

Series: 1 Corinthians
Gray Areas Pt 6
The Conscience of Christian Liberties
1 Corinthians 10:23 – 11:1
Tim Armstrong, Senior Pastor

Weekend 03.05-06.11

Thank the worship team for leading us this morning. Nice job. Thank you Dan. Good morning Crossroads. Good to have you here this morning.

Let's take our bibles now and turn to what, for most of us have become a familiar book, 1 Corinthians, chapter 10. Today we're coming to the end of our study on Christian Liberties. We've been working on it for the last five weeks and we've been seeking, essentially one answer throughout our study and that is how do we know in the area of conduct what is right and what is wrong for us to be involved in when the scriptures are silent. We've learned that Christian liberties are any conduct not addressed in scriptures. We understand that the scriptures give us clarity on some conduct issues. In other words it's black and white; there's no debate about it but there are other issues, other conduct related issues that are not so clear. We call those gray areas. Those are Christian liberties. And we're asking the question – what conduct is right; what conduct is wrong when the bible doesn't give us clarity; when the bible is silent.

Now, it doesn't take long following Christ when you run into a situation like this where you're wondering if there's some aspect of your lifestyle that you ought to be changing; that isn't as glorifying to the Lord as it ought to be so you're wondering is this something that I should be involved in or not. So, you search the scriptures and you seek to find an answer. Or you find someone that will help you and you go to the scriptures and you find out they're silent on that particular issue. And so, what do you do? You go to someone that you trust. You ask their opinion or you go to a group and you ask their opinion and their opinion might be you might be right. The bible doesn't say anything about that but our personal feelings are it's wrong for you to be involved with that. It's sinful. You ought to not do that.

And then you go and you ask the opinion of somebody else or some other group and they have the absolute polar opposite response. They'll say, no, no, no. That's a part of your freedom. That's not a sin. That's a Christian liberty. You say, well, which is it? How do I know? How do I determine what is right, what is wrong?

Well, in this section, this last section Paul gives us the concluding answer to that question. He give us, in essence a summary of the principles we've been learning from chapter 8 all the way through chapter 10. This section you might think of as a type of a compendium of resources in understanding Christian liberties. So, if you're struggling with a gray area and you're not sure if there's a conduct in your life that is right or is wrong, today Paul is going to give you the tools, definitive tools to answer that question in confidence.

Now, we're in 1 Corinthians 10. The section is verse 23 through 11:1 and the way that we normally do this is I like to read the passage so that it seats it; kind of cements it in your mind and then we're going to go back and we're going to pick it apart so that we have the

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depth of understanding of the scriptures so I'm going to read this passage beginning in verse 23. You follow along.

Paul writes, all things are lawful but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good but the good of his neighbor. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any questions on the ground of conscience for the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. If one of the believers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience but if someone says to you this has been offered in sacrifice then do not eat it for the sake of the one who informed you; for the sake of conscience. I do not mean your conscience but His, for why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience. If I partake with thanksgiving why am I denounced by that for which I give thanks? So, whether you eat or drink, whatever you do do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God just as I tried to please everyone and everything I do, not seeking my own advantage but that of many that they might be saved. Be imitators of me as I am of Christ.

Now, the outline of the passage is very simple. This is a very simple section to understand and you're going to find that by the time we get done with it, it does answer the questions that we've been seeking. It brings all of the principles together in a simple, cohesive, understandable way. In fact, there are four principles that I see in this section of the text and just to help you understand those I've put them in something that I hope will be a hook for your memory that you can come back to. What we're going to see is a series of don't if it won't statements. And so if you have questions about Christian liberties you can come back to these statements and you can apply as if it were a litmus test these don't if it won't statements to your particular situation. So, let's dive right in. We're going to look at verse 23 and out of that comes the first statement.

