

Glorifying God with our freedom

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Father, as we come to your word again, will you help us to sit under your word? Will you help us to submit to your word that is always freeing and life-giving and instructive?

So we pray, Lord, that even though sometimes a passage might look a bit puzzling at first glance, that you would illuminate these words and bring it down to our lives.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery.

Now those are wonderful words from Galatians 5, verse 1, aren't they? And those are words that describe every Christian. If you're a Christian today, you've been set free. You've been set free from sin, from having it dominate you and pull you in directions that you were previously powerless to resist.

You've been set free from death, for the wages of sin have been paid, and now even death cannot separate us from the love of God. You've been set free from the past, from whatever regrets used to haunt you.

[1 : 2 0] For in Christ you have been given a new start, and you can face the future with God alongside you. Christians are free, and radically so.

But freedom never stands alone. Or put another way, we are not just set free from something, but set free for something else. Think of an 18-year-old starting college for the first time away from home.

When she arrives at college, she thinks, free at last. What does she mean? She means, of course, that she is free from the constant parental supervision and all the rules at home.

But she also means that she feels free now to do what she's always wanted to do. Arrange her room however she likes, go hang outside until late at night.

She has the freedom to go a certain way. And so freedom is never simply about the absence of constraints. It has a direction. Free people want to use their freedom for something.

[2 : 3 0] But here's the question. What should Christians use their freedom for? You see, if you've been following the series so far, you might have found it weird that Paul started addressing idolhood in chapter 8, but he doesn't seem to talk about it again until today's passage.

Instead, he had that long passage over the last two weeks that Paul Ling brought us through about his apostleship and the history and privileges of Israel and all of that. And you might be thinking, why does Paul go on such a long tangent?

Is he getting old and he's started rambling like your great-grandpa? And the answer is quite simple. It's because idol food isn't the underlying issue.

It's just the surface issue. The underlying issue is that question. What should Christians use their freedom for?

For many of the Corinthian Christians, the answer is found in verse 23 of today's passage. I have the right to do anything. Or as some other translations put it, everything is permissible.

[3 : 47] And so this Christian said, hey, we live in a world full of idols and temples, but no worries. We can go into those temples whenever we like.

We can attend the parties held there, and then we can tapau the meat sacrifice to idols back home. After all, the idols are nothing. We are free. We saw that a few weeks ago in chapter 8.

And then in chapter 9, they were saying, hey, Paul, don't you know you're free too? After all, you're an apostle. You're free to be paid, free to claim remuneration for your work.

And it's kind of weird that you don't. Makes us wonder if you're really an apostle. You really need to make good use of your freedom in Christ.

And so Paul knows he has to challenge the thinking of the Corinthians. In chapter 8, when they said, we're free to eat idol food whenever we want, Paul's reply was, well, yes, on one level you are right.

[4 : 55] But actually, Christians should give up their freedom when it concerns the spiritual health of others. We don't do anything to cause people to move away from Christ.

And then in chapter 9, when they said, hey, Paul, we're not sure if you're the real deal as an apostle because you never assert your rights. His reply was, well, yes, I have the right, amongst other things, to be paid, but I forego all those rights for the sake of the gospel.

If I claim this right, my message could easily be misunderstood. And I'm not willing for people to think that the gospel is not free.

In fact, the gospel is so important that I'm willing to adapt my lifestyle if that helps people receive the message of the gospel better. And then in the first half of chapter 10, he tells the Corinthians, by the way, beware of misusing your freedom.

Think of your forefathers. They were set free. They received all the privileges, but they abused it. They committed sexual immorality. They tested the Lord.

[6 : 14] They grumbled. And so they were disqualified. They were a prime example of what not to use your freedom for. And instead, Paul says, what you should do is to keep finding your freedom in Christ, who is the way out of temptation, who is the ultimate demonstration of God's faithfulness.

That's what we saw last week. And with that, finally, we come back to the presenting issue of idol food.

And certainly, today's passage will deal with that particular issue in more detail. But today's passage is also Paul's way of wrapping up the argument. In summary form, he's going to succinctly answer that question that's been running throughout.

What should Christians use their freedom for? And he's going to give us two answers and a concluding exhortation. So let's work through the passage to find out what those are.

Firstly, demonstrate covenant loyalty. Demonstrate covenant loyalty. Paul begins with an appeal to the people he loves, verse 14.

