

Freedom for a purpose

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Date: 30 July 2017

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[0:00] In a short series entitled How Should We Live? It's a good question and it does need thought.! Christians have asked this question in every generation.

We're asking this question again in four messages, looking at the Bible answers. And today we're with the Christians in the church at Corinth as they asked, or sometimes they should have asked, this question of the Apostle Paul.

I draw attention to chapter 10, verse 23, where you see in quotes, everything is permissible. It's actually a quote that is given four times by the Apostle in the book of 1 Corinthians. And it seems extremely likely that this was something that was almost like a saying for him as he brought the gospel to them.

And as we read it in the English there, it looks a bit flat, but I would like for us to read it in this way. Freedom! Everything is permissible.

[1:19] Freedom! Freedom! Freedom! The cry of freedom is a major part of the Apostle's writings to the Christians in Corinth, but also in Colossae and Galatia and Philippi, lay at the heart of Paul's own understanding of the gospel and lay at the heart of his own experience of the gospel.

So it's a phrase that he is very, very comfortable with, and indeed a phrase that all of us should be extremely comfortable with if we know anything of the gospel of Jesus Christ in our lives.

The gospel of Jesus Christ spells freedom from a very dark place, from the guilt and power of sin, from the judgment of God, from slavery to our own desires, from bondage to Satan.

These are weighty things. These are massive, wonderful things. And throughout the Bible, there is this idea of people who were in slavery being brought into a place of freedom.

And the gospel of Jesus Christ spells freedom for everybody who is a Christian. And whoever you are today, if you have tasted of these things, this is your position.

[2:41] Not just some of this, but all of this. Because that is exactly why Jesus Christ came to this world, died upon the cross, and rose again that he should have a people who were free from the guilt and power of sin.

And free from the judgment of God. The terrifying judgment of a God who would condemn us for one sin. May Jesus die for the sin. So that we might be freed from that judgment and from the slavery of our own desires.

And don't we see that in the city that we're based in? How enslaved we are to our own personal desires. And from the dark bondage to Satan.

Another place Paul talks about people being children of the devil. So we are freed from that and we're brought into a reign of grace, the forgiveness of our sins, reconciliation with the God who we have offended, adoption into God's family, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the hope of eternal life. And aren't these wonderful, wonderful truths and our hearts leap and we say, Hallelujah for such a great salvation.

[4:04] Such freedom that we have been brought into. This is not partial. This is complete. This is the work of God because it's a work of grace. And how wonderful it is that we're not standing here today and just hoping on the basis that, you know, we've tried to live a better life this week.

That somehow these things might somehow seep into our lives again. No, no, no, no, no. It's because of what Jesus has done. And our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ only that we can say that

these things are actually true of us.

We were one thing, we are now another. And that is our status and position because of the grace of God that is found in Jesus Christ. And what an extraordinary thing it is and I just thought, wouldn't it be good for us just to think of a few Bible verses that sort of spell that out.

Verses that rejoice the heart. Isn't this extraordinary? If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The old is gone and the new has come.

Isn't that so deeply thrilling? That something so total can have taken place because of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

[5:28] If we're in Christ, the old has gone and we do not have to live with it. We're brought into a new world.

How beautiful it is that Jesus says to us, peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Some of us just need to hear that word today, don't we? We just need to hear that word, which is the birthright of every Christian. Jesus says to his disciples and to us, peace I leave with you, my peace I give you.

We know how the world gives. It's partial in a bargaining sort of way. But the grace that's given to us is so rich, undeserved, so lavish.

Peace of God that passes understanding. Don't let your hearts be troubled. Don't be afraid.

Something for us to enjoy today. Maybe just what you need to hear today.

[6:48] How powerful, Apostle Paul says, I can do everything through him who gives me strength. We're all facing issues in the coming weeks and months.

Many things that we don't even know about. You know, to think we went on that holiday and then it just turned into a kind of such a trouble.

But we have a God who upholds us, puts his loving arms around us, just carries us, doesn't he? He holds us, he carries us, keeps us.

I can't do everything in my strength. Of course I can't, but I can do everything through him who gives me strength. We are people who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and therefore we're so blessed.

Whatever you're facing this coming week, which may seem like a big burden and a hurdle for you, here's the promise for you. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

[7:59] So our brothers and sisters on the beach mission, I can do everything through him who gives me strength. In your work situation, there's a family difficulty going on at the moment.

