

Use your freedom in a loving way

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"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. Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if anyone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience' sake — the other man's conscience, I mean, not yours. For why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience? If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for? So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God — even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1)

Introduction

One of the most glorious things about true Christianity is that it sets us free from man-made rules and laws. Other religions place great emphasis on human rules, because those who adhere to these religions are trying to achieve a right standing before God through works. So there are rules about fasting, rules about "holy days", rules about washing, rules about clothing, rules forbidding marriage for clergy, and so on. Different religions have different sets of rules. Roman Catholics and some Anglicans have rules about Lent, saying that during that period they should fast, or give up luxuries. Moslems have rules about Ramadan. Jehovah's Witnesses have rules about doing a certain number of hours of visiting a week. Other groups have laws about not eating

meat. People hope that by keeping these rules they can clock up merit with God, and so somehow gain a place for themselves in heaven.

Through Christ, however, we who are true Christians are set free from these man-made rules. This is because Jesus has already, by his death on the Cross, given us a place in the new world which God will bring into being at the end of time. What Jesus did on the Cross has made us right with God. We do not need to follow human laws to make us good enough for God, because we have already been made good in God's sight. So we do not need to live under man-made rules any longer. The apostle speaks about this in Colossians 2.20 – 23:

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

So we have been set free from man made rules. But we should not use the freedom that we have in an unfettered way, in such a way as to hurt others, or to make it difficult for others to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. We are free, but we should not use our freedom as a license for harming ourselves or others, or for bringing dishonour on the name of Christ.

The passage that we are looking at today tells us about the right way to handle the freedom that we have as believers. It tells us that there are times that we need to place limits on our freedom, for the good of ourselves and others. We can see in this passage a number of tests that can be applied to what we do, or we consider doing, to see that our freedom is not abused.

There are six tests for an activity that we draw out from this passage

1. Is it beneficial?

Paul says in verse 23, "'Everything is permissible', but not everything is beneficial." It would appear that in the first half of this quotation Paul is quoting back to the believers in Corinth what they had said to him in a letter. They had got hold of the idea of the freedom that we have as believers, but had reduced it to a simplistic slogan "Everything is permissible" (or, literally, "Everything is

lawful"). Like so many slogans, this slogan had an element of truth about it. As believers we have been set free from human laws and regulations, as we have already seen. But although we have been set free from *human* laws, we are still under *God's* law, and particularly we are bound by the law of love. Love should dominate all that we do, even those activities about which there is no direct command from the Bible. And if we are going to be loving, we need to consider how helpful are the activities in which we are engaged.

The word translated which is translated here as "beneficial" means literally "bringing together". It is translated as "helpful" by the English Standard Version and the New King James Version. The King James Version translates it as "expedient". It could also be translated as "profitable".

So, as regards the activity you are thinking of engaging in, there might not be a direct command against it, but is it positively beneficial? Is it beneficial to your health? Is it beneficial to your finances? Is it beneficial to your relationships? Is it beneficial to your service of God? Is it beneficial to your desire to gain self-control, or will it weaken your ability for self-control by forming a habit of dependence? Will it be beneficial in helping others to come to know Christ?

Take smoking, for example. There is no direct command against smoking in the Bible. But if you smoke, or if you are thinking of taking up smoking, you need to ask yourself, "Is this helpful to my health, and to the health of my family? Am I addicted to smoking? Is it eating up money which could be better spent on other things?"

Or again, consider computer games. Again, these had not been invented when the Bible was written, so there is no law about them in the Bible. But you need to ask yourself, if you play computer games, "Is this a good use of my time? Is this going to help me to be a more loving, more responsible, more considerate person?" If the game involves shooting people, or running away from the Police, I think you can safely say that is not going to be helpful for you. Even if it involves a harmless activity like building a "virtual" model railway, you need to ask yourself if this is the most helpful use of your time.

The same considerations apply to things like the music we listen to, books we read, films and TV programs we watch. We need to ask ourselves whether the book we are going to read or the film we shall watch is something which will help us to help other people, or if it is going to be counter-productive to that goal.

2. Does it build up?

Paul goes on to say, in the second half of verse 23, "Everything is permissible, but not everything is constructive." Yes, we have been set free from human laws and regulations, but not every thing we do or say is going to be constructive.

