

## **Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> September 2021 – 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1 'The limits of freedom'**

Life has lots of grey areas. Some things are clear and straightforward – there are others where it's possible to hold different views with equal integrity. This is true for followers of Jesus as well, and people often wonder why that is. Surely God's way would be black and white, with a clear answer to each dilemma?

The answer to that question is found when we ask **what following Jesus actually is. At its heart, it's not a religion, it's a relationship.** Our first and primary task is to love, and be loved by, Jesus. And like any close relationship there are some clear boundaries, but the rest is navigated by a conversation of love. Think of a marriage: we know that abuse is wrong, neglect is wrong, adultery is wrong – these are clear 'black and white' issues, just as saying thank you is good, telling the truth is good, making time for each other is good.

But most of the rest is negotiated. Who works and how much; how much we see wider family; how much we give away; how we use our leisure time. There's no right or wrong answers to these, and every couple has to navigate those things in their own way. But we still want to make the best choices, especially if we're followers of Jesus. So what guidelines are there for those choices?

In today's passage, St Paul is addressing this very question. The presenting issue might seem obscure to us: a lot of animals were sacrificed in Corinth to pagan gods, and then the meat was sold in the city market to be eaten. **And Christians were divided over this – especially as they gathered to eat every time they met for worship.** The 'freedom brigade' – and Paul quotes their mantra at the start 'I have the right to do anything' – were happy to eat this meat all the time. Their reasons were both good and bad: they were confident in Jesus' power to cleanse anything, but they also thought that they could do what they liked with their bodies because only the 'spiritual' life mattered.

The 'holiness brigade' refused to touch it: in their view the meat was defiled by being sacrificed to idols, and Christians should keep themselves set apart for Jesus alone. You can see that both sides have a valid point: we are free in Christ; we are also set apart in Christ. Which is right? Paul's answer is that *both* are, but each side needs to adapt their behaviour to serve the other. So the advice is: eat what your host offers, but if your host raises the conscience issue, curb your freedom for the sake of love.

We do the same today with, say, alcohol. We know drunkenness is forbidden by Scripture, but Christians disagree as to whether to be teetotal or to drink in moderation. And most Christians who drink practise the same approach as Paul advises in this passage: they enjoy a glass when everyone is comfortable with it, but refuse to drink when with believers who are teetotal.

*But in this discussion, Paul actually gives us three very useful tips for making wise choices generally – what I call the 3 G's.*

**The first is my growth** – Paul starts by tackling the idea of freedom from a Christian perspective. Yes, we are free in Christ, but not everything is either permissible or beneficial. So the first guideline we apply to our life choices is: does this help me to grow as a human, or does it diminish me, or keep me in some form of bondage?

**The second is others' good** – this is actually repeated at the beginning and end, so we can deduce that this is even more important than the first: 'No-one should seek their own good, but the good of others.' (v24) For followers of Jesus, the good of others comes *first*. Even if we are free to do something, we must prioritise what benefits others, and if our freedom hurts others then we should change our behaviour. We are free not to serve ourselves, but others.

Which brings us to the third G – my growth, others good, **God's glory**. 'Whatever you do,' Paul says, 'do it all for the glory of God.' (v31) In other words, can God put his name to what you're doing? Would Jesus do the same?

These three guidelines are incredibly helpful at helping us to make good life choices. It reminds us that **freedom is ultimately a privilege, not a right – it should be invested for the benefit of others**. So when we come to apply this to the environment, and start to make decisions on what is most beneficial to others (and most glorifies God in the process), then suddenly a different pattern of life starts to emerge:

- When we see our world choking up with unnecessary waste, then we want to recycle as much as we can – not to feel good about ourselves, but because it helps others
- When we see companies whose ethical practices damage eco-systems, we switch our business elsewhere, to companies who look after others better
- When we see purchases where our 'consumer freedom' brings short term gain but long term pain, we may choose to limit our freedom for the greater good of others and the greater glory of God.

As I close, I want to flag up one specific issue. If the dominant ethical debate in the church of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was over alcohol, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it will be meat – you might say the wheel comes full circle to where we started in Corinth 2,000 years ago. Only this time, the issue is that meat requires far more land than arable crops, vegetables and fruit. For example, beef needs eight times more land than wheat to produce the same amount of nutrition.

A lot of the debates about over-population ignore the fact that we could feed our world easily if we all ate less meat. Meat used to be a weekly privilege for most of our ancestors; it is now a daily expectation.

And, as with alcohol 200 years ago, Christians will divide between those who become vegetarian, and those who reduce their meat consumption. My choice has been the latter: we now aim to be meat free 2 or 3 days a week – and perhaps I need to go lower still. But the bottom line is, it is hard to justify our current lifestyle when we read passages like this.

These are challenging discussions, and even harder choices. But here we have a blueprint for a life which helps us to grow, blesses others, and gives glory to God. May God grant us grace to have ears to hear, a heart to love and a life to change. Amen.