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## 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1 “Responsible Freedom”

Intro. There is a mystery about kite-flying that has always intrigued me. When the kite string breaks for some reason, one would think that the kite, freed from all restraints, would soar higher into the skies. But it doesn't. It starts zigzagging, flipping, and diving. Finally, it crashes into a tree or power line. People react in a similar fashion. That person who claims to be utterly free, to be obligated to nothing or nobody, is almost always a pitiful slave to selfishness. His life usually is a tale of tragedy, ending with a crash. On the other hand, the happiest and most creative people on earth are those who maintain a balance between freedom and restraint.<sup>1</sup> So this morning I want to use this message to encourage you to exercise both Christian liberty and Christian restraint.

Now in our text today, Paul continues the subject of Christian liberty. Paul took a firm stand on the fact that Christians are free from man-made commandments and rules. In Col. 2:20-22, Paul rebuked the Colossians for submitting to “commandments and doctrines of men.” Paul was opposed to legalistic religion. He didn't want Christians judging one another by man-made legalistic standards. He said in v.29b of our text, “For why is my liberty judged by another man's conscience?” When it comes to issues that are not clearly addressed by the Word of God, Paul did not believe that Christians should try to force their personal convictions on other believers.

But even though Paul was a strong advocate of Christian liberty, he did not teach that Christian liberty should be an excuse to live any way you please. Here in chapter 10 we have already seen what happens to people to engage in liberty without restraint. The Israelites tried that and were destroyed in the wilderness. So there are always certain limitations upon liberty. We are to use our freedom responsibly. For example, if you abuse your freedom to drive your car by driving recklessly, you will probably lose your license and your freedom to drive. So a mature exercise of liberty involves setting voluntary limits to our liberty for the sake of others. We must learn to balance freedom and restraint.

So what I am going to do today is share with you 3 limitations for exercising Christian liberty. While I want you to stand fast in your liberty in Christ (Gal. 5:1), I want you to also be careful to use your liberty responsibly, and with restraint. So what are the 3 limitations that Paul gives here in our text? First of all:

### I. LIBERTY SHOULD BE LIMITED BY CONSCIENCE

Four times in vv.25-29 Paul mentioned conscience in relation to Christian liberty. Paul says that we are not free to do something that violates your conscience. Back in chapter 8, v.7 Paul first addressed the issue of eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol. He acknowledged that if some Christian felt that doing so was wrong, then for them it would be wrong to eat such meat. On the other hand, in Rom. 14:14 Paul says, “I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself...” In other words, Paul was convinced that just because a piece of meat had come from an idol sacrifice did not mean that it had become spiritually contaminated. But then he said, “but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.” So if your

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration based on Bill Bouknight, “Just a thought”.

conscience tells you that something is wrong, it is a sin to go against your conscience. In fact, in v.23 of that chapter he says, “But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.”

Then in Rom. 14:5 Paul is talking about different opinions regarding observing the Sabbath & other special days. Then he gives one guiding principle, “Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.” Do you believe that Sunday should be observed as a Christian Sabbath? Or do you believe that you are free to work & play on Sunday just as any other day? Well, be sure that your actions are consistent with your conscience on the matter. So when it comes to questionable moral issues, when in doubt, don’t do it. So the first limit that we need to impose upon our liberty is our own conscience.

Now in v.26 Paul teaches us by example that we should train our consciences by the Word of God. So he quotes the authority of Psalm 24:1 saying, “for ‘the earth is the LORD’S, and all its fullness.’” He is saying that we shouldn’t feel guilty about eating such meat, because it comes from God, not a non-existent idol.

Now since we should always live by our consciences, Paul gives some practical advice regarding protecting your conscience, especially if you are very conscientious. Paul tells the Corinthians to be altogether unconcerned about the nature of the meat that is sold in the ordinary butcher shops. He says in v.25, “Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience’ sake.” “Asking no questions” (*medeis anakrino*) could be translated, “Making no investigation.” No doubt there were some with inflamed consciences who did ask such questions, and rather prided themselves on their strictness and rigidity; but Paul encourages them to let sleeping dogs lie.

The same rule of conduct is found in v.27, “If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience’ sake.” Once again, don’t even ask if the meat came from the idol’s temple. Especially if you have a very sensitive conscience, don’t ask a bunch of questions that will only cause your conscience to bother you. Enjoy your freedom to eat the good things that God has provided. By the way, Paul is not opposed to a Christian eating at the home of a non-Christian, unlike the Jews who would not eat with Gentiles. Such contact is important if we are to be effective in the task of evangelization.

