

"CHRISTIAN LIBERTY"
I Corinthians 8-10
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Bill and Sally had for several months been trying to build a relationship with their neighbors.

It was slow going at first because both couples were busy.

But over time it was easy to start and carry on conversations with them.

It seemed like a real break-through in the relationship when the neighbors initiated a dinner out together.

They were to meet at the Charthouse and Bill and Sally prayed about their time together with these new friends.

Both Bill and Sally had grown up in homes where alcohol was just not used. In fact while their parents weren't legalistic about it they all had strong convictions against the drinking of alcohol of any kind and so Bill and Sally were glad that the first invitation from their new friends wasn't to a nightclub.

Dinner went well, the conversation was easy and the food good.

About the time that dessert would have been ordered, the neighbors rather awkwardly said they had a surprise to announce and it was so special that they wanted Bill and Sally to join with them in the celebration.

At that the neighbor signaled the waiter who brought a very elegantly wrapped bottle of wine to the table.

And before Bill or Sally could say anything, the neighbor had poured a small amount of wine into four glasses and proceeded to announce his and his wife's glad announcement.

They had just received the name and particulars on the child they were adopting from out of the country.

With that they asked Bill and Sally to drink a toast to their good fortune and their baby.

The neighbor had been talking non-stop during the few seconds that passed and while Bill heard everything he said, nonetheless Bill's mind was going a hundred miles an hour wondering what he and Sally should do.

How do they break this grand celebration by refusing the toast?

They have been praying for weeks for an opportunity to talk about Jesus and so they want to encourage this relationship not offend it.

BUT how can they drink wine when that is intentionally not part of their lives?

And then to complicate the situation sitting near them in the restaurant was a young couple from their church who had recently talked with them about their struggle with alcohol.

The waiter and the neighbors had made such a big deal out of this apparently expensive and special wine that everyone nearby was vicariously entering into the celebration.

What to do?

I think all of us can identify with the situation and dilemma here even if alcohol isn't an issue for you.

For most of us as Christians there are certain behaviors that we find morally objectionable even if the Scriptures don't specifically prohibit them.

Through the years some Christians or others have sometimes objected to:

card playing,
 certain kinds of clothing,
 long hair on men,
 games of chance,
 smoking,
 drinking,
 various kinds of music,
 various or all kinds of dancing,
 attendance at night clubs, pool halls and bowling alleys,
 movies of any kind or movies of certain kinds,
 some types of magazines or fictional reading
 cosmetics,
 bathing too often,
 Playing or attending games on Sunday,
 working on Sunday,

Whether you agree that all of those things are morally neutral or not, I want you to remember that in the past there have been things that were not wrong in and of themselves but were perceived by some Christians as wrong because of other factors.

There has been conduct which in itself was not wrong or evil but which, in some eras, had been so tainted by the culture, so associated with that which is wrong that the conduct itself became wrong.

For example: Twenty five years ago only one kind of woman wore slacks in the villages of rural Mexico - prostitutes.

And even though there was nothing inherently sinful about wearing slacks, for a Christian woman to wear them in that cultural setting was a sin.

It would have led immature Christians to false conclusions and it would have hindered the hearing of the gospel by non-Christians.

That which was not inherently sinful became sinful under certain circumstances.

What are the things you don't do that other Christians do and it bothers you?

What are the things you can't build a strong biblical case against but you nonetheless wish other Christians didn't do?

Or what things do you do that you know bother other Christians?

Things that aren't wrong in and of themselves but other Christians think they are wrong?

What guides our conduct in areas of lifestyle wherein Christians disagree?

When was the last time you were invited to a dinner party where they served meat that had been sacrificed to idols?

It does still happen today - It probably happened to me in India but it is not a common occurrence in Colorado.

But it was very common in the city of Corinth in the Apostle Paul's day!

Now I know the issue for you isn't "meat offered to idols" but maybe for you it is drinking, or smoking, or certain kinds of music, or what you should or shouldn't do on Sundays, or how much money Christians should have, or dancing or all of the above or something else.

What you will see in this text is how Paul deals with their issue but from it glean principles for how to deal with our issues.

I have quite intentionally taken a rather large portion of I Corinthians to discuss with you this morning.

We are looking at all of Chapters 8-10.

I don't pretend that in one sermon we will exhaust the wealth of material in these chapters but I do want you to see the whole of Paul's argument.

Yes there are others issues addressed in these verses, issues well worth spending other time on, but I want you to see that even those other issues are presented here by Paul to make his primary and overarching point - How to conduct ourselves in lifestyle issues on which we disagree.

