

1 Corinthians 10:23-33

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[0:00] Turn back in your Bibles, if you would, to 1 Corinthians 10, the passage that was read for us. It's page 958, if you're in the Black Church Bibles. When you heard it read, I wonder what you're thinking.

Food sacrifice to idols. Do we eat the food or do we not eat the food? It's been what we've been thinking about in this section of 1 Corinthians for a while now. People's consciences, what do we do with other people's consciences, that kind of thing.

We've been circling these issues, as I say, for a number of weeks. And if you've just started coming along, or perhaps you're with us for the first time this morning, you think to yourself, what on earth have I walked into? How on earth is this relevant to my everyday life?

I've got real things to deal with. Tomorrow morning, we're back into it. And you think to yourself, what's this got to do with the real world? Well, I hope to show you that this morning.

And for those of you that have been hanging on for head coverings, I go on holiday, Lord willing, this weekend. And so it'll not be for a while, and let's hope the Lord returns before we have to get there next time.

[1:09] But I do want to show you, I hope, this morning, the relevance of all that we've been looking at here for the grit and the grime and the real life that we live in. Because if we get hold of what Paul is saying in this section, 1 Corinthians 10, really back to 1 Corinthians 8, and this section, the last few chapters, it will help us to navigate many of the ethical questions that we face in the course of our regular lives.

And I think this is really important because many of us, perhaps even most of us, we don't really know how we should think about the tricky ethical questions that come our way. We see this with the assisted suicide bill raising its head again.

We see a version of this. Why this is even up for debate is simply absurd. We know in the depths of our being that taking another person's life is not something that we're allowed to do.

But the debate shows that our culture doesn't know how to decide between right and wrong. So some will go with gut feeling. Some of us will just follow the crowd.

Many people will decide on the basis of the most compelling arguments in the debates. But we've lost the ability to correctly answer ethical questions. That's clear as day in our wider culture.

[2:24] And the church isn't great when it comes to complicated questions either. You see, some of us think, just show me the text. Show me the text in the Bible and I'll do what it says. It's a great instinct.

Nothing wrong with that. But what if there's no text? What if there's no text about the sorts of questions that come up about, for example, what the government are and aren't allowed to require of us?

What are the rules? It's a complicated one. And some of us go the other way. We adopt the approach of the Corinthians in verse 23. Look at verse 23. Their slogan, all things are lawful, they say.

That was their approach, you remember, back in chapter 6 when it came to what they did with their bodies. They said, my body, my choice. But both of those, on the one hand, Jesus, what are the rules?

And on the other hand, Jesus has freed me from all of the rules. Both of those are wrong ways to think about the Christian life. They're like ditches on either side of the road that we should actually be on. But what is that road?

[3:28] What course do we need to take? Those are the questions that we need to answer. And Paul provides a framework here for us to show us how we can live well. How we can be the church,

the people of God in the world.

See, that's really at the heart of this letter of 1 Corinthians. How should the church live in a culture that is constantly trying to squeeze it into its mold? And because these are tricky issues, Paul has taken time to walk this Corinthian church through the details and the nuances involved.

He could have added, if you think about it, he could have added a couple of lines at the end of chapter 8 and said everything principally in terms of concepts that he then goes on to say in 9 and 10.

But he doesn't do that. He has moved slowly. And he's done that to help us, to help the Corinthians and then us get hold of what God requires. Can you eat food sacrificed to idols?

Can you today eat food that has been offered up to Allah with prayers? It depends. Remember? That's what we said.

[4:32] The answer is, it depends. And if you're prone to either of those two ditches, what's the text? Show me the text. Or I can do what I want. If you're prone to either of those, an answer like, it depends, is really frustrating.

You either just want a yes or no, or you want a don't even think about it. It's not a problem kind of answer. But that's not how Paul goes. It's more complicated than that. And as he lays out a framework for how we're to think about these things, first of all, he rehearses stuff that he's already said.

