Knowledge can inflate the self; love builds the church (8:1-13).

Three settings for idol food

SETTING	PAUL'S DIRECTION
Pagan temple meal	Do not participate. Eating within the religious ceremony joins the worshiper to what the sacrifice represents (8:10; 10:14-22).
Marketplace meat	Eat without anxious investigation. The earth and everything in it belong to the Lord (10:25-26).
Private meal	Eat freely unless someone identifies the meat as sacrificial; then abstain for that person's conscience and witness (10:27-30).

Paul does not let the most easily offended person veto every freedom. The weak believer in chapter 8 is vulnerable to returning to former worship, not merely irritated by another person's preference. Love refuses to use freedom in a way that draws another believer into sin.

Rights surrendered for the gospel

Chapter 9 uses Paul himself as the example. He possessed genuine rights to hospitality, marriage, and financial support, yet he sometimes declined support so that no suspicion about money would obstruct the gospel. Becoming 'all things to all people' means adapting to people and cultures wherever biblical faithfulness permits. Paul changes his practice, not his message or ethics. His flexibility is an act of love and respect aimed at saving some (9:19-23).

In 10:1-13 Paul uses Israel's wilderness generation as a warning. Israel experienced covenant privileges that resembled baptism and spiritual food, yet privilege did not make rebellion harmless. The warning confronts Corinthian confidence: participation in Christian rites is no license to flirt with idolatry. God's faithfulness supplies a way through temptation, so believers must flee rather than presume.

IDOLS AND DEMONS Paul says pagan sacrifices are offered to demons, even though the idols themselves are nothing (10:19-21). Teach the spiritual seriousness of idolatry without claiming that every modern object of misplaced trust is literally a demon. Money, politics, technology, status, and pleasure become idols when they receive trust and devotion that belong to God; evil can exploit that idolatry, but speculation is not the lesson.

A Christian freedom test

ASK	TEXT
Is it beneficial, not merely permissible?	10:23
Will it build another person up?	10:23-24
Am I seeking another's good rather than only my own?	10:24, 33
Can I do it for God's glory?	10:31
Will it help or hinder gospel witness?	10:32-33
Does it reflect Christ's self-giving pattern?	11:1

2. CORE The Lord's Supper makes one body visible

Read 11:17-26 and 33-34. The Corinthians' gathering reproduced the city's class divisions. Wealthier members could arrive earlier, eat generously, and occupy the best spaces while working believers and the poor arrived later to little or nothing. A meal proclaiming Christ's self-giving death had become an exhibition of selfishness and status (Life Application Commentary, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34).

'In an unworthy manner' describes how they received the meal, not a class of people who had finally made themselves worthy. None of us earns a place at Christ's table. Self-examination asks whether we are approaching with faith,

repentance, reverence, and concern for Christ's body. Awareness of sin should lead us toward Christ in confession, not away from the grace he offers. 'Discerning the body' includes recognizing the significance of Christ's sacrificed body and refusing to despise the gathered body of believers.

TEACHING LINE The Lord's Supper proclaims that Christ gave himself for one body. We contradict the meal when we remember his sacrifice while ignoring or humiliating his people.

3. CORE Many gifts serve one body

Read 12:4-13. The same Spirit gives different gifts; the same Lord receives different forms of service; the same God empowers different kinds of work. The lists in the New Testament are varied rather than identical, so this list should not become a rigid catalog or a ranking system. The Spirit distributes gifts as he determines, and each manifestation is given for the common good (12:7, 11).

The body metaphor dismantles both inferiority and superiority. No member may say, 'I do not belong,' and no member may say, 'I do not need you.' The less publicly impressive members deserve particular honor. In 12:13, baptism by one Spirit refers to the Spirit's work of joining every believer to Christ and his body at conversion. It does not create a higher class of Christians who possess the Spirit and a lower class who do not.

The more excellent way

Read 13:1-7 and verse 13. Chapter 13 is not a decorative pause between discussions of gifts. It is Paul's correction of a church using gifts competitively. Tongues, prophecy, knowledge, faith, generosity, and sacrifice amount to nothing when separated from love. The verbs in verses 4-7 describe how love behaves in a congregation: it refuses envy, boasting, dishonor, self-seeking, resentment, and delight in wrongdoing. Gifts belong to the present age; love endures (Prior, The Message of 1 Corinthians, 12:31-13:13).

