

## “Think of Others Too”

**Lesson Text:** 1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1 **Background Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 8; 10:23–11:1

**Devotional Reading:** James 1:19–27

### 1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1 (NIV)

23 “I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but not everything is constructive.

24 No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.

25 Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, 26 for, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.”

27 If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience.

28 But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience.

29 I am referring to the other person’s conscience, not yours. For why is my freedom being judged by another’s conscience?

30 If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?

31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. 32 Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—

33 even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.

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11:1 Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

## TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To know that just because we can do something, doesn’t mean we should. (Refer students to 1 Corinthians 10:23 to support this)
- **Biblical Principle:** To understand Paul’s holy humility regarding the role of one’s conscience.
- **Daily Application:** To think of one personal practice that has a negative influence on others and make a change.

## INTRODUCTION

### No Place for Selfies

By definition, a “selfie” is a photo that includes the person taking the picture. Selfies have become routine in modern life, but some claim that the first selfie was actually taken in the year 1839! That was the year when Robert Cornelius, an amateur chemist and photographer, took a picture of himself in the back of his family’s chandelier store. The word selfie was not used back then, not appearing in print until 2002. Gaining in popular usage, the word was chosen as “Word of the Year” by the Oxford English Dictionary in 2013.

Selfies flirt with the concept of self-centeredness since by nature they always include—and often focus on—the person taking the picture. And one does not need a smartphone camera to engage in self-centered behavior. That fact has been evident ever since the serpent successfully tempted Eve into thinking that eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would benefit her, putting her on the level of divinity (Genesis 3:5). Self-centered thinking and behavior inevitably result in sin (James 1:14–15).

When the apostle Paul describes characteristics of life in “the last days,” he includes among them the fact that people will be “lovers of themselves” (2 Timothy 3:1–2). Self-centeredness in the Corinthian church had resulted in the abuse of Christian freedom to the detriment of many. That was just one of many problems that Paul had to address in his first letter to that church—self-centeredness may even have been the basis of those other problems.

## **LESSON CONTEXT**

### **The City**

The city of Corinth was one of the great centers of commerce in the Mediterranean world of the first century A.D. It was located near a narrow strip of land (an isthmus) that connected two major land masses. The city had a harbor for the Saronic Gulf and Aegean Sea to the east (at Cenchreae; see Acts 18:18) and another harbor for the Gulf of Corinth and Adriatic Sea to the west (at Lechaion). Maritime traffic between Asia and Rome had a choice of routes: either the dangerous and longer route around the Peloponnesian Peninsula or the shortcut of a four-mile limestone trackway between Corinth’s two harbors. Merchants choosing the latter would pay to have their ships hauled in their entirety from one harbor to the other on this road.

Like many seaport cities, Corinth was quite worldly and eclectic in nature. Pagan temples and the idolatry they represented characterized the city (compare Acts 17:16 regarding Athens, some 50 miles to the east). The contents of 1 Corinthians indicate that many in the church there had struggled to overcome practices of their former pagan lifestyles (see 1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

### **The Church**

Having planted the church in Corinth on his second missionary journey (about A.D. 52; see Acts 18:1–17), Paul found it necessary to write to its members while he was in Ephesus on his third journey (A.D. 56; Acts 19:1–20:38; 1 Corinthians 16:8, 19). Paul was headed toward Corinth at the time (Acts 20:1–3), but Ephesus was several days away by sea travel, and the situation couldn’t wait for a personal visit. Reports had come to Paul regarding needed correctives and clarifications in Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 1:11; 7:1).

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul had introduced the difficult issue (for that time) of eating meat that had been offered on pagan altars to idols. Meat that was left over from a pagan sacrifice, initiated by a worshipper who had brought the sacrificial animal, was at the disposal of the officiating priests. What they couldn’t eat personally they would sell in the marketplace. Such meat would be less expensive than other meat because the pagan priests didn’t have any investment to recover. Some Christians wondered about the propriety of buying such meat. In doing so, were they were participating in pagan worship and thus compromising their witness for Christ?