So on the one hand, when it comes to these questions, remember, you're free. When it comes to buying and eating meat from the temples, verse 25, eat whatever is sold in the meat market, without raising questions on the grounds of conscience, for the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

Don't have any concerns about the meat and whatever idols it might have been sacrificed to, because it's not demon-possessed. The meat, nothing has happened to that. As the psalmist made clear, the whole earth is the Lord's.

It's the Lord's. And that includes the meat that even ours earlier was being offered to some pagan god or other. All meat ultimately comes from God, our Creator.

[5:45] And Mark chapter 7, Jesus made it really clear that all foods are clean. So you're free. You're free to go to any butcher and buy what he's selling, no matter what prayers he was praying while he was cutting it up.

You're free. You're also free, verse 27, to eat what is served to you when you're at dinner with friends from other religious backgrounds. Have a look. Verse 27, if one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you're disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you, without raising any question on the ground of conscience.

You've been invited. It's lawful for you to go. If you want to go, you can go. And you're not responsible for tracing the history of the food. Just eat and enjoy.

Your conscience should not be bothered by whether or not the meat that they serve has been offered to Zeus or Allah or any other false god earlier in the week. What they think has happened to the meat in their ritual doesn't change the status of the meat.

That's Paul's point in verse 29. Your liberty in Christ to eat anything is not affected by their idolatry. You're free. If you can thank God for it, verse 30, you can eat whatever's on the plate.

[6:57] You can even eat the plate if you feel so disposed. That's what he's saying. You're not constrained on the basis of the food or where it came from. You should have no qualms whatsoever about the food chain for moral reasons.

One author says this, If you can give thanks to the Lord for the food, and you must, then you cannot be denounced for eating it.

Whatever it is and wherever it came from, you're free. You're free. But the status of the food isn't itself the only factor to consider, because when it comes to eating, we're also bound.

So, alongside being free, we're also bound. Verse 26, Here's the thread.

It's a thread I think you can see that Paul has weaved all the way through the whole letter, certainly through this section. The good of your neighbor is also a factor in the decision. Your eating has to be helpful and up-building to others.

[8:29] Eat what you like from the market. Eat whatever your pagan friend serves you. Verse 28, look at 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. What's he saying? He's saying this, When your host brings the food to the table, if they hold it up and say, This is offered to X deity, praise His holy name, or something like that, then you have to decline the food.

If they have a prayer before the meal, you can't participate in that, and you can't say amen or anything like that. And you are refraining, not for the sake of your conscience, the meat is just meat. The God that they've, we saw in previous chapters, the God that they think is there isn't there. So, on the one hand, you're free to eat it, but you don't want to join in their idolatry.

Nor do you want to give them any impression that you're joining in their idolatry. That's what Paul means by their conscience. So, if you're with unbelieving friends who think that you're joining in their worship, then you need to say no, however awkward, or however relationally costly it might be. [9:46] Can you see the nature of the restraint? You're not constrained by the meat. You're not constrained by an idol. You're not even constrained by your own conscience.

You're constrained by love. And that is the reason why your freedom is not compromised when you go without. The constraints of love are real constraints.

When you are constrained by another's conscience, that is a real constraint. But these constraints are the constraints of love that are similar to those of marriage. We choose the constraints because we want to give ourselves to serve the other person.

And when you forego things for the sake of love, as we do all the time in marriage, you never find yourself chafing against your freedom. You're free and you're bound.

Now, that much Paul has already said. That's not actually new to us, but he's reiterating it here. But what he adds here then are two factors to be considered when we're trying to apply these categories.

[10:52] To decide whether an action is sinful or not. And this applies to actually any action. And here are the two factors. Number one is the glory of God. The glory of God.

That is a factor that should govern all of the ways that we make decisions. And the second is the good of our neighbor. Let's look at the glory of God. You see, if you've been following along this morning, if you have followed the thread all the way through, I know some of you have, there's a bit of a sense of déjà vu, isn't there?

