

THE LIMITS OF BELIEVERS AND FREEDOM

1 CORINTHIANS 10:14–11:01

Introduction

How far can a Christian go in participating in the activities of the world, especially in social functions? This question is a constant problem that nags both believers and nonbelievers. Christian liberty vs. license — what a believer is free to do and what he is not free to do — is the subject of this important passage.

- I. Flee idolatry (v. 14).
- II. Judge whether our participation in a function identifies who we worship (vv. 15-22).
- III. Judge whether lawful acts are always permissible (vv. 23-28).
- IV. Judge whether our behaviour and freedom should be determined by another person's conscience (vv. 29-11:1).

I. *1 Corinthians 10:14 Flee Idolatry*

Flee idolatry (see 1 Cor. 8:1-13). The charge is given for a very real reason: most people are worshipping some god other than the Lord God Himself. The word idolatry (eidololatrias) means both the worship of false gods and the failure to have a right relationship with God. Any person who does not worship God is worshipping some idol, and almost everything upon earth can become an idol and consume the heart and passion of man:

- self
- religion
- family
- sex
- possessions
- knowledge
- business
- power
- sports

In practical terms, an idol is anything that consumes a person's mind, heart, soul and body. An idol is that to which a person gives himself.

- => Some people give themselves and are consumed by some purpose or possession on earth.
- => Other people give themselves and pray to their own idea of god; that is, to the *god* which they imagine in their own mind. (This is actually the worship of most people in industrialized societies.) They have a concept of god and worship that concept. They choose their own concept of god instead of the living and true God who revealed Himself in Christ and the Holy Scripture.
- => Still other people give themselves and pray to some idol, picture or image which they have made or purchased. (The idol may either represent some god or be considered the god himself.)

From this, it is readily seen that most men are idolaters, for most men are consumed by something other than God Himself. They reject the only living and true God, Jehovah, who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ and the Holy Scriptures.

The Corinthian church was confronted with the problem of idolatry in its very midst. Some of its members were actually attending social functions held in the banquet halls of idolatrous temples and in the homes where images of idols were prominently placed to oversee the family. Such functions included marriages, business affairs, and even day-to-day fellowship and meals in the homes of neighbours.

Were the church members right in attending these functions, or were they being loose with their Christian liberty? What was to be the attitude and position of the church? Paul had already dealt with the issue at length; however, it was of such importance that it needed to be reinforced so that the issue was unmistakably answered (see *Christian Liberty*, 1 Cor. 8:13).

The charge is forceful: flee idolatry. Turn away and run from it. Do not leisurely turn and do not just walk away, but be quick to turn and quick to run away from it.

Thought 1. Think for a moment. If we are to run from idols, to whom do we run? To God, of course. This fact stresses a crucial point. The only way to escape idolatry is to stay near God. Our hearts are either consumed by God or by someone or something else. Someone or something has our attention and loyalty: either God or some other person or thing.

The exhortation is to flee idolatry. Be as wise men; judge the force of the following argument (v. 15).

II. *1 Corinthians 10:15–22 Participation in Social Functions*

First, does our participation in social functions identify who we worship? Note six points.

1. Participation in the Lord's Supper identifies us as a worshipper of the Lord (v. 16). When we partake of the cup and the bread, we declare that we worship the Lord...
 - that we are in communion and fellowship with Him.
 - that we are bound together with Christ by His body and blood.
 - that we have given our lives to Him.
 - that we are committed to His death and purpose.
2. Participation with other people identifies us with their function or activity (v. 17). Believers who come together to partake of the Lord's Supper are identified as worshippers of the Lord. Their very purpose for coming together is to partake of the bread as a fellowship of believers. Therefore, they are naturally looked upon and identified as worshippers of the Lord. The point is this: believers who come together with unbelievers in their functions are identified with the unbelievers' function.
3. The participation of Israel identified them as worshippers of God (v. 18). When an animal was offered as a sacrifice to God, only a portion of the animal was actually consumed upon the altar. The rest of the meat was always kept and eaten by those

who offer and the priest. The very fact that the Jewish worshipper partook of the same meat offered in sacrifice identified him as a worshipper of God. The God to whom he sacrificed identified him in communion and fellowship with God; it identified him as a worshipper of God.

4. Participation in idolatry is meaningless worship (v. 19). The idol, whatever it is, is nothing. It has no existence, no soul, no spirit, no power, no objective being. An idol is nothing more than the imagination and idea within a man's mind. It is nothing more than a figment of man's imagination.
5. Participation in idolatry is fellowshiping with demons (v. 20). The devil and his angels or demons are behind all idolatry, whether the idolatry of a heathen society or of an educated society. Scripture definitely declares:

***Eph 6:12** For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

***2 Cor 11:14-15** And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.*

Satan is out to cut the heart of God and to destroy God's purpose in saving man. Satan does this by turning men away from the Lord Jesus Christ, by enticing men to give their lives to the things and gods of this world. When a person becomes consumed with anything upon this earth, then he has fulfilled the will of Satan: he has turned to something other than God. The man prefers something else over God.

Note what Scripture says: when people make sacrifices (whether animals or self) to something other than God, they are sacrificing to demons. One thing is certain: the offering of their allegiance and commitment is not to God. And it is not to some man-made thing or idol, for idols and things are nothing. They are meaningless as objects of worship. To whom then does a person offer his allegiance? Scripture says to demons. Note the clear statement: "I do not want you to be participants with demons." In other words, "Flee idolatry."

6. Participation in idolatry condemns a person (v. 21). It is utterly impossible to participate in the true worship of God and in the worship of demons.