Now back to what it was that was so common in Corinth:

8:1 "Now about food sacrificed to idols?"

Or more particularly 8:4 "Now about eating food sacrificed to idols."

After studying ancient Greek and Roman culture, William Barclay wrote:

"Sacrificing (animals) to the gods was an integral part of ancient life. (The sacrifices) might be of two kinds, private or public.

In private sacrifice the animal was divided into three parts.

A token part was burned on the altar...' the priests received their rightful portion...' the worshipper himself received the rest of the meat.

With that meat he gave a banquet. Sometimes these feasts (10:27) were in the house of the hosts; sometimes (8:10) they were even in the temple of the god to whom the sacrifice had been made. (The temples were the social centers of that day - even social events not overtly religious would be held in the temples just as today some community events will be held in church buildings)...

The problem which confronted the Christian was, "Could he take part in such a feast at all? Could he possibly take on his lips meat that had been offered to an idol, to a heathen god?" And if he could not, then he was going to cut himself off almost entirely from all social occasions and contact with non-Christians...

In public sacrifice..., after the required amount had been burned and after the priests had received their share, the rest of the meat was given" to the city officials who sold in the markets what they didn't want.

So even when a Christian went to market and purchased meat for his own home, it may well have already been offered in idol worship.

What followed was that Christians could hardly eat meat at all which had not in some way been connected with a heathen god. Could the Christian eat it? (Barclay p 79ff)

In this text we will look at five principles that will help us deal with similar difficult lifestyle differences between Christians.

But first I want you to look briefly with me at how Paul develops the theme in these three chapters - I want you to do a quick overview with me:

Please look at chapter 8.

We have already noted that the issue is whether Christians should eat meat that has been offered to idols.

In 8:2 we see the way Paul first addresses the issue: "love builds up".

And in this chapter he builds the argument that even though you may have freedom to eat meat there is a higher principle that will guide your actions - love for others - and therefore from V.13 If exercising my freedom will hurt my brother or sister in Christ - I won't do what I'm otherwise free to do.

Look now at chapter 9.

Here Paul gives a lengthy illustration of freedom restrained by love (The principle set forth in Chapter 8).

Yes, I have freedom to do certain things but I willfully restrict my freedom for the sake of others (vv 5, 12, 15, 19).

Looking at Chapter 10 we find that Paul cautions against taking the idea of freedom too far. Yes you have great freedom as a Christian but liberty doesn't give you a license to sin.

Using the Israelites as an illustration, he says you can go too far.

And then at V14, returning to the specific issue of eating meat he again notes there are some things which truly are wrong even for the free Christian.

And then beginning at 10:23 and concluding with 11:1 Paul gives a summary of the whole discussion of liberty controlled by love. V 25 Meat eating is still the issue. See how it all ties together?

Now as I said, after that quick overview I want us to back up and look at five principles that Paul develops that help Christians know how to act when there are difficult lifestyles differences.

1. Principle # 1: Some lifestyle choices are truly neutral - in and of themselves they are neither good nor evil.

Look please at 8:4 READ

Paul in essence says idols are not real spiritual beings - they are just what they look like- wood or stone.

We know there is only one God from whom all things were created and one Lord Jesus by whom all things were created.

Therefore meat offered to idols is not truly tainted - nothing about the meat objectively changes because it was offered to an idol - the meat is morally neutral.

Look at verse 8: READ

Food in and of itself is neither good nor evil.

In spite of what you think of Cheetos and Twinkies.

Look at 10:25-26: What a thing for a Jew to write: READ

Nothing which God has created is inherently evil.

What's the application?

Just as eating meat offered to idols could be wrong as we will see in Chapter 10 - it is not necessarily wrong.

And, no, this is not situation ethics.

Some things are wrong and no situation can make them right.

But some things are morally neutral - and it is how they are used which makes them right or wrong.

Let me be so bold as to make some modern comparisons:

Is dancing wrong for a Christian?

We know the Bible commends dancing in some instances.

We also know the Bible condemns dancing in others situations.

Is dancing in and of itself a sinful behavior? No, the act is neutral - amoral - of itself it is not a moral issue.

But can dancing be wrong? yes, of course!

Is all alcoholic consumption wrong?

Only a few diehards would try to make a case for the "fruit of the vine" of Abraham's day, of David's day, or of Jesus' day being anything other than the fermented juices of fruit.

Is wine inherently evil - No.