I can do everything through him who gives me strength. You need to know that. In your loneliness, you can do everything through him who gives me strength.

freedom. Well, freedom's, it's heady stuff, isn't it? It's wonderful stuff. Just to have that.

Capital letters, exclamation mark, freedom, that is the privilege and the joy and the experience of every Christian. And it had clearly infected the Christians at Corinth so that Paul's gospel words, everything is permissible, were now for some all they needed to know and live on.

Don't bother me with the rest of the stuff. Just give me that word. Everything is permissible. Here's a picture of nearly 50 years ago, Woodstock, 1969, August 1969.

[9:32] The sort of apex of the permissive 60s in a way and sexual liberation, the permissive society.

But freedom for what? For what? How many freedom movements there are abroad in the world today?

This urgent cry that is in the hearts of all people because of the slavery that we do experience. But what freedom?

And it's a good question for Christians to ask as well for the freedom that God has lavished on us. What is it for? What is it about?

I want to suggest that it's for the Christian. Freedom is always for a purpose. It's never an end in itself. It's never intended to result in lives that are rudderless, erratic, unpredictable.

[10:49] Something very deliberate and fruitful that arises from Christian freedom. There are many descriptions in the Bible of what this might look like, but here's one where Paul writes to the Thessalonians how the

report had come back about these people that they had turned to God from idols.

But it doesn't stop there. They turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. And Paul goes on to say, and to wait for his son from heaven who he raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Yeah, people are people with a mission, people with a vision, people who are able to look beyond the present existential experience of their freedom and just say, why has God done this for me? Why has he plucked me like a bran from the burning? Why I've been brought into this new and precious and wonderful place? Why has this happened? And it's happened because God wants us to be people who live for him, for his glory, for his praise, that it should be evident that we are a people who have been rescued by him and that we belong to him and that we shine the life of Jesus Christ through us.

So freedom, Christian freedom, is always for a purpose. So we come to our reading this morning and there may be a part of you as we go through this that feels, well we've reached a high point in the message and we're sort of going downhill from now.

[12:58] Because it's almost like a but that's introduced. But I hope you don't feel that. I hope you really don't feel that. Because it's important to take these words, God's word, seriously, just as the fact that Paul was not content with the idea that the Corinthians had just got the principle of freedom, but he was very, very concerned to see how it should work out in their church's life and in their personal lives.

That's why we're looking at this passage this morning because we have the heading, how should we live? And it's quite clear that the apostle was writing this letter in response to certain questions that they had asked, the Christians have asked him about certain questions about living and behaviour and he gives them some answers.

But it's also evident that they were living in a certain kind of way and in some ways those were good ways and in other ways they weren't. And he wasn't just happy to leave them like that, just say, well, you're free, you can do what you like.

No, he wanted to challenge them and to test, ask them to test themselves whether this was a right way of living. So, he says in verse 23 here, everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial.

Everything is permissible but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good but the good of others. And he's asking them to use these two tests to examine the way that they're living and to test their behaviours against this.

[14:55] Is it beneficial? Is it constructive? Use these tests for a specific situation. And now he's going to give them a specific situation.

This is where we're going to have to concentrate a bit because it's something which is so foreign to us. It's very hard for us to put ourselves in the shoes of the people who had this major burning question.

It's about idol worship, idol feasts, idol food. I could pretty confidently say that almost none of us would have been involved with this.

There are places in the world where this is a reality, where this is a truth. I remember Phil coming back from Sri Lanka showing us those pictures of all the Hindu gods. I remember we went to Bali and we went to the temples there, which are very synchronistic kind of religion there and saw these pathetic offerings of food in front of these idol statues there in the island of Bali.

Very, very interesting to see that. But it was almost as if it was there for tourism rather than for a reality. But this is a reality. reality, what we're about to talk about here was a deep reality in Corinth, in that city-port, cosmopolitan, permissive society of Corinth.

[16:19] Quite often we relate it to a place like Brighton and say, well, it's much like Brighton. But in this way, it wasn't like Brighton because of this very manifest issue of idol worship, which had seeped into the whole of society and infected the whole of society.

