

Liberty, Not License

Lesson for November 26, 2023

Unit III: Christ Frees, Law Enslaves

Adult Topic: Do What is Helpful

Background Scripture: 1 Corinthians 8; 10:23-11:1

Printed Text: 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

Key verse: “... *I have the right to do anything*”—but not everything is constructive.” (1 Corinthians 10:23b, NIV)

You’ve all heard the saying, “Just because you can, doesn’t mean you should.” This became clear to me as a middle schooler in my neighborhood with friends building homemade bike ramps, nothing more than a rotten piece of plywood from a trash pile and a cinder block.

Just because you can make a ramp and attempt a bike jump doesn’t mean you should. One memory comes when I was on vacation with the family at a campground in North Carolina. At the campground there was a 100-yard down-hill road into the campground with a few small speed bumps. Another boy I met at the campground and hung around decided he wanted to skateboard down the hill.

We looked at the small speed bumps and decided he could handle them, he built up the courage and got to the top of the hill. He started down that hill and got a good rate of speed. He handled the speed bumps just fine. I thought he might be home free.

Just as he was about to pass where I was standing about 3/4th of the way down, I looked down at the road and noticed a significant amount of gravel on the road.

It was too late to warn him.

His skateboard hit the gravel. It came to a dead stop.

His body kept going and he fell full speed on that gravel.

It chewed him up.

Some of you all have heard the saying, “If you’re gonna be dumb, you better be tough.” He handled being badly chewed up very well.

I learned an important lesson that day.

Just because you can, doesn’t mean you should.

Jonathan M. Melchior, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Lewisville, GA.

This is the message Paul presents to the church at Corinth in today’s lesson.

Key Terms

1. **Conscience** (10:28) – The sense or consciousness of the moral goodness or blameworthiness of one's own conduct, intentions, or character together with a feeling of obligation to do right or be good.
2. **Expedient** (10:23) – Characterized by concern with what is opportune *especially* : governed by self-interest for what is suitable or convenient for a particular occurrence.
3. **Freedom** (10:29) – The quality or state of being free: such as the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action; liberation from slavery or restraint or from the power of another; independence; the quality or state of being exempt or released usually from something onerous, freedom from care; unrestricted use.
4. **Sacrifice** (10:28) – An act of offering to a deity something precious.

Lesson Background

“It is widely believed that Paul had received a letter from the Corinthians in which they had written the phrase ‘all things are lawful for me,’ and he is here quoting them in his response. (Sunday School Commentary, Townsend Press, 103rd ed., p. 117)”

Chapter 10 continues Paul’s teaching from the prior chapter, where he pointed out his own practice of setting aside his “rights” in favor of what was best for others. When it comes to associating with idols, there are no “safe” ways. While the specific topic is idolatry in ancient Corinth, the principles given here are important for all believers as we navigate our Christian liberty.

Paul begins by making a connection between the Corinthians and the generation of Israelites that escaped from Egypt in the Exodus. That same generation died in the wilderness over the next 40 years. The rescued Israelites received significant blessings from the Lord. He led them by a pillar of cloud, and through the parted waters of the Red Sea. In a sense, they were “baptized” into Moses as their head and given spiritual food—manna—and supernaturally-provided water, both symbolic of Christ. Despite all of that, they were unfaithful to God. Paul writes that God was not pleased with most of them and killed many of them (1 Corinthians 10:1–6).

What did they do to earn that level of condemnation? Primarily, they betrayed their relationship with God by worshiping false idols. They indulged in other sins as well. Paul summarizes these corporate sins and God's extensive judgment of His people in His wrath (1 Corinthians 10:7–10).

These examples should cause the Corinthians to pay attention. Failing to do so would risk them falling, as well, at the hand of God on account of idolatry. Like the Israelites who came out of Egypt, the Corinthians were also raised in a culture that normalized the worship of false gods. Idolatry was an everyday experience in their upbringing. As Christians, they knew to stop worshiping idols. And yet, they may not have recognized how closely their daily practices brought them to participating in it again. Thankfully, God never allows people to face temptation they cannot possibly overcome. There is always a means to avoid sin by some form of "escape" (1 Corinthians 10:11–13).