Can drinking be wrong - yes, of course!

Is having money inherently wrong for a Christian?

We know from the Bible that money is a powerful tool for evil.

But is money itself therefore necessarily evil. No.

But can money be hoarded or used in an evil way? absolutely

There are lifestyle issues on which Christians disagree today wherein the activity itself is neither good nor evil.

And Christians must be able to acknowledge that and make their own lifestyle decisions on the basis of other things not just on the basis of calling something evil which in itself is not.

Principle #1 Some lifestyle issues truly are morally neutral.

2. Principle #2 "The Christian has freedom in those matters that are morally neutral - those things that, in themselves, are neither right nor wrong.

Look please at 10:25-27 READ

Please see that Vv 28-29a note an exception which we will deal with in a minute but let's go on to finish reading: READ 29b-30

The Apostle Paul was particularly hard on legalists.

There were Christians who thought they had the inside information on exactly how everyone else should live.

They would take their personal view on lifestyle and try to impose it on other Christians telling them that doing these things made for a better Christian - one more acceptable to God.

Jewish Christians were doing that with circumcision - demanding that new Gentile Christians be circumcised.

Paul said no. Circumcision is not a moral issue.

Others were demanding of new Christians that they eat only certain kinds of food and that they must celebrate certain holy days Paul said, no. Certain days and certain foods are not moral issues.

And here in Corinth some were saying that eating meat offered to idols was evil. Paul says, "No, the meat is not evil."

Principle #2 In those things that God has not forbidden the Christian is free.

But does that mean anything goes?

Paul not only had to deal with legalists (those trying to impose their standards on everyone else) but he also had to deal with libertarians - those who said "everything is permissible"!

3. Let's look at principle #3: Some things are clearly wrong!

Freedom in Christ does not give Christians liberty to sin.

Look again please at chapter 10:1-13.

Paul uses the illustration of Israel to make a point.

Those who came out of Egypt under Moses' leadership were all part of the people of Israel - the chosen people of God.

But just because they were free people didn't give them liberty to do whatever they liked.

In Vv 6-10 Paul uses four examples of when these people of God abused their freedom and sinned.

No, Paul says, don't let your liberty as a Christian turn into a license to sin.

Then at verse 14ff, in case we missed the point, Paul turns our attention to the specific issue of the Corinthians - eating meat offered to idols.

Paul has already pointed out that the meat, even the meat offered to idols is morally neutral - neither good nor evil.

He has already pointed out that Christians are free to eat the meat, to engage in lifestyles that are morally neutral.

But in verses 14-22 Paul makes it clear that if you eat that meat in the conduct of a pagan religious ritual - you are actually entering into that evil, demonically inspired world.

You crossed a line from what was morally neutral (eating meat that had been offered to idols) into the openly sinful (participating in their pagan worship).

Did the "strong" "free" Christians of Corinth think they could do anything and still be spiritually healthy and acceptable to God? Apparently they did.

But the point is that the amoral can become immoral.

Drinking can become drunkenness.

Occasional smoking can become addiction.

Harmless games can become gambling.

Explicit movies can become sexual fantasizing.

Fictional stories can turn into an entrance to the occult

Principle #3 Some things clearly are wrong - The Christian is responsible for never letting his or her freedom turn into a license to sin.

Principle #1 was: Some lifestyle choices are truly neutral.

Principle #2 was that the Christian has freedom in those lifestyle choices that are morally neutral.

And Principle #3 was that freedom does not give a person a license to sin.

I think those three principles form the foundation for the last two.

Because the fourth and fifth principles directly address the issue of how our conduct relates to others.

4. The fourth principle is this: "Love restrains freedom" - love for other Christians causes us to voluntarily restrict our freedoms - love controls our choices in lifestyle.

Paul really began this whole discussion with this idea.

Let's go back to chapter 8:1-3.

"We possess knowledge" he wrote, but "knowledge puffs up".

You may know that you have a great deal of freedom to do or not to do certain things in life but sometimes that knowledge leads to an arrogance - a self-centered exercise of personal rights.

"Since I'm free in Christ - I'll do whatever I want".

In verse 2 Paul says the person who thinks like that doesn't truly know what he ought to know.

From verse 1 what is the Christian to know?

"Love builds up" - love is concerned for the welfare of others.

We may have freedom but our greater concern is to help those who are less mature in the Lord.

In verses 7-13 Paul says in essence, there are some Christians who can't yet discern the difference between morally neutral and morally sinful actions.

