

Freedom to Edify

Devotional Reading: James 1:19-27

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

Today's Scripture: 1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1

I. Exercising Freedom

1 Corinthians 10:23-30

23 All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.

24 Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth.

25 Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no question for conscience sake:

26 For the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof.

27 If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake.

28 But if any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake: for the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof:

29 Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other: for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?

30 For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks?

23a. The two statements in this half-verse are almost an exact repeat in the Greek of what Paul previously stated in 1 Corinthians 6:12a. The statement *all things are lawful for me* appears to have

been something of a proverb among the Corinthian believers. Perhaps they created it to justify certain behaviors in light of their freedom in Christ.

In response, Paul points out something the Corinthians apparently had not considered: the issue of what is legally permissible should be considered alongside the issue of what is *expedient*. The word being translated occurs in contexts that address things that are advantageous.

23b. The first of these two statements is almost identical to 1 Corinthians 6:12b. Again, Paul does not outright challenge the truthfulness of the statement. Instead, he sets alongside it another important consideration as he calls on the idea of *edify*. Christian freedom must not be exercised in a manner that considers only what is legally allowable. There is a bigger issue at stake: the impact of one's actions on others.

24. You may notice that the word *wealth* is italicized in the *King James Version*. That means there's no word in the Greek text being translated, but the translators needed to supply a word for smooth reading. Wealth in this context implies the spiritual enrichment of another person. The principle that Paul sets forth here is entirely consistent with his instruction to other churches.

25-26. Paul continues to affirm Christian freedom regarding an issue of his

day. The word *shambles* carries for modern readers a negative image of a place that is rundown and in a state of disrepair. At one time, the word designated a place of slaughter or bloodshed, and it came to be used of places where animals were butchered and the meat sold.

As we read the two verses before us, we may be inclined to think in terms of the clean/unclean issue regarding food in Mark 7:19 and Acts 10:15. But that's not the point here. Rather, Paul is reaffirming the reality of a Christian's freedom to buy and eat marketplace food, regardless of its association with paganism.

27. Paul then sets forth a hypothetical scenario in which an unbeliever invites a Christian *to a feast*. Whether such a feast takes place "in the idol's temple" (1 Corinthians 8:10) or elsewhere isn't Paul's stress at the moment. Rather, he is stressing that this could be considered an "open door" that presents an opportunity to share the gospel. This may be compared to the times when Jesus was invited to dine with those considered "sinners" (Luke 5:29-30). Again, one's freedom in Christ allows eating *whatever is set before* him or her.

28-29a. Paul briefly departs from his main line of thought to deal with a related issue: another person's *conscience*. Suppose the host at a meal informed his Christian guest that the meat being served had been part of a pagan sacrificial offering. In that case, the believer is to refrain from eating. Given the host's statement, to eat of this meat could be seen by the host as an acknowledgement of the idol by the Christian. Thus the host is potentially led astray.

The earliest manuscripts of the New Testament do not have the phrase *for the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof*, which is from Psalm 24:1. But since there is no doubt that it is indeed quoted at 1 Corinthians 10:26, above, we are certain it is part of Paul's thought.

29b-30. Sorting out the complexities of Paul's statements is a matter of some debate among many students. One proposal is that Paul is now resuming his main line of thought after the parenthetical verse-and-a-half just considered. In so doing, the apostle restates his freedom to eat his own choice of food and not be paranoid about what others think. Thus there's a certain tension between freedom and restraint. We saw this tension earlier in the first verse of this lesson (1 Corinthians 10:23). At the point of 10:29, where we are now, Paul seems to be leaning a bit more toward the freedom side of the two actions because of freedom's evangelistic potential.

II. Exercising Responsibility

1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1

31 Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.

32 Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God:

33 Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.

11:1 Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.

31. Our last section maintains the tension between freedom and restraint. But now a vital context is presented: that of doing *all to the glory of God*. Christians today are rarely, if ever, faced with the issue of eating meat offered to idols. But there are modern parallels. And no matter what difficult (and easy) choices we face, we must honor this imperative.