With that in mind, Paul tells them to run away from idolatry. In more literal terms, they ought to separate themselves completely from anything even close to idol worship. This echoes the reaction of Joseph who literally bolted from a woman attempting to seduce him (Genesis 39:7–12). It's not that the man-made idols themselves have any power, Paul continues, but demons lurking behind them do. Participating in communion by taking the bread and cup of Christ connects Christians to Him. In the same way, partaking in the altar of idols causes people to participate with demons. Why provoke the Lord to jealousy (1 Corinthians 10:14–22)?

Paul granted that there are some matters connected with idolatry that are not wrong. He next gave his readers some help in making the tough choices needed in view of the amoral nature of some practices connected with pagan worship and the immoral nature of others. He suggested applying the test of what is edifying to these decisions. He proceeded to explain that food formerly offered to idols but sold in the marketplace was all right for Christians to eat at home. He himself had eaten such food (1 Corinthians 9:19-23), and the Corinthians had challenged him for doing so (1 Corinthians 10:29).

But the real issues seem to lie deeper than the mere question of eating food. Both the nature of their argument for eating at the temples (1 Corinthians 8:1; 1 Corinthians 8:4; 1 Corinthians 8:8) and their criticism of Paul (1 Corinthians 9:1-3; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23) have revealed a basic confusion between absolutes and *adiaphora* (nonessentials). They had tried to make temple attendance an *adiaphoron*; for Paul it was an absolute because it was idolatry. At the same time they had confused the true basis for Christian behavior. For them it was a question of knowledge and rights (*gnosis* and *exousia*). For Paul it is a question of love and freedom.

Lesson in Depth

I. Do What Is Helpful: How? (1 Corinthians 10:23-30)

In (verses 23-30), Paul gives four principles for Christian liberty:

- Edification over gratification (verse 23);
- Others over self (verse 24);
- Liberty over legalism (verses 25-27); and
- Condescension over condemnation (verses 28-30).

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful: The Corinthian Christians focused on their own “rights” and “knowledge” and only asked one question: “*What’s the harm to me?*” Instead of only asking that question, they needed to also ask, “*What good can this be for me?*”

Just because something is *permitted* does not mean it is *beneficial*. The Corinthians did not seek the **helpful** things, or the things that would **edify**. Essentially, instead of wanting to go forward with Jesus as much as they could, they wanted to know how much they could get away with and still be Christians. That’s the wrong approach!

Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being: As the Corinthian Christians asked the question “*What’s the harm to me,*” they did not consider how their actions harmed others.

Just because something is fine for *me* does not mean I should do it. My own “rights” or what I know to be permitted for myself are not the standards by which I judge my behavior. I must consider what is the loving thing to do towards my brothers and sisters in Jesus.

Eat whatever is sold in the meat market: How can Paul say this in light of what he said in 1 Corinthians 10:20-21 (*the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons... I do not want you to have fellowship with demons... you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons*)? Simply because the *meat itself* isn't “infected by demons,” and can thus be eaten. Paul's warnings in 1 Corinthians 10:15-22 have to do with the *atmosphere of fellowship with demons* at the pagan temple, which is to be avoided, not the food itself.

The sacrifices lost their religious character when sold in the meat market, so it was permitted to eat meat that may have been sacrificed to an idol at a private table.

Asking no questions: At the butcher shop, some of the meat was sacrificed to idols, and some of it was not. Paul says, “If you aren't going to partake of the atmosphere of the pagan temple, the meat itself doesn't matter. Don't even ask, and it won't even bother you.”

This is directed towards those Corinthian Christians who had *consciousness of the idol... and their conscience, being weak, is defiled* (1 Corinthians 8:7). Paul says, “Don't even ask!”

What if one of the brothers with a weak conscience objects saying, “Wait a minute! That meat was sacrificed to an idol”? Paul responds by quoting, *The earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness* (Psalm 24:1). The cow belonged to the Lord when it was on the hoof, and it belongs to the Lord now that it is on the barbecue! The *food* wasn't the issue, the *idol worshipping atmosphere* was the issue.

This quotation from Psalm 24:1 was used as a Jewish blessing at mealtimes. Paul says it applies to this food, also.

If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner... eat what is set before you: If an unbeliever invites you to dinner, don't get into a debate about the meat with them. Don't ask, and it won't bother you.

Notice that Paul *does not* prohibit socializing with non-Christians, he only prohibits the meal of fellowship at the pagan temples.