If you feel that way, well, you're right. Back in chapter 6, Paul quotes that Corinthian slogan related to how they use their bodies. All things are lawful for me, they say. And he finished that section, chapter 6, verse 20, so glorify God with your body.

Do you remember that? Well, it's exactly the same here. Verse 23, all things are lawful when it comes to food. But verse 31, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Whether you eat or drink, what you put in your shopping trolley, or what you put in your online order, what you order in the restaurant, what you drink, and how much of it that you put away, all of these decisions should bear in mind the glory of God.

[12:12] You should ask yourself, will God be glorified if I consume this thing? That's the first step. But then when you are consuming it, is He glorified then as well?

You've heard me talk before about there being a Christian way to eat an apple. I've said that before, and I've obviously said it in other contexts because I was at a conference last week and someone said, oh, I've met you before, you're the apple guy.

I didn't. It's not how I want to be known, but apparently it's something that people remember. There is a Christian way to do everything, and there's certainly a Christian way to eat food.

But food is food at one level. When you're younger, perhaps especially men, we consider it to be fuel, to be pumped in as fast as possible.

It comes, and you just get it in as fast as you can. Now, if you're a bit more civilized, it's something to be savored and enjoyed. And the more civilized you get, I suppose you take the occasion into thinking when you consider the speed at which you eat.

[13:21] You know, we train our children, don't eat faster than your hosts. It's basic manners, that kind of thing. Food is fuel, but it's not just fuel. Food is food, but it's not just food.

It is, at root, a vehicle for worship. Now, it's not distinct in that regard. That's the case with everything that God has made, because the earth is the Lord and the fullness thereof.

God expects to be given glory in your eating and drinking, and He can be given glory right down to the last bite or sip. And the stuff that you're eating and drinking, it doesn't matter what it is.

From fillet steak to donner kebabs and everything in between. From the finest Bordeaux you can get your hands on, all the way down to the Australian stuff.

From whatever the most nutritious drink you could put in your body might be, I don't know, you might have your own version of that, all the way to the least, and we know what that is, iron brew.

[14:24] Okay? A radioactive orange drink shouldn't really have any place, but you can glorify God by doing that. You can drink it to His glory. Isn't that an amazing kindness? Have your preferences, by all means, but the quality doesn't matter.

What matters is that God is glorified. How does that happen? It's very simple. Verse 30, can you see? Verse 30, gratitude. Partake with thankfulness.

You just say thank you. You give Him praise. That's what we're doing when we say grace at mealtimes.

We're acknowledging that we don't deserve any of it. If God was to give us a mouthful of dry, dusty gravel, that would be more than we deserve, and He doesn't. So, we're saying thank you, and we're giving the glory to Him.

And that is why eating food where someone has given thanks to another deity isn't allowed for the Christian. The glory of God controls the Christian's eating and drinking, and if God is not thanked, but another deity is, we can't be involved because we have robbed Him of the glory that He has owed.

[15:36] And not just that, but we have given that glory to somebody who doesn't deserve it, something that doesn't exist that doesn't deserve it. Eating and drinking. But did you notice that Paul expands the scope of this motivation?

Do you see that? Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Whatever you do, all. God's glory must control the way you think about everything you do.

Everything. So, stop and think. Whatever it is that you are about to do in the course of your life, is God going to be glorified in this?

What about the thing that I'm about to buy? This purchase. Who will get the glory? Can I afford it? Does it add to my debt? Is it wasteful? Is it an effort to glorify myself?

The best way to tell is to ask yourself, will I gladly and without shame hold this thing that I'm about to purchase before the Lord Jesus and say, thanks for this. What about the relationship?

[16:43] Can you bring that man or woman before the Lord Jesus, content that your relationship with Him glorifies Him? The way that you communicate to one another, how you spend your time together, the way that your relationship is ordered, do all to the glory of God.

