

HELP FOR CONFUSED CHRISTIANS

1 Corinthians 10:14–11:1

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Rather than reading the entire passage at the beginning today, we'll simply read it as the message progresses. Today's title is "Help for Confused Christians."

This passage before us today is the last in a series of Scriptures, beginning with 1 Corinthians 8, which has dealt with the question the Corinthians asked Paul. Is it all right to eat meat offered to idols? In answering that question, the apostle has been providing us basic outlines for Christian freedom. We have seen that for us here in America today the question isn't, "Is it all right to eat meat offered to idols?" It's really not a present moment, contemporary question. It is, however, for Christians that are still being saved in idol-worshipping cultures. We have other questions, which are similar in nature, though. Is it all right to drink beverages with alcoholic content? Is it all right to attend a theater? Is it all right to dance? Paul has given us some apostolic principles in respect to these kinds of questions.

The first principle is simply: As Christians we are called to freedom. Sometimes in the body of Christ there are those with a too tightly constrained or narrow or negative definition of what really constitutes real Christianity. Paul's first argument, his first line of approach in 1 Corinthians 8, is to claim that we as Christians are called to freedom.

But then he has carefully, through the rest of this section, put four parameters or four qualifications on the exercise of that freedom. The exercise of our freedom must never be in violation of our own conscience, lest in becoming struck down by our conscience, we fall into sin which is morally wrong. The exercise of our freedom must never lead to the downfall of someone else. This is not to say that, from time to time, the exercise of our freedom will not

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cause someone to criticize us who is maybe just waiting for something to criticize. That's not the apostle's point. His point is that there are persons who, perhaps through the exercise of some legitimate right, might actually, through the pursuit of that, lead to someone else's downfall.

He then gives himself as an example of another principle that we have the right to give up: our freedom. We have freedom to relinquish our freedom. And he also, we saw last week, indicates that the careless exercise of our freedom can lead to our own downfall. Not just another person's downfall, but our own downfall.

There are some things that we're better off not exposing ourselves to. That's really the focus of today's Scripture. Paul is admonishing the Corinthians to stay away from the banquets at the pagan temples. There were some Corinthians that were going there saying, "I'm very strong. I can handle that." Yet, in fact, they were not. Because the atmosphere was so seductive that they could not successfully maintain their Christian experience and continually be in that atmosphere. Probably a modern parallel to attendance to a pagan temple banquet would be attendance to a disco. The same kind of environment is taking place—a seductive, wrong sort of environment, where a person might say, "I'm free in the Lord. I can exercise that freedom and go." And yet the very presence of being there might be sufficiently strong, in terms of temptation and pull, that it could lead to your own spiritual downfall. As the children of Israel, who experienced worship of the golden calf out in the wilderness. They couldn't handle that kind of pagan revelry. God hasn't called us to even want to handle that kind of pagan revelry.

There's a source of a Christian's freedom that I don't want to neglect as we close this whole section of 1 Corinthians 8–10—concerning matters over which Christians sometimes have difference of opinion. I want us to go back, for a moment, to the beginning of the letter. It's so easy, as you go through a letter verse by verse, section by section, chapter by chapter, to become

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like a person who's in the middle of the forest: All you see is trees and you've forgotten what the forest looks like. It's possible, as we're in this particular portion of God's Word, that we might begin to develop a spiritual mentality, that Paul is reducing our relationship with God to a system of obedience, to rules and regulations and principles. "Do this right, obey these principles right and you will please God." But this letter has begun with this a great liberating word. "To those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called holy, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:1). Before the apostle ever talks to us about our conduct and about our performance, he reminds us, first of all, of our position in God. It is not what we do that determines our relationship with God at this moment. It's what Christ has already done for us, in elevating us to a position of complete acceptance and worth in the presence of God. So even though, at times, the Corinthians are having trouble acting sanctified, acting holy, in fact, it has already been given to them as a gift of grace. Called sanctified, called holy and receiving grace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Over the past number of weeks, I have traveled with the pastor of First Assembly of God, San Diego, in seminars throughout the Southern California area, doing seminars for fellow pastors and ministers. I've listened to him a number of times, and I'm going to use one of his illustrations this morning. It's deeply ingrained upon me. He was telling about going over to Bath, England. There, in the center of Bath, England, is a great cathedral. An imposing sight. As he came near, he saw, on the outside doorway, a relief or a carving in the stone of the church. Those of you who have seen the cathedrals of Europe know how complicated and intricate this kind of carving can be. On either side of the doorway, there were ladders. The ladders sort of arched up over the doorway. There, at the top of the ladder, was the person who was evidently the figure of the Lord. He was looking down. There were people that were climbing the ladder.

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But the funny thing was that, in the relief, the carving, nobody was reaching to the top. For the sculpture was showing that everybody going up the ladder was falling off.

This evidently was the sculptor's representation of how difficult it is to approach God. We are climbing the ladder to where the Lord is, we can get maybe part way up, but sooner or later, we fall off. We can't ever be that good. We can't ever make it. We're falling off the ladder. You could just look at the outside and realize what the theology of that place was, and the deadness that comes when we think that we are, somehow, in regard to God, climbing the ladder and making all the right steps and right principles and finally, if we ever get good enough, then we get to where the Lord is.

Actually the Lord doesn't use a ladder to get us from where we are to where He is. He reaches down with a hook and hikes us up all at once. He's operating the pulley. Whether you're operating Christianity by ladder or hook, Christianity tells you and tells me a great deal about your vision of God and your understanding of God, and whether or not you've really understood what God's grace is. God's grace is a hook and not a ladder.