It wasn't just a question of people who were religious, who went along with it, but it was just part and parcel of what it was if you were part of that society. It's almost, it reminds me a little bit of the sort of the idea of the Masonic position, where if you want to get on, the idea is, well, you have to

know certain people.

And maybe Corinth there, if you wanted to get on, you needed to kind of sign up for this approach. church. So, we're thinking about multiple places where there are temples, where there are idols. And this is a business. This is a man's site, and a woman's site. This is where people earn their living.

This is where money passes hands. This is where food is offered to idols. idols. And so much of it so, that it's far too much for the people, the priests and the priestesses who are sort of in that situation.

[17:41] And so that food, the bulk of it, goes back into the marketplace and is sold on to people. And that's the picture.

And as I say, it's very hard for us to identify with any of that. But this was a burning topic for the church in Corinth at that time. How should they, as freed people, react to this sort of endemic habit and behavior all around them?

What should they do? Not easy. A slight digression. I was coming here, I was remembering a talk which I'd heard about Muslims in certain countries, India in particular, coming to Christ.

And what should they do when they come to Christ? The implications for a Muslim to come to Christ are massive, aren't they? In their own family, and societally, it's a massive thing.

It'd be very easy for us to stand here in Brighton in 2017 and say, it's straightforward, just get baptized, become a Christian, the Lord will look after you. It's not like that, is it? It's not so straightforward.

[19:05] There are complications. It's really interesting to see the way in which these Muslim converts are being counseled in different ways by Christian people to try to keep them close to the Lord without complete wreckage of their families.

And I think we need to read this passage a little bit like the strength of that. This is not a theoretical problem.

This is a real issue that these people were facing. And that's why Paul spends quite a lot of time in this one letter talking about this matter. I want us to look at verse 25 and 26, where he says this, eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience.

For the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. So there you are, you want to get some meat, you go to the market, you buy yourself, you see some meat on the stall, one pound fifty, pass it over, enjoy. Because he says, why not? The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. interesting here. So you're going to that meat market, you're probably troubled by the thought, maybe this meat has been offered to an idol.

[20:36] It's contaminated in some way. Paul's advice to them is, don't ask questions, just enjoy it. That's a situation. It's interesting, isn't it, how he works it through.

And I would say that part of this freedom for a purpose is that we should be freed from legalism. We should be freed from legalism.

Legalism is the kind of the default position of human beings. In the thought of a mighty God who searches all things, how can I placate this mighty God?

What am I to do? And Paul is saying, the God that you have come to is not a God who nitpicks over your life.

He's brought you into a place of wonderful liberty and freedom. And there's a much bigger picture. So, I'm trying to think of some examples of how that might apply today and the sort of questions that people might ask.

[21:42] So, you might be particularly bothered about the idea that clothes are made in third world countries at ridiculously small cost because the people are underpaid.

So, you go along to the Heart Foundation charity in London Road and you find a garment on the stall there and it looks very nice and then you think, well, maybe it was made in Bangladesh or somewhere.

Maybe I shouldn't take this. so, you go to the counter and say, was this made in a sweatshop in Bangladesh? Can you just imagine the scenario? Or maybe you're very strong on the fact that eggs should be free range.

so, again, you go along to London Road Market and you see what's on offer there and you ask the person behind the stall, was the eggs made in that cake come from free range poultry? country. Well, here's another one. You're a student and you're probably very upset about the fact that the government actually introduced fees for tuition.

[23:10] This is our government once upon a time, many of us actually had free education. Sorry, confess it. Free education. Not now.

Your prospect is of leaving your university with a debt of £50,000 and a 6% interest rate tacked onto the back of that.

Good news is you're probably never paid off. 75% of the student loans in this country are never going to get paid off, apparently. It's a crazy system, isn't it? You can be really annoyed about that. This is our government. This is what they've done. How annoyed are you? Would you be prepared to to say to this government, I'm so fed up with you, I'm not going to accept the income tax you send back to me through gift aid?

I feel so strongly about it. I'm going to stand at a point of principle. Or you've got an extension to build on your house and someone recommends a builder and he seems to be doing a good job and so forth.

[24:18] He comes around to your place, measures it up well, gives you a nice price. And at that point you say, I'm just not very sure you paid your tax last year. Can I see your accounts?

