

g. The third part of Paul's four-fold summary exhortation returns to the specific issue raised by the Corinthians in their letter to him: the question of what to do about food that has been sacrificed to idols (10:23-30). The first thing to note about this passage is that Paul introduced his treatment with a reiteration of his general thesis regarding Christian liberty (10:23; cf. 6:12). His restatement virtually repeats 6:12, *but with a notable shift in emphasis*:

- In the chapter six context Paul was speaking of the believer's freedom as it factors into his obligation to his own sanctity and devotion to the Lord. The Christian's freedom reflects his union with Christ and the liberation it entails; thus it must serve the *truth* of that union and not be the occasion for or instrument of self-will or self-enslavement (ref. 6:12-20).
- But here Paul turned his attention from the believer himself to others – people whose lives are touched by his. Freedom in Christ must serve one's own spiritual benefit, but also the benefit of others. For freedom to be truly freedom – for it to conform to the truth, it must be *profitable*: It must seek and nurture newness of life in the Lord Jesus Christ, which means that it must build up (edify) rather than undermine and further enslave.

It is in view of this principle that Paul issued his concluding instruction respecting “idol meats” (10:24-30), and he introduced that instruction with a general exhortation expressing the practical implication of the principle of Christian freedom: Liberty in Christ is to serve the goal of christiformity (as should every facet and operation of the Christian life), *and this means that every believer is obligated to employ his freedom for the good of his fellows* (10:24). Several things about this exhortation must be considered in order to grasp Paul's meaning.

- The first is that Paul's statement is conspicuously imprecise. Rendered literally, it is: “Let no one pursue his own, but that of the other.” Paul employed a neuter singular object in both clauses (*that of himself, that of the other*), thereby leaving the object of this pursuit undefined. His meaning must be supplied by the context, and the context points to *edification* being Paul's implied object. (The fact that Paul's grammatical object is generic while the context is concerned with edification has led various translators to supply the noun “good” – ref. NAS, ESV, NIV).
- The Corinthians were not to pursue “their own,” but what concerns the other. If Paul was indeed referring to seeking the other's edification, this raises a second issue: Was he suggesting that Christians shouldn't seek their own edification, but only that of their brothers and sisters? This clearly can't be his meaning, for Paul everywhere insisted that Christ's saints are to apply themselves to their growth in Him, as he himself did (Philippians 3:1-21). Every believer's destiny (and so his great good) is his full conformity to Jesus Christ, and this is to be the goal of each one's pursuit and labors (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; Philippians 2:12-13).

But this wasn't the personal pursuit Paul was referring to, evident as well in the fact that he saw it as antithetical to seeking the good of others: The one seeking his own good in the sense Paul meant is not seeking – indeed cannot seek – the good of others; Paul was talking about *self-seeking* that reflects self-concern and self-interest and which takes no real thought of others. ***Importantly, this sort of self-seeking can occur even where the individual is acting out of concern for the truth and his desire to conform to it.*** This was precisely the case in this instance: The Corinthians were “seeking their own good” in the sense that they were insisting upon exercising the “rights” that were theirs in Christ; they were conforming to their freedom by exercising it, but without concern for others.

Ironically, the Christian who seeks his own good in this way is actually undermining it. He seeks what he *perceives* to be his good, but his perception is driven by an immature view of his liberty and how it is to be embraced. Thus his liberty becomes the source of his own stumbling as well as those around him. Conversely, the Christian who is committed to edification – to the building up of Christ's Church – will view his freedom through that lens and employ it accordingly. In every circumstance and interaction, he makes his maturity and mature liberty the servant of edification – his own as well as his brother's. In this way he rightly seeks and serves his own good, whether directly or indirectly by building up Christ's body of which he is a part.

- Finally, it's notable that Paul exhorted the Corinthians to pursue that which concerns the *other*. One might well have expected Paul to refer explicitly to other Christians rather than using this generic term. Some English versions fill out this adjective with the noun *neighbor*, perhaps because it has a generic connotation, but possibly also because of the linkage Paul makes in the larger context between the Church and Israel (ref. 10:1-11). For the notion of “neighbor” was woven into Israel's covenant and was a key aspect of the nation's ethic (cf. Exodus 20:16-17, 21:14, 22:7-27; Leviticus 18:20 and 19:13-18 with Matthew 22:34-40).

