

# **Living in Liberty to the Glory of God**

## **1 Corinthians 10:23-30**

**January 30 & 31, 2010**  
**Steve DeWitt**

We will be partaking in the Lord's Supper a little later in the service. I'd like you to keep that in the back of your mind and let's allow this time in God's Word to soften our hearts and prepare us for what the Lord has for us at His table.

We are in the final stretch of Paul's long answer to a thorny question the Corinthians were struggling with; how do Christians live in community with one another when there are deep differences of opinion on lifestyle issues that some view as freedoms and some view as sin. The two issues of the day were 1) The eating of meat offered to idols and 2) Participating in feasts held in honor of the Corinthian goddess Aphrodite. As we saw last week, Paul makes it clear that attending the pagan feasts was fellowshiping with idols and an affirming of idolatry and the evil behind it. A Christian who fellowship with God can't fellowship with demons also (Verse 20). God is jealous for His own glory which means we must be too.

How do we navigate the minefield of liberty issues in the Christian community? To this Paul gives some practical advice, the principles of which will be very helpful to us. Some of you have been asking for some practical helps with this. You have Christian family members who are way more one way or the other than you are in some of these areas. Family gatherings are contentious because they always want to talk about "idol meat" kind of stuff. You have discovered in your small group that there are real differences with fellow members and you're wondering if you should be sensitive or not, talk about it or not, adjust your lifestyle or not. Here's what Paul has to say.

*"All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:23-31)*

Verse 31 gives the overarching goal - whatever you do, do it in a manner that is glorifying to God. Next week's message will focus on what that means specifically. Verses 23-30 are practical tips on how to do this.

### **Personal Freedom in Christ is Important but Not Ultimate**

*"All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. (Verses 23-24)*

We talked back in chapter 6 about the danger of Christian slogans; these little truisms that we easily memorize and want to apply to any and all situations. These are the kinds of things that end up on bumper stickers. "My boss is a Jewish carpenter." "Jesus is my co-

pilot." I heard of a bumper sticker recently that says, "Honk if you love Jesus, text if you want to meet Him." The Corinthian Christians had latched on to a slogan; *Everything is lawful* or as the NIV translates it, *Everything is permissible*. This might have been the sermon title to one of Paul's messages when he pastored in Corinth and it stuck with some of them for obvious reasons; who wouldn't like the thought that everything is allowed for a Christian? While true, without theological and biblical context it is a dangerous principle to apply to any and all situations. We know they were doing this because in chapter 6 we learned they applied "Everything is permissible" to whether they could have sexual relations with the temple prostitutes. *Everything is permissible!* That's the danger of living by slogans instead of biblical truth.

Paul says that yes, in the areas of Christian liberty - not morality - but liberty, we are free in Christ to enjoy the creation God has made. We are free from the bondage of legalistic, man-made rules and false measures of spirituality. Galatians 5:1 says, *for freedom Christ has set us free*. We are free in Christ and this must be protected and celebrated. In Christ, all things are lawful.

However, our personal freedom is the NOT ultimate and is not the final criteria for a Christian's personal behavior and lifestyle choices. *All things are lawful but not all things are helpful*, which he qualifies at the end of the verse, *not all things build up*.

The Greek word for *helpful* means *profitable, expedient, prudent, to bring together in a positive way*. Freedom must be guided by responsibility and wisdom. I think of what Jeff Goldblum's character Dr. Malcolm says in the movie Jurassic Park to the creator of the dinosaur park, *Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn't stop to think if they should*. Our conscientious freedom to do something is not the final criteria. When it is, it becomes a sign of immaturity - like the teenager who insists that he can do what he wants regardless of its impact on the harmony of the home. His perceived freedom is really a bondage to self. Paul insists on a better way for us.

