

## When the end goal is God's glory

- 1 Corinthians 10:23-33
- “All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up.” Paul started this thread back in chapter 6, when he first brought up the idea that something might be lawful for a believer, but not helpful. Then he interrupted himself in chapter 7 with a discussion on marriage and singlehood. He resumed the discussion again in chapter 8 as he wrote about whether to eat meat offered to idols in the presence of a weaker Christian who believes that would be sin. Paul interrupted himself again briefly in chapter 9 to defend his apostleship and discuss a Christian's obligation to give where he is being taught, and then he picked up the thread again that a Christian's freedom is submitted to God's will when it comes to winning the lost. He wrote, “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.” Now he finishes this thread with a thunderous declaration that we as Christians are to do whatever we do **to the glory of God.**
- When we think of giving God glory, we tend to think in terms of spiritual disciplines or Christian practices, things that are vertical in orientation, upward, towards God. We read our Bibles. We fast, we pray. We go to church. We memorize and meditate on Scripture. Those are wonderful and excellent, and we are called to those disciplines, for the glory of God. But that can tend to be a compartmentalization, where we think of the sacred and the holy as something we do for God, where everything else, normal life we might call it, really isn't God-glorifying material. But isn't all of life to be glory-aimed? Isn't Paul making the case here that how we live day by day with our neighbors has importance, significance, and can bring glory to God? Yes, and Paul frames his argument with two horizontal statements that have glory-potential. Verse 24, “Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.” Verse 33, “I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.” Each of those are horizontal, if you will, and each produces glory for God.
- That's the principle, then: all that we do as followers of Jesus Christ has the potential to bring glory to God, and we are to aim for that in our practice of Christian disciplines and in our relationships with fellow believers and with the lost. Let's look at this principle as Paul applies it to table fellowship. First the application, and then the examples.
- **The Application (vs. 25-26)**
- Paul confirms what he said earlier in his letter, that Christians are free to eat meat without any qualifications or questions, no matter where it came from. To the Christians in Corinth who were Greek, nothing changed for them. They were already in the habit of eating whatever meat they wanted. To the Christians in Corinth who were completed Jews, a LOT changed for them, and that seems to be who Paul was primarily addressing here. Paul says to the Jewish believers, you don't have to only visit kosher shops or only buy kosher meat. That may have been a shock to the system, but it is based on the biblical idea that meat has no spiritual significance in and of itself. Paul supports his command to eat without question with a quote from a Psalm that every Jewish Christian would have immediately been able to quote and recite the whole chapter that followed. Psalm 24:1, “The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and those who dwell therein.” Paul did not choose haphazardly with this verse; it was used in Jewish prayers before a meal. Everything over which we can give thanks, the Jews said, is kosher, and is good for us to eat. Paul says to them, you are right! In fact, all foods are clean. All foods are kosher (from the Hebrew ‘kaser,’ meaning, ‘proper.’). We hear an echo of Peter's encounter in a vision with God when he heard the Lord say, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” The application, then, is that we are free to eat because it all belongs to God and was made by God. Can I suggest two corollary principles that are true from Psalm 24:1, where we are reminded that the earth is the Lord's? First, the earth is the Lord's, which means we are called to be stewards. We give glory to God even in the way we care for the earth. Second, the earth is the Lord's, so we cannot destroy it. If nothing can take one believer out of the hands of the Lord, how can puny people

take the earth (the earth!) out of his hands? Are we stronger than God? (verse 22) No. The earth is his, he created it, and only he can destroy it and make it new. Which is exactly what he will do at the end, as the Bible teaches us. Let's look at the examples that Paul uses to illustrate the application.