The privilege and duty of all creation to glorify God is a theme that permeates Scripture. This requirement transcends all times, places, and cultures. Sharing meals was one way the first-century believers

brought glory to God, and it can be so today as well. Paradoxically, we are the freest when we think least of ourselves in our desire to please the one who is our Creator, Ruler, and Redeemer. In so doing, we follow the example of Jesus who “pleased not himself” (Romans 15:3), but who humbled himself in an unparalleled way.

32a. Here we see another imperative regarding conduct. In contrast to the positive imperative of the previous verse, this one is stated as a negative.

To grasp the full meaning, we must consider the nature of the phrase *give none offense*. The Greek word being translated is rarely found in literature of the era. It occurs in the New Testament also in Acts 24:16 and Philippians 1:10. In all cases the foundational idea is that of neither causing offense (in terms of not causing to stumble) nor taking offense (meaning to have a clear conscience). A closely related word, spelled nearly the same, is found in John 11:9, 10; Romans 9:32; 14:21; 2 Corinthians 6:3; and 1 Peter 2:8. All these occurrences refer to stumbling in a spiritual sense. These passages as seen in their respective contexts indicate that the word *offense* is not to be understood as merely an insult or affront; Paul uses different words for that action.

32b-33. The imperative is all-inclusive, and the reason is clear: Paul wants to be able to have the widest hearing possible for the gospel. Given his desire that everyone—Jew and Gentile alike—*be saved*, Paul states later in this letter that “I am made all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22). Were he to focus on his *own profit*, he would be no better than the false prophets of the day. He was determined not to be a stumbling block. This is what he means by not seeking his own profit.

Paul points to himself as an example of the kind of conduct he desired the Corin-

thians to imitate. This was not egotism on his part, simply an honest, straightforward assessment of the kind of man he was. Elsewhere he refers to himself as having served the Lord “with all humility of mind” (Acts 20:19). A cynic would characterize that self-assessment as Paul’s having developed a sense of humility he could be proud of. But Paul’s actions match his words.

1. Paul never desired to build a following for himself, as he made clear at the beginning of this epistle. He was interested only in building disciples of Jesus—people who shared his passion for knowing Jesus and proclaiming His gospel of grace to others. He lived out the lifestyle he was encouraging his readers to follow: a life that glorified God in every way possible, including the need to edify others. To do that is to embrace the freedom that Jesus promised to all who choose to follow Him.

Paul’s primary concern in our lesson text is making the edification of others a priority within the body of Christ. The example he gives of eating meat offered to idols is not an issue for most believers today. Modern equivalents might be those places and things that observers come to associate with us when they see us—places and things that work against holiness.

This is, of course, an all-the-time challenge. It involves our lives out in the public arena, which must be lived with a sense of duty both to glorify God and as a witness to others (believers and unbelievers). It involves the kind of freedom that is anchored in personal holiness, without legalism or hypocrisy. It involves foregoing our rights, as Paul did, for the good of others. As we ponder these things in our hearts, may it be said of us as Paul said of himself near the close of his life, “I endure all things for the elect’s sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (2 Timothy 2:10).

Involvement Learning

Freedom to Edify

Into the Lesson

Describe a time you participated in an activity simply because you could do so.

What impact—good, bad, or indifferent—did your actions have on others, including family, friends, strangers, etc.?

Into the Word

Read 1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1. How does Paul contrast self-centeredness with other-centered thinking?

How can one create a balance between exercising one's freedom in Christ and not hindering another person's growth in Christ?

Key Verse

All things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.
—1 Corinthians 10:23b

Read 1 Corinthians 10:25-30. Why was this meat practice a problem for some Christians and not for others?

What would have been the telltale signs of crossing from a celebratory feast into a gluttonous one?

Into Life

Brainstorm personal practices that may cause others to stumble or question either your faith or their own.

Write a plan for discerning when and how to refrain from engaging in that permissible activity.

Thought to Remember

To edify others is one way to glorify God.