Or you're in the back of a taxi and you're given some change by the taxi driver for your £10 note, probably a £50 note. you're given some change from the taxi driver.

And actually that money has just been handled in a drugs deal. Well, if you're going to be holier than thou, whiter than white, you're going to question so many things in life, aren't you?

I was reading about the Hasidic Jews in Stamford Hill in London. It's a very, very close community. And so everything is brought down to tiny, tiny rules.

Jesus encountered that all the time, didn't he? I'm thinking of Jesus walking with his disciples through the cornfield on the Sabbath day. And they do what all of us do.

[25:39] We walk through a field on any day that we pluck the ears of the corn. Well, that was a breach of the Talmud in various ways because they were working, picking up the ears of corn.

They were trying to make a meal like that on the Sabbath day, breaking, breaking the Sabbath. We know what Jesus said.

The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. What do all these examples show us? They show us something about what it is to lose the bigger picture.

And we have been brought into freedom so that we should see the bigger picture. We shouldn't be trapped by the tyranny of micro legalism.

Look at Jesus' words in Matthew 23 23 and 24. Matthew 23. Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites, you give a tenth of your spices, mint, dill, and cum in, but you have neglected the more important matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

[27:01] You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former. You blind guides, you strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. They've got the whole of life upside down and the tragedy was that they were examples to other people and were pushing other people down that same pathway as well.

We have been brought into a place where we can be free from legalism. And here's another one. Freedom not to sin.

Freedom not to sin. I'll add to your attention to 1 Corinthians 6, 12, and 13, which is the other place where the phrase everything is permissible occurs in this letter.

1 Corinthians 6, 12, and 13. Everything is permissible for me, but everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me, but I will not be mastered by anything. This particular story is actually about sexual immorality.

And Paul goes on to say, verse 13, the body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. Now the only reason why he is saying this is because some Christians in the church of Corinth were behaving in a sexually immoral way.

[28:35] They were misusing their bodies. And they were doing it under the banner, everything is permissible for me.

Well, what sort of reaction do you have when you hear that? Freedom! I can live as I please, because there's always grace.

There's always forgiveness. But they're not even saying that. They don't even think it's wrong. They think it's okay. Food for the stomach, the stomach for food.

What's my body for? Sexual immorality. Well, they wouldn't call it sexual immorality, they just say sexual liberation. I can use my body whatever way I want. God has given me a body, I can do whatever I want with it.

I'm free. Paul won't have anything of that, will he? Will not tolerate that. Sexual immorality for the non-Christian is exactly the same as sexual immorality for the Christian.

[29:54] Adultery for the Christian is exactly the same as adultery for the non-Christian. condemnation. They're condemned by God. We have no license to go down the route of thinking that somehow the law of God has nothing to do with this on this point.

God. You, my brothers, were called to be free, but do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.

I don't know if anybody's here today and you're just tempted down that route and you just feel that somehow God has a different standard for the world so you, you're in a kind of privileged place. You are in a privileged place because you've got light and having light gives you a responsibility and that responsibility is to obey the law of God from the heart and willingly because you want to please him.

Jesus himself, the totally free man, knew what it was to have to battle with temptation. He had to resist the devil. He was offered things that were very tempting but he resisted that.

[31:25] Corinthians 6.12 I will not be mastered. I will not be mastered. Think very carefully about anything in your life that you just can't live without.

seems to me that's pretty close to the definition of I will not be, I will be mastered. Is there anything in your life that you think, I just need this, I've just got to have this?

That's what it is to be mastered. freedom not to indulge the sinful nature.

But the bulk of this latter part of 1 Corinthians 10 is actually taken up with this subject, freedom to serve others. So I won't read it again but the scenario is as follows, back to the idols, back to an idol feast of some sort.

An unbeliever invites you to a meal you want to go, that's okay, good, it's good to be with unbelievers. Eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience, that's also good as well, back to that first point, the earth is the Lord's and the fullness of it.

[32:47] But if anyone says to you, this has been offered in sacrifice, what do you do then? This has been offered in a sacrifice to an idol, what do you do then? Well, Paul, you've already told us.

Idols are nothing. It's not a problem. I can have it. I can demonstrate my freedom by eating this without any objection.

Paul says, don't eat it. both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience sake, the other man's conscience.