Once we are brought into grace in the family God, the Father seeks to then treat us as children. We're already His children. That's been established by the cross. In raising children, two things are probably most crucial: support and control. You can't raise good children without plenty of support and love and you must also exercise control and discipline. If you have all support and no control, you wind up with spoiled brats. If you have all control and no support, you wind up with very angry, bitter kids who feel that all that's ever been imposed upon them were rules and regulations—no warmth, no love, no hugging, no caring. Just tow the line! Get in line, kid! All control and no support.

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God, our Father, comes to us with both great support and great control, so that we might grow up into maturity. Paul right now, in the Corinthian letter, has not left off the aspect that God supports us through His grace, but has now come to that phase where he has been showing us that God also seeks to bring us to control, so that discipline might be in our life and we may not be as the Corinthian were, simply spoiled Christians—because they felt all support and no control. There’s a balance between the two, but it all stems out of grace.

I had to remind myself of that as I looked at this passage again this week and said, “Am I making it clear enough that your relationship with the Lord is not dependent upon all of a sudden getting in line with a bunch of rules and regulations and even legitimate valid spiritual principles?” That is already something God has given to us in the cross of Christ Jesus, which we have received by faith. We have been instantly elevated to a position with Him of complete acceptance and righteousness. All Christian work from then on is simply a thanksgiving to God for what He has done—an act of gratitude, not an act of somehow earning God’s favor.

From that base, Paul comes, in today’s passage, to give us some more attitudes which foster our Christian freedom.

I. The first thing we look at is a matter of our heart and loyalty.

“Therefore my dear friends, flee from idolatry” (1 Corinthians 10:14, NIV). The word “therefore” is important because it’s a connective of what has been going on before. And what has gone on before is that Paul has used the example of Israel getting into idolatry, and from that, into pagan revelry. He says, “Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. I speak to sensible people [the Corinthians prided themselves in their good sense]; judge for yourselves what I say. Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one

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loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons” (1 Corinthians 10:14–20, NIV).

On a hill behind the city of Corinth stood the temple of Aphrodite, where a thousand male and female prostitutes plied their trade in the name of Venus, the goddess of love. Immorality was associated with worship. Within the city itself, there were many temples, the ruins of which are still there, where this same thing was practiced. There were some Corinthian Christians who, in regard to public banquets at these temples, were attending and freely taking of the meat that was offered to the idols and, by their presence, they were indicating their participation in an event which clearly did not have the approval of the Spirit. Paul says, once you have taken the food of the Lord and become a participant with Him, how then can you take the food of idols, which in reality has been offered to demons? Paul is saying that behind the presence of idols are demons. I remember, as a child, on the Tibetan missionary field, the reality of that in a monastery, a place of a hundred thousand idols, where in the evening hour, no one could get any sleep because the demonic presence was so strong there, all one could do is say the name of Jesus. Mom related an experience that, in her early days as a missionary, she was staying in a temple area outside of Peking. They were putting up some missionaries there for language training. She and her sister, both single, were put in this one room. There was a great big idol in the room that divided their beds. Just a mammoth thing. Mom took a sheet and put it over the idol when they went to bed at night. In the early hours of the morning darkness, her bed began to levitate. She felt a tremendously demonic presence. Mother began to rebuke the demonic spirit in the name of

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Jesus. She felt like her mouth was stuffed with cotton. She finally got out the word “Jesus” and the bed quieted down. Things settled down for the rest of the evening. But those who have ministered to a demonic kind of culture know the very presence of demons as realities behind the idols.

We, in our western society, have a more sophisticated methodology of demon possession, which is a possession of our ideas and thought forms and publicity and public relations and the like, and we don’t see demons in quite the same form that the eastern culture often does, although they are here in many aspects of our culture.

Behind the worship of idols is demonic presence. Therefore, the Lord is saying through Paul to these Corinthians, “Don’t get involved in that kind of thing.” From time to time things come across our way where we need to ask ourselves, will this divide our loyalty? Remembering the word of Jesus, “No one can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24).

I remember some time ago I decided to read the book *The Exorcist*. I decided not to see the movie because I didn’t want to be exposed to it. But I decided to read the book, because there were people reading the book and seeing the movie coming in for counseling and spiritual help. That seems to have awakened something in people, by the way. I remember I was about half way through the book, and I know it’s just a book and I don’t want to be super-scary or ridiculous or anything like that, but I felt something about midway through that book. I had to lay the book aside and pray to the Lord, “Lord, do You want me to go on reading this thing or not, because I am very uncomfortable reading this book.” I felt the Lord, after a while, sort of speak to my heart and say, “For the sake of your ministry, you need to know what’s going on at this particular point because people are coming with problems.” I read it then without trouble.

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But it's surprising, that book. What is a book? Just print on a page. Yet something can be a reality behind the book. This is exactly what Paul's saying—don't treat things in the world as if they're just things. Sometimes, something can be associated with the demonic level of life and a sinister force stands behind it.

Also, in verse 22, we're called up to reckon to God's heart loyalty. "Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?" (NIV). Here Paul is referring to the fact that the believers, just by participating in the table of the idols, the table of demons, are actually arousing the Lord's jealousy. We know by reading the Scripture that the word "jealousy" is sometimes used as an attribute of God. It's actually a manifestation of God's love. The word "jealousy," when used of God, shouldn't make us uncomfortable at all. Jealousy is not the catty kind of jealousy that sometimes takes place. But it is a real essential part of love. Without jealousy, love can never really be true love.

For example, suppose you are a bride to be and, unbeknown to you, your fiancé is going out with other gals. He comes back to you as if nothing has happened. But you know about it, only he doesn't know that you know. He just keeps being with you, like nothing's going on elsewhere. Do you think you can accept him on the same good terms? I don't think so. For you to say, "I don't care what he does," is a mark that you don't really love him. But for you to care, for you to be jealous, is a mark that you love and your jealousy demands fidelity. It's the only way love can be preserved.

God properly is jealous