



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 10:23-11:1

Topic

Paul brings the discussion of Christian liberty to its conclusion by telling the Corinthians to imitate his example the way he imitated Jesus Christ

Title

"Imitation is the Sincerest Form of Liberty"

Introduction

A group hug happens when at least three or more individuals hug in order to show their affection for, and unity with, one another.

Perhaps the most famous televised group hug occurred on the last episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. All the characters were involved in a heart-tugging group hug followed by a hilarious group shuffle to pick up a box of Kleenex.

The Guinness world record for the largest group hug was achieved on Friday, May 29, 2009 when 10,000 citizens of Alba Iulia and its surrounding townships in Transylvania gathered in a circle stretching over 2 miles and literally embraced their city.

Our text in First Corinthians has a group hug feel to it. The apostle Paul has been resolving the problems being caused by the believers who were

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exercising their Christian liberty in ways that stumbled others. As his analysis comes to its conclusion he strongly encourages them to “seek... the other’s well-being” (v24) and to “give no offense” (v32) but rather “seeking... the profit of many” (v33).

I can almost hear him say, “Group hug!” as he encouraged them to limit their liberty in order to all get along with one another.

With or without the hug we are encouraged to limit our liberties and get along. I’ll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Your Christian Liberty Won’t Cause Problems When You Are Seeking The Good Of Others, and #2 Your Christian Liberty Will Bring Profit When You Are Seeking The Glory Of God.

#1 Your Christian Liberty Won’t Cause Problems
When You Are Seeking The Good Of Others
(10:23-30)

The discussion of Christian liberty began in chapter eight. A liberty is some behavior that is not specifically forbidden in the Bible but is questioned by some. They are the so-called gray areas. Historically they have included things like drinking alcohol, dancing, smoking, participating in certain types of entertainments, and gambling.

In the first century city of Corinth the issue was eating meat that was being sold in the public marketplace after it had been sacrificed to an idol in one of the pagan Temples.

Some of the so-called stronger believers had no problem buying and eating the meat. It was, in fact, their liberty to do so. But their exercise of liberty also affected others and, therefore, must be taken into account.

Biblical Christianity is relational. It’s based upon my relationship with a risen, living Savior, Jesus Christ. It involves relationships with every other believer - especially those I am in the closest fellowship with.

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Rather than simply give rules about every possible situation in which liberty might be a problem, Paul gave a relational principle to govern all of our activities all the time.

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

1 Corinthians 10:24 Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being.

The principle that ought to answer all of our questions about Christian liberty is in verse twenty-four. Because I am a believer, I am to always seek the well-being, the good, of others over my own good. Period.

Verse twenty-three shows the principle in action guiding my decisions. "All things are lawful for me" means that all the things that are morally neutral and not specifically condemned by the Bible are in the realm of liberty. But since I am seeking the good of others over my own, before I participate in any liberty I ask myself two questions:

1. Is this liberty going to be "helpful"? In the context it seems to mean, Is it going to benefit others?
2. Is this liberty something that can "edify"? The word means *to build up*. Once again it is building-up others, not myself, that I should be concerned about.

Whatever might be on the current cultural list of gray-area liberties available to me needs to be tempered by whether or not my participation in them will benefit and build-up others.

What follows, in verses twenty-five through thirty, is a series of practical situations that the Corinthians found themselves in. Paul put the principle he had just established into action.

The first situation was meat being sold in the public marketplace.

1 Corinthians 10:25 Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake;

1 Corinthians 10:26 for "THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND ALL ITS FULLNESS."

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Paul had already established that being sacrificed to an idol in no way defiled a piece of meat. It was perfectly good to eat. Here he added a quote from Psalm 24:1. Since “the earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness,” then the meat belonged to Him before it was ever sacrificed to an idol. If it was good to eat before the sacrifice, it was good to eat afterwards.

If you’re thinking about the good of others you won’t investigate the meat any further. Buy it, eat it, “asking no questions for conscience’ sake.” In other words, *don’t make it an issue!*

The Christian who has liberty should do so without making it an issue by flaunting it. The Christian who does not have liberty should not make it an issue by investigating it.

The second situation is a private dinner in the home of nonbelievers.

1 Corinthians 10:27 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.

You’re invited to the home of nonbelievers. You might “desire” to go in order to share Jesus with them. In that case, “eat whatever is set before you.” Don’t ask if the meat was sacrificed to an idol. *Don’t act weird!*

Paul anticipated a situation that might occur at such a dinner.

1 Corinthians 10:28 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."

Who is the “anyone” who might say “This was offered to idols?” The traditional answer is that it is another believer, a weaker brother who would be stumbled.

But the context is that you have been invited into the home of a nonbeliever. It could be that it is the nonbeliever who mentions to you that the meat was sacrificed to an idol.

Why would they? Because they have some idea that, as a Christian, you might have a problem with it. That it might be off-limits to you. In that case, so as to not confuse the nonbeliever, you ought to abstain.

Why does Paul repeat the quote from Psalm 24:1? I think he means it in this second application to say that there is a lot to eat and drink that is not questionable. Eat or drink something else so as to not confuse your nonbelieving host.

This seems to be the correct understanding of the situation because of what we read next.

