

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY LIMITED BY THE GLORY OF GOD
1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1
February 12, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

This morning we conclude our series on “The Limits of Christian Liberty.” As we have seen, Paul’s emphasis in 1 Corinthians 8-10 has been on the rights of the believer and how the exercise of those rights might affect others (chapter 8), the gospel (chapter 9), and the individual believer (10:1-14). The exhortation in chapter 8 was that the more mature believer should be willing to give up those rights that were his in Christ for the sake of the weaker brother, lest they become a stumbling block to them. In chapter 9, Paul gave a word of personal testimony as to how one can give up these rights without forfeiting their freedom in Christ. Paul then offered the history of Israel, well-known to these at Corinth, as a bad example to follow in this area (10:1-13). Then, as we saw last week, Paul rebuked those that participated in idolatrous ceremonies and called them to claim their allegiance. In our text today, Paul shares the supreme purpose of the Christian life. He concludes this discussion on the limits of Christian liberty with that grand text, **“do all to the glory of God”** (v. 31). That is the ultimate bound to Christian freedom.

I. A Restatement of the Principle (10:23-24)

Paul opens with a well-known slogan in Corinth, **“All things are lawful for me.”** He quotes this four times in 1 Corinthians, twice in 6:13 and twice here in 10:23. As we saw in our study on Christian liberty in chapter 6, Paul would not disagree with this slogan. He used it himself to distinguish between the legalistic tendencies of Judaism and the freedom that comes in trusting Christ and being delivered from a performance oriented religion. Who better than Paul, the Hebrew of Hebrews and Pharisee of Pharisees (Phil. 3:5), to address this issue? The Corinthians, however, used this slogan, and perhaps Paul’s use of it, as an excuse to justify their actions, to continue to gratify their desires, in this case, eating the meat offered to idols without regarding the effect of their actions on weaker brothers.

This attitude may have arisen from their misunderstanding of **“all things.”** The Corinthians might have thought that by **“all things”** Paul was referring to the plain prohibitions of God in Scripture. In this case their conclusion would have been that Paul was not referring to their actions. But what Paul meant by **“all things”** was all things indifferent, all things that God had not explicitly or implicitly commanded. If God had not commanded it, if God had not spoken concerning an action, Paul says, then you are at liberty to do or not to do, free to commit or omit. You may have heard it expressed as “gray areas.” But the Christian is never to use this liberty as license to live as they please, even in those areas where God has not clearly revealed His will. So Paul reminds them that while there was an element of truth in the slogan, **“All things are lawful for me,”** this was not a Pauline dispensation for the Corinthians to live as they pleased at the expense of others.

Paul quickly qualifies this statement with few things the believer should consider. First, is it profitable? **“All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable.”** Further, **“All things are lawful, but not all things edify.”** We might call this the test of expediency. Both terms, **“profitable”** and **“edify,”** convey basically the same truth. The difference being that **“edify”** is always an action performed for the benefit of someone else (Kistemaker, 351). Therefore, Paul may be making a minor distinction between that which is profitable (as it relates to self) and that which edifies (as it relates to others). Regardless, Paul’s concern is this test of expediency. Is

this action profitable for the body of Christ? Is this action going to build up the believer or bring destruction? This is the focal point of this section. As it related to eating meat offered to idols, Paul told the Corinthians in chapter 8 that while they were free to do so, their liberty was restricted if it would cause a weaker brother to fall. Paul here restates this principle in closing his argument. The Christian's liberty is limited by, among other things, a genuine concern for the spiritual welfare of others.

He expresses the same thought a bit differently in v. 28, **“Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.”** The only way we can be sure if we are concerned about profitability and edification is to focus our intent on the good of others, not selfish ambition or hunkering down in our “rights.” The Christian life is to be selfless, not selfish. Our concern is to be more for the welfare of our neighbors than for self. This does not mean we are simply to neglect our own selves. Jesus, quoting Levitical law, said, “You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*.” A person loves himself by taking care of himself, physically and spiritually. This personal welfare is to be extended to others. Jesus called this the second greatest commandment, following only loving God with the whole self (Mt. 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; cf. Lev. 19:18). Paul twice quotes this second greatest commandment (Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14) and James wrote, “If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF, you are doing well” (James 2:8).