Don't if it won't benefit you is what Paul is saying in verse 23. He says all things are lawful but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful but not all things build up. Now, if you have questions about gray areas and you're not quite sure what you should do or what you shouldn't do the following principle don't if it won't benefit you will serve you well. But there's also a bit of pushback from our human nature that you're going to have to get over because whenever someone tells me that I shouldn't or I'm not allowed to do something I find that there's this working inside of me that says oh really? And I want to push beyond that. Do you find that true to yourself? If someone says no to you what do you want to do? You want to say yes. Someone says you can't do that you say, uh-huh, well, I'm going to do that. That's part of human nature. If you have children you understand that. At a very young age I remember telling my little girls don't touch the remote. And I would tell them that over and over again. Finally they kind of got on to it and I would leave the room and I would say don't touch the remote. And as soon as I would leave the room if I looked around I would see this little hand just going out, just touching the remote, just going beyond what they shouldn't do. That's the same case as

you and I. If you hear this statement don't if it won't the first thing is well, I'm going to test that.

Well, Paul helps us here because he gives us two words to persuade our thinking. He uses the word helpful and build up. And these words move us in our thinking to why we don't if it won't. If it won't benefit us. The word helpful means advantageous. It's not the most common word for advantageous because it also has the idea of bringing together. Now, it's going to make sense when you look at the second word to build up. The build up is actually a combination of words *oikodomēō*. Oiko in the Greek is the idea of a house, a building. *Domēō* means to build. So, essentially what it means is to build a house. So think of it this way. Verse 23. All things are lawful but not all things bring together. All things are lawful but not all things build the house. It's a very eastern way of presenting an image. They're saying not everything that you're allowed to do or you're permitted to do builds the spiritual house; brings the spiritual house together so in an essence it's a cry to be wise with what you do and what you don't do in conduct issues.

He says, look, everything might be lawful. You notice that phrase? Notice the quote marks around the phrase all things are lawful and he uses that again. Why is that there? Would you remember, we actually saw this phrase once before in chapter 6, verse 12. And the phrase, if you remember I told you was a popular saying of the day. Paul is just playing off culture. There is this popular saying. Most scholars think it was created by Hellenistic philosophers who wanted to inject this idea of freedom and permissibility into the culture. Well, it caught on and it caught on in such a way that it became just a part of the cultural saying. As if to say, look, if there's no law against it then I'm free to do this. Well, the Corinthians picked this up and they would apply it in a spiritual way. Well, if there's nothing in the scriptures that say I shouldn't do this well, then I'm free to indulge. I'm free to do this.

Well, Paul doesn't argue against the statement but he provides a caveat; he provides a warning to this popular slogan. He says all things are lawful unless they won't build you up; won't build your house; won't build you into a better follower of Christ. Now, this is a crucial thing to think through as you move through your concept of a gray area because you could easily fall into this trap. You could say, well the scriptures don't say anything more about this. There's nothing in black and white that tells me what I can or cannot do and so that's fine. I'm going to go ahead and be involved in it. But you have to ask is it the best thing for my spiritual life because I have found there are many things I can be involved in that are not necessarily wrong; that actually would fit clearly into my freedom as a Christ follower but if I'm not careful these things that are free for me start to take a toll on my Christian life; they start to draw my heart away from Christ. There's no law against me doing it or not doing it but if I tend to overindulge in it I watch my Christian life, my spiritual house become in a bit of disarray. And that's exactly what Paul was saying.

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Do you remember his other analogy he uses just about a chapter ago, end of chapter 9 verse 25, 26, 27? He uses the analogy of an athlete and what does an athlete do? An athlete knows how to discipline their body and control their lifestyle. That's just the same thing Paul is saying with a different analogy. He's saying be careful how you build your house.

So, what's the first litmus test? Don't if it won't benefit you.

The second is like it but it ratchets it up a notch. This would be the A-game of Christianity. Don't if it won't promote love. We see that in verse 24. Let no one seek his own good but the good of his neighbor. The focus, do you see shifts from our benefits to other's benefit. You need to understand that the word good, do you see that in the text? The word good is actually supplied in the Greek. It's not actually there. And that actually helps us in the translation. Literally, it says let no one seek his own but that of his neighbor. That would be the most wooden, literal translation. What's going on here? Well, the concept of others is a major concept in scripture so Paul doesn't have to be definitive in using the word good. He's using the concept of thinking more of others than yourself; to be more concerned about your neighbor.