### **Our freedoms must be ultimately guided by what edifies others**

That's the meaning of "not all things build up." The root of that word means "to build a house." One translation goes with "not everything is constructive." Spiritual maturity weighs the impact my actions will have on my fellow Christians and the testimony of Jesus in the community and the advancement of God's gospel ministry. *Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor*. (Verse 24)

Freedom in Christ is not a slogan or permission for all manner of personal expression. We are on this journey with others. We are in community with others and how I live and act needs to be guided by what is best for them, not for me. Here's a good guiding principle, *What if everybody did exactly like me?* That's a good question to ask on a Ministry Fair weekend. *What if everybody in this church served like I do?* How effective would this church be? *What if everybody's attitude was like mine? What if everybody was a great steward of their finances like me?*

Friends, how we live has a ripple effect on everyone around us. Paul is asking, Is the effect of your life and attitude one that builds up? Does it edify? Does it bring positive momentum to the church community? The Corinthian response to this is, *But everything is permissible! I am free in Christ to do as I want!* That attitude is a sign of incredible spiritual immaturity. Are you free in Christ? Yes. Was Jesus free? Yes. How did He express it? He laid down His life for the church.

I read of a pastor who preached this passage and then opened the mikes up for the congregation to share some things they have given up for their fellow Christians. No one responded. After the service, members of the church said, *For the first time in my life I realized that I don't really give up anything for the sake of others.*" (John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, p. 246.)

I remember hearing John Piper tell about being in Brazil speaking to a conference of pastors. He said he was in his hotel room and thought about turning on the TV. He also knew that some Brazilian TV had explicit material. He said, *I had freedom in Christ to turn that TV on, but I didn't. Why? Because I wanted power today as I speak to you and turning that TV on would possibly compromise my joy in Christ.* He *could*, but then he thought if he *should*.

So many things in life and Christian community come down to this. It's lawful, but is it helpful? Could or should? When we insist on expressing our rights and don't care about its impact on others, we are not following the example of Christ who gave up all His rights that we might be saved. In love we must seek the good and edifying of our fellow Christians. If Christ was willing to give up what He did for them, how can we do anything less?

### **Meat is meat and God calls it good so don't ask needless questions**

*Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. (Verses 25-27)*

I love this point. If you are from a background like mine, you will probably love this point too. The foundation of it is quoted in verse 26. Psalm 24:1 says, *The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof.* Every pious Jew would quote this verse as a thanksgiving before eating. Here Paul says that since meat is sourced in God, then it must be good and appropriate for us to enjoy. Remember what God said about His creation? *It is very good.* God made it for our enjoyment and all its pleasures are opportunities to praise God for them. As I often quote from Augustine, *He loves thee too little who loves anything together with thee that he loves not for thy sake.* A Christian worldview has a robust appreciation for God's good creation and our obliquity is to enjoy it to His glory (Verse 31).

I come from a church background that tended to try to be more spiritual than God. If it was really enjoyable, then it's probably not pleasing to God. Have you ever wondered why fundamentalism starts with the word "fun"? "Fun" is very suspect when you struggle to believe God would ever create pleasure for us to enjoy for His sake. All of this good creation is the Lord's including its holy, sensual pleasures. *For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving. (1 Timothy 4:4)*

So here Paul applies it to the idol meat issue. When you go to the meat market, there is no reason to ask all kinds of perceived spiritual questions about where this meat came from. *Was it offered to an idol? Have pagan priests' hands touched it?* All meat is God's meat. Just buy it, grill it, and savor it. Sometimes we try to be too spiritual, don't we? "I only eat idol-free meat and only shop at stores that are kosher." God's in heaven shrugging His shoulders. Lots of people are going to get to heaven and find out they could have enjoyed a lot more here.

Paul anticipates the "What about \_\_\_\_\_?" question. What about if an unbeliever asks you over to dinner? What should you do then? *Eat whatever is set before you* – finally a verse

many of you have obeyed all your life. *Eat whatever is set before you, without raising any question on the ground of conscience.* Since the earth is the Lord's, when you sit down at a table to eat, there's no reason to ask over-scrupulous questions. I don't think he means questions for your own conscience. I think he means questions about everyone else's conscience. *Has this meat been offered to idols? And if it has, is everyone here okay with us eating it?* This is a Christian version, "Don't ask, don't tell," or as my Dad used to say, "Don't ask a question you don't want the answer to." There's no reason to make it a conscience issue. Just eat, talk, and be normal about it.

