

Freedom and glory

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Date: 01 May 2016

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- [0 : 00] Our first reading is from 1 Corinthians, chapter 10, beginning to read at verse 14, and that's on page 1153 in the Bibles on the chairs.
- So 1 Corinthians, chapter 10, beginning to read at verse 14. Therefore, my brothers, flee from idolatry.
- I speak as to sensible people, judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?
- The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we, who are many, are one body, because we all partake of the one bread.
- Consider the people of Israel. Are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then, that food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything?
- [1 : 23] No, I imply that what pagan sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons.
- You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?
- All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.
- Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, without raising any question on the grounds of conscience. For the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof. 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.
- 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.
- [2 : 45] I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by somebody else's conscience? For if I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?
- 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. So, the second reading is from Matthew chapter 27, and as Ben said, on page 1005 of the church Bibles.
- Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him.
- [4 : 00] And they stripped him, and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head, and put a reed in his right hand.

And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews! And they spat on him, and took the reed, and struck him on the head.

And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe, and put his own clothes on him, and led him away to crucify him. As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name.

They compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha, which means place of the skull, they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gold.

But when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots.

[5 : 05] Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. And over his head, they put the charge against him, which read, This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.

Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself.

If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. So also the chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him, saying, He saved others.

He cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel. Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God deliver him now if he desires him.

For he said, I am the Son of God. And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way. Now, before we start this morning, I'd like us each to think of a recent decision that we have made.

[6 : 26] It needn't have been a sort of completely life-changing decision, but a decision, nonetheless, that you had to give some thoughts to, where you're thinking, Well, I could do that, or I could do that, or I could do that.

And then what I want us to do is think about the kind of process of decision-making. So have you got the decision in your mind? And now will you just spend a few moments, talk to your neighbor if that helps, just thinking about what was the kind of process of decision-making?

How did you decide to go for A rather than B, or B rather than C, or whatever it was? What are the sort of factors you were weighing up? Spend a few moments thinking about that.

Some people are looking very anxious, the kind of, the anxious decision-makers. Some people, their faces lit up, the glad decision-makers. But I guess, you and I, we make decisions all the time, don't we?

And 1 Corinthians chapters 8 to 10, and I hope we've seen this, those who have been following this series of talks over the last few weeks, are all about guidance and how to make decisions as Christians.

[7 : 30] But perhaps not in the way we'd expect God to guide us. Because you see, what God is doing in these chapters is giving us a framework by which we make decisions, by which we make decisions that glorify him, a framework which we can then apply in a whole range of different life situations.

It may not sound very exciting, perhaps, compared to the way in which Christians sometimes talk about guidance. But I take it, it is the way in which we should, generally speaking, expect God to guide us, to understand the principles that he gives us, and then to ask for his wisdom, then, in putting them into practice.

It's why, for those here looking in on the Christian faith, these are such important chapters, because they show us, you see, what the Christian faith looks like, living the Christian faith, in practice. The Christian is someone who has been forgiven by Jesus, but saved for a purpose, to live a new life, serving God for his glory.

And these chapters, 1 Corinthians 8 to 10, show us what that looks like. In summary, we've seen three principles over the last three weeks. So remember, the presenting issue is the issue of whether Christians should eat food that has been sacrificed to an idol.

The first principle, chapter 8, doing what builds up other Christian believers. And the summary, verse 13 of chapter 8, therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I'll never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

[9 : 02] The second principle, chapter 9, we are to limit our own freedom and the use of our own rights for the sake of unbelievers. And the key principle, chapter 9, verse 22, I've become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

And then the third principle, chapter 10, we are to make decisions for our own spiritual health. And the warning of chapter 10, verse 12, therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed, lest he fall.

And the Apostle Paul continues with that in today's passage. You'll see there's a little outline there. Don't worry about the diagram for the time being, especially those who freak out with diagrams. We'll come to that later on. But I've summarized today's passage.

You'll see that on the outline with those three words, jealousy, liberty, and glory. And we're going to have a look at each one in turn. First of all, jealousy.

And have a look, if you will, at verse 22. Chapter 10, verse 22. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

[10 : 15] And here, I think, is the question. Is jealousy a good thing or a bad thing? Well, I guess you say, at school, it looks like a pretty bad thing. Or perhaps you say, frankly, at work, jealousy looks like a pretty bad thing as well.

But wouldn't you want a lover to be jealous? Wouldn't you want a lover to be jealous of the relationship and to guard the relationship?

Seven times in the Bible, God is described as a jealous God. Not in the sense of playground jealousy, but in the sense of the jealous lover.

If you're a Christian, if you've put your trust in Jesus, then God is jealous of you in that way. And just as you kid yourself if you think you can two-time your husband or wife, say you kid yourself if you think you can two-time God.