Your career. So, I'm not just talking about be a good colleague or boss, you know, be known in the office as a good person. I'm not just saying, don't buy the funds that promote exploitation, but decisions about where you work, decisions about whether promotion would be good for your soul, good for your family's spiritual good.

You say, God has blessed me with a promotion, and then we're moving to X place where there is no actual good church. A successful career that takes you away from the church is not a career that brings glory to God.

Could be anything. Communication. Will this text, will this email, will this conversation, will this comment bring glory to God? Doing this thing, saying these words, am I crystal clear about the supremacy of God and His demand on my life, or will it communicate to others that I'm endorsing something that God says is not glorious?

Paul says, whatever you do, you cannot participate in any rejection of God. God's design or His purpose for our lives. Doing everything to God's glory is the undergirding impulse of Paul's ministry, and the truth is it should be the bedrock of all of our Christian lives.

[18:28] In the end, there are only two motivations for every single action, the glory of God and the glory of something or someone else. And if it's the latter, that's idolatry, and we're not allowed to do that if we take the name of Christ.

The glory of God. The second factor also bookends the verses here, and that's the good of your neighbor. Point number two, the good of your neighbor. Verse 24, let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.

What does it mean to seek the good of your neighbor? Does that mean that we help them with the DIY? Do we do chores for them? Does it mean that we serve in the community? We sign up for the local neighborhood watch? Maybe.

Might mean that. Those are all good things to do. But Paul explains what he means at the end of the passage. Look at verse 33. 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.

And when Paul says saved here, he's not just talking about people making a one-time decision to follow Jesus. He's talking about them hearing about Christ, putting their trust in Christ, and persevering in Christ all the way to glory.

[19 : 38] That's the biblical picture of salvation. It's from the beginning to the end. This desire drove Paul's whole ministry. Remember back in chapter 9, verse 22, I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some.

The Corinthians' decision to eat or drink should be framed by a similar desire. The way that we decide about what we're going to do and what we're not going to do should be framed by a similar desire.

Will my eating prevent someone from seeing Christ as supremely precious, as supremely beautiful and worthy of my worship? Will it prevent somebody seeing the magnificence of Christ and putting their faith in Him?

Will my eating, will my actions, will what I do, what I don't do cause somebody who already professes faith in Christ to be misled back into idolatry, back into the old life where they didn't follow Christ?

Will their conscience be trampled by my freedom such that they stumble away from Christ and from His salvation? Wherever they come from, verse 32, if they are from a Jewish background, don't do anything.

[20 : 47] They might give the impression that Christians are okay with idolatry. Or that they would have to give up the confession of the one God. If they're Gentiles, on the other hand, don't do anything that would confirm them in their desire to reject God.

If they're already in the church, giving no offense here means doing anything that would lead them back into idolatry. One commentator says this, it's simple. One must avoid doing anything that might turn potential converts away from the gospel or that might cause Christians to betray their faith.

This approach demands far more than simply trying to avoid hurt feelings. To bring glory to God, Christians must behave in ways that lead others to a saving relationship with Christ.

So, Paul is seeking the salvation of many people. And he puts those people ahead of his own interests. And that is what it means to seek the good of our neighbor.

And it should motivate us in a similar way. Paul was talking to the children at Sunday school this morning and that old adage about how it is that we can both be happy ourselves and honor God.

[22 : 01] Jesus first, others second, yourself third. J-O-Y. It's very simple, but it's profound and it's very true. Jesus first, ourselves next, others next, and ourselves last.

See, it's so deeply ingrained in all of us. Seek the good of your neighbor. Don't put unnecessary barriers in the way of people's salvation.

Don't use your freedoms that are really yours and are real freedoms. Don't use them in obnoxious ways. And what that will mean, in practice, of course, will look different in different situations and it will require wisdom.