Now, you need to understand that this concept is like a current that runs through scripture. You can see it in the Old Testament all the way through to the last book of the New. It's like a flood water moving through the pages of scripture. I'm not going to take you from the Old into the New but let me just back you up one book into the book of Romans and show you this. Let me just take you through a couple of passages in the New Testament to help you see that this is one of the foundational principles in scripture. Let's start in Romans, chapter 13, verse 10.

Paul again is writing and he's saying to the Romans this is what I want you to be consumed with. This is what I want you to be thinking about. He says love does no wrong to a neighbor therefore; love is the fulfillment of the law. He's talking about the written law. He says you want to fulfill the written law of God? Then be consumed with loving others. Promote love. Now that's not hard to understand. But look over in Romans 15, verse 1. Just probably one page over for most of you. We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his own good to build him up. Here's again the idea of love without coming out and saying it. It's the idea that we ought to be concerned with others welfare than our own welfare. The river keeps moving through scripture.

You could turn over to Philippians, chapter 2, very familiar passage. Philippians chapter 2 speaks about Christ emptying himself; the example of his humility but in the middle of this theology rich chapter Paul gets very practical again and we see this idea flow through this passage. Here in verse 4 of chapter 2 of Philippians he says let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others. He says when you do this you

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have the mind of Christ. Do you want to have the mind of Christ? You're saying I'm quite not sure – what does that mean to follow after Christ? Here it is. You're focused more on the needs of others than your own. This is called, James says it in James chapter 2. This is called the Royal Law. James 2, verse 8. He says it almost with a ring from the Old Testament. Leviticus 19. He says if you really fulfill the Royal Law according to the scripture you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

You say, where is the headwater to this whole concept? Well, in the New Testament it's actually found in Matthew 22, verse 37, 38 & 39. In fact, if there's a passage of scripture that you ought to commit to memory it's Matthew 22. You know, this might be a great little experiment this week. Just take an index card, write this out, put it on your mirror in your bathroom so you see it every morning. Take it with you in the car. This is a great, why? I'll tell you if you want to have the entire life of a follower of Christ encompass into one verse here it is. It's Matthew 22. It's also called the great shema in the Old Testament.

Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, with all of your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like unto it. Love your neighbor as your self. Who started this? It started in the Old Testament with God the Father proclaiming this is what I want you to be about. It moves into the New Testament and Jesus picks it up and He says here are the headwaters of everything that it means to follow me and it runs like a river throughout the rest of the New Testament that is to be more in tune with promoting the love of others. Which is what is Paul saying? That if there is a Christian liberty that you're free to practice but it doesn't necessarily promote love don't if it won't promote that love in another. Again, a litmus test; an easy principle to understand.

Now as we move, let's flip back to 1 Corinthians, as we move through this passage if you're like me you'll be thinking you know what? An awful lot of Christian liberty sounds as if I ought to be just giving up. What is my liberty? That doesn't make sense. I thought it was a freedom. Why does it seem like every time I turn around there's a principle I have to give it up. I think this probably was in the mind of the Corinthians because Paul addresses this. He addresses the idea of our liberties and so the next principle you might state it like this – don't if it won't advance liberty. Or you might even say advance your Christian liberty.

Now, at first you might think well this is just opposite of what we just learned. I don't think so. Actually, I think what we're going to see in verses 25 through 30 is that Paul counter-balances the whole concept of Christian Liberty. It's interesting when you're studying through a concept and you go to the commentaries to get their take on it sometimes they'll add a sentence at the beginning of the study to kind of give you an idea of where they're heading and they're in agreement with this idea that Paul is attempting

to counter-balance the idea. Let me just read a couple of statements from a few commentaries to give you an idea; two to be precise.

One commentary writes it this way: Love others should be our first concern but their standards should not rule everything you do. Another commentary says this about 25 through 30. He says: Do not offend your weaker brother with your freedom but also don't allow their legalistic extremes to dictate your life.