Have a look at the warning of verse 14. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. Idolatry, you see, is far more of an issue for the Christians in Corinth than they think it is, just as it may be for some of us.

[11 : 25] And Paul explains why in verses 16 and 21, where the key word is the word participation. You'll see it in almost every verse in verses 16 to 21. It's a word which elsewhere in the New Testament is translated as fellowship.

Have a look at verse 16. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?

When we take the Lord's Supper or share Holy Communion, we are, in a sense, participating in the death of Jesus Christ. It's what we'll be doing later on in our service this morning.

Sharing together in the benefits of his death, the forgiveness of sins. In other words, by eating and drinking, we are saying, I am relying on the death of Jesus for forgiveness and to be in right standing with God.

And not just individually, but corporately, verse 17. Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

[12 : 35] We're saying we're in it together. We are together, those who have been forgiven by the Lord Jesus. And together, we are seeking to serve him.

Just as verse 18, in the Old Testament, to eat the meat that had been sacrificed was to rely on and share in the benefits of the sacrifice. What do you say?

What are the implications of that? Well, remember how back in chapter 8, Paul agreed that idols are nothing. Chapter 8, verse 4. An idol has no real existence.

And there is no God but one. There's no Apollo. There's no Zeus. There's no Aphrodite. There's no Artemis. Yes, they do not exist. But verse 19 of chapter 10, you see, that does not mean that food offered to idols are simply nothing.

That's a rather surprising conclusion. Does it mean that an idol is nothing? No, verse 20. Because you see, behind the idol is the reality of Satan.

[13 : 41] Verse 20. Idols are used by demons to hook people and to draw us away from the Lord Jesus. Is that not a very strong picture?

Just like the child catcher in the film Chitty Chitty Bang Bang voted even recently as one of the most scary villains of all time. I think I'm probably still haunted by my first memory of watching Chitty Chitty Bang Bang as a child.

The lure of the treacle tart and the ice cream offered by the child catcher. But, of course, behind the sweets and behind the fake smile was the cage waiting to take unsuspecting children into captivity.

And I take it that is the picture here, isn't it, in verse 20. Hence, verse 21, you see, You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

In other words, you cannot two-time God. You cannot have a foot in both worlds in two camps. The Christians in Corinth, in their arrogance, think that you can.

[14 : 54] Just as perhaps some of us think that we can. But you cannot. I put Matthew 6, verse 24 on the outline, the words of the Lord Jesus, No one can serve two masters.

For either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. One of the great sadnesses as you go on in the Christian life is that the list of people you know who have been drawn away from the Lord Jesus, it just gets longer, doesn't it?

It's very sobering. The fact that in Britain in 2016 we don't call things idols does not mean we don't do idolatry. It just means we are blind to idolatry.

An idol is anyone or anything that we put in God's place. An idol is whatever our heart clings to and relies upon. It is that which we trust and love and serve above all else.

It is that that we give things up for. It might be possessions, money, career, pleasure, academic success, health, fitness, beauty, family, leisure, pleasing others, producing successful children, any of these things.

[16 : 18] And countless others can be our idols. And what is the application, verse 14? Flee from idolatry.

I gather there's a great example of this on the women's weekend away a couple of weeks ago, of what it looks like to flee. An idyllic walk in the beautiful Kent countryside one Saturday afternoon, without the shackles of children and husbands, I gather was reduced to complete chaos by a herd of inquisitive cows in a field.

And while I gather some stood still, while I gathered others gingerly inched away, I gather as well there were indeed those who fled.

Well, I don't know whether fleeing is the right thing to do with cows, possibly not, but it is certainly the right thing to do with idolatry. Verse 14, my beloved flee from idolatry.

When you say, what might that look like practically? Well, I guess a Christian from a Hindu or Chinese background, perhaps who's invited to a family wedding or a celebration at the temple, I guess they may decide to go, so as not to cause undue offense.

[17 : 35] But I take it they will stop at the point where they would be participating, when actually what they are doing would be joining in with the worship of the idol.

It's why, of course, Christians won't participate in interfaith worship. Interfaith worship services where the Lord Jesus is worshipped alongside false gods and false idols.

Or what might it mean to flee the idol of career? Well, I think of Christians who have decided that they will never work on a Sunday, or they'll always make sure they are back from work in time for their Bible study group at midweek, whichever evening that is, to establish lines in the sand, to make it clear that their affections are not being torn in two completely different directions, in order not to provoke the Lord to jealousy.

I guess fleeing the idol of exam success at school might look similar. But I guess the biggest idol in Dulwich is private education.

Is that not the case? The biggest idol in Dulwich? Private education. Which may seem a strange thing to say from someone whose children are in private schools, but you see, how might you tell if private education is your idol?