I have tried to think of a modern day parallel. In today’s society, many businesses and corporations have practices that I find morally objectionable. They may give health benefits to live-in homosexual lovers. They may give financial support to groups that support abortion. But should we engage in a detailed inquiry about such things prior to shopping at a particular business, especially when you may find that you have little choice but shopping at a business that has at least *something* that you find morally objectionable? After all, can you think of anything as morally objectionable than idolatry? And yet Paul taught that eating meat from the local market is permissible, even though in a direct or indirect way idolaters are making a profit from the sale of that meat!

So when it comes to questionable activities, let your conscience be your guide. But also guard against an overly scrupulous conscience.

Now let’s suppose you pass the first test. You can do something with a clear conscience. Well, there’s another restraint upon our liberty that we should consider:

## II. LIBERTY SHOULD BE LIMITED BASED ON HOW IT AFFECTS OTHERS

Paul tells us our actions have social implications as well. This principle is basically the principle of love set forth in 8:1, 7-13. But Paul restates this principle in a concrete way. Notice what Paul says in v.24, “Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being.” Paul’s criterion for all his actions was not what he liked best, but what was best for those around him. We must be willing to put the welfare of others before our own. This is an important principle of the Christian life. We should be thinking of others, and not so much ourselves. This is in stark contrast to the “me first” attitude that is so common today. Now this principle is not to be understood in an absolute way, but it excludes all selfish regard which cares nothing for the interest of other people. And I want to mention that in v.24, Paul used the Gk. word *heteros* for the other person, which means that he has in mind a person who is different from us, not just like-minded people.

Now as we consider how our actions may affect others, there are two basic questions we should consider:

A. Will the Exercise of my Liberty Help Others? – We see this in v.23. Paul once again quotes from the libertarians, “All things are lawful for me.” But then he adds, “but not all things are helpful.” That word “helpful” (*sumphero*) gives the picture of helping someone carry something. So before we exercise our Christian liberty, we should ask, “Is there any benefit to myself or others? Will it help someone physically, socially, or spiritually?” For example, we try to sponsor some softball & volleyball games each summer for Youth & Adults. You may say, “Why should you? Churches should not sponsor such as that.” Let’s put it to the test then. Will there be any physical benefit? Yes. Many can get good exercise. How about any social good? Yes, we can have a good time, learning to help one another in a team effort. It involves good Christian fellowship. There may even be some spiritual good. Your Christianity will be put to the test when you can’t even hit a slow pitch! We can be a positive witness of the fact that Christians can have a great time without turning to what is sinful. So I believe we are free to play softball. A little more difficult question is this? Am I free to miss church to play softball?

Then, in the last part of v.23 Paul says, “all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify.” The Gk. word used (*oikodomeo*) literally refers to building a house. This same word is used to refer to spiritual growth. So before we exercise our Christian liberty, we should consider if doing so will build up anyone spiritual, socially, physically, or in some other way.

However, there are some activities that are just the opposite. They are not constructive, but destructive. So that leads to my second question.

B. Will the Exercise of my Liberty Hinder Others – We find this principle summarized in v.32, “Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God.” The word translated “Give no offense” (*aproskopos*) literally means that we should avoid causing someone to stumble, in this case into sin, or a violation of their conscience. We are not talking about offending someone who is hypersensitive. Furthermore, that many people are offended by the gospel is their problem, but when they are needlessly offended by our way of living, that is *our* problem. What we are saying is that we shouldn’t exercise our freedom at the cost of hurting a Christian brother or sister.

Now in this text Paul addresses two basic types of people that could be hindered by our exercise of Christian liberty.

1. Our Liberty Should not Hinder a Weak Christian Brother - Now let's get back to the illustration found in vv. 27-28. Suppose a few Christians had been invited to the home of an unbeliever. Keep in mind that Paul had given his permission to eat any meat that came from a market, even though much of it had come from an idol temple. But suppose another believer is there who doesn't feel free to eat such sacrificial meat. He finds out that the host is serving meat that had been sacrificed to an idol. So as v.28 says, he tells you, "This was offered to idols." In such a case he probably expects you to join him in not eating such meat. What do you do then? Do you go ahead and insist on your liberty in Christ? Should you say, "I'm not going to turn down a good steak just because my Christian brother has some issues." No! Paul goes on to say in vv.28-29, "do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience' sake. Conscience, I say, not your own, but that of the other."