[7 : 32] Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. That's the headline. Learn from the passage last week, he says. Learn from history. Don't go back to what used to enslave you.

After all, verse 15, you are sensible people, aren't you? You can see the good sense in what I'm saying. But how does this command practically apply to the issue of idol food?

Well, Paul now brings up a tale of two tables. On the one hand, you have the Lord's table. And on the other, you have the table of demons, verse 21.

You can see those two tables there. And we'll get to the second of those tables a little later. But here is Paul's basic point for now, for this section.

He says, there are these two tables, and contrary to what the Corinthian Christians thought, you can't eat and drink at both.

[8 : 37] Why not? Well, let's think about all of that a little more. First of all, let's think about the act of eating in general. What is eating?

At its most basic level, it's simply placing some food in your mouth and then chewing and swallowing. It's a physical act. Maybe we could also say it's all about nourishment.

You know, we chill and swallow to get the energy and the vitamins that we need. But Paul now points out that is not all there is to eating. Notice that in verses 16 to 22, there is a word that is repeated throughout.

I wonder if you spotted it. It's that word participation or participant or have a part. it's there in almost all the verses.

And this is what Paul is saying. Whenever you're eating or drinking at one of these tables, you're not just chewing stuff. You're participating in something.

[9 : 43] But what exactly? Well, let's get that word participation clear first. Now, when we think of participation, we might think in terms of attendance.

You know, so for instance, if you join a short course or something like that, sometimes they give you a certificate of participation. It's a way of saying we confirm you've attended.

But that is not what we're talking about here. The word participation here is translating the Greek word koinonia. And koinonia means fellowship.

fellowship. Sometimes it's translated in other English versions as a sharing in or having communion. And that's what Paul means by participation here.

He says that when you're eating at the Lord's table, you're doing more than just moving your teeth up and down. You are actively sharing in something.

[10 : 39] You're engaging intimately in something. You're celebrating something. And so what do Christians participate in when they eat at the Lord's table together or as we say today when we take the Lord's supper together?

What are we actively engaging in or celebrating or having fellowship with? Well, verse 17 tells us we are participating in the blood and body of Christ.

Now, Paul doesn't mean that literally as if whatever we're drinking suddenly and magically becomes the actual blood of Christ or that the bread literally becomes the body of Christ again.

That's what Roman Catholic theology says where the body of Christ is literally presented again as a sacrifice at the Lord's supper. But that's not what 10 verse 16 to 17 says.

Instead, when we take the Lord's supper together, what is happening is that we are sharing in and enjoying the knowledge that Christ is now present with us.

[11 : 57] We are participating in a relationship with him. Or put another way, we could say he's the host and we are his invited guests.

We are participating in God's family meal, enjoying shared life with him. And we can do so because unlike pagan gods who demanded sacrifice, even human sacrifice sometimes, if we wanted to commune and communicate with them, our God sacrificed himself so that we could commune with him.

And that's certainly an occasion for thanksgiving, isn't it? And so, when we eat and drink at the Lord's table, we are saying we have fellowship with God, we have been blessed by him, we are receiving the full benefits of having Christ's blood shared for us and his body broken for us.

We are identifying publicly with what he has done both to ourselves and to others. And this, Paul points out, is consistent with Old Testament understanding.

Look at verse 18. Consider the people of Israel. Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? In other words, is it not true that back in the Old Testament, whenever people ate food that was sacrificed, they were expressing their affiliation with God, their fellowship with him, indeed their worship of him.

[13 : 39] So, in other words, eating and drinking isn't a neutral act. You can't reduce this act simply to someone putting meat or bread in their stomachs.

people who are going to see where Paul is going. Guys, Paul says to the Corinthian Christians, if all I said is true, then do you know what you're doing when you're consuming the food on a pagan altar?

Instead of saying that you're in fellowship with God, that you're blessed by him, that you're enjoying all the benefits won by God's Son on the cross, you're saying instead that you're in fellowship with another God, that you're blessed by another God, that you're recognising the benefits of another God.

In other words, you're committing idolatry. You're repeating what your forefathers did. But hang on a minute, Paul, the Corinthians might have protested.

Are you not basically going back on what you said in chapter 8? Didn't you say that idols are nothing and since there is only one God? Your argument only works if you're now saying that idols are actual gods.

[15 : 05] But we've already established back in chapter 8 that they are not. They're just images, statues, pieces of wood. We're not in communion with anything by taking that roast pork.