At the very heart of this entire issue of liberty is this selfless love for others. *Agape* love is not a love that seeks its own, but others. It is not a love that is *conditional* (“I love you if...” or “I love you because...”) but an *unconditional* love, simply, “I love you.” Paul wrote to the Philippians,

Philippians 2:1-4 – Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, ² make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. ³ Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴ do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Paul continues with the supreme example of this type of love, Jesus selfless sacrifice in coming to this earth and taking the brutal wrath of God upon Himself on the cross (Phil. 2:5-8). What was the key to Christ's selfless love? “He emptied Himself,” He set aside His rights and resisted certain freedoms that He himself had as God.

That is what the believer is called to, selfless sacrifice for the sake of others. Not on a divine scale like Christ, mind you. Thankfully eternal salvation does not hang in the balance based on our decisions and actions. But let that sink in for a moment. How great the sacrifice Christ made on your behalf, and what you are asked to refrain from in these circumstances for the good others and for Him. In my mind, this comparison is not even in the same ballpark. Quite frankly, we are without excuse in this area. We must take great care that our actions are born out of a love for others and Christ and not prideful ambitions or creaturely comforts.

II. The Application of the Principle (10:25-30)

Paul then gives specific illustrations of how this principle could be applied. Having restated the principle that the Corinthians liberty was limited by a concern for others, Paul gives some concrete cases.

1. In the privacy of one's home (vv. 25-26)

Paul's first example concerns an individual in the privacy of his home. First, he tells them that the believer is free to **"eat anything that is sold in the meat market."** This goes back to 8:4-6 where Paul established the truth that there is really no such thing as an idol, for there is no God but one. Based on this truth, eating meat offered to an idol, which is nothing, does not make one better or worse in relation to God (8:8). Therefore, the believer is free, has liberty, to eat not only this meat, but, as Paul states here, **"anything that is sold in the market"** in the privacy of his home. **"Anything"** is an indication that the meat was not contaminated nor did it contaminate anything else in the market.

The second thing Paul tells them in relation to this privacy is that they need not concern themselves where the meat came from. They could purchase and eat the meat, **"without asking questions for conscience sake."** As we saw last week, Paul plainly taught that they were not to participate in idolatrous ceremonies (10:20). But once the meat was sent to market, Paul says it is just like any other meat. Paul quotes Psalm 24:1 to emphasize this point, **"FOR THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND ALL IT CONTAINS."** Based on Paul's quotation, Curtis Vaughan's concluded, "All food that the earth produces is to be gratefully received as a gift of God" [*1 Corinthians*, 107].

Based on a false interpretation of 8:7-13, some believe that Paul taught that eating meat offered to an idol was always forbidden. But if that were the case, then in this verse Paul certainly would have told the Corinthians to ask if the meat was from a pagan temple or had been used in idolatrous offerings. To the contrary, Paul said that there was no need to ask. They were to not to draw attention to the meat and should simply consider it meat just like any other meat. The origin of the meat did not disqualify it. Therefore, the believer could buy and eat in the privacy of his home, no questions asked.

But what about in public, or, more specifically, in someone else's home?

2. As a guest in another's home (vv. 27-30)

Paul answers the question of how the believer is to respond when this meat is served at someone else's dinner party of which he is a guest. In v. 27, Paul says that the principle is the same. **"If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake."** Again, the origin of the meat is not important. Just as it is of the bounty of God in private, it is of His bounty in this situation as well. Therefore, eat, and **"eat anything that is set before you."** Again, one need not worry that the meat on his plate might somehow contaminate his vegetables or bread. Paul said, "Eat up and don't ask any questions. You are not to draw attention to the meat."