Let me explain how exercising your liberty could harm that person in such a situation. Suppose you go ahead & eat the meat that had been sacrificed to an idol. Then, that other brother might feel pressured to go against his conscience by joining you in eating, and thus sin against his conscience.<sup>2</sup> Listen, we are not to insist on exercising our liberty if it adversely affects someone else, especially a Christian brother. Our brother's conscience is more important than our own desire to eat or even the feelings of an unbelieving host. If we have to choose between offending a Christian and offending a non-Christian, we should offend the non-Christian. Our testimony will be harmed more by arguing with and condemning fellow believers than by standing by them in love.

Let's apply this principle to today. Someone may say, "The Bible doesn't directly forbid betting on a ball game. I can afford to lose a dollar, so why not?" But you need to apply this principle. Suppose another Christian at the office decides to join you in placing a bet. Yet he does so against his conscience and he thus sins. Or suppose his conscience is OK with it and he wins the bet, and in his greed he becomes a compulsive gambler, and eventually loses everything, including his wife and children. Has your exercise of "liberty" helped that person? No! It has hurt that person. Listen, nothing of real value comes from gambling. In my book there are no real winners, and everyone acknowledges that there are many losers.

Then Paul says there is another group of people we need to be concerned about as we consider exercising our Christian liberty.

2. Our Liberty Should not Hinder Our Gospel Witness – This is Paul's greatest concern in reference to other people. Look at v.32 again, "Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God." Now the first two groups are both unbelievers. We are not, by some foolish or inconsiderate action, to place a stumbling block in someone's path in regard to Christ and the gospel. No action of ours is to prevent a Jew or a Greek from coming to Christ. We are not to do anything to hinder our witness to the community. I believe that legalistic Christians hinder the gospel. Their lifestyle depicts Christianity as submission to a long list of dos and don'ts, and many unbelievers are repelled by that unnecessarily. On the other hand, some libertarian church members hurt the cause of Christ by how they talk and how they live. They give unbelievers an excuse to stay away from church. Even unbelievers expect Christians to live by basic principles of righteousness.

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<sup>2</sup> Back in 8:10-12 we have a similar situation. Paul says in those verses, "For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ."

One night when Stuart Brisco was driving in the pouring rain, he was almost run off the road by a car that passed him where there was no room to pass. Through his rain-covered windshield, he was just able to decipher the bumper sticker: "See you in church on Sunday."<sup>3</sup> That church member was exercising a freedom to drive without proper restraint. He was a bad witness for his faith.

Not only are we to avoid doing anything that would hinder our gospel witness, but v.33 states the point in a more positive light, "just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved." Paul did not please men in terms of going along with their sin or compromising the Gospel (see Gal. 1:10). He would not remove the stumbling block of the Cross, for there is no salvation apart from the Cross (1:18-2:5). But he was willing to please them in the non-essential areas; areas that did not affect his relationship with Christ. Paul has already described this principle in detail in 9:19-25. When he was with Jews he would live like a Jew. When he was with Gentiles, he would adapt to the customs of the Gentiles. One example had to do with food. As Paul said in 8:8, "But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse." So Paul would eat whatever pleased those he was with if doing so would open the door for him to witness to them about Christ. When he was with Gentiles, he would eat like a Gentile. When he was with Jews, he would eat like a Jew.

Now Paul makes reference to Jesus Christ as the supreme example of One who set aside His rights for the sake of others (Phil. 2:7-8). He did not please Himself, but made sacrifices that others might be saved. That is why Paul said in 11:1, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ." Mature Christians in particular need to model Christlike behavior for other believers. There is a great need for mentors today.

Are you willing to sacrifice some of your freedoms for the sake of others? Christ did. Shouldn't you?

### III. LIBERTY SHOULD BE LIMITED TO WHAT GIVES GLORY TO GOD

Paul said in v.31, "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." Starting with knowledge plus love to our brethren, Paul reaches up to God, to our supreme obligation to Him. Giving glory to God is the ultimate consideration in limiting our liberty. Everything we do must truly<sup>4</sup> glorify Him. Last fall we discussed what is our purpose here on earth. Well, the chief purpose for man is to glorify God. You may recall back in 6:20 Paul said, "You have been bought with a price. Therefore glorify God in your body." Your life is to glorify God. So if something we say or do does not glorify God in some way, then don't do it.