The word that the apostle uses here is the same word as the one which is translated as "builds up" in chapter 14 when he is talking about gifts of the Holy Spirit. He says in verse 12 of that chapter "since you are so eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in spiritual gifts which build up the church." We should seek gifts which will build up the church. How is the church built up? By God's Word being spoken in an intelligible way.

This helps us to understand what the apostle is talking about here. Our behaviour, and especially our speech, should build people up, and particularly should help people to understand the truth about God better. This is in line also with what the apostle says in Ephesians 4.29: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up [the same word as we are considering here] according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

So this thought should dominate all that we say: will my saying this help the person with whom I am speaking to come to a right understanding of God? The story that you recount, the joke that you tell, the comment about the politician, all of these must be under the control of the thought: will this help the other person to come nearer to God, or will it encourage him further away. Even the way in which we talk about the weather can be upbuilding or destructive, depending on whether we give thanks to God or complain.

The same should apply when we rebuke another. There are times when we need to point out that someone has done wrong. But the way in which we do this is important. We should not insult them and call them names, but we need to calmly and humbly point out the wrong that they have done, and point out that it is contrary to God's Word. We need to do this in a non-judgemental way, whereby we admit we are sinners ourselves, and in such a way as the person is most likely to come to Christ for forgiveness and salvation.

3. Does it do good to others?

In verse 24 the apostle says, "No one should seek his own good, but also the good of others." We should seek the good of others rather than our own good, and in particular we should seek the salvation of others rather than our own comfort and pleasure. This comes out in verse 33, where the apostle says, "For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many – so that they may be saved."

In this we are to follow the example of Jesus. He had been with his Father from before the world was made, in a loving relationship with him. He could quite happily have stayed in heaven for all of eternity. But he chose willingly to give up his place in glory for a while, and to become a man, and to live a life of service and humility, culminating with the dreadful experience of separation from the Father when he died on the Cross. Why did he do this? Because he was thinking not so much of his own good as the good of others. He was concerned that others might be saved.

So in the activities we are thinking of engaging in, we need to think, not so much about what we would like, but what will do the most good to others, and what will most help others to come to Christ. This affects decisions like where we live. You are free as a Christian to live where you want. But in the light of a passage like this you may decide to stay in a densely populated place like London, which has perhaps a less pleasant environment, for the sake of being able to preach the Gospel to more people, rather than moving to a place in the country where your only neighbours for miles around are sheep. The latter place may be a more pleasant place to live, but opportunities for evangelism are likely to be fewer!

This verse should affect also things like how we spend our money, A Christian who understands this passage will think to himself, as regards his money "How can I use this money to do the most good to others, especially to help them to come to the knowledge of Christ", rather than thinking, "How can I satisfy my own desires the best with this money?"

It applies also to the question of whether you take a holiday, if you can afford one, and if so, where you go and what you do. A Christian who understands this passage, if he goes on holiday, will do so in order to be refreshed in order to serve others better, rather than treating it as a period of self-indulgence.

4. Does it offend someone's conscience?

In verses 25 to 30 the apostle speaks about the matter of meat which has been previously offered to idols. In those days in Corinth there was a good chance that meat that was for sale in the local markets had previously been offered in sacrifice to idols. Paul says that if the believers buy meat in the local markets they should not ask where it has been previously, and they should eat it gladly because "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it." (Psalm 24.1). Equally, if an unbeliever invites them round for dinner and offers them meat to eat, they should eat it gladly without asking where it has been before. However, he says that if the host tells them the meat has been previously offered to an idol, they should not eat the meat. And the reason Paul gives is that the host's conscience might be offended by seeing a Christian eat meat which he knows has been offered to an idol.

Paul's concern is not for the conscience of the Christian, who does not feel guilty about eating such meat. His concern rather is for the conscience of the unbeliever. The unbeliever might find it hard to understand why a Christian, who serves the God of the Bible, should eat meat which might have been previously been offered to idols. The unbeliever might think that this meant that the Christian was saying that idolatry was acceptable, and this might encourage the unbeliever to continue in his non-Christian life, rather than to turn to Christ.

An example of where this sort of thing might apply to us is in how we treat our Bibles when we are talking to Moslem friends about Christ. If, for example, you place a Bible by your feet, your Moslem friend may be offended, because he might think that you were treating a "holy" book with contempt. You know that what is holy about the Bible is not the book itself, but the message that it contains. The paper on which the Bible has been printed is no more holy than the paper of any other book. But in order not to offend your Moslem friend, you would do well to treat your Bible in a way which did not look sacrilegious.

Another example might be in the way you discipline your children when you are in a public place. Corporal discipline is commanded in Scripture, and used with love and with restraint it can be very helpful in training a child in the right way. But it may not be wise for you to discipline your child in a public place, as it might be misunderstood and you might be thought to be abusing your child.

5. Does it bring glory to God?

Paul says in verse 31, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all

for the glory of God." The whole purpose of our lives is to bring glory to God. As people hear you speak, as they see you live your life, it should lead them to say, "What a great and wonderful God, that he has caused this person to be so loving, so kind, so humble, so truthful, so considerate."

So your speech should bring glory to God. As a Christian, you should be polite. You should say "please" and "thank you". If you point out where someone has done wrong, you should do so politely and gently. As you eat and drink it should be to God's glory. You should not guzzle your food, but eat with restraint and in a considerate way.

6. Will it lead someone to "stumble"?

Paul says in verse 32, "Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God – even as I try to please everyone in every way." We should avoid doing anything which will make it harder for someone to hear and to believe the Gospel, and so be saved, and we should also avoid doing anything which might lead that person to sin once he has been saved.

For example, if you are a woman and you dress immodestly, you might tempt a man to have lustful thoughts, and fall into the sin of sexual immorality, at least in the mind if not in the body. There is no "dress code" laid down in the Bible as to what length of dress or skirt a woman should wear, or whether a woman should wear trousers or skirt or a sari or any other type of clothing. But the Scriptures do say that a woman should dress "modestly, with decency and propriety" (1 Timothy 2.9). It is left up to us to work out what this means in terms of the actual styles of clothing that we wear.

Another example is in terms of the way we speak with unbelievers. If you talk to people in a rude, aggressive or abrasive way, then they might never get as far as hearing what you have to say about the Gospel because they have been caused to stumble by your way of life.

Conclusion

The apostle sums up all he has been saying, not just in this passage, but all the way from chapter 8 verse 1, with the words "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." Jesus' life and death was not only the means of our salvation. It was also the model for us to follow. Just as he gave up the right to

live in heaven and to have all the comfort and pleasure that he could have wanted, and lived a life of extreme suffering and difficulty, out of love for others, so we also should "take up our cross" and follow Christ.

It is not that we should embrace suffering for its own sake, or as a virtue in its own right. This is where some Roman Catholic teaching on the "imitation of Christ" has gone astray, because it depicts suffering as a virtuous thing which clocks up merit in God's sight. Suffering is not something we should seek, and it does not impart merit. All the merit we have as Christians comes from the work of Christ on the Cross. God has "credited" us with the merit of Christ. We are to aim at love rather than at suffering. But if we do love, we shall inevitably suffer, as a consequence of that love. You cannot love without suffering in one way or another.

This is where we need the power of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit we shall be unable to have true love for others, and what love we do have will quickly evaporate when we suffer. How can we know the power of the Holy Spirit? First of all, we have to be born again. If we are not born again, we cannot truly love. Have you been born again? Has your life been changed by the working of God's Spirit in you? If your answer is "no" or "not sure" come to God, and ask him to give you the gift of the Holy Spirit. Turn from your sins, and trust in Christ. God promises that if you truly trust in Christ, he will give you the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Having received the Holy Spirit, we need to be constantly filled with him. We tend so easily to become dry. Our patience can run out, and we start to become self-centred and unloving. So we need to be filled again and again with the Holy Spirit. Keep coming back to God, and asking him to fill you afresh. Meditate afresh upon his love. Think of what Christ did for you upon the Cross. Think of how patient God has been with you as a Christian. Fix your thoughts on the glory that God has got stored up for you in heaven. As you are filled afresh with the Holy Spirit, and as you think about God's love for you in Christ, you will find fresh strength to love those whom you would not naturally love.

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