[19 : 02] Well, I take it it would be when actually that governs everything else. When how hard you're going to work, how much you need to earn, where you're going to live, what job to do, are all governed, not by the principles of 1 Corinthians 8 to 10, how can I bring glory to God, how can I do what's best for building up other Christians, how can I do what's best for unbelievers, how can I do what's best for the sake of my own soul, not by those things, in other words, decisions not governed by the gospel, but instead by the need to earn enough money to pay the school fees.

Brothers and sisters, at that point, private education has become an idol. But you say, I want my kids to have the best start in life.

Of course, every parent does. But as a Christian, the way we do that, actually, is by bringing our children up in a family where the driver and shaper of decisions is the gospel.

What is best for the salvation of others? What is best for the sake of our own souls? Rather than the driver and shaper of decisions being something else. And yes, of course, private education can be just as much an idol for those who don't have it as well as for those who do have it.

So jealousy. Secondly, liberty. Verses 23 to 30. Have a look at the second half of verse 29.

[20 : 42] For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? To be a follower of Jesus Christ is to enjoy enormous liberty.

Liberty from religious rules and regulations. Liberty from law keeping. These things can never make us acceptable to God. We are wonderfully free from those things at the point when we put our trust in the Lord Jesus.

And the Christians in Corinth understood that, verse 23, all things are lawful, they say. But as we've seen repeatedly in chapters 8 to 10, the question is, how do we use that freedom in a way that builds others up and is helpful for them?

And so what we had, and we'll have seen this in our growth groups a few weeks ago, what we have in verses 25 to 30 is that Paul goes back to the question of food, sacrifice to idols, which he raised, or which they raised in chapter 8, and he applies the principles of chapters 8, 9, and 10 to three different situations.

And what I've done, I've put those three different situations there on the outline. So situation number one, verses 25 and 26, to meat that's been sold in the meat market, verse 25.

[21 : 57] Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the grounds of conscience. Don't say to the butcher, where has this meat come from? Can I see the certificate of conformity to, you know, whatever it is?

And the reason, verse 26, quoting Psalm 24, because the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. God hasn't handed ownership of the animal over to an idol. It's his animal still, regardless of its history and where it's come from.

Second scenario, a dinner party, verses 27 to 30. Have a look at verse 27. 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 grounds of conscience.

You can imagine, can't you see, everyone's arrived for the dinner party, everyone's had their pre-drinks, pre-dinner drinks, and their nibbles, invited into the dining room, and there it is, wonderful roast beef or whatever it is on the table.

And Paul is saying that is not the time to sort of cough delicately and inquire about whether the meat has been sacrificed to an idol. And the reason, halfway through verse 29, for why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience?

[23 : 14] If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? You are free. In Christ, all the Old Testament food laws have been abolished.

You see, the danger, I guess, is that these Christians in Corinth, they might end up and sort of create a sort of ghetto, mightn't they? Shutting themselves off from Corinthian society. You know, we're not going to eat these kinds of foods and create a sort of Christian ghetto, which would be completely the opposite of the principle that we saw in chapter 9, chapter 9, verse 22, of being all things to all people to win some.

But then thirdly, another dinner party scenario, verse 28, 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.

So again, imagine the dinner party. You're all sitting down at the dinner table. Perhaps imagine a scenario where there are lots of different dishes on the table and your host says, oh, by the way, the chicken was offered to an idol just yesterday.

Perhaps they're doing it to be helpful, to point out for you. Perhaps their expectation is you won't eat. They want you to be helpful. And so he says, Paul, don't eat at that point.

[24 : 41] And the reason, not for your sake, but for their sake. Perhaps they're a Christian. Well, so they won't stumble. Perhaps they're not a Christian, but nonetheless, that is their expectation of you that you won't eat it.

So don't eat it lest they think you are inconsistent with your beliefs. So, should Christians eat meat sacrificed to idols?

Well, the answer's pretty messy, isn't it? As it will be for other issues. And therefore, because it's messy, our practice will look different in different situations.

And with a whole range of issues, our practice as a church family will look different between us. Two implications. First of all, don't just follow the crowd.

I suspect we underestimate, don't we, how much we are influenced by the decisions of others, by the decisions of others within the church family, by the decisions of other Christians that we know.

[25 : 46] If so-and-so does it, that must be okay, but so-and-so doesn't do something else so I won't do it either. We very easily, aren't we, influenced by others like that. But of course, you don't know why they're doing it.

Their decision-making in terms of what is best for the gospel, you don't know what their decision-making has been. So you can't just follow the outcome of their decision-making. So don't be lazy, you see, and simply do what others do.

No, we need to do the hard work of applying the principles of 1 Corinthians 8-10 in a whole variety of situations in terms of working out what is generally the best for the gospel in different situations.

So don't be lazy, don't just follow the crowd. But secondly, you mustn't be judgmental. I wonder if you've ever caught yourself getting on your high horse thinking, you know, how can they possibly justify that?

