

Liberty in the Balance

1 Corinthians 10:22-30

Breaking Icy Barriers

When it comes to breaking through barriers, it's hard to beat the international effort that occurred in Alaska's Beaufort Sea. In 1988, three gray whales were trapped by pack ice in a bay near Point Barrow, Alaska. On October 7, an Inupiat hunter discovered that the three whales had been cut off from the open sea. As mammals, needing air to breathe, they needed a path through the growing ice. The hunter attempted to use a chain saw to cut a path for the whales through the thin ice. He recruited his neighbors to use water pumps to keep the path from re-freezing. Captains of nearby ships suggested that the whales be shot to provide food for the local Eskimos. News of the whales' plight spread rapidly; before long a U.S. Skycrane helicopter joined the efforts – breaking the ice by plunging down with a 5 ton hammer. Journalists knew a good story when they heard one, and raced to the scene; they christened the effort, "Operation Breakthrough." The U.S. requested the help of two Russian icebreakers that were in the area, and they set to work on a path. But when the whales attempted to follow the icebreakers, they were frightened back by a gaggle of journalists on the scene. So the whales, now named Bonnet, Crossbeak and Bone returned to the bay – bloodied by the jagged ice. The youngest whale (Bone) died in the bay while the icebreakers broke a new path to the sea. After the path was cleared, they could not find the older whales. It appeared that they had made it safely to the open sea.¹ This international effort to break the icy barrier reminds us of what we have been learning about the Christian use of liberty.

Love and Liberty

One of the most well-known chapters in 1 Corinthians is "the love chapter" – chapter 13, consisting of thirteen verses. But the Apostle Paul spent seventy-three verses (73) to teach the Corinthians about the loving use of Christian liberty! Chapter 8 instructs us as to how to use our liberty, being careful not to create barriers for our brothers and sisters in Christ (8:9) for this is a sin against Christ (8:11-12). In chapter 9, we learn how to use our liberty in such a way that we do not create barriers for the gospel (9:12, 19). In chapter 10, we have learned how to use our liberty in such a way that we do not allow dangerous barriers to trap us (10:12, 14, 22). As we learned in the last message, this danger was evident in verse 22: **"²² Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? are we stronger than he?"** Paul included himself in the path of this danger! In the last message from 1 Corinthians 10, we learned that we must look at our liberty against the dangerous backdrop of idolatry. "Operation Breakthrough" was designed to blaze a trail for the whales. 1 Corinthians 8 through 10 help us understand how to break through icy barriers for our fellow believers and further the Gospel ministry.

Verses 23-30 help us to carefully balance how Christians ought to behave.

■ Permissible vs. Profitable

²³ **All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.**

Sometimes the icy barriers form when we emphasize one principle while deemphasizing other good principles. Many commentators believe that the Corinthians had been quoting part of Paul's teaching to them; Paul alludes to their quotes in this verse. The phrase "all things are lawful for me" occurs twice in this verse (and in 1 Corinthians 6:12). The KJV, NKJV, ESV, and NASB all translate the word

([ἔξεστι] “exesti”) as “lawful.” But translating it this way implies that law is somehow involved. A better translation of their quote would be “all things are *permissible* for me.”ⁱⁱ

The Corinthians were quoting Paul, but they were not quoting him in context. Yes, he had taught that “all things were permissible” within the realm of questionable things. But he balanced their understanding by explaining, “. . . but all things are not expedient [profitable] . . . but all things edify not.” So, yes, neutral things (about which some may have questions) are *permissible* (as opposed to prohibited). But that doesn’t mean that those things are *profitable* or edifying to you or others. The fact is that Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians 8, 9, and 10 has shown that they could be dangerous; neutral things could be used as destructive sins. About Paul’s use of the phrase in 1 Corinthians 6:12, one author commented that it could be rendered, “All things are in my power, but I shall not be overpowered by anything.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This is what happens when one principle is overemphasized while others are ignored. Watch these current trends in the light of the Scripture. Brett McCracken opens his book “Gray Matters” (which is about Christian liberty) with the illustration of his friend “Lee” who is “something of a wet blanket at parties, always giving disapproving grimaces when he sees fellow Christians (gasp!) watch R-rated movies . . .”^{iv} McCracken went on to comment that Lee’s “legalistic stance on media consumption can be downright noxious.”^v Knowing what the world means by “R-rated movies,” we must ask: “Can a Christian entertain himself with the very sins for which Christ died? Let’s honor Christ and break through the icy barriers for the sake of others. John MacArthur highlighted this trend in Christian circles: “One person might approach another person to confront him or her about an activity they believe to be wrong or sinful, only to hear this response: “I’m not interested in your legalism!” And the behavior in question may be legitimately and rightly pointed out as wrong according to Scripture, yet the accusation of legalism is supposed to end the discussion. Even if the confronting person can cite an explicit command or clear principle from God’s Word, the predictable response is all too familiar: “Well, that’s just your interpretation.” The spiritual climate today is reminiscent of that tragic statement in the Bible describing the time of Judges when ‘everyone did what was right in his own eyes’ (Judges 17:6).”^{vi}

What is it that profitably builds up believers and the Gospel ministry? What can we use to break the ice?

- Love builds up, 1 Corinthians 8:1
- Working together with other saints in the ministry of the local church builds up, Ephesians 4:12, 16 building others up in love.
- Scripture is profitable, 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Acts 20:32 refers to it as “the Word of His grace” which is able to build you up.
- Using the Scripture in plain and simple language builds others up, 1 Corinthians 14:3, 19.

■ Selfishness vs. Service

²⁴ Let no man seek his own, but every man another’s wealth.