So he's thinking of this person who's saying it's been offered to an idol. And that person is rather troubled by that thought. It's a believer or an unbeliever.

in that situation, you are to behave in such a way that you don't stumble other people. You actually suppress your own freedom for the benefit of others.

[34:10] Which is what he says at the end here. Verse 32, do not cause anyone to stumble whether Jews or Greeks, they're not Christians, Jews and Gentiles, the whole of the world out there.

The church of God don't cause anyone to stumble. Why? Because these little stumblings get in the way of the salvation work of Jesus Christ.

The key here criteria for these Corinthian believers is not to please themselves but to look out for others. Key criteria is how can I build others up?

In the Corinthian church there, there was a big spectrum, range of people, different opinions. There were some people who had a very sensitive conscience on this point.

They would say, I just don't think it's right to eat food that's been offered to an idol. On the other end stream, there were people who said, that's not a problem at all.

[35:33] I don't have a problem with that at all. God's made all this. We can enjoy it. strong, but the strong gives way to the weak.

You look out for the other person's conscience. Maybe in time, their own views will change. But this is a fantastic picture of the church of Jesus Christ and the way that it should operate.

It is not about strength, or rather, it is not about the display of strength. strength. It is about the display of strength in service. It is about me being so concerned for every one of you that I am very careful in the way that I behave towards each of you.

And you are equally careful in the way that you behave towards me. I need to be careful with my words, careful with my behaviours, careful that I don't cause people to stumble.

Of course there will be stumbling, but let me not be a cause of it. How important it is we are very careful with those who are new in the faith.

[36:58] How important it is that we are able to encourage and build them up. building others up.

So be careful. What might that look like in Brighton in 2017? You might criticise some of these examples, but I'm thinking of pride next Saturday, which is always a tricky one for us.

because we'll say it as it is. We believe that that is the ultimate celebration in this city of the very things which are condemned by God.

So I would just ask you to be very carefully, if anybody's out there just thinking, I don't know, I'll just go along and see what it's like.

Why don't you come with me? You need to think very carefully whether that is going to be beneficial and constructive.

[38:17] Why are you doing it? What is the purpose? If you want to get close to the homosexual community in Brighton and Hove, let me suggest Pride Day is not the day to do it.

You need one-to-one relationships. You need to invite them to a meal. You need to get to know them personally. Let me suggest you go to be very careful with some situations that have the potential for uncomfortableness built into them.

We know that this is a mecca for stag do's and hen do's Brighton, isn't it? I hope you won't ever be in that awkward situation where you're invited to some sort of event like that and you suddenly find yourself at 11.30 at night in a very, very compromising situation.

I hope you can keep your testimony at that time. There aren't many times when Katie and I have walked out of something but I remember walking out of the Theatre Royal one day at half time, wasting half your money, just because the language was so foul.

And you know it's so much more difficult when you're with someone else because you feel embarrassed for them and you know what they are thinking and you want to do the right thing.

[39:58] It wasn't edifying. Ever since then I've been extremely careful about any modern theatre because it seems absolutely standard that the language should be bad, degrading.

Remember we went out of a film as well. I'll give Katie credit because she actually encouraged us to do it. It's not easy to walk out of a film is it? You can't think it's going to get better. No, I don't need it. I don't need it. We don't need this. Freedom is not just to be able to suck up all the filth the world throws at us. It's to be discerning, responsible and to recognise that we're in the business of building one other up.

Can we do this to the glory of God? God? As I read this passage again, I think, isn't this astonishing sensitivity to others?

Isn't this another mindset entirely from the world? Isn't this beautiful? Isn't this extraordinary? Isn't this powerful?

[41:23] powerful if we should so look out for one another in that manner? Isn't this so like the Lord Jesus Christ?

We read of him, Mark 10, verses 43 to 45. You know the Gentiles lorded over them, their high officials exercise authority, not so with you.

Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

We're called to be walking in the Master's footsteps. And this is what Paul says about that sort of behavior. So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

Isn't that a high calling? Some might say that's an impossible calling. But we say, by the freedom that we have enjoyed in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, by the calling that God has put within us.

[42:44] We do not need to be trampled down by legalism. We do not need to sin, but we can be free to serve others.

Brothers and sisters, if that's where we're at, well, hallelujah. What a great calling. What a beautiful place to be. good good good