What are the rules? It's not that simple. I can live how I like. No, you can't. It depends. It's complicated. It requires wisdom. But even asking these questions to start with, will this bring glory to God and will this be for the good of my neighbor?

Even asking those questions is a new idea to many of us. So I want us to have those categories in our minds because it flies in the face of our culture's obsession with putting ourselves first all the time.

[23 : 11] What's best for me? What's best for those that I like or love? And what other people, what happens to them? Well, I don't really care. That's on them. For the Christian, our preferences must give way to the urgency of winning people to salvation, seeing people persevere in Christ and not fall away.

Why is that? Well, the reason that Paul gives as he closes this section, chapter 11, verse 1, I have no idea why the editors put the end of chapter 10 in chapter 11, but they did.

Be imitators of me as I am of Christ. It really is vital that we see that Paul's model of ministry, self-sacrifice for the good of others, Jesus first, others second, yourself last, that wasn't something

that Paul decided on himself.

It was patterned after the example of Christ. Christ, who being in very nature God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, held onto, but he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, not any old death, but the worst and most humiliating death, the death of the cross.

Why did he do this? He did it for your salvation, for the salvation of anyone who would turn from their sin and put their faith in him. So those questions, will this action glorify God?

[24 : 47] Will this action be good for my neighbor? These control the life of the Christian because they control the life of Christ. And we follow Christ, don't we?

That's what we say. He glorified God in setting aside his freedoms and laying down his life for the good of his neighbor, for your good and for mine, for your eternal good and the eternal good of all who trust in him.

If you haven't put your faith in Christ, if you're here this morning and you're looking into the Christian faith, if you haven't put your faith in Christ, let me tell you this, he has done everything, everything necessary for your salvation.

You just need to trust him. Turn from your sins and put your faith in him. Surrender to him. Give up life on your terms and give yourself to Christ.

I saw that someone called Joe Weller, who's a YouTuber apparently, never seen him before, but he came up on my algorithm. He's become a Christian. He said this, I have been saved by the Lord Jesus Christ.

[25 : 50] Many of you, I don't know, some of you may have seen this. Whatever you call that thing, when they talk to the camera and it goes online, whatever that is, he says, I've been saved by the Lord Jesus Christ and it is the best thing that has ever happened to me.

I have tried everything, everything to try and feel genuinely fulfilled and at peace. He went on, spirituality, diet, travel, here, there, everywhere, work, fame, money. I have tried everything that seems like it could work for me, but Jesus has genuinely transformed me.

He has renewed my mind. He is the truth, the way, the life that we are all searching for and I'm just so thankful and grateful that he has never given up on me. Nearly 30 years ago, I had the same revelation and I can tell you he's right.

Joe Weller's just getting started from my perspective. I want to be able to, I can tell you, if you haven't put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, he is faithful and he will keep you and he will not let you go.

So, if that's you, today's the day. Don't wait. He'll forgive your sins. He will give you his peace. He will transform you and through all the ups and downs of life in this crazy world that we live in, he will never give up on you.

[27 : 05] No one else will do that. No one else will be that faithful to you through your faith in Christ. And to those of us who have done that, which is most of us, Paul is reminding us again here to follow Christ's example.

When we take Christ's name, that's what he has called us to do. If anyone would come after me, he must take up his cross and follow me. If you want to save your life, you'll lose it.

If you want to lose your life now for Christ and for the gospel, you'll save it. If we take Christ's name, we need to follow his example. He gave everything he had.

He submitted to God's glory and poured his life out in love for others. That's what it takes to live well in the world. If we want to flourish, that's what it is. We honor God, we glorify him in all that we do and we seek to serve our neighbors.

And when we fail, we confess our sins as we did this morning. We confess our sins, we get back on our feet and we go again, seek to glorify him and serve our neighbor. That's what it means to live well in the world.

[28 : 08] So let's go and do likewise. Let's pray together. Let's pray together.