However, if someone brings up the fact that the meat has been sacrificed to idols, the situation is different. Here we have a few things to consider. First, some would say that this particular situation is taking place in the pagan temple as indicated by the invitation being offered by an unbeliever. However, if this were the case, then why would there be a need to indicate, **"This is meat sacrificed to idols."** In the midst of the ceremony, this would be unnecessary. It seems more likely that this indicates that the meat had been offered in the temple or some idolatrous ceremony, sold to the market, and purchased by the host.

Further, while the identity of the one making the claim is difficult to know, it is obviously a fellow guest, and not the host. It goes without say that the host's conscience would not be bothered. I believe it is right to assume that the one bringing attention to the meat in this instance is probably an immature believer. Curtis Vaughan goes so far as to show that the Greek word used for **"sacrificed"** is the word for a sacred pagan sacrifice, not the customary Jewish term for idol sacrifice. His conclusion is that this was a Gentile believer.

So what is the believer to do in this situation? Paul is clear, **"Do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake."** His instruction hearkens back to 8:7-13 where he taught that they were to refrain from do anything that would cause an immature believer to stumble or wound their conscience. Notice the change in consciences here. Where vv. 26-27 had the conscience of the more mature believer in mind, Paul changes in v. 29 to the conscience of the informant or some other immature believer at the meal. Curtis Vaughan points out, "The statement is somewhat awkward, but the thought is that the person (whoever he is) would be shocked, and the shock would be a shock to conscience" (107). Suddenly the more mature believer is put in a precarious position. Paul says, **"Do not eat."**

Paul then interjects himself into the situation. He asks two rhetorical questions to justify the more mature Christian's restraint in this situation. His first question, **"Why is my freedom judged by another's conscience?"** indicates, as we have seen in chapters 8-10, that the Christian's freedom is to be exercised in the context of a love for God, for others, and the gospel. The verb here translated **"judged"** is often interpreted as "condemned." That seems to be the correct rendering here. In other words, Paul is saying that others will condemn us if we use our Christian liberty at the wrong time for the wrong purpose. Calvin stated it this way,

Paul warns us of the danger that must ensue, if we make use of our liberty unreservedly, so as to give occasion of offence to neighbours—that they will condemn it. Thus, through our fault, and our unreasonableness, the consequence will be, that this special benefit from God will be *condemned*. If we do not guard against this danger, we corrupt our liberty by our abuse of it. [*1 Corinthians*, 346]

Calvin shows the danger of what Paul expresses. Paul's question could be stated this way, "Why put yourself in a position to be condemned by another?"

Paul's second question furthers this thought, **"If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks?"** Paul seems to address those that use an opportunity such as this to prove they are right. Not only do they partake, they do so after saying grace over it! How would the weaker brother look at this? Where Paul speaks of condemnation in the first question, here he deals with slander. Paul's question again, "What good can come out of eating the meat in this situation? Why needlessly give someone the opportunity to slander you and call you a hypocrite?" Paul's advice, **"Don't eat it."** To do so would be an inconsiderate use of liberty.

III. The Motivation for the Principle (10:31-11:1)

Paul now gives the overarching purpose for our carefully considering our freedom in Christ. Paul says, **"Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do."** Eating and drinking are in the context of eating and drinking to idols, but are also considered to be things that we often do unconsciously. When we are hungry, we eat. When we are thirsty, we drink. In the every day routine of life, this is simply ordinary. But eating and drinking, and whatever else we do, are to

be considered in light of the grand purpose Paul has longed to set forth in these chapters. What should motivate the Christian to take care in how and when he exercises these liberties?