So we're still free to eat. And Paul anticipates that objection in verse 19. Do I mean that food sacrificed to an idol is anything?

Or that an idol is anything? And he says beginning of verse 20, no, you and I both agree on that. Still, idols are nothing.

There is only one God. but, verse 20, that doesn't mean there is no spiritual significance to idol food.

For, Paul says, that idol food you see being sacrificed on the altar, is being offered to demons, even when the people offering it don't realize it.

[16 : 10] for this is the reality. What stands behind an idol is not another god, so to speak, but the demonic.

Now, remember, Paul here is not referring merely to the leftover meat that has just been bought from the local aeon mall, but to occasions where there is more of a religious context.

And remember also that Paul isn't saying that the food itself suddenly, magically takes on properties that would somehow cause you harm, like in horror movies or something. Rather, Paul is saying, when you consume such food in these more religious contexts, you are getting involved in the worship of demons, even if you don't intend to.

For, when you do so, your actions indicate that you are in communion with such demons, that you celebrate their presence, that you pledge loyalty to them.

And Paul says, there's no way I want any Christian to be participants with demons. To eat at your table would be completely incompatible with eating at the Lord's table, because now your loyalties are split.

[17 : 32] You're celebrating two things that are directly opposed. to one another. You're contradicting yourselves. And more than that, verse 22, you're provoking God.

You're failing to honour him with your everything. That should put more fear in you than any demon. So what should Christians use their freedom for?

Well, they certainly shouldn't use it to justify serving two masters or having a foot in two worlds. Paul is saying there's no middle road.

When you give your life to Christ, you are pledging covenant loyalty to him alone and no other. And that must be seen at every level of our lives.

The truth is, there are behaviours and practices prayers and even certain rituals that offend God for they show that we have not given our absolute loyalty to him.

[18 : 42] That's why the Corinthian Christians were being rebuked. When they ate and drank at two tables, they were taking communion with two different faiths and thus declaring loyalty to two different masters.

Paul says, when you use your freedom to do that, you soon find you have no freedom at all. And so what does that mean for us today?

Well, for some of us, there's still a very direct application, isn't there? Perhaps you're someone who has recently become a Christian and you're the only one in your family.

And your family wishes for you to take part in a ceremony where you offer reverence, bordering on worship to your dead ancestors. If you're the oldest, maybe you even come under extra pressure to do so.

And of course, you love your family, you want to respect them, rightly so. So what should you do in these circumstances? Well, perhaps part of you thinks, well, these ancestors are not gods.

[19 : 58] I know for a fact they are nothing, they're just people. And in my heart, I'm trusting Jesus. I know I'm not worshipping them, so maybe there's nothing wrong with taking part, I'm free.

It's a difficult issue, isn't it? And it requires wisdom to navigate. But 1 Corinthians 10 does give us some guiding principles.

And 1 Corinthians 10 tells us that the issue at hand isn't simply what you know to be true or not, and whether you trust Jesus or not. What matters is that the ceremony itself is understood to have a religious character or spiritual significance of some sort.

And if that's what the ceremony is like, then there is a spiritual reality behind that ceremony, a demonic one, and one in which you shouldn't partake in.

Your loyalty is to Christ even above your family. That's tough. No wonder Jesus said that when he came, he would not bring peace by the sword, turning father against son and daughter against mother.

[21 : 16] Jesus, of course, doesn't mean that he's deliberately encouraging hostility in families, but that sometimes following him has such a cost that it expresses itself in this kind of family division.

Now, again, let me say that in such situations, you, of course, still want to love your family as much as possible. And so it's a good idea to show that whenever you can. There is nothing to stop you attending that ceremony.

Remember here, attendance does not equal participation. Perhaps there are alternative practices you can try to do to show that you respect your ancestry.

But there are lines we cannot cross if we want to remain faithful to our king. And remember the principle, demonstrate covenant loyalty.

Don't serve two masters. And that means this has wider applicability beyond just idol food and ancestor worship. And so we need to keep thinking, what practices show that we have split loyalties?

[22 : 24] What are some of the things that clearly contradict the gospel that we cannot take part in? Let me name a few more. It means that we should not take part in a Roman Catholic mass.

For we are not just eating a wafer, but we are affirming a particular doctrine where Christ becomes the sacrificial victim all over again in a literal way.