***1 Cor 10:21** You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.*

7. A person cannot be a guest of the Lord at His table and a guest at the table of idolatrous demons. God will not allow it. Such hypocrisy provokes the Lord. And we are not stronger than He. We cannot escape His judgment if we practice idolatry.

Rom 1:21- 22, 25 *For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools...They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator — who is forever praised. Amen.*

1 John 5:21 *Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.*

Exo 20:4 *“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.”* (cp. Lev. 26:1)

Deu 11:16 *Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them.*

Deu 16:22 *And do not erect a sacred stone, for these the LORD your God hates.*

Psa 81:9 *You shall have no foreign god among you; you shall not bow down to an alien god.*

Isa 42:8 *“I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.”*

III. 1 Corinthians 10:23–28 Limits of Christian Liberty

Second, are lawful acts always permissible? Remember the subject of this passage: the limits of Christian freedom. The particular problem of the Corinthian church concerned social and fellowship functions with their neighbors and fellow employees (see 1 Cor. 8:1-13; 10:14-15). The point has just been made that when a person participates in a function he becomes identified with that function. In light of this, does this mean that a believer must never attend a social or fellowship held by an unbeliever? And how about the more specific question: What can a believer buy and eat and drink (v. 31; cp. 1 Cor. 8:8; Rom. 14:21)? Scripture gives five tests in these verses.

1. Test 1: Is the thing or act helpful and edifying (v. 23)? It may be lawful, legitimate and allowed...
 - but is it beneficial: profitable, expedient, helpful, useful?
 - but is it edifying: building up, constructing, maturing?
2. Test 2: Does the thing or act seek the welfare of others (v. 24)? We are not to act for self, but for others.
3. Test 3: Does the thing or act violate our conscience (v. 25-26)? The verse deals specifically with the Corinthian problem. It was a common practice for the temple priests to take the meat from animal sacrifices and sell it to the markets for retail sale. Some believers were bothered by the fact that they might be purchasing meat which had been offered to idols. Very simply, Paul says to buy the meat and ask no questions about its source, for the earth with all its creatures and provisions is the Lord's.

The animal was created by God for food; therefore, if there is a wrong, it was committed by the idol worshippers, not by the believer who uses the animal as God purposed. The point is this: the believer is not to do anything that violates his conscience. He should not be asking questions and making a fuss over small and minute matters (scruples). Personal opinions, scruples, rules and regulations that disturb conscience are *not to be pressed and made an issue*.

4. Test 4: Is it courteous and kind (v. 27)? If an unbeliever invites us to a social function and we are inclined to go, then we should go out of courtesy and kindness. However, after arriving, we are not to ask questions that would disturb our conscience. A clear conscience before God is much more important than a social function. (Note: this applies to the specific activities at socials as well. No believer should participate in an activity...
 - that would violate his conscience (v. 25, 27, 28).
 - that would identify him as a worldly person (v. 16-18).
5. Test 5: Does it hurt the conscience of another person? The point of the verse is clear: if partaking of any meat or drink or if participating in any function or activity offends a brother, then we are not to partake or participate. His conscience and life are far more important than any food or drink or any social event or activity. This is the test that controls all the others. Even if our own conscience is not bothered, we are to act for the sake of others. We are not to do things if they offend others — no matter how lawful and legitimate and acceptable they are.

Rom 14:13 *Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.*

Rom 14:15-17 *If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

Rom 14:21 *It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.*

Rom 15:1 *We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.*

1 Cor 8:9 *Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.*

1 Cor 8:12-13 *When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.*

1 Cor 9:22 *To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.*

IV. 1 Corinthians 10:29–11:01 Christian Liberty

Third, should our behaviour and freedom be determined by another person's conscience? Paul asks two clear-cut questions that are relevant for every generation of believers.

=> Why is my liberty to be judged (controlled) by the conscience of others?

=> If I can do something by the grace of God and give thanks for it, why would I let myself be criticized for it? The idea is that it would not be worth it. Bearing the criticism would not be worth the activity, especially since our purpose is to live for Christ and His glory. There are three reasons why the believer is to control his behaviour by the conscience of others.

Rom 14:17 *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

1. The believer is to do all for the glory of God. His concern is not his own rights, but the glory of God. Whatever will glorify God the most is to be what the believer does. Eating, drinking and socializing — all are to be done for the glory of God.

Mat 5:16 *“In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”*

John 15:8 *“This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”*

Rom 15:6 *So that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

1 Cor 6:20 *You were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.*

2. The believer is never to be a stumbling block...

- to the Jews
- to unbelievers (Gentiles)
- to the believers of the church of God

The believer is to do absolutely nothing that would offend another person or cause him to stumble. He is to love and live out of concern for all.

Mark 9:42 *“And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.”*

Luke 17:1-2 *Jesus said to his disciples: “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.”*

1 Cor 10:32 *Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God.*

2 Cor 6:3 *We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.*

1 John 2:10 *Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.*

3. The believer is to please all men *in all things*. He is not to seek his own profit, that is, his own will, advantage and benefit. The believer is to seek the advantage and benefit of others. Why? The reason is powerful, and note: it is the very reason God acted in our behalf; therefore, it is the reason we are to act in behalf of men: *that they might be saved*.

Note: there have been two men who lived upon earth this way. Paul says so. Who were they? Paul and Christ: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).

Mat 16:24 *Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."*

Rom 8:13 *For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.*

Rom 14:21 *It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.*

1 Cor 10:24 *Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.*

2 Cor 9:8 *And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*

Gal 5:24 *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.*

Phil 2:4 *Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

Phil 3:8 *What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ. ■*