

In these verses, Paul concludes what he began in 8:1. The believer has liberty, but he also loves. Thus, he must consider others in the choices he makes. The key word here is “conscience.” The believer must live in accordance with both his conscience and the conscience of others.

In the context of Corinth, eating (or not eating) food offered to idols was considered a grey area. Paul deals with this grey area, not by dealing with what the individual should or shouldn’t—may or mayn’t—do, but addresses the issue based on what is best for one’s neighbour and God’s glory.

Liberty and Your Neighbour (10:23–30)

What does it look like to love one’s neighbour? According to these verses, love for one’s neighbour has far-reaching consequences.

As we have seen, there were two groups within the Corinthian church: the progressive and the conservative; the licentious and the legalist. The progressives in the church had a slogan: “All things are lawful.” They used this to justify any behaviour they wanted to be involved in. Paul addresses them in vv. 23–24. The conservatives strongly objected to this notion of licentiousness, to the degree that they seemingly considered it sinful to even eat meat offered to idols. Paul addresses them in vv. 25–26. He then, in vv. 27–30, gives an on-the-ground example of what loving Christian liberty looks like.

TO THINK ABOUT

Are “all things ... lawful” for Christian? Is there any sense in which this slogan is true? Explain your answer.

1. Paul to the liberal (vv. 23–24). The liberals in Corinth lived by the slogan, “All things are lawful.” The moment the liberal was challenged about some behaviour, he would reply, “All things are lawful!” They might immediately throw out the accusation of legalism when challenged regarding their behaviour.

Paul counters their claim by assuming it is true but arguing that what is acceptable is not the only consideration in any given matter. Even if it is lawful, is it helpful? Is it edifying? The legalists were concerned only about themselves, but Paul exhorted them to consider their neighbour as important as themselves.

TO THINK ABOUT

If it is true that there is more to evaluating the wisdom of pursuing a particular course of action than simply asking if it is acceptable, what other questions might you want to consider? What questions should you ask when evaluating the wisdom of pursuing a grey area?

2. Paul to the conservative (vv. 25–26). The conservatives in the congregation suggested that Christians should avoid meat completely because of its associations with idols. “The meat market” was generally located in the pagan temple compound, so the conservatives found it impossible to separate meat from the idolatry that was practised at the meat market.

Paul refutes the argument of the conservative with Scripture. He quotes Psalm 24:1 (a verse that was frequently invoked by Jews at mealtime) to show that meat, in and of itself, was perfectly acceptable as a source of food. (Of course, as he argued in 10:14–22, it was never acceptable to actually enter into the worship of idols while visiting the marketplace, but eating the meat, in and of itself, was not sin.)

3. A practical example (vv. 27–30). As a helpful example to illustrate his point, Paul imagines that a church member is invited by an unbeliever to dinner. The unbeliever places meat before the believer. Since it was a pretty safe bet that meat in Corinth came from the meat market, the believer could be sure that this meat had been offered to idols. Paul counsels the believer to eat the meat without raising questions of conscience.

However, suppose that there is another believer present at the meal, who incredulously wonders if the believer is unaware that the meat had been offered to idols. “Don’t you know that the meat you are about to eat has been offered to an idol?” Paul’s counsel is to forego eating the meat—not because there is anything wrong with eating it, but for the sake of the brother whose conscience might be offended.

This does not mean that our liberty is determined by the conscience of others, but it does mean that we are willing to forego our liberties out of love for our brothers and sisters. We should be more concerned with the good of our fellow Christians than we are for our own liberties.

Liberty and God’s Glory (10:31)

This is one of the most frequently-quoted verses in the New Testament by believers, but its context is not always noted. Technically, eating and drinking here is a reference to eating the meat offered to idols. It is an illustration of the exercise of Christian liberty. Paul’s exhortation, then, is for Christians to ensure that, in the exercise of their Christian liberty, they bear in mind the glory of God.

We should probably note that giving glory to God is, in this context, something done in the context of others. *“It is important to understand that giving glory to God is not simply vertical (between the individual and God) but also horizontal (between the individual and neighbors/communities). God’s glory is designed to be gained comprehensively”* (Stephen T. Um).

Liberty and God’s Grace (10:32–11:1)

Paul closes his consideration of Christian liberty by showing that Christian love is love on a mission. Rather than seeking their own, Christians should pursue others-centred, self-giving love that mirrors the others-centred, self-giving love of Christ in the gospel. The goal of showing this kind of love to others is “that they might be saved.”

TO THINK ABOUT

How might deferring our rights to others out of love be a witness to the gospel? In what way does such love mirror the love of Christ in the gospel?

It is through our other-centered, self-giving posture that we can be good neighbors because we are concerned about their ultimate good, namely their salvation. Though this need not and cannot be the exclusive aim in the way we relate to our neighbors, it must be the primary aim. God is glorified when our love for our neighbors leads them to embrace him. Paul offers himself as a model of this kind of love. His ministry is a model for how one can adapt to all kinds of different settings in order to make the gospel of Christ compelling. But his model is based on the accomplishments and example of one who is even greater. The only way we can be moved out of our self-interest and self-centeredness and live lives of other-centered, self-giving love on a mission is to see that we are the recipients of God’s other-centered, self-giving love on a mission in Christ!

(Stephen T. Um)

To sum it up, Paul was so concerned about others—believers and unbelievers alike—that he was willing to forego his own rights and liberties out of love for them. He did so because he knew that this would exemplify the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul could say, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (11:1), because by foregoing his rights, he was doing exactly what Jesus Christ had done by giving up the glories of heaven to go to the cross. In reality, this greatest motivation for loving Christian liberty is a grasp of Philippians 2:5–11:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