In a way, I think, that contradicts what the book of Hebrews says about who Jesus is and what he has done. It means that we shouldn't worship here this morning and go to see a Balmour on Tuesday.

It means that we shouldn't pretend that essentially pagan declarations for health and wealth are accepted simply because we add in Jesus' name at the end or throw in an out-of-context Bible verse for good measure.

It means being careful that we don't confuse our loyalty to Christ with loyalties to certain political figures, parties, or ideologies. It means being careful that we don't end up worshipping more at the altar of work than we do communing with Christ.

[23 : 34] Our situations and temptations will vary, but the same core remains. Flee from idolatry, demonstrate covenant loyalty.

So what else should Christians use their freedom for? Let's move on to our second answer. Secondly, display Christ to your community.

Display Christ to your community. Remember how we said at the beginning of this sermon that the Corinthians were boasting in their freedoms? I have the right to do anything they said.

And there is a sense in which Paul wants to affirm that. He does want us to enjoy our freedoms. And when it comes to idol food, Paul shows this in one very practical way. You see, Paul understands what he said so far could make us very uptight.

And so he imagines one common scenario. Suppose one of the Corinthian Christians just came back from a grocery run at Iman. And then looking at the meat he bought, he starts to get very worried.

[24 : 37] Uh-oh, if I eat this and it just happens to be sacrificed to idols, does that mean that I'm engaging in idolatry? And what if my brother in Christ sees me eating it and makes all kinds of assumptions?

Would I be causing him to stumble? And so he begins to get very anxious in an obsessive compulsive kind of way. And so what is Paul's reply?

Look at verses 25 and 26. Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience for, quoting Psalm 24, the earth is the Lord's and everything in it.

In other words, Paul is saying, don't feel like you have to ask tons of questions about the origin of the meat. In this case, ignorance is bliss. Just eat whatever you grab from the counter.

Why? Because everything, including the butcher shops in Corinth, belongs to God in the end. And so that meat can be received with thankfulness regardless of how it was originally used by others.

[25 : 47] Remember, the meat itself, it doesn't magically become something harmful. And similarly, verse 27, if you're invited over to a friend for a meal, just eat whatever's been put in front of you.

You don't need to ask whether it's been sacrificed or not. It's irrelevant. And so Paul wants to say to us, on the one hand, Christian, you are really free.

You aren't automatically going to get zapped by God if you accidentally consume food sacrificed to idols. Relax. Here's a contemporary example.

The truth is, there are some things that have come to us, that have probably been made by companies that have exploited their labour force, that have forced them to work in deplorable conditions for less than the minimum wage, that have treated them like slaves.

And we should rightly be concerned to protest against such practices, to support measures that hold such companies accountable, perhaps occasionally even to engage in a boycott.

[26 : 52] But it would probably be impossible to trace every single item we own and wonder if it's been ethically produced. Now, where we are aware, we should take time to consider what is the best step we can take to honour the Lord.

But we don't have to obsess and get anxious that we've just booked a ticket to hell simply because we haven't been so meticulous to check whether every single thing we have is ethically produced.

we are free from such worries. And we can display that freedom we have in Christ in our community. But, on the other hand, Paul says to these Corinthian Christians, yes, we are free, but remember, our freedom is never for ourselves.

Look at verses 23 and 24. 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.

No one should see their own good, but the good of others. And here you can say that we have the theme verse for our entire sermon series.

[28 : 08] We are free, but how are we to use our freedom? Paul says to engage in a building project. More specifically to build others up, we are to use our freedom for the good of others.

And that's been the running theme throughout all the chapters that we've seen so far, and you will continue to see it in chapters 11 to 14. You see, this is the positive vision that God has cast for our lives.

You know, we just heard in the previous section that God has asked us to flee from idolatry. But there is a danger that if we just stop there, then we might be just content to say, okay, okay, God says that I should flee from idolatry.

Hmm, okay, I wonder, what can I still get away with? How far is too far? If I do this or that, technically, right, that one is not idolatry, right?

And you can see the heart behind that attitude is still not right. God doesn't want us to flee, but to build.

[29 : 17] Earlier on in 1 Corinthians 10 verse 17, Paul reminds us what else the Lord's table is all about. It reminds us that because we all share in the one loaf, that is, we all share in receiving the benefits of Christ's death for us, we have become one body, one family.