Trying to bring balance to this idea. What do we do and when do we do it when it comes to Christian liberty and our freedom? Well let's look at the way Paul explains it. He explains it in the form of an illustration and he goes back to a very familiar illustration that we've seen since really the very beginning in chapter 8. He goes back to the idea of meat sacrificed to idols.

Now, let me just bring you back and let me remind you what we've already learned. What have we learned about this whole concept of meat sacrificed to idols? What was going on in the Corinthian culture? Well, remember I told you that the Greeks were very superstitious people and they thought that there were evil spirits behind every bush and under every rock. And so, they were concerned about this. In fact, this is how the entire aspect of pagan idolatry within the Greek world probably began. They were superstitious and fearful of what they didn't understand and then they added concept on concept and it became full-blown, kind of community awareness of evil spirit. In fact, it got to such a point that they thought these evil spirits had a desire to come inside and possess the body and that the way they did this was attaching themselves to food and that when you consumed the food you brought the evil spirit in and they would over-take your life. So the way that they would stop this from happening was that they would take their food and they would take it to their temple and they would have the priest sacrifice their food before this little statue and that was to protect the food and drive out the evil spirits.

Now, many, and you've learned this already, many of the Corinthian believers had come out of this lifestyle. They had come out of a lifestyle of paganism belief and as they developed in their walk with Christ they started to look back on their old lifestyle and they thought, you know what...this is ridiculous. I don't believe in that anymore. I now understand there's one true God. I understand that that was just all fallacy. I don't even believe they exist and Paul would have agreed with them. You're right. They don't exist. But what have we learned about the Corinthian church? There were two kinds of believers. There were those mature believers who could see these idols as nothing and would not be concerned about eating the meat that was sacrificed to them. And there were those others who were the immature or weaker brothers and sisters who had just come out of that lifestyle and they were afraid that if they ate that meat that it would actually cause them to sin or even have them slide back into that lifestyle so they were very concerned about eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols primarily because that

was their old lifestyle. That was the link for them so they were trying to avoid that. So you had these two competing groups within the Corinthian church.

The problem was when they came together and Paul would say your liberties are saying that you can eat meat but when they came together some of them didn't have that same sensation, that same freedom and that would cause them to stumble. So Paul brings this to a head; brings it together again and he brings a real clear conclusion. Let's look through it. It starts in verse 25.

He says it this way – he says, imagine that you go to the market and there is meat that has been sacrificed to idols there for sale. How do you handle this as a mature believer? Well, he says, verse 25 - eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. In other words, this is Paul's don't ask, don't tell policy. He says don't go up to the butcher and say was this meat sacrificed by an idol? Don't worry about it. Just buy it, eat it, don't worry about it. In fact, verse 26 he quote Psalm 24:1. He says, for the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof which is a way of saying God has given it to you. Enjoy it.

Now, he enters in and he causes a bit of a controversy to begin brewing in verse 27. He says, imagine this though. He says imagine if one of the unbelievers, now note that because we're going to come back to its importance, that an unbeliever, someone who is not a follower of Christ invites you to dinner and you're disposed to go, eat whatever is before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. It's kind of like the meat market. If an unbelieving friend invites you over to have a steak, don't be questioning him whether or not he sacrificed this to an idol. What will happen is ultimately you might offend him. So, just eat it because again, it is just what the Lord has given you. But, imagine that there are other people at this gathering, verse 28. He says, if someone says to you this has been offered in sacrifice. Now stop right there. Who is this someone? That's the question you have to ask. The someone would be a Christ follower; would have been a believer. You say how do you know that? Because an unbeliever wouldn't have cared about this. An unbeliever could have cared less about if it was sacrificed or not sacrificed only if they were highly superstitious would they have been concerned. This was likely this was a believer who's got that radar up; who's already concerned and turns to you and says do you realize that what you're about ready to eat has been sacrificed to idols. You shouldn't do that. They get wide-eyed and looking at you waiting to see what you do.