1 Corinthians 10:29 "Conscience," I say, not your own, but that of the other. For why is my liberty judged by another man's conscience?

Paul tells you it is the "conscience" of the "other" person, in this case the nonbeliever, that he was talking about.

"Why is my liberty judged by another man's conscience?" In other words, If my conscience is clear, why should I submit my behavior to the conscience of someone else?

Because,

1 Corinthians 10:30 But if I partake with thanks, why am I evil spoken of for the food over which I give thanks?

I might be free to partake and give thanks to God for my liberty (in this case, food). But I don't want to risk being "evil spoken of" for some liberty I exercise in the presence of the nonbeliever.

This happens all the time. I often hear a nonbeliever say of someone, "He claims to be a Christian but I saw him," and then they mention some item from the list of questionable practices.

I can argue that those practices are liberties. But I am arguing with someone who does not understand spiritual realities. I should rather be

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sensitive to their conscience about what is appropriate behavior for a Christian.

Remember that Paul was dealing with the issue of meat sacrificed to idols. Sure, it could be eaten. But the nonbeliever might have a hard time understanding why. After all, it just took three chapters to try to explain it to Christians who were arguing over it!

If I am seeking the good of others, whether they be believers or nonbelievers, I will adjust my behavior, including my exercise of Christian liberty, to benefit them and to see them built-up. I will be sensitive rather than selfish.

“The earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness.” I can therefore be thankful for and enjoy everything in the world that is not morally wrong. But if it is going to stumble some believer, or offend some nonbeliever, then I will limit my liberty (at least in public) and enjoy something else from God’s creation.

Seeking the good of others comes natural to me if I am seeking the glory of God.

#2 Your Christian Liberty Will Bring Profit When You Are Seeking The Glory Of God

(10:31-11:1)

If you have been born-again, then your life no longer really belongs to you. It belongs to God. Your chief purpose is to bring glory to Him and in doing so to point others His direction.

1 Corinthians 10:31 Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Food was the particular issue in Corinth. No matter the issue, however, you are to bear in mind that you want to bring God glory in “whatever” you do.

“Whatever you do” tells me that in every act and activity of my life there is potential to glorify God. All the little mundane, monotonous things can be

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invested with incredible purpose and meaning because I am in a living, intimate relationship with the Lord.

If along the way I must, for the sake of others, avoid or give-up certain temporal things, so what?

1 Corinthians 10:32 Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God,

“Offense” does not mean hurt feelings. We should, of course, try to not hurt others feelings but that is beside the point.

The word means something more like *obstacle*. We should not want to have anything in our lives that might be or become an obstacle to others from seeing the glory of God. Those others include nonbelievers who might be Jews or Greeks as well as believers.

Paul was their example. He was not telling them to do anything he was unwilling to do himself.

1 Corinthians 10:33 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.

If you want to know what Paul meant you need to see him in the Book of Acts and hear him in his letters to the various churches. Without ever compromising his faith in Jesus, Paul adjusted his habits and lifestyle depending upon the people he was seeking to reach with the Gospel.

He was never a man-pleaser but in seeking to please God and bring God all the glory he would act in ways that did not offend others.

- Around Jews he could appreciate their customs and restrictions without giving the impression that rules and rites and rituals had anything to do with salvation.
- Around Gentiles he could enjoy freedom from strict diet and from the observance of holy days and the like without acting outside of any moral law of God.

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His own “profit” was not as important as “the profit of many, that they may be saved.” The word for “profit” can be translated *personal advantage*.

In other words, Paul did not want to risk taking advantage of his personal liberties if it would hinder in any way his sharing the Gospel.

Where did he get this understanding of seeking the glory of God? From the Lord, Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 11:1 Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.

The Bible was not originally written with chapter and verse notations. This statement belongs with and concludes what we’ve been discussing.

“Imitate” can mean *mimic* or *follow*. Paul was following the example of Jesus.

Jesus Christ was all about bringing glory to God in Heaven. He was all about pointing men on earth to His Father in Heaven. Though Himself God, He laid aside the voluntary use of His deity and submitted Himself totally to His Father. He came to serve, not to be served, and it resulted in His giving His life as our Substitute and Sacrifice on the Cross at Calvary.

I used to think that this statement was a far-off goal to shoot for. Someday I might be able to mumble to someone, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.”

Then I realized that there is a sense in which the moment you tell someone you are following Jesus, or they somehow find out without you telling them, that they hear you say to them, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.”

You don’t actually say it. *You don’t have to!* It’s understood.

Christian means *Christ-like*. Lately more-and-more people are referring to themselves as ‘Christ-followers.’ Have you heard that? It’s popular in the emergent church movement. They try to distinguish themselves from those

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who call themselves Christians but are really just shallow church-goers. I thus avoid using it.

Christian or Christ-follower, it amounts to the same thing. You are letting people know that the way you think and talk and walk in this world is the way Jesus would if He were still here.

It can seem overwhelming, and it would be if not for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the inspired Word of God.

They remind me that I exist, that my chief end, is to bring glory to God and to thereby enjoy Him forever. And they empower me to do just that by seeking His glory and the good of others.

We've come full circle. The question of Christian liberty is understood in the context of Christian community. The church on earth ought to be listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the largest continuous group hug in history.