And so God wants us to build that body up so that we will all be strong and healthy and mature. And we do so by demonstrating a concern for our community both in the church and outside of it.

Now, how does that work out in the area of idol food? Well, look at verse 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.

I'm referring to the other person's conscience, not yours. And so Paul says, let's suppose you're at a social function at your non-Christian friend's place, and if he offers you satay, you eat it, no problem.

But what if the friend, before he offers you the satay, he says to you, by the way, this satay has come straight from the altar of Aphrodite.

[30 : 39] It's really prime quality. And then he looks at you expectantly, knowing full well that you are a Christian. What do you say?

Well, in this case, Paul says, you pass on the satay. Why? Because although you know the meat won't cause you harm, and you know that if you didn't know where it came from, you would happily eat it, now you don't eat it for the sake of your witness.

For if your friend sees that you eat it anyway, having been informed that it is idol food, then he will conclude either that you are a hypocrite, or that actually it's okay to have split loyalties, you know, one to Jesus and one to Aphrodite.

Now, either way, it's bad for your witness. So it's kind of like 1 Corinthians chapter 8 again, except this time, you don't eat, not just to make sure that your fellow Christian doesn't stumble, but to make sure that the non-Christian knows that you are serious about your Christian faith.

And so you display Christ to your community, not by trying to make sure that everything is alright socially, but by taking a firm stand for the gospel.

[32 : 09] And so if we were to take a 21st century example, perhaps today at certain parties, it might be wise to abstain from alcohol that is offered because, you know that would better display Christ in those particular circles, even though you are free to drink it.

Or perhaps you would have to be wise in your choice of clothing. Now, the point is, yes, you are free, but what is your freedom for?

It is to display Christ to your community. So act accordingly. Because in the end, what is freedom for?

The Corinthian Christian said, it is for me to do anything. But now, Paul counters by saying, no, it's to do everything for God's glory.

That's his concluding exhortation. That's what he says it's finally all about. Look at verse 31. So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

[33 : 23] Instead of thinking about your own liberty, think of God's glory. Instead of thinking about your rights, think about serving others with glad sacrifice. Instead of thinking about maximising our pleasure where it is permissible, think instead of how we can try to expose as many as we can to the gospel.

that, Paul says, is what it's all about. And in verses 32 to 33 is basically what he's been trying to do all this while. And so Paul says, imitate me, follow my example.

Why? Because 11 verse 1, that's what Christ did. Christ was absolutely free. Free to call upon the angels, free to turn stone into bread, free even to come down from the cross at any time.

But he didn't. He hung on the cross for the sake of you and I. And in doing so, he won true freedom for us even when he looked just the opposite.

And so what makes us think that following his way will lead to true freedom? God's glory. So do everything for God's glory. Now, how can we do that?

[34 : 49] Well, as we finish, let me propose a few questions to us or taken from the lessons we've learned through these three chapters. Firstly, we have to ask, does the Bible say no to a certain action?

If it's clear in scripture, then don't do it. Flee from idolatry. Display covenant loyalty. But often there are many actions that are not so black and white and they often fall into the category of freedom instead.

So what else can we ask? Well, here are three further questions you could pose. Number one, what is the effect of this action on other Christians?

Will it cause them to weaken in their Christian conviction and destroy their faith? That's the lesson of chapter 8. And then we ask, will this action help put on display the gospel to non-Christians?

How will a non-Christian interpret this action? Will it make Christ clearer to them? Or will it have the opposite effect? That's the lesson of chapter 9 and 10.

[36 : 01] And then we ask, will this action help show where my loyalties lie? Is it putting the lordship of Jesus on display? And again, that's the lesson of chapter 10.

And so my brothers and sisters in Christ, let us use our freedom to glorify God. For remember, while we were still his enemies, this God did not wage war on us, but he sent his son, who by his perfect sacrifice has brought us not only peace, but has brought us close to himself.

And in his loving kindness, we now have a seat at his table. And so let's worship him with all our lives, and let's renew our commitment now, as we get ready to eat and drink together at the Lord's table.

so what I'm going to do now is just to let you have a few seconds to reflect on what we've heard today. Maybe you recognize that today you have not always glorified God in all areas as you ought.

You know that you have had split loyalty sometimes, so I encourage you now just to go and confess that to God. But after that, remember that God's invitation to this table is always open in Christ.

[37 : 30] He always welcomes you back. You can always find forgiveness at the cross.