Now, we've learned from the past, haven't we? That Paul says that if you go ahead and eat that meat sacrificed to idols you might be opening the door for that weaker brother to go down that path and then later his conscience would bother him and he would think he had sinned. Remember that? So what is our response? He's very consistent. Paul's consistent. He says when you're in that situation don't do it. Don't eat it. Don't do it. In

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verse 29 he says I don't mean about your conscience but for his sake. Don't do it for his sake.

Now, part of you should be saying alright. I understand this so far but what about my rights? I don't think that there is a problem. Do I have to give up everything because I'm ultimately concerned about what everyone else is thinking or saying? No and that's the beauty of this because look in the middle of verse 29. Paul continues this and he says this. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? If I partake with thanksgiving then why am I denounced for that for which I give thanks? You know what he's saying? He's basically bringing this back into balance. He's saying listen. There are times when you're going to have to altar your actions for the sake of a weaker brother but when that weaker brother is not around then go ahead and indulge in your freedom. You see, the point is you need to live a life is wise that is how you live your life; how you use your life and what you present in your life. You need to be aware that others might be following or watching you but when they're not following or watching you and you don't have a conscience problem with it then go ahead and indulge. If it's not forbidden in scripture then it's a part of your freedom.

Now, can I just bring this into a modern realm? I'm not going to get specific about what liberties rather how we project our liberties. Do you realize that we live in a culture today completely different from the culture that Paul was writing to? You know I can do something that literally thousands of people will know about in moments. I can do something, take a picture of it. I can post it on Myspace, on Facebook. I can tweet about it on Twitter. I can blog about it and literally it goes out into all the world to see. You know what I would say to you as modern day believers. You need to be careful of what you're projecting on some of these social network spaces because some of the things that you could be projecting out there could be picked up by a weaker brother and they could look at it and they could say well, they're doing it. If they're doing it it must be ok and it will lead them down a path that you never intended to influence them towards. You see, you've got to be wise.

That's what Paul is saying here to the Corinthians and that same principle applies to us all these years later. We have to be wise about how we use our Christian life and how we use our freedoms and liberties. Don't if it won't benefit you. Don't if it won't promote love and don't if it won't advance liberties.

Now, there's on last litmus test; one last principle. We see it in verse 31 and that is, this might be considered the culmination of everything that Paul says. Don't if it won't glorify God. In fact, if you really want to sum up all Christian liberties and you forget everything I've said through chapter 8 through the end of chapter 10 and you can't even remember the last three principles here is one principle that could sum up all of the questions and answers about Christian liberties. So, therefore, then whatever you do, whatever you eat or drink, Paul says, the mundane of your life or whatever you do. In

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other words, all of the things that you do, all that encompasses your life – do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews, Greeks, or the church of God. By the way, who are the Jews, the Greeks and the church of God? That's everybody, isn't it? He's just encompassed every social schema that we have here. He's saying give no offense to anyone. An offense. Great word. It's the word *aproskopos* which is the idea to trip and literally it's the idea have you ever walked behind someone and kind of kicked up their heel or move it to the side, you kind of make them stumble? That's the idea of the text. Don't do anything. Whatever lifestyle that you're in be ultra careful not to trip up anyone. Why do we do this? What is the evaluation if we're doing this or we're not doing this?

Well, look at verse 32, end of verse 32 and 33. He says, just as I try to please everyone and everything I do not seeking my own advantage but that many that they might be saved. He's saying do you want to evaluate? See how your life is influencing others. You don't want to be the cause of stumbling for someone who's in the church or outside the church. You, yourself and your freedom and your lifestyle don't want to be the cause of stumbling and so you go back – don't if it won't glorify God.

Reminds me of a passage that Peter writes in 1 Peter, chapter 2. He says it this way, 1 Peter, chapter 3, verse 11. Beloved I urge you as sojourners and exiled to abstain from passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct, and isn't that what we're talking about? Keep your conduct among the Gentiles, those outside the body of Christ, honorable so that when they speak against you as evil doers they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Why do we do this? Why are we so concerned about our liberties? So that ultimately we might be people who glorify God, used by God; for some in the church – to lead them to a deeper relationship to the Lord; for those outside the church to lead them to seek a relationship with the Lord. That's why we're careful with how we live our lives.

Let's pray together.