If you exercise your freedom in front of them they might follow your example and then even go further than you go.

For example they might see you eating meat offered to idols and assume that it is permissible to even enter into the worship of idols.

Your "free" conduct might actually wind up hurting this less mature Christian - leading them away from God instead of strengthening them in the Lord.

Paul says in V 12 that when you exercise your freedom in a way that hurts your brother or sister in Christ you sin not only against them but you sin against the Lord - because that brother belongs to the Lord.

Paul goes on in verse 13 to emphasize, that for the sake of others, he would be willing to give up his freedom forever so that he wouldn't hinder the spiritual growth of another.

In the first part of chapter 9 as we saw earlier Paul makes a strong case for the rights that are his, the freedoms that are his BUT he notes several times what he has chosen to do with those rights:

V12b, 15a, 18c I did not use my rights for your sake.

At the risk of being misunderstood I'd like to illustrate that:

We live in an "immoral sex" and "violence" saturated society.

Two of the most influential purveyors of that sex and violence are television and motion pictures.

Even secular sociologists and psychologists are beginning to recognize what our grandfathers told us all along - "If you watch that stuff and it will affect you."

I do not believe that all "R" rated movies are inherently wrong just because they are rated "R".

I believe there are biblical stories that if shown on the screen would get an "R" rating.

(By the way, I'm not suggesting that all "R" rated movies are morally neutral.

From the reviews I have read and the previews I have seen, I highly suspicion there are few "R" rated movies that are anything other than morally evil. And for that matter many that are rated "PG".

But my point is that I have chosen to restrict my freedom to see any "R" rated movies, even those that may be morally neutral or even morally good BECAUSE I have wanted my children to grow old enough to make biblically based and godly decisions about movies before they were subjected to so much evil that they were trapped.

And if I didn't want them to choose "R" rated films, with their level of maturity, I would do better for them by not tempting them with my watching "R" rated films.

By the way, the pastors of SGC have asked our volunteer youth leaders to take the same position - restrict their freedom for the sake of others.

Let me give you another example:

I personally hold the same conviction regarding the consumption of alcohol.

Do I believe that alcohol is inherently evil? NO

But given the American culture,
the abuse of alcohol that plagues students and adults,

I want to give the least occasion I can to my children or any others to fall victim to the excesses of alcohol or have to live in the family lifestyle that alcohol too often creates.

Therefore I will restrict the freedom I have to drink in moderation and will instead give no occasion for someone else to follow me and go beyond me into the abuse of alcohol.

I know there are others who believe that modeling "drinking in moderation" is a better example.

But in either case I believe Paul is saying let "love" for others, not our "rights" truly be the driving force of our decisions.

The 4th principle was let love for fellow believers restrain my freedom.

The 5th principle is let love for non-Christians restrain my freedom.

In the last part of chapter 9 Paul makes a passionate statement about his desire to do whatever it takes to get a hearing for the gospel.

He wasn't suggesting that he would do anything sinful just to get others to listen

BUT he was saying he would restrict his freedom, his rights, in whatever way it took so as to open the door to others to hear about his Jesus.

READ v19

Look with me also at Vv 10:32-11:1 READ

Do you know what guided Paul's thinking about what he would or would not do when it came to lifestyle issues?

"Kingdom thinking"

Here was a man who was ate, slept, and breathed opportunity to tell others about Christ.

His life was not governed by his freedoms - oh, he had freedom and he could articulate those freedoms clearly.

And Paul never wanted anyone to try to impose their restrictions and man-made laws on other adults.

But he would voluntarily yield all his freedoms if it meant he could reach one more person with the Gospel.

My point is that Paul had rights but because of a much higher purpose in life he didn't allow himself to stoop to that immature self-centered attitude of "I have my rights and I will exercise them no matter what anybody thinks".

As I close let's visit Bill and Sally up at the Charthouse restaurant again.

What should they do?

Take the wine or refuse it?

I'm not going to answer it for you.

Instead I ask you to answer whatever issues you confront by applying these five principles:

1. Some lifestyle issues are truly neutral - neither morally good nor evil.
2. The Christian has freedom in matters that are morally neutral.
3. Some things are clearly wrong and even that in which we are free can be turned to sin.
4. Love for other Christians will cause us to limit our freedom
- and 5. love for those who don't know Christ will cause us to limit our freedoms

When it comes to the lifestyle choices that are neither inherently right nor wrong love for others guides us - that is "kingdom thinking".

Paul said it this way to the Galatian Christians:

"You were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather, serve one another in love."