### **What if it is a conscience issue and participating will be spiritually damaging to them?**

*But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—I do not mean your conscience, but his. (Verses 28-29)*

Here is a very practical help. If someone brings it up at the table and says, "This is meat offered to an idol," that statement is an indication of where their conscience is on the issue. Now you know that you are at a table with someone who is not conscientiously free to eat it. What do you do? What some people do is see it as an opportunity to argue about it. "Oh Sally, it's no big deal, the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. Get over it." Or it's an opportunity to flaunt your freedom: "Oh, it's meat offered to an idol, I prefer that kind of meat. Please pass the A1." Is arguing and flaunting "building up"? No, it is prioritizing my personal freedom. That's the thing. The person who brings it up is theologically wrong, yet what are the strong to do? Get their priorities right. Unity tastes better than steak. Love tastes better than steak. Even if you have personal freedom, for the sake of the other person's conscience, graciously refrain and show the other person you love them more than your freedom.

I was at a wedding reception and sitting next to me was a young married couple that I didn't know. They knew that I was a pastor at Bethel. The wife was sitting next to me and it turns out that she was a pastor's daughter. At this reception there was a Champagne toast. I have taught on alcohol and Christianity and I don't have time to give you a summary on it. It's available at our Media Center. Sometimes these bottles on the table are alcoholic. Sometimes it's the sparkling juice stuff. It is hard to know. The woman said to me, "Pastor, I want you to know that this is real champagne." She said this as she was clearly about to drink it herself.

Why did she say that? If she is about to drink it and if her conscience is strong on it, that means she doesn't have any problem with anyone else doing so. But if that was the case, why would she point that out to me? Perhaps just as random information, but I think her conscience was not truly strong on it. It was okay for her, but not for the pastor sitting next to her. What should I have done? "Great! I hope there's more where this came from!" No. I could have pointed out the duplicity of her concern for me while she drinks it herself. But that would have been awkward at the table in front of others. In these kinds of moments, let the other person's conscience be your guide and if refraining from the exercise of your freedom creates harmony, honors the other person, shows unbelievers at the table the Christian virtue of mutual respect, then choose that path. Nothing tastes better than love.

When Christians go to war over these idol-meat kinds of issues, it undermines the gospel testimony. Remember, it is not the eating of idol meat or not, the drinking of Champagne at a wedding or not, the practicing of a Sunday Sabbath or not, the involvement in culture or

not that will say to the world that we are followers of Jesus. *By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" (John 13:35)

### **Love requires adjusting actions, not necessarily conscience**

The issue may seem to be liberty, but the real issue is love; love for one another that submits my personal preference for whatever is going to be best for them.

*For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? (Verses 29-30)*

This doesn't mean that we change our conscience or position on things. My liberty is not bound by someone else's conscience. We are not hostage to the weaker brother's immaturity or lack of understanding or whatever else has created this conscientious weak spot. *We are to modify our actions for the sake of others, but we are not to modify our consciences.* (John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, p. 247)

Implicit in this example is that if I am not with people I know are weak on a matter then I am free to enjoy my freedom. Context is important and a mature Christian will bear that in mind. Should I feel freer with my liberty in a private setting, like my home or somewhere where the possibility of offense is low? I think so. We just need to be mindful and loving; not fearful. I have seen that as well where everyone is walking around in fear of offending someone. Paul ate idol meat. He says so. But in his example obviously there are some contexts where he wouldn't. I can't answer every "what if" for you but I can encourage intentional discernment.

### **God's glory is the goal**

*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.* (Verse 31)

There's the ultimate. Can I do this to God's glory? I am really looking forward to next week. I want to talk with you about a lifestyle shaped around this verse. It might be one of the most important messages we will ever have here.

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