But if anyone says to you, “This was offered to idols,” do not eat it: Here, Paul has in mind the setting where a Christian is *warned* about the food by his unbelieving host, or a Christian host with a sensitive conscience. In that case, it is clear the person *thinks* it is wrong for Christians to partake of meat sacrificed to idols, so don't eat it – for the sake of conscience, **not your own, but that of the other.**

But if I partake with thanks – that is, if I can eat with a clear conscience, and offending no one else’s conscience – **why am I evil spoken of?** Since the food itself is not the problem, no one should judge another Christian who can eat meat sacrificed to idols, as long as they don’t violate their own conscience or someone else’s.

It may seem that Paul is being inconsistent, but he is being very consistent according to one principle: liberty within the limits of love.

II. Do What Is Helpful: Why? (1 Corinthians 10:31-33, 11:1)

Paul concludes his conversation by saying “Do all to the glory of God.”

Do all to the glory of God: The purpose of our lives isn’t to see how much we can get away with and still be Christians; rather, it is to glorify God. If the Corinthian Christian would have kept this principle in mind from the beginning in this issue, how much easier it would have made everything!

Give no offense: An **offense** is an occasion to stumble, leading someone else into sin. Paul says none of our behavior should encourage another to sin.

Paul is not talking about offending the legalism of others, something he was not shy about doing (Galatians 5:11-12).

Paul’s desire regarding men was **that they may be saved**. More often than we think, low conduct in Christian living is connected to little regard for the lost. Paul’s concern was **not seeking** (his) **own profit**, but that all **may be saved**.

In the concluding verse of this lesson, there is a call to follow the example set by Paul.

Follow my example/imitate me: Paul knew he followed Jesus, so he did not hesitate to tell the Corinthian Christians to **imitate** his walk with the Lord. He knew the Corinthian Christians needed examples, and he was willing to be such an example.

Paul simply did what he told his young associate Timothy to do: *Be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity* (1 Timothy 4:12).

How few today are willing to say what Paul said! Instead, because of compromise and ungodliness, we are quick to say, “Don’t look at me, look at Jesus.” While it is true we must all ultimately look to Jesus, every one of us should be an example of those who look to Jesus.

iii. In the specific context, it is a little difficult to know if Paul’s words here relate to the context before or after. Does Paul refer back to 1 Corinthians 10, and therefore mean, “Follow my example as I seek to bless others instead of pleasing myself,” or does Paul refer to what is to follow in 1 Corinthians 11, and therefore mean, “Follow my example as I respect God’s order and authority in the church”? Though he most likely connects it with what went before in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul was a good example in both cases.

Just as I also follow/imitate Christ: Paul knew he was an example, and a good example at that. He also knew that it was not “Paul” who was a worthy example, but “Paul the follower of Jesus” who was the example.

This also sets a limit and a direction on the way we imitate others. **Just as I also imitate Christ** has the idea of “follow me as much as you see me following Jesus.”

Lesson Summary

The previous chapter concluded with Paul's commitment to continue to control himself. He exercises discipline so he does not become ineffective in his ministry. He begins chapter 10 by reminding the Corinthians of how the Israelites brought consequences on themselves in the wilderness. Among their many sins was worshiping idols, and God killed many of them for it. The Corinthians must flee idol worship and any appearance of supporting the demonic practice. They are free to eat meat if they don't know that it is idol food. However, they should be ready to set aside their own freedoms and rights whenever doing so will glorify God and win others to Christ.

Paul's final words on the matter boil down to Christians avoiding any food they *know* to have been offered to an idol. This is for the sake of the consciences of those watching, both believers and the unsaved. Paul urges the Corinthian Christians to set aside their freedom to eat this food, even though it is not really "anything." The main purpose of this, established in chapter 8, is to avoid giving any appearance that they approve of the worship of idols. On the other hand, Paul says clearly that they are free to eat any meat if they do not know whether it has been offered to an idol or not. They don't need to be paranoid. The meat itself is just meat and, in fact, God's good creation and a gift from Him for which they can be thankful (1 Corinthians 10:23–30).

In the end, every choice a Christian makes should hinge on whether the activity will bring glory to God. And, it's necessary to consider whether it will build others up. Paul urges his readers to follow his practice of restricting his own rights and freedoms in order to avoid putting any stumbling block between unbelievers and faith in Christ (1 Corinthians 10:31–33).

Finally, Paul says, he tried to live a life before them that they could follow. We know we have discussed, over and over, that the best sermon a person can preach is the life they live that others can see. I believe that is what Paul is saying here. He had tried to be a Christian example that they could follow. Paul is saying, follow the pattern that I have given you, because my walk is full of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1)