Intelligibility and order

Summarize chapter 14 and read 14:26-33a, 39-40. Paul does not ask which gift produces the most impressive experience. He asks what strengthens the church. Public tongues require interpretation. Prophecy must be weighed. Speakers remain responsible for self-control. Outsiders must be able to recognize that God is among his people rather than conclude that the gathering is madness. Everything is to be done for edification and in a fitting and orderly way.

CESSATION AND CONTINUATION Christians disagree about whether miraculous gifts continued after the apostolic era. Present cessationism and continuationism fairly, but do not make that debate the lesson's center. Paul's undisputed rules apply to every claim: Jesus is confessed as Lord; the body is strengthened; speech is intelligible or interpreted; prophecy is tested; no gift is compulsory; and worship remains orderly.

Brief notes on disputed worship texts

Head coverings in 11:2-16

In Corinth a married woman's uncovered hair could communicate immodesty, sexual availability, rejection of marital honor, or elite disregard for ordinary social expectations. Paul also appeals to creation, mutual dependence, and worship before God, so the passage cannot be dismissed as meaningless custom. The transferable principle is that men and women should honor God, one another, and their embodied sex in ways that do not bring shame or needless scandal. The passage does not require modern Western churches to impose the Corinthian head covering itself (NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16).

Women speaking in 11:5 and 14:34-35

Paul assumes in 11:5 that women pray and prophesy in gathered worship, so 14:34-35 is difficult to read as absolute silence. Major contextual readings understand the command as limiting disruptive questions, the public evaluation of prophecies, or another form of disorder in Corinth. The repeated command to 'be silent' also applies conditionally to an uninterpreted tongue speaker (14:28) and a prophet yielding the floor (14:30). ECO ordains women and men to ordered ministry; that egalitarian practice is the working position for this class. Acknowledge complementarian readings respectfully. This is an important interpretive and polity question, but it is not the gospel and must not consume the lesson.

The Gospel Then and Now

MOVEMENT	CHURCH APPLICATION
Church reality then	Corinthians used knowledge, rights, wealth, and visible gifts to distinguish themselves from other believers.
Church temptation now	Churches can turn freedom into self-assertion, Communion into routine, gifts into status, and worship preferences into contests.
Gospel-shaped church	Because Christ gave himself for one body, believers surrender rights when love requires it, honor every member, and use every gift to build others up.

Discussion

1. When can exercising a legitimate Christian freedom become unloving?
2. How is a vulnerable conscience different from mere annoyance at someone else's choice?
3. How can a church contradict the Lord's Supper even while using the correct words and elements?
4. What happens when Christians treat a visible gift or ministry as proof of greater spiritual importance?
5. Which Corinthian problem most closely resembles churches today: individual rights, social division, worship preferences, platform-seeking, spectacular gifts, or disorder?
6. What would it look like for our congregation to measure worship and ministry by whether they build others up?

Likely rabbit trails

Whether every modern idol is a demon; clergy compensation; every disputed activity that might offend someone; contemporary dress codes; the precise meaning of 'because of the angels'; whether every spiritual gift continues; private prayer languages; cataloging every possible gift; deciding who may be ordained; and replaying every worship disagreement a participant has experienced. Answer what is necessary, then return to Paul's test: does this confess Jesus as Lord and build up his body in love?

Leader preparation

Primary sources used in these notes: Life Application Bible Commentary New Testament, sections on 1 Corinthians 8-14; David Prior, The Message of 1 Corinthians, sections on 12:31-14:40; NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, notes on 1 Corinthians 8-14; and ESV Study Bible, notes on 12:13, 13:8-12, and 14:34-35.

ECO connection: Essential Tenet III.C, covenant life in the church, and III.D, faithful stewardship of all of life. Official text: eco-pres.org/constitution/

Before Lesson 12: Read 1 Corinthians 15-16. Mark what Paul says happened to Christ, what will happen to believers, and why resurrection makes present service worthwhile.