



Doing it *All* for God's Glory

1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

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I want to look this morning at the final verses of the tenth chapter of First Corinthians. St. Paul's going to wrap up his argument about what it means to responsibly live out the freedom that Christ has given us. The Corinthians had the attitude that because they were free from the Law, they could do pretty much whatever they wanted – even taking part in pagan festivals at the local temples and spending time with pagan temple prostitutes.

Paul's response was to take them back to the example of Israel. The Hebrews had been slaves in Egypt, but God purchased their freedom. He led them into a new life through a sort of baptism in the Red Sea, brought them out safely on the other side and sustained them in the wilderness. But he didn't just free them from the Egyptians so they could do whatever they wanted. While he sustained them with his loving care, he gave them the Law and through it explained to them that his ultimate purpose was his own glory. He freed them so that they could follow him and receive his blessing in return and all so that his loving-kindness would be made known to the whole world through them. It was a type – a foreshadow – of what he would later do for us through Christ.

Consider that each of us was once a slave to sin, but through the shed blood of Jesus, God purchased our freedom. Through his Spirit baptises us and grafts us into Christ, giving us new life – giving us spiritual sustenance – here in the wilderness of the world. And as he cares for us, God also teaches us – makes us disciples of Christ that we might be living witnesses so that the entire world might see his loving-kindness at work through us.

The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?" And the answer is, "To glorify God and to enjoy him forever." In his book, *Desiring God*, (which I heartily

recommend to everyone) John Piper revises that answer a little, saying that the chief end – the chief purpose – of man is "To glorify God *by enjoying him forever.*" God's chief purpose is to glorify himself and he's glorified by us as we find our joy in him. And why shouldn't we find our joy in him? He's the one who took us when we were sinners and when we were his enemies and bought us freedom from the mastery of sin with his own self in the person of Jesus Christ. Why should we not find our joy in him and in living out the freedom he gives by giving that very freedom back to him? How we can do anything *but* that when we consider how much our freedom has cost him.

And yet consider that so much of the time we take for granted the freedom God purchased with the blood of Jesus, and how often we use it to seek our own enjoyment – taking our freedom and using it to run back to our old master – to sin. We're free in Christ and yet we *voluntarily* run back to sin as if we were still its slaves. Why do we do that? We do that because we've lost sight of the cross. Because we forget just how bad our sins were and just how bad slavery to sin once was. Because we forget how much it cost God to free us – that it cost him his own Son. And like the Israelites, we start grumbling about God's gracious provision and wish we could skulk back to indulge ourselves in the "fleshpots" of Egypt. Yuck. Seriously. Maybe manna wasn't the most interesting food in the world, but manna wasn't the point. God provided for his people so that they could devote themselves to enjoying him – to enjoying being in fellowship with their Creator. And yet if it had been up to them, they would have gone back to the whip and the lash and making bricks without straw. Why? Not because they liked being beaten and making bricks but because they wanted to go eat out of the "fleshpots". I'm not sure exactly what a fleshpot is, but really, does it sound appetising? No. It sounds disgusting. I don't know if the Egyptians made sausage or not, but if they didn't, I bet the leftover parts went into those fleshpots along with the camel that died last night and the rats that got squished under the rollers when the slaves were moving that 20 tonne granite block from the quarry to the pyramid. No thanks. I'll take manna. Were the Israelites crazy and stupid? Probably.

And yet, friends, when we get bored with our new life in Christ and use our freedom

to seek our own glory and our own enjoyment and voluntarily give ourselves back to the mastery of sin, we're being just as crazy and just as stupid. But crazy and stupid are what happen when we lose sight of the cross.

Every morning gives us a new day to live out the freedom Jesus has given us. The Corinthians were using that freedom for their own benefit – not for God's. What are we going to do with it? That's what Paul's been dealing with in these last few chapters. Glorifying God *should* be our priority. Using our freedom for anything else is sin – and sadly, the more we sin, the more we lose sight of the cross and the more we end up doing "crazy" and doing "stupid" – the more we fall back into sin.

Paul showed us that there are some things in life that are definite and absolute no-no's. Anything that leads us into idolatry falls into that category and he illustrated that with the temple feasts and the temple prostitutes. If it directs you away from God, there's no question about it. Don't do it. If it causes your brother or sister to stumble in their faith, don't do it. If it causes harm to the cause of Christ, don't do it. If God's already told us in Scripture that it's something he hates, don't do it.

