

An Outward Focus

The Point: Bring glory to God by seeking the welfare of others.

Session Passage: 1 Corinthians 10:23-33

1 Corinthians 10:23-24

Connection to the Point: Do what is beneficial to others.

Context. In 1 Corinthians 5–8, Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth about a variety of matters that they were dealing with in their church: disciplining sinful church members (chap. 5), resolving issues without bringing public lawsuits (chap. 6), marriage and singleness (chap. 7), and food offered to idols (chap. 8). He then defended his apostleship (chap. 9).

In the immediate context of chapter 10, Paul warned the believers by reminding them of Israel’s past sins. He began the chapter by reminding the Corinthians of all the ways God had provided for the Israelites after He freed them from slavery in Egypt. God not only led them out of Egypt; He also provided them with spiritual food and drink. In referring to those very events, Paul specifically warned them against falling into idolatry, just as their ancestors had done. In one fascinating statement, Paul wrote that the Israelites tested “Christ” (10:9) when referring to an incident in the book of Numbers (Num. 21:4-9). Jesus, of course, was not born until over a thousand years after this event. By stating God’s people were rebelling against Christ in that event in Numbers, Paul was teaching that God the Son is eternal, and thus, as God, was present during the exodus and wilderness wanderings. In verses 14-22, Paul specifically instructed the Corinthians not to eat meat or drink in pagan temples. He said that doing so would mean participating in worshiping demons. The issue of eating the same meat that vendors had sold in the market was an entirely different question (8:1-13).

Everything is permissible (v. 23). This is not the first time that Paul used this phrase in this letter. He also used it when discussing the issue of sexual immorality (6:12; see 6:12-20). Many commentators agree that in both instances, Paul was quoting the people of Corinth back to themselves. The quote likely appeared in an earlier letter the church in Corinth had written to the apostle. Perhaps the quote was derived from a misunderstanding of Paul’s teaching on Christian freedom, or possibly it could have been a popular saying known to both Paul and the Corinthian believers. Regarding the Corinthians’ use of the saying, Paul seems to be saying something like, “That’s not quite right.” Because we live in a world that was both created good by God and is also fallen and broken, many falsehoods come with a glimmer of truth. Since all the Law and the Prophets had been fulfilled in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, there is a sense in which “everything is permissible” for Christians (apart from sin, of course; Rom. 6:1-14), but the Corinthians needed a deeper understanding.

Permissible/beneficial, permissible/builds up (v. 23). Paul paired the saying “everything is permissible” with two phrases that basically share the same meaning. While not admitting that “everything is permissible” was a valid perspective, Paul pointed out the absurdity of the concept even if it were true. The Corinthians needed to consider other people and not just think of themselves. Even if something is permissible, it does not mean that it helps build believers up. The implication is that buying into this way of thinking would not only fail to build others up but would actually be detrimental to them and might impair their faith in Christ.

Seek (v. 24). The Greek word translated “seek” (*zeteo*) can mean to try to find (“search for,” Matt. 2:13; 18:12); to seek information—investigate, examine (“seek,” Matt. 6:33; “made efforts,” Acts 16:10); or to strive for, to devote great effort to achieve one’s goals (“in search of,” Matt. 13:45; “looking for a way,” 21:46). In this

instance, it carries the meaning of the third definition, and could also be translated “aim at.” The same Greek term is used later in this letter when Paul described love as “not self-seeking” (13:5). Paul used the same term in Philippians 2:19-21 when he told the Philippians he hoped to send Timothy to them and that no one else was like-minded, that others “all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.”

No one is to seek his own good, but the good of the other person (v. 24). While the phrase “everything is permissible” is self-seeking, Paul’s corrective was that the Corinthian believers should look out for the interests and good of others (Phil. 2:4).

1 Corinthians 10:25-30

Connection to the Point: Don’t offend others unnecessarily.

Everything that is sold in the meat market (v. 25). After instructing the believers at Corinth earlier in this chapter not to eat meat in pagan temples, Paul wrote that they could and should eat “everything” that vendors sold in the meat market. “The meat market” was a public market where people from all walks of life shopped for their daily needs. Vendors did not label their food, specifically the meat, as to its source. Some of the meat was leftovers from feasts in pagan temples. The other meat came from a butcher. Paul told the Corinthians they were permitted to buy and eat any meat available in this public market.

Raising questions for the sake of conscience (v. 25). Paul had previously told the Corinthians not to participate in the pagan temple feasts, but he was not contradicting himself here. The meat itself was neither good nor evil. It was the worship of pagan gods and idols associated with those feasts that was the issue. Therefore, the Corinthians were not to let their consciences be bound by asking questions about the origin of the meat sold in the market. Instead, they were to express their Christian liberty and gratitude to God by buying and eating the meat from the market as they desired.

The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it (v. 26). This phrase is a quote from Psalm 24:1. The Old Testament is full of teachings that the whole world belongs to God (Deut. 10:14; Ps. 50:12). Paul used a similar argument elsewhere when he wrote, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, since it is sanctified by the word of God and by prayer” (1 Tim. 4:4-5). The fact that God is the Creator of all things is a reality that Paul could not overstate. God’s status as Creator makes Him worthy of all praise. It also makes Him the owner of everything in the world. Nothing comes into existence or continues to exist outside of God’s sovereignty. And since all food, including meat, comes from God, it is permissible to eat with a clear conscience.

