



# CHARIS-MATTERS

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## 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 en masse 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 non-moral 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, participating in certain types of entertainments, and gambling.

In the first century city of Corinth the issue was 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. They did, however, go too far when they went to the temples and participated in the feasts. Paul explained to them that was not a liberty; that was sin.

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 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 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 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 to that 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!

This is a good word for both the Christian who has liberty to eat it and for the weaker brother who does not. For the Christian who is bothered by such meat, what you don’t know can’t hurt you. If, on the other hand, you go around investigating the source of the meat, you are acting as though the earth is NOT the Lord’s, and all its fullness.”

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.

Let me give you an example. Though many Christians drink alcohol, and it doesn't seem to be an issue among nonbelievers, it is if you are a pastor. Nonbelievers expect I won't and even shouldn't drink. So in order to not stumble them, if they ask me to partake of something I might have liberty to eat or drink, I say "No, thank you" because of their conscience.

Why does Paul repeat the quote from Psalm 24:1? I think he means to say that there is a lot to eat and drink that is not questionable. Eat or drink something else so as to not stumble 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 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?

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I might be free to partake, and give thanks to God for my 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.

Now I can argue that those practices are liberties. But I am arguing with someone who does not understand spiritual realities. I should rather be sensitive to their conscience about what it means to be a Christian.

We don't want to give the nonbeliever the impression that we are Christians because we have given-up certain things. But neither do we want to give them the impression our lives are just as sinful as theirs.

Remember that Paul was dealing with the issue of meat sacrificed to idols. Sure, it could be eaten. But the nonbeliever would 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 in 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)

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Selflessness. Self-sacrifice. Thinking of others first. It's just not in our nature. But it is in our new nature.

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 everything that you do.

Does that sound restrictive? It should sound liberating! "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 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 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 seeing the glory of God. Those others include nonbelievers who might be Jews or Greeks and believers.

Paul was their example.

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.

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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.

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 not be advantageous to 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.

Jesus Christ was all about bringing glory to God in Heaven. He was all about pointing men on earth to His Father in Heaven. In His case, 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.

“Imitate” can mean *mimic* or *follow*. Paul was following the example of Jesus. In the matter at hand, therefore, they ought to follow his example and act in ways to not offend others in the church or in the world.

There is a sense in which the moment you tell someone you are following Jesus, or they somehow find out, that they hear you say to them, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.”

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You don't actually say it. But you don't have to! It's understood.

Christian means Christ-like. Lately more-and-more people are referring to themselves as 'Christ-followers.' It's to distance themselves from all the terrible things done in the name of Jesus by the church. It's lame but 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 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.

***Group hug!***