However, the implication of assigning this Israelite connotation to Paul is that it tends to limit the meaning of *other* to other members of the covenant community (the Church) as the concept “neighbor” did for theocratic Israel. Paul's instruction has obvious concern for the community of believers, but the context argues for a wider meaning for “other” (ref. 10:27-29, 32-33). The Christian obligation to seek the good of others extends beyond the household of faith to include all men. The Corinthians were to regard and employ their liberty in the same way as every other dimension of their lives: according to the overarching ethic of serving the cause of the gospel. They were to become all things to all men with the goal of winning them; in this way they would truly fulfill their obligation to “do good to all men” (Galatians 6:10; cf. 9:15-23).

With regard to the present issue, this meant that the Corinthians were to view their freedom in terms of an obligation, not only to their fellow believers, *but to their fellow human beings*. The mature saints at Corinth may have given some thought to how their actions respecting “idol meats” and idol rituals were affecting their weaker brothers and sisters, but Paul insisted that they also consider their non-Christian countrymen. Were their actions testifying to the gospel and working toward the faith of the unbelievers around them, or were they bearing false witness, thereby showing themselves to be opponents of the gospel and its work rather than co-laborers with it (ref. again 9:23-27)? In the name of exalting the liberty that was theirs in Christ, some at Corinth were guilty of stumbling their countrymen as well as their believing brethren.

Paul exhorted the Corinthians to pursue the good of their fellow man, and he elaborated on that charge by showing them what this means in terms of food sacrificed to idols (10:25-30). This instruction is critically important, not merely because it was Paul’s final word on the subject, but because he brought together in practical terms all that he’d said about such foods and how the Christian is to approach his freedom in Christ in light of his status as Christ’s bondsman for the sake of His gospel. The specifics of his argument are as follows:

- First of all, it’s crucial to note that Paul distinguished here between “idol meats” as such and pagan ritual worship. His instruction pertained to foods that come to a meal table through the process of ritual sacrifice, not food that is consumed in connection with idol rituals. The Corinthians (and all Christians) were free to purchase and eat anything available in the marketplace despite the strong probability that it had been involved in a sacrificial ritual (v. 25). They could do so without having to identify its history in order to set their consciences at ease that it was “clean” (in Paul’s words, “*without inquiring on account of conscience*”).

Paul gave as the reason for this “good conscience” toward all food the fundamental truth that everything the Lord created is good. And it is good because the Lord is Himself good and “*the earth is His and all it contains*” (cf. Psalm 24:1 with Psalm 50:10-12; cf. also Genesis 1:31 with Mark 7:14-23 and Romans 14:14 with 1 Timothy 4:1-5).

- Secondly, Paul enlarged his discussion by posing a second situation, namely a Christian being invited to a meal *by an unbeliever* (10:27-30). This is an important detail for a couple of reasons. First, it suggests that the host had no conscience problem with the possibility that the meat he was serving had come through an idol temple. If he did, he obviously wouldn’t be serving it. Therefore the offense (as indicated in Paul’s scenario) is taken by one or more of the *guests*. But given the circumstance, the offended one could be either another Christian or an unbeliever. In fact, Paul’s instruction speaks equally to both possibilities.

- The Corinthians needed to understand that there was more at stake in their decisions and actions than their own consciences. They obviously needed to honor their own conscience, but they also needed to consider others who might be affected by what they did. Verses 27-28 show that Paul was concerned about both. With respect to the Corinthian saints who might find themselves invited to such a meal, Paul instructed them that they needn't be concerned about accepting the invitation; they were free to accept without having to ask about the status of the food (v. 27; cf. v. 25 where Paul gave the very same counsel regarding food available in the marketplace). Their host had no conscience issues about what he was serving and they shouldn't either.