But what about all those grey areas. What about those times when there is no absolute – when you're truly free to do or not to do? How do we manage our freedom in that case? Well, starting in 10:23 Paul tells us what do to and he gives us some examples that have a connection with the "eating in temples" problem. In fact, they deal with an issue where the Corinthians were almost certainly judging and criticising him for something he was doing. So starting in verse 23 St. Paul spells out the basic principles we need to operate under when making decisions about how to live as people free in Christ.

He starts out with their line: "All things are lawful." That's been their argument all along. "But," he says, "not all things are helpful." Again, he repeats their line, "All things are lawful." "But," he says, "not all things build up."

Yes, you *can* do whatever you want. Jesus has purchased your freedom with his blood. "There is therefore now no condemnation" for you – no matter what you do. His blood is more powerful than any sin you can commit. But God didn't buy our freedom with his own life so that

we can test the boundless limits of his grace and mercy. He freed us so that we can do what he originally created us to do: to give him glory by enjoying him. We need to ask if the ways we exercise our freedom work to further his cause or our own. Does it put bring me closer to God? Does it bring others closer to the cross? Or does it just exalt me? He says in verse 24:

Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.

Whose cause am I promoting with my freedom? Mine or God's? Paul says the same thing in Philippians, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4). He urged the Romans to do the same thing by pointing to Jesus as our example:

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." (Romans 15:1-3)

Jesus is our example. There's no one more "free" than God, and yet the Word, the second person of the Holy Trinity, became incarnate – became one of us – so that he could die the death that each of us deserves. Paul wrote to the Philippians: "Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8). And what does Paul says in that same passage? Jesus humbled himself for our sake, but it doesn't stop with Jesus. Paul also says, "Have this mind yourselves." Let Jesus' example be the example you live by yourselves.

So the question then is: what does living out Christ's example look like when it comes to these grey areas and to these things that are otherwise morally neutral? Paul gives two situations that show us how to live our freedom. The first one is in verse 25.

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."

This is the positive side of Paul's advice. He says, "Meat is meat. Buy it and eat it. Don't ask any questions, because you don't have any reason to ask any questions." Part of living in freedom is not creating an "issue" where there isn't one already. The Jews had made an issue out of meat that had been offered to pagan idols. It was forbidden – not because of God's law, but because of their own rules. Freedom means not burdening ourselves with unnecessary rules.

He quotes Psalm 24:1. "The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein." The rabbis taught that a blessing needed to be said over every meal and this was the verse that brought them to that conclusion. If it all belongs to God, the least we can do is give him thanks for what he's given us. They saw it as presumptuous – almost to the point of it being theft – to just take from God's creation for ourselves without acknowledging the source and the ultimate owner. And while the rabbis were right on that point, they missed something else and that's what Paul points out here. If the earth is the Lord's and everything that's in it belongs to him, there's no such thing as unholy food. Just because the meat makes its way from the cow to the meatmarket with a stopover in a temple doesn't negate the fact that the cow and its meat ultimately belong to God. God is the source of the food whether the cow was butchered following kosher rules, whether you raised it and butchered it yourself, or even if it was slaughtered and butchered at the foot of an idol. It's God's and nothing can contaminate it and change that fact – so eat it and give him thanks. Again, you're free. Don't make an issue when there isn't an issue to make.

Paul gives us a second example in verse 27. What if your non-Christian neighbour invites you over for dinner and you see meat on the table? He says:

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.

Again, it's the same principle. It doesn't matter if you bought the meat to eat at home or someone else bought it and invited you to dinner. God made it. It doesn't matter who butchered it. Eat it and thank God for it. But what if someone else makes an issue out of it? Look at verses 28-29:

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.

Paul gives us this hypothetical situation. You're at the neighbour's house with a bunch of friends, and the guy passing the plate to you, who's your non-Christian neighbour from across the street says, "Oh, wait, you probably don't want any of this. I was walking through the market and I saw that our hostess buying it from one of Aphrodite's priests. I know you're a Christian and don't eat this stuff, so I thought I'd give you a heads up." Paul says that if that happens, don't eat it. Why? Not because the meat matters, but for the sake of the one who told you.