And feeling rather twitchy in indignance and a sense of moral outrage. Well, of course, the reason may be very simple. It is that in their situation with the people they know, with the opportunities that they have, they have come to a very different conclusion to the one you have come to in your situation with the people you know and the opportunities that you have.

[27 : 08] just as they are free to do. Liberty. Thirdly, glory.

And Paul finishes this whole section, chapters 8 to 10, in chapter 10, verse 31 to 11, with a summary of the key principles. Let me read them for us. Chapter 10, verse 31.

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.

Everything we do as followers of the Lord Jesus should be for the glory of God. No compartments, no compromises, no areas of our lives where we don't bring the gospel to bear.

Verse 31, whatever you do. Verse 33, in everything I do. And all for the glory of God.

[28 : 18] Where the glory of God, as we've seen over these last few weeks, is defined for us, isn't it? Because if we're careful, I reckon that you and I, we could justify loads of things, couldn't we? And we could give them the caveat, oh, but I'm doing it for the glory of God.

And sort of get ourselves off the hook like that. But God will not let us get away with thinking like that. Verse 33, what is the glory of God? It is the salvation of others.

That should be our one aim if we're followers of the Lord Jesus, to use all our gifts, all our rights, all our privileges, all our freedoms for the salvation of others. That is defined for us in verse 32.

as Paul says, for Jews or Greeks, in other words, for unbelievers, but also for the church of God, for believers.

Now's the time to look at this diagram. I think it's an excellent diagram. And I can say that because it's not my diagram, it's someone else's diagram. So I've pinched it from someone else. I think it's a fantastic diagram.

[29 : 23] And it summarizes really everything we have seen in chapters 8 to 10. In terms of decision making, you see, so here's our decision making tool which summarizes 1 Corinthians 8 to 10.

With any decision, here are the questions to ask. First of all, does the Bible allow it? Yes or no? That's the principle we've seen throughout the chapters, chapters 8, 9, and 10.

Next question, does my conscience allow it? Just as we saw, that was the issue in chapter 8. And then, three further questions to ask. What is the effect on other Christians?

Chapter 8. Secondly, what is the effect on those who aren't Christians? Chapter 9. Thirdly, what is the effect on my own spiritual health?

Chapter 10. How many significant decisions have we taken, say, in the last month that have been based on these principles?

[30 : 22] principles? Or perhaps there's a significant decision you're taking at the moment and you're just kind of weighing out the pros and cons. Well, how about going through this decision-making tool and asking these questions of the decision that you face?

Because remember, you and I live in what Paul calls the gospel age. Look back to chapter 10, verse 11. We are those, chapter 10, verse 11, end of the verse, on whom the end of the ages has come.

This is the age that the whole of the Old Testament looked forward to. This is the age when the risen Jesus is building his church, when the gospel is going out to the nations, when he is gathering in his people.

This is not the time, you see, to take our eyes off the gospel. It is time for direction, focus, and purpose.

Parents, how are we teaching our children to make decisions? Do we just encourage them to do what they feel most comfortable with?

[31 : 37] Or what, you know, everyone else is doing, perhaps? Let's encourage our children to make decisions in terms of what is best for the gospel, what is best for the salvation of others.

Now, I'm very conscious there are some for whom this may feel very, very alien. We live, don't we, in a world where people are very quick to stand on their rights and live by their rights.

It may sound, perhaps, to some as if, frankly, this is just taking Christianity far too seriously. So look, will you, finally, at chapter 11, verse 1. The imitators of me as I am of Christ.

This is the model for the Christian life because Jesus Christ, who, as God in the flesh, in a sense, had more rights than anyone else, yet actually he gave them up.

Very strikingly, in Luke, chapter 19, verse 10, in conversation with Zacchaeus, Jesus says, for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

[32 : 48] Exactly the same word, seek and save, the Apostle Paul uses in chapter 10, verse 33. And at his crucifixion, in that reading from Matthew, chapter 27, while he hung on the cross, the scoffers said to him, he saved others he cannot save himself.

He is the King of Israel. Let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him. Now, they were right, of course, weren't they? He couldn't both save himself and save others.

He gave up his rights. He gave up his freedom for the sake of saving others. You see, the Apostle Paul has grasped what this freedom means and looks like.

It is the freedom to forget oneself. It is, if you like, the freedom not to be free, to seek ultimately what is important, the eternal salvation of other people.

But it's also, of course, humbling, isn't it? It's humbling when we stand so often on our own rights. It's humbling when we want to use our freedoms for ourselves to think of the Lord Jesus who gave up his rights.

[34 : 07] But of course, it's also the answer, isn't it, when we get things wrong. When we get this wrong, as so often we do get this wrong. Jesus Christ who died for self-centered people like you and me to bring forgiveness and salvation to those who don't deserve it, as we'll be remembering in just a moment in the Lord's Supper.

Thank you.