In this regard, Paul emphasizes two points in 1 Corinthians 8. The first is the awareness that an idol is “nothing” (8:4); therefore those who are mature in knowledge on this point were free to eat such meat. Paul’s second point counterbalances the first: “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak” (8:9). This stresses the importance of demonstrating concern for those having a weak conscience. Such a person might witness a fellow believer eating meat that had been offered to idols and thereby be drawn back into idolatry. Paul had more to say on this issue, and that is today’s text.

### **Exercising Freedom: 1 Corinthians 10:23–30**

At no time did Paul deny the freedom of the mature Christian to enjoy his privileges in Christ. “I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial”—Paul knew that some activities could cause your weaker brother to stumble (1 Cor. 8:11–13). In other words, it is a mark of maturity when we

balance our freedom with responsibility; otherwise, it ceases to be freedom and becomes anarchy, lawlessness.

## **1. What are some ways we can use our freedom most effectively for ourselves? (1 Corinthians 10:23-24)**

### **What Do You Think?**

What is the first example that comes to mind of something you are free to do but do not do because it is not beneficial?

### **Digging Deeper**

Are you more motivated by your own benefit or others'? What difference might you see in your behavior if you considered the opposite first?

The principle that Paul sets forth in verse 24 of today's lesson is entirely consistent with his instruction to other churches (examples: Romans 15:2; Philippians 2:4). When members of the body of Christ adhere to this principle, no one needs to be preoccupied or worried about his or her own good. When each person seeks the good of others, nobody is neglected.

### **What Do You Think?**

What fears prevent you from considering others' benefit before your own?

### **Digging Deeper**

What examples of God's care (from the Bible and your own experience) help you to overcome these fears?

Paul continues to affirm Christian freedom regarding an issue of his day regarding how the meat being sold could be recognized as being associated with a pagan sacrifice.

In 1 Corinthians 10:25-26, he instructed the believers to ask no questions about the meat purchased at the market for use in their own homes. After all, everything comes from God (he quoted Ps. 24:1) and all food is permissible to the believer (see Mark 7:14-23; Acts 10:9-16, 28; 1 Tim. 4:3-5). The mature believer can enjoy in his own home even meat sacrificed to idols. Even if meat purchased at the regular market originally came from the temple (which was often the case), he would not be harmed.

But what about those times when the believer is the guest in the home of an unbeliever? Paul handled that problem in 1 Corinthians 10:27-30. If the Christian feels disposed to go (Paul did not make this decision a matter of great import), he should eat whatever is set before him and ask no questions (see Luke 10:8). However, there may be present at the meal one of the weaker brothers or sisters who wants to avoid meat offered to idols, and who has done some investigating. If this weaker Christian informs the stronger Christian that the meat indeed has been offered to idols, then the stronger Christian must not eat it. If he did, he would cause the weaker believer to stumble and possibly to sin.

## **2. How can we respect the traditions of others which we don't share? (1 Corinthians 10:25-30)**

### **What Do You Think?**

In what circumstances do you defer to another person's sense of conscience?

### **Digging Deeper**

What parameters help you determine whether to defer to another or instead to defend your freedom to choose differently?

## **Exercising Responsibility: 1 Corinthians 10:31–33–11:1**

Our last section maintains the tension between freedom and restraint. But now a vital context is presented: that of doing “all for the glory of God.” Christians today are rarely, if ever, faced with the issue of eating meat offered to idols. But there are modern parallels. And no matter what difficult (and easy) choices we face, we must honor this imperative.

The privilege and duty of all creation to glorify God is a theme that permeates Scripture (examples: Psalm 19:1–6; Romans 11:36; 2 Corinthians 1:20; 4:15). This requirement transcends all times, places, and cultures. Sharing meals was one way the first-century believers brought glory to God (Acts 2:42; contrast 1 Corinthians 11:20–22), and it can be so today as well. Paradoxically, we are the freest when we think least of ourselves in our desire to please the One who is our Creator, Ruler, and Redeemer (1 Thessalonians 4:1; Hebrews 11:6). In so doing, we follow the example of Jesus who “did not please Himself” (Romans 15:3), but who humbled Himself in an unparalleled way (Philippians 2:5–8, 11).