Eat everything that is set before you (v. 27). Christians can and should always eat with grateful hearts—knowing that everything good that they receive, specifically food, is a gift from God who gives good gifts to his children (Luke 11:13; Jas. 1:17). The specific context of Paul’s instruction about eating food set before them is when a believer accepts an invitation to eat a meal in the home of an unbeliever. Notice that Paul did not compel the Corinthian believers to accept the invitation in the first place. He left that decision up to the individual believers by writing, “if . . . you want to go.” Whether to go or not was up to the conscience, wisdom, and desire of the individual Christian. Paul instructed the Corinthians on how to behave once the person made that decision.

Food from a sacrifice (v. 28). The meat related to pagan worship was used in three ways. First, some of the meat was burned up and consumed by the flames of the fire as a sacrifice to the idols. Second, worshipers consumed some of the meat in a pagan feast. In verses 14-21 of this chapter, Paul instructed the Corinthians not to participate in either of these first two practices. The third and final use of meat sacrificed to idols was

leftovers sold in the public food markets. Believers could eat this “food from a sacrifice” without sinning. In this instance, their consciences were not to be constrained or bound.

Out of consideration for the one who told you (v. 28). A believer’s freedom in Christ to eat food from a sacrifice was not the only reality Christians were to consider when determining whether they would or would not eat the meat. They were also to consider whether eating that food would violate another believer’s conscience—that eating food that priests had sacrificed to idols would be viewed as a sin by another believer (see 8:4-13). The other believer may have been thinking incorrectly about the issue, but being theologically correct is not the only issue believers were to consider. As Paul taught in Philippians 2:4, a believer should “look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others.”

Partake with thanksgiving (v. 30). Because God is Creator, Sustainer, and Provider, believers are free to partake of all kinds of food. Not only are Christians free to do this, but they also can and should partake in all kinds of food with thankful hearts—acknowledging that God is the Giver of all good gifts.

1 Corinthians 10:31-33

Connection to the Point: Seek the benefit of others and the glory of God.

Whether you eat or drink (v. 31). The specific context of this oft-repeated phrase is connected to whether a Christian was willing to eat meat that had been previously sacrificed to idols in a ritual in a pagan temple. However, Paul likely was seeking to apply this specific principle more broadly. The apostle was reminding the Corinthians that the specific question at hand was about something as mundane as eating and drinking. Moving from the lesser to the greater, Christian liberty should be embraced and celebrated in other areas of life (“whatever you do”) as well.

Do everything for the glory of God (v. 31). All things—even things as ordinary as eating and drinking—can and should be done for the glory of God. The glory of God is a common theme in the Bible, but it can be challenging to define precisely. The Greek term is *doxa* and carries with it the idea of light and visual magnificence. The line “bright shining as the sun” from the hymn “Amazing Grace” is an image of glory. We glorify God when we make His attributes—the unique characteristics of God that make Him God—known to and among His creation. In other words, when God in Christ is honored as He should be by His creation, He receives His glory. In support of this idea, Paul used the word “dishonor” as an antonym to “glory” in his next letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 6:8). Paul’s contention that eating and drinking, or not eating and drinking, can be done for the glory of God is instructive for us. Since believers can glorify God in simple things like eating and drinking, surely the bigger parts of one’s life, like a person’s personal life, job performance, as well as conduct in one’s family life and in one’s neighborhood also can be done for His glory.

Give no offense (v. 32). If a Christian’s conscience was weak in the sense that he or she considered eating food purchased in the meat market that had previously been sacrificed to idols a sin, the stronger believer was to refrain from eating food sacrificed to idols in that instance as well (v. 28). The only offense that we should desire to give people is the offense of the gospel. Earlier in his letter, Paul wrote that the cross is “a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles” (1:23). Paul did not suggest that we seek to remove this offense. Instead, he insisted that we communicate the cross clearly and in a way that makes sense to those of a given culture with the result that we might “by every possible means save some” (9:22).

Try to please everyone in everything (v. 33). In Galatians 1:10, Paul wrote, “If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.” This difference in the apostle’s two statements is due to differing contexts. In Galatians, Paul was combating the heresy that insisted that people had to become Jews first in order to become Christians. In that instance, in fighting for the gospel Paul sought to please no one but Christ. In 1

Corinthians Paul was battling an unhealthy view of Christian liberty that had led some to live in such ways that harmed fellow believers through their actions. In this case, believers were to live in such a way as to please other believers, in the sense of living in such a manner that did not cause other believers to stumble in their faith, specifically over eating or not eating meat sacrificed to idols.

Not seeking my own benefit (v. 33). Paul would not personally benefit from the believers in Corinth accepting his way of thinking on this issue of meat sacrificed to idols in relation to Christian liberty. However, as we have already seen throughout this letter, Paul was never interested in personal gain or advancing his personal agenda or popularity. Instead, he was interested in seeing others come to know and accept the truth of the gospel. Paul reflected this same thinking in chapter 9 when he stated that he desired for “all people” to be saved (9:22). Paul was willing to relinquish his rights for the spiritual benefit of others.

That they may be saved (v. 33) continues a line of thought that Paul began earlier in chapter 9. In that section, Paul wrote that he became like a Jew to be an effective witness for Jesus to Jewish people. Likewise, Paul also became like a Gentile to be an effective witness to the Gentiles. In all cases, Paul’s goal was to adapt himself so he could clearly communicate the gospel to others (9:20-22). This same principle applies to Christians today. Being good witnesses for Christ includes seeking to understand our audience in such a way that we may communicate clearly the truth of the gospel and how it applies to all people in all cultures in every moment of history.