1. Glory of God (v. 31)

First and foremost, the Christian should **“do all for the glory of God.”** We know this text well, but do we really understand **“the glory of God”**? How can we know if we are glorifying God in all things if we do not have a basic understanding of what that glory is? Our confessions begin with this thought. The first question and answer of the Shorter Baptist Catechism are:

1. What is the chief end of man?

A: Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

That is the goal, the purpose, the apex of the Christian life. What is this **“glory of God?”**

John MacArthur defines God’s glory as “something that is worthy of praise or exaltation; brilliance; beauty; renown” (*1 Corinthians*, 244). While I agree with this definition, there can still be confusion over how we, who are mortal men and sinners, can give God glory, who is infinitely and perfectly worthy and the sole object of praise and exaltation, brilliance, beauty and renown. In other words, how do we glorify that which is perfect glory?

Thomas Watson, in his commentary on the Westminster Shorter Catechism titled *A Body of Divinity*, offers some help in this regard (pp. 6-8). Watson describes God’s glory in two ways. He begins with God’s *inherent* or *intrinsic* glory, the glory that God has in and of Himself. God is by His very nature glory. Glory is essential to His being and this glory is perfect, because it is God. Nothing can be added to it; nothing can be taken from it, or God would cease to be God. We read in Isaiah 48:11, “My glory I will not give to another.” Glory is what God is.

Watson distinguishes this *inherent* glory of God from the glory *ascribed* to Him. That is what we are called upon to do in glorifying God. By glorifying Him we attribute glory to God. In doing so, we do not add to God’s glory, we simply are affirming that He is glory and therefore that He and He alone is God. God does not need us to do this, but it is His desire and the purpose for which he created man. In 1 Chronicles 16:29 the chronicler wrote, “Ascribe to the LORD the glory due His name.” Watson declared we do this by showing our appreciation and gratitude to God; in our adoration and worship; in our affection for God and subjection to Him as Creator and Master. This is what it means to **“do all for the glory of God.”** Charles Hodge urged,

Let self be forgotten. Let your eye be fixed on God. Let the promotion of his glory be your object in all you do. Strive in everything to act in such a way that men may praise God whom you profess to serve. [*1 Corinthians*, 202]

This is the supreme purpose and motivation of considering our liberties in Christ. Our choices in these matters must bring glory and honor to God. Flowing from this, and a necessary consequence of glorifying God, is the example of Christ.

2. Example of Christ (vv. 32-11:1)

The believer is to give no occasion for stumbling to anyone. Paul writes, **“Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.”** This describes all of mankind. **“Jews”** and **“Greeks”** refers to all of unbelieving man, and **“the church of God”** refers to all believers. Paul wrote earlier that to the Jew, he became as a Jew; to the Gentile, he became as a Gentile, so that he might win them (9:19-23). He restates that here, **“Just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.”**

That is the essence of seeking the good of your neighbor. Paul calls on all believers to do the same, and he extends the warning of offending others to those in the church as well. The believer must take care that he does not abuse his privileges in Christ and become a stumbling block to anyone.

Paul then interjects what at a cursory reading might appear to be the most arrogant of statements, **“Be imitators of me.”** But notice the qualifier, **“Just as I also am of Christ.”** The language here suggests that Paul is worthy of imitating only as long as he is imitating Christ. Curtis Vaughan concluded, “Though most of this statement has to do with Paul and his example for the Corinthians, the climax is reached when he affirms that he is an imitator of Christ. It seems therefore that the ultimate purpose of the passage is to hold up for emulation the example of Jesus Christ” (108).

So Paul’s message is that we are to **“do all for the glory of God”** through Christ. In other words, when another person looks at you and your actions, do they see Christ in you and you in Christ? That is the point of this passage and the theme of chapters 8-10. As Paul wrote in Colossians 1:27, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

Conclusion

We come to the end of our six-week journey on the limits of Christian liberty as found in 1 Corinthians 8-10. Our journey began in 8:1, “Now concerning things sacrificed to idols” and now concludes in 11:1, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.” That is Paul’s instruction concerning Christian liberty.

What then should be our response? We must examine ourselves in all things, those things that God expressly forbids and commands, as well as those liberties we have that He does not expressly forbid. We must think of God and others before ourselves. And may we heed the warning of Paul in 10:12, “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.” What is it to fall? It is to fall short of the glory of God.