- But there might be others present who *do* have a problem with eating such foods, and the believer – who himself has no conscience issue – needs to take that into account (v. 28). Specifically, in this situation the Christian needs to refrain from eating. He ought not raise any questions or concerns himself, but once someone else raises them and manifests a violated conscience, he is to honor the other's conscience by not eating. *And this is the Christian's obligation regardless of whether the offended person is a believer or an unbeliever.*

Readers typically conclude that Paul was talking about offense being taken by another Christian, but his generic language (“if anyone says to you...”), together with the scenario he posed – namely, a Christian eating in the home of an unbeliever, points toward it being an *unbelieving* guest who is offended. This is not to say that Paul's instruction in this passage doesn't apply in the case of another Christian being offended, but Paul recognized – and wanted the Corinthians to realize – that believers can just as easily (if unintentionally) become a stumbling block to unbelievers.

In this particular example, Paul was allowing that unbelievers – not just Christians – can take offense at the eating of “idol meats.” Most importantly, the unbeliever's offense has nothing to do with the food as such or his own eating, but with the Christian present at the meal.

In Paul's scenario – and assuming an unbeliever to be the offended one – the offense derives, not from the history of the food set before them, but from the fact that a *Christian* is eating it. This individual knows that the food has passed through a pagan sacrificial ritual (v. 28a), and so is startled to see a Christian – a person who has renounced as false the gods of Rome and Greece in order to serve a singular deity associated with a crucified Jew – partaking in that sacrificial meat. It doesn't matter that the offended man has a wrong understanding of idols and Christian freedom; what matters is that the Christian has effectively borne false witness to him; he has caused that one to stumble and so has failed in his obligation to partner with the gospel (recall again 9:23, 26-27).

- And so the Christian needs to refrain from eating, not for the sake of his own conscience (which is rightfully clear), *but for the sake of the other man's conscience*. By doing so he isn't deferring to error or ignorance, but meeting that person at the point of his own understanding and convictions for the sake of the gospel. This perspective is critical to capturing Paul's point, especially as it's embodied in his two rhetorical questions (v. 29b-30). These questions have perplexed many, but Paul's meaning is apparent when his words are viewed through the lens of his concern that believers subject everything to the cause of the gospel (ref. again 9:1-27):

For the Christian to fail to yield to the offended man's conscience is for him to have his legitimate liberty in Christ become the occasion to strengthen that person's unbelief; in Paul's words, he finds his freedom being judged (condemned) by another's conscience.

- The believer's liberty, which is to be an instrument of worship and edification, becomes in this instance an opponent of Christ and a hindrance to His gospel. Christian freedom should testify to Christ and lead men to Him, not bear false witness and drive men away. *Again, it's critical to note that the issue isn't the legitimacy of the believer's freedom*. The Corinthians wanted to reduce the whole matter to who was right and who was wrong in their convictions concerning "idol meats," but Paul understood that this determination doesn't settle the issue.

He agreed with the mature saints at Corinth that Christians are free to partake in all things because the good Creator created all things to be enjoyed by His image-sons. Paul himself enjoyed this freedom in Christ, no longer encumbered by the dietary constraints of the Law of Moses which he now understood to have been a preparatory shadow pointing to the substance that has come in Christ (Colossians 2:8-17).

Paul upheld and rejoiced in his liberty in Christ, but he recognized that freedom isn't determinative; love in the service of Christ and His gospel is (ref. 8:1). Every dimension and exertion of the Christian's life is to be bound over to this constraint. Believers are to express and celebrate their freedom, but *in truth*, and this means making their liberty the servant of the truth as it is in Jesus Christ; in practical terms, their freedom is to be an instrument of true worship and true testimony. Thus the meaning of Paul's second rhetorical question (10:30): *By insisting upon his freedom in this scenario, the Christian's eating – which should express true worship out of a heart of grateful enjoyment – becomes the object of denunciation. **The believer who is partaking of the meal might very well regard his own eating as an act of thankful worship, but the other man views him with contempt precisely because he's a Christian*** (10:30). The result is that Christ and His gospel – not merely the Christian himself – are impugned (indicated by Paul's use of the verb *blaspheme*).