Here is another way to break through the icy barriers. In your use of Christian liberty, seek your neighbor’s good rather than your own good. For a moment, open your heart in the eyes of the Lord to answer this question: “What have I given up for the sake of others?” With the Lord as your witness, what can you point to that you have given up for the sake of other believers or for the sake

of the Gospel? If we were to have a testimony service on this theme, what would you say? Paul gave similar instructions to the church at Philippi: ³ **Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.** ⁴ **Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others**” (Philippians 2:3-4). This is an important general principle that covers a number of areas. But some authors seem to miss his point altogether. For instance, Charles Swindoll writes, “But when questionable things aren’t specified in Scripture, it then becomes a matter of one’s personal preference or convictions.”^{vii} This smacks of “all things are permissible” to the exclusion of other important principles.

The point that Paul makes at the end of this discussion (11:1) helps us turn from selfishness to service. Jesus, the Son of God, gave up His rights to take on the burden of your sin and my sin. How far did He take that? He took it all the way to His death on the cross. For all those who would trust Him, His death carried their sins into the black mouth of death. But three days later, Jesus rose from the dead to show us His glorious victory over sin and death. Have you mixed your faith (Hebrews 4:1-2) with the promises of God that have been preached to you?

■ Don’t Be the F.B. I.

²⁵ **Whatsoever is sold in the shambles [meat market], that eat, asking no question for conscience sake: ²⁶ For the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.**

After the dire warnings of 1 Corinthians 10:20-22, you would almost expect Paul to write, “Flee away from meat that was offered to idols.” But such is not the case. Why? It is because (v. 19) an idol is nothing. Joining in a feast which worships idols is to have fellowship with demons (v. 20). But how far do you take the issue of association? That meat was once offered in a ceremony which was a communion with demons.^{viii} Shouldn’t they avoid anything which could possibly have any hint, any taint, any association with that pagan feast? No, Paul makes it clear that they don’t need to join the “Food Bureau of Investigation” to find out about that meat in the marketplace. Why not? Well, an idol, being nothing, has no power to create meat! Where did the meat come from? “**For the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.**” To answer a question about New Testament liberty, Paul used an Old Testament principle (quoting Psalm 24:1). The Lord made the meat. These are meats “. . . which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth” (1 Timothy 4:3b). Paul’s response answers the question about places that sell the meat, but what about social settings?

■ In Social Settings

²⁷ **If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake. ²⁸ But if any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake: for the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof:**

Verse 27 does not refer to the pagan ceremonial feast before idols; it refers to an invitation to someone’s home. So Paul brings the principles of 1 Corinthians 8 through 10 to another practical and personal application.

○ Don’t be the “F.B.I.” when you are a guest in the home of an unbeliever. 27

It was not necessary for the Corinthian believer to trouble his conscience about the meat. A tender conscience is a gift from God, so God’s Spirit used these words to inform their consciences. Some could argue that the believer’s testimony was at stake. Paul would agree, but would point out that it

is the believer's testimony to the Gospel that is at stake. He would have them give no offense other than the offense of the Gospel itself (1 Corinthians 1:23-25).

○ **If another believer points out that he perceives evil, avoid it, for his sake. 28**

If another believer pointed out that the meat at the feast had been offered to idols, this would create a problem. Should the mature believer choose to offend their host (by not eating the meat) or offend his brother in Christ (by eating the meat)? Paul told them to abstain from the meat, for the sake of his fellow believer and his conscience. Some would argue that refusing the meat would hurt their witness to the host. Paul had that very witness in mind. When the host saw how Christian brothers care for each other, that would be the most effective witness (see John 13:34-35). The fellow believer's conscience should be more important than the host's feeling about the matter.

■ **Thoughtful Thanks**

²⁹ **Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other: for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?** ³⁰ **For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks?** John MacArthur gives a helpful explanation of verse 29-30: "Our freedom should not be judged by another man's conscience. That is, we should not cause our freedom to be slandered by expressing it in ways that offends a weaker brother. We should give thanks for the food and for our liberty and then express our liberty by choosing not to eat food that offends the brother."^{ix} It makes no sense to be thankful to God and make your brother stumble with the same choice.

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ⁱ Richard Mauer, "Unlikely Allies Rush to Free 3 Whales," The New York Times, 10/18/1988, accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/10/18/us/unlikely-allies-rush-to-free-3-whales.html>

ⁱⁱ Ronald Trail, *An Exegetical Summary of 1 Corinthians 10-16*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 42. The word is connected to [ἐξουσία] exousia] which is translated as "liberty" or "power" (as "within my power") in 1 Corinthians 8:9, 9:4, 9:5, 9:12, 9:18. The problem with translating the word as "lawful" becomes even clearer in 1 Corinthians 6:9-12 where a number of unlawful things are listed – with the warning that these shall not inherit the kingdom of God. Paul was certainly not including those sins within the realm of things that were lawful.

ⁱⁱⁱ David E. Garland, 1 Corinthians, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007, p.229. (citing Edwards 1885:145-146).

^{iv} McCracken, Brett. Gray Matters: Navigating the Space between Legalism and Liberty (p. 7). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} MacArthur, John. Law and Liberty: A Biblical Look at Legalism (Kindle Locations 78-83). The Northampton Press. Kindle Edition.

^{vii} Charles Swindoll, "The Grace Awakening," Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996, p.136.

^{viii} I find Charles Swindoll's book "The Grace Awakening" troubling on this point. From what I see in his book, he *begins* his discussion of Christian liberty with verse 25, seems to set aside the profound teaching of 1 Corinthians 8 and 9, and the dire warnings in 1 Corinthians 10:1-22. In fairness to Dr. Swindoll, he does write, "Paul also makes some wise comments about times when it is best to restrain; but the overall general rule is to eat the meat." (p.135.)

^{ix} John MacArthur, 1 Corinthians, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Chicago: Moody Press, 1984, p. 248