

The Proper Use of Christian Liberty

1 Corinthians 10:14-33

1 Corinthians 10:14-33: *“Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. **15** I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say. **16** The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? **17** For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread. **18** Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar? **19** What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? **20** Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. **21** You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons. **22** Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He? **23** All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. **24** Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being. **25** Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience’ sake; **26** for “the earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness.” **27** If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience’ sake. **28** But if anyone says to you, “This was offered to idols,” do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience’ sake; for “the earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness.” **29** “Conscience,” I say, not your own, but that of the other. For why is my liberty judged by another man’s conscience? **30** But if I partake with thanks, why am I evil spoken of for the food over which I give thanks? **31** Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. **32** Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, **33** just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.”*

Background Notes

In chapter 7 the apostle Paul began to answer questions that the Corinthian Christians had raised in a letter that they sent him. Questions about marriage and celibacy were answered in chapter 7.

In chapter 8, Paul began answering questions about a believer’s proper use of Christian liberty. In that culture, was it OK to eat food that had been dedicated to idols? The answer was yes, because there is plenty of liberty for the believer in non-moral areas. However, Christian liberty should be restricted if younger, immature, and weaker Christians might possibly be stumbled and hindered in their Christian growth as a result.

Look again at chapter 8:9-13 (in the NIV): *Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way, and wound their weak conscience, you sin*

against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.

So, Paul said, he would not eat food that had been dedicated to idols if a weaker brother or sister in the Lord would be stumbled - even though there was nothing evil about the food itself, or in the eating of it. In fact, Paul said he would never eat meat again rather than cause a less mature believer to stumble because he ate meat!

Many examples of potential stumbling areas could be given for the Christian today: for example, certain forms of entertainment; sports and other non-church activities on Sundays; drinking wine with meals; various other practices through which weaker Christians might be stumbled.

Another danger involved in Christian liberty is that we can allow our liberty go to “license” – if we begin to feel we can do whatever we want since our sins are already forgiven. That’s why Paul said that the Christian life involves a lot of self-restraint and self-imposed restrictions and self-denial and self-discipline (chapter 9). Paul used himself as a positive example: *“Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”* (9:26-27).

In the first half of chapter 10, Paul used the wilderness wanderings of the nation of Israel as a negative example. They were God’s people, but they did not practice self-restraint, self-denial, and self-discipline. They complained and criticized and were ungrateful, and as a result they lost out on the blessings and rewards of the Promised Land. The same thing will happen to believers today who don’t practice self-denial and self-discipline, and who don’t properly use their Christian liberty.

In the second half of chapter 10, Paul returned to the subject of food offered to idols, and the larger context of participating in idolatrous feasts.

Doctrinal Point

1. Celebrating the Lord’s Supper portrays the unity of the Christian body.

This is a great truth, and it’s interesting that it was presented here in the context of Paul’s answer to the Corinthians’ question about pagan feasts. What’s the connection, anyway? Back in chapter 8, Paul showed that it was OK to eat meat that had been offered to idols, which was a practice in the Greek and Roman culture of that day. He explained it was OK to eat the meat, because the meat itself did not become contaminated by being offered to false “gods” that were nothing more than idols were made of wood and stone. As long as weaker fellow believers were not stumbled, it was all right to eat this meat.

But - did this liberty to eat meat that was offered to idols extend to participating in the Greek and Roman public feasts and festivals, all of which were tied in with the Greek and Roman gods? Here Paul’s answer was different. Eating the meat

apart from the pagan feast was no problem. But participating in the pagan feast and eating food at the festival was a problem. In fact, it was idolatry!

Why the difference? Because when you participated in and ate food at the pagan feasts and festivals, you were linking yourself with the whole idolatrous system. Even though the food itself was not evil or contaminated, and the idols themselves were only wood and stone - **the pagan worship system was demonic!** There really were demons associated with these idolatrous feasts and festivals, and when people participated in the festivals, they actually shared in demonic practice.

Just as the people of Israel had fellowship with the Lord and with each other and ate part of the peace offering in the Old Testament (v17), so if a Christian participated in a pagan feast or festival, he or she linked themselves (whether knowingly or unknowingly) with the demonic world surrounding that feast or festival.

This, then, is the context of this wonderful truth of the Lord's Supper. When we participate in the Lord's Supper, we share in fellowship with each other and with the Lord Himself! Look again at verses 16 and 17, *"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread."* Celebrating the Lord's Supper portrays the unity of the Christian body.

2. Considering the Lord's Body governs the use of Christian liberty.

1 Corinthians 10:23-33: *"All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake; for "the earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness."*

If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake. But if anyone says to you, "This was offered to idols," do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience' sake; for "the earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness. "Conscience," I say, not your own, but that of the other. For why is my liberty judged by another man's conscience? But if I partake with thanks, why am I evil spoken of for the food over which I give thanks?

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved."

Be careful not to pull verse 23 out of context! *"All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify."* The Bible is not saying here that a sinful activity is lawful – that it's just not profitable or beneficial. No! Sinful activity is **not** lawful – it's **unlawful!**

Remember the context! Paul was discussing non-moral areas such as eating meat that had been offered to idols. That's the topic here. Eating meat offered to idols in a restaurant was OK - as long as no fellow believer was stumbled. But eating the meat and participating in a pagan feast or festival was wrong.

But what about buying meat that had been sacrificed to idols in the marketplace? And what about eating this meat at a dinner party at an unbeliever's home? Here again, the answer was: **consider the others around you**. There was no problem in buying and eating the meat, but don't stumble weaker believers – and **don't offend unbelievers**.

If you're at a dinner party with all unbelievers, you can enjoy your steak without asking any questions about the food. But if an unbeliever raises the issue of the food being offered to idols (and they probably will!), and it appears that your testimony may be compromised in their eyes, then it's best to refrain from eating that meat! It's better to refrain than to possibly ruin your testimony, or offend someone, or hurt his or her conscience in some way.

As believers, our standard operating procedure should be verses 31-33: *"Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved."*

Notice that verse 32 includes more than just the principle of not stumbling weaker believers. We should **try not to offend anyone** - whether it be unbelieving Jews, unbelieving Gentiles, or believers in the Church. We want unbelievers to be saved and to be added to the body of Christ. So considering the Lord's body should govern the use of Christian liberty.

Practical Application

Would you go to New Orleans for Mardi Gras?

I ask this question to try to illustrate and apply what Paul has been teaching in this chapter. If you asked me if I would go to New Orleans, I might say "yes" if I were going take part in a missions trip, or if I had free tickets for the SuperBowl, or maybe to look at the architecture, or maybe to play golf in the winter. And if you were to ask me if I would go to New Orleans and eat Cajun food in a restaurant, again I would say "yes" - as long as no young believer would be stumbled, and no one was offended with my actions.

But if you asked me if I'd go to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, I'd say a resounding "No!" Do you see the difference? Mardi Gras is a **pagan** festival. I definitely wouldn't want to link myself **in any way** with Mardi Gras - with the food, or the activities, or anything else associated with Mardi Gras. Even if I were to go just to observe, I would become a supporting participant of that pagan festival. And you can be sure that *there are demons behind Mardi Gras!* So let me ask you - Would you go to New Orleans for Mardi Gras?