To understand the situation, remember that the Jews had a rule about not eating meat offered to idols. Remember too that the first Christians worshipped in the Jewish synagogues and, at least until persecution came, were classified as a Jewish sect by the government. Most people thought of Christians as essentially being Jews and would assume that all the laws and rules of Judaism applied to them. Jewish customs were widely known, so it's entirely possible that if you went to a banquet in a non-Christian's home, someone who knew you were a Christian just might give you a warning like this guy does in Paul's example. Thinking you were like the Jews and could be defiled by eating certain things, he warns you lest you do something he thinks is a sin for you.

And Paul says, it's for the sake of this person that the best exercise of your freedom is to just pass the plate to the next guest. Don't eat any. Rightly or wrongly, your friend thinks it's a sin for you, so don't eat it. Don't give him a reason to label you a hypocrite. I have to wonder if there's some way that Paul had the modern in Church in mind here, because

the number one criticism I hear from non-Christians about why they're turned off by the Church is that they see us as a bunch of hypocrites – people who preach one thing and do another. We need to be careful not to reinforce that criticism, even if it means sacrificing our freedom to do something that's otherwise perfectly alright for us to do. Again, what's more important: seeking to please myself or the cause of the cross? Is my exercise of freedom going to turn someone off of the Gospel? That's grace: caring enough about my neighbour that, even though he's wrong, I forgo my right to something perfectly "legal" lest he get the wrong idea and be turned off of the Gospel.

Then in verses 29-30 he turns it back on the Corinthians. Paul was known to eat this idol meat and, oddly enough after all the things they were engaging in, they accused him of sinning by eating it. He says to them:

For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? [He's referring to them – to the Corinthians and their legalistic accusations.] **If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?**

He asks, "Why would I let you dictate what I eat? I'm free to eat or not to eat. I already said that it all comes from God and that we're free to choose to eat it or not to eat it." Some have taken this whole passage to mean that Paul is worried about one Christian doing something that offends another who thinks that thing is sinful. These verses pretty much demolish that idea. Paul wasn't worried about offending the Corinthians by his eating meat. It doesn't give us license to deliberately offend our brothers and sisters, but it does mean that the Church doesn't operate on a "lowest common denominator" moral level. History bears out that every time the Church has tried that, it inevitably leads to legalism. Paul's ultimate concern was for the cause of Christ's cross and for giving glory to God. He understood that God had made him free so that he could show his grace and mercy to a world full of people who needed to see it at work – to a world of dying people who need to hear – and see in action – the Gospel message of new life in Christ. That's his closing point in 10:31 and 11:1:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

You see, we may be free to do a lot of things. There are all kinds of things in this world that are morally neutral in and of themselves, but the fact that we're called to live out our life in Christ in front of the watching eyes of the world adds a new moral dimension to everything we do.

Jesus calls us to be salt and light in this world. He likens the Church to a city on a hill – a light in the distance seen for miles around and lighting up everything around it. That's the reason why back in Chapter Five, Paul told the Corinthians that they needed to stop worrying about the sins of the world and start worrying about the sins within their own fellowship. The non-Christians out in the world aren't going to go to heaven just because we convince them to stop being sexually immoral, or to stop being homosexuals, or doing drugs, or whatever other worldly sin offends our sensibilities. If we want to see them rescued from sin and death, we need to lead them to Jesus Christ. It means we need to share the Gospel with them in words, but more importantly, we need to share it with them in how we live. We need to back up our words with our deeds. We need to be careful not to give them any cause to call us hypocrites and when we do stumble and sin, we need to be humble and honest about it instead of being self-righteous.

Friends, it means that we as the Body of Christ need to be growing together in love for each other and in holiness so that the testimony of our church in our community will be pure and beautiful and attractive to those who don't yet know Christ. That means practising what we preach. It means steering clear of obvious sins like idolatry, but it also means exercising our freedom with others in mind instead of just ourselves and our wants and our desires. It means that we need to use our freedom to glorify God. If there is anything in your life that is an offence to someone else, that's keeping them from coming to Christ, other than the cross, that

thing is a sin. Don't underestimate it or soft-pedal it. Root it out and nail it to the cross.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we ask you this morning to help us live out our freedom in love. Love for you, love for each other, and love for the lost. Father, remind us daily, even hourly, of the great love you have shown us and the great price you paid to purchase our freedom that we might come to see everything to do through the lens of love and seek in all things to give you glory. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.