### **3. What are scenarios in which you can glorify God while respecting when someone else isn’t? (1 Corinthians 10:31)**

#### **What Do You Think?**

How can your mealtimes remind you to give glory to God in *all* situations?

#### **Digging Deeper**

How can other mundane tasks become reminders to glorify God?

Paul says that there is a third responsibility that ties in with the first two (in addition to using your freedom wisely, and putting other’s feelings first): We are also responsible to seek to win the lost (1 Cor. 10:32–33). We must not make it difficult either for Jews or Gentiles to trust the Lord, or for other members of the church to witness for the Lord. We must not live to seek our own benefit (“profit”), but also the benefit of others, that they might be saved.

When Paul wrote, “I please all men in all things” (1 Cor. 10:33), he was not suggesting that he was a compromiser or a man-pleaser (see Gal. 1:10). He was affirming the fact that his life and ministry were centered on helping others rather than on promoting himself and his own desires.

We see in 1 Corinthians 11:1 of today’s lesson that Paul never desired to build a following for himself, as he also made clear in verses 11:12–17. He was interested only in building disciples of Jesus—people who shared His passion for knowing Jesus and proclaiming His gospel of grace to others. He lived out the lifestyle he was encouraging his readers to follow: a life that glorified God in every way possible, including the need to edify others. To do that is to embrace the freedom that Jesus promised to all who choose to follow him (John 8:36; Romans 8:21).

### **4. What other imperative did Paul point out? (1 Corinthians 10:32–11:1)**

#### **What Do You Think?**

Who is the most Christlike role model in your life? What do you see in that person that reminds you of Jesus?

#### **Digging Deeper**

How can you follow his or her example even if that role model is not present with you?

## **CONCLUSION**

### **He Made Us Better**

Years ago there was a Christian publication that featured a series of tributes to a Christian leader who had gone to be with the Lord. That this man's life and ministry had an impact on countless numbers of people was clear from the words written about him. Among the tributes included was one statement that caught my attention: "He made us better."

To make others better is part of what it means to edify others. Sadly, we are surrounded by influences that make us anything but better. The behavior on display in media of many kinds often features and even glorifies the worst in human conduct. These won't make us better except possibly as cautionary tales. As followers of Jesus in a fallen world, we will not win every person with whom we share our faith in Jesus. But we can, as salt and light, seek to make the people we encounter better, or at least add some brightness to their lives, because we brought something of the spirit and character of Jesus into their lives.

Paul's primary concern in our lesson text is making the edification of others a priority within the body of Christ. The example he gives of eating meat offered to idols is not an issue for most believers today. Modern equivalents might be those places and things that observers come to associate with us when they see us—places and things that work against holiness. Do we have Christian freedom to attend movies that are rated other than "G"? Yes, indeed. But how will doing so affect the openness to receive the gospel of those who see us at such movies?

This is, of course, an all-the-time challenge. It involves our lives out in the public arena, which must be lived with a sense of duty both to glorify God and as a witness to others (believers and unbelievers). It involves the kind of freedom that is anchored in personal holiness (1 Peter 1:15–16), without legalism or hypocrisy (Matthew 23:16–26). It involves foregoing our "rights," as Paul did (1 Corinthians 8:9; 9:15, 18), for the good of others.

Think of the person who introduced you to Christ. That person wasn't perfect, and neither will you be. But that doesn't mean the standard of Matthew 5:48 should be lowered! Resolve to be like the one above who "made us better" as if eternal destinies are at stake—because they are!

As we ponder these things in our hearts, may it be said of us as Paul said of himself near the close of his life, "I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory" (2 Timothy 2:10).

## **PRAYER**

Heavenly Father, thank You for the freedom in Jesus that liberates people from slavery to sin. In this world where freedom is often misunderstood and abused, help us to represent our freedom in Jesus in a way that honors You and edifies others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## **THOUGHT TO REMEMBER**

To edify others is one way to glorify God.