- **The Examples (vs 27-28)**
- Paul offers two different scenarios, which again would have been very familiar to the Christians in Corinth. In the first example, you are invited to eat at the home of an unbeliever. (Even that makes me pause to ask when was the last time we sat down in our home for a meal with unbelievers, or were invited to sit down in their home?) There is no mention of dinner being at the pagan temple, which would have changed the instructions, as Paul has already told them not to participate with demons. But this is a home, so the instruction is to eat whatever is put in front of you without questions. Even questions like, "Is this bacon nitrite-free? Cause you know, my body is a temple, and God don't put no junk in his temple!" Is that going to help your neighbor love Jesus? Or maybe make him think that God's primary concern about people is how fit and how nutritionally-minded they are? Ok, I know, this is about conscience, and your conscience should be clear, Paul says, so that you can eat whatever is served. But it is also about loving your neighbor and hospitality given and received with thanksgiving. I remember our first trip to Haiti with the New Directions in 1984, and we were out in this little village. The people there were very poor, but they had prepared their most prized meal for us Americans: Ox-tail soup. Yes! With the tail still in it. The hairy tail, floating right there on top. Now, I honestly didn't know whether that food would make me sick or not; but I knew that how I chose to react to their hospitality had powerful implications. So, I told the group to smile and eat. Can I add a corollary principle to this? God is sovereign, and he is able to take care of his people when we sit down to eat together. And even if He chooses that we should get sick from the meal we eat, that's ok, too. May I say something, as gently as I can? If you never eat with people who cooked for you because you are afraid you might get sick, you are missing an opportunity to give glory to God through your love for others. If you never stay for the fellowship meals on the second Sunday for the same reasons, you and the rest of us are missing out on something very important. Jesus never turned down an invitation to come to someone's house for a meal.
- The second scenario is just like the first, except at some point during the meal, you find out that the meat on the table was sacrificed to idols. Paul says at that point you put down your fork and say, "I will be unable to eat this meat." Why? Because your conscience tells you not to eat? No, we have already established that our conscience is clear with regard to all foods. You do so for the sake of your witness to Christ. The scenario could be that you were invited to an unbeliever's house, along with other believers. Perhaps as the meat is being passed around, the unbelieving host reveals that the meat was offered in a sacrifice. The word that Paul uses for sacrifice is a word Gentiles used for sacrifice, and it was a derogatory term used by Christians and Jews in reference to Gentiles. For the sake of that man's spiritual condition and the possibility that eating the meat would discredit the gospel in the eyes of the host, Paul says we are to let go of our liberty. Our freedom to eat any meat is to be limited by our love for the gospel, for the glory of God, and for the sake of our neighbor's salvation. FF Bruce wrote, "The essential point is that Christian liberty should be modified (only, but certainly) by Christian charity." Our freedoms, or we could say the rules we live by, must submit to love for others.
- Randolph Richards and Brandon O'Brien put it this way in their book, *Misreading Scripture With Western Eyes*: "Our tendency (is) to emphasize rules over relationship ... Imagine a wedding ceremony in which the groom vowed, 'I will kiss you twice daily, with one kiss lasting at least two seconds. I will make at least one statement implying thoughtfulness every morning. I will provide three hugs per week of medium snugness, lasting three seconds. Flowers will be provided on four dates a year of your choosing. Candy will be given with flowers on one occasion per year.'" (May I interrupt and say: some wives in here may be sighing and thinking, 'I would take that!' But that's not the point, though I am sad for any who would long for that kind of attention because you are getting much less.) The point, as the writer says, is this: "While a loving

husband may perform all those actions, they are the results of the relationship, not the rules that establish it.” So, in the case of refusing to eat meat when the host reveals it was sacrificed to idols, your concern is with the relationship with that unbeliever first, and your rights according to the rules about meat come second.

- Finally, Paul asks two questions in verses 29b and 30. These are not to undermine what he has just taught us, but to underscore an important point he has already made: we are free. We have liberty. “Why should our liberty be determined by someone else’s conscience?” Based on what Paul has said in the previous two chapters, he is underscoring the point with this question that though we have the freedom to eat, we choose the freedom not to eat out of love for God and love for our neighbor. Because the gospel and the glory of God is at stake. Then Paul asks why he is denounced for giving thanks over his food? FF Bruce explains that though Paul will limit his liberty voluntarily out of regard to another man’s lack of faith, “he will not allow others to sit in judgment on his exercise of liberty or to make their conscience the standard by which his liberty must be regulated.” He wrote this to the church in Colosse: “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink.” It would be good for us to review Romans 14 on a regular basis, where Paul beautifully balances our love for one another with our liberty in nonessential matters, like eating and drinking. Finally, we would do well to follow Paul’s exhortation in verse 32 of 1 Corinthians 10. “Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.”
- Why? Because whatever we do, whether we are eating or drinking, worshiping or playing, singing or speaking, reading or watching, traveling or staying home, we do all to the glory of God.
- Prayer