What is the glory of God? Glory may be defined as a public manifestation of the praiseworthy attributes of an individual. The word "glory" means "something that is worthy of praise." For example, Susan plays the piano very well, and I'm sure she receives many complements. Her ability to play the piano is her glory.

God is all glorious. His character is wonderful. He is so loving, so good, so kind, and so merciful. His ability knows no limits. He is all-powerful. He could speak the word, and billions of stars took their place in the galaxies. There is so much to glorify God for. That is why Psa. 29:2 says, "Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name."

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart Brisco, *What Works When Life Doesn't* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books/SP Publications, Inc., 1976), 55.

<sup>4</sup> I say "truly", for sometimes we think we are giving glory to God when we are not. A Corinthian Christian may think he is glorifying God by judging other Christians for eating sacrificial meat, but that would not be glorifying God.

How, then, do we do all to the glory of God? Let me give you 3 suggestions:

1. By Praising God - Psa. 50:23 says, "Whoever offers praise glorifies Me." Our praise should be publicly declared. I believe we need to be careful to give praise and glory to God for everything.

Gil Dodds set a new record in 1943 for the indoor mile run. He ran it in 4 minutes, 6 seconds. Upon completing the race they gave him the opportunity to say a few words. He took that opportunity, not to brag on himself, but to give glory to God. He gave God the credit for his ability to win that race. He went on to say that he did not have what the coaches said that he had to have to be a successful mile runner. He was not a good sprinter. But he told that audience that God gave him something else, and that was stamina. Instead of needing to sprint at the end, he just kept up a fast pace the whole race.<sup>5</sup>

2. By Thanking God – When you combine vv.30 & 31 we see one way to give glory to God. In fact, we are told how we can eat to the glory of God. We glorify God by being thankful for what we are eating. After all, He is the ultimate source of all food. We can also glorify God's goodness in providing such good tasting and refreshing food for our enjoyment. So every time you sit down to a meal you should glorify God through thanksgiving.

3. By Our Lives – In v.31 Paul said, "whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." We do all things for "God's glory" when the excellence of God's attributes is made to shine forth by our actions so that men may see it. It all begins with God's presence in our lives. Paul said in Gal. 2:20, "Christ lives in me," and the glory of Christ should shine forth in our lives. When you are filled with the Spirit, you will bear the fruit of the Spirit, like love, joy, peace, gentleness, and being slow to anger. Jesus said in Jn. 15:8, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit."

When Moses spent 40 days & nights with God on Mt. Sinai, he came back with the glory of God on his face. I probably will never forget what Evangelist Jay Strack told a group of young people. He said, "When it comes to finding a mate, go for the glow." The glory of God's character should shine forth from our lives. When people see you, they should be able to see the wonderful love of God. When people see you, they should see the goodness of God in action. Mt. 5:16 says, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, who is in heaven." We should manifest the other praise-worthy attributes of God in our lives. God is slow to anger, and so should we. People ought to be able to see in us the forgiving grace of God, and the mercy of God and then glorify God who gave us those character qualities. Even in the most mundane, routine, nonspiritual things of life, God is to be glorified.

We could answer many real questions in our lives if we each asked ourselves, "Am I doing this for God's glory?" Or ask, "Will this activity bring glory to God?" The next time you are ready to read a pornographic novel, can you bow your head and say, "Lord, I thank you that I can read this novel for your glory."? Can you say, "I feel like telling others how God blessed by life with that novel."?

Can you drink alcohol to God's glory when you know that drink is slaying thousands body and soul, and that hopeless drunkards start out as moderate drinkers?

Appeal: Christian liberty is a wonderful gift from God. We are free in Christ from the bondage of sin. We are free in Christ from religious bondage. But we have seen today that we should voluntarily limit our freedom by 3 considerations. Our liberty should be limited by conscience, by loving consideration for others, and by the test of God's glory. In other words, live at peace with

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979), #1874.

yourself, live for others, and live for the glory of God. That is the formula for a wonderful life! I wonder if there is something that you have been doing lately that does not pass those 3 tests? If so, will you this day make a commitment to stop doing it? Remember, Jesus died to set you free. Your highest obligation is to glorify God in your body in all that you do.

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); Craig Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937); John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 14 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Paige Patterson, *The Troubled Triumphant Church: an Exposition of First Corinthians* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Jerry Vines, *God Speaks Today: A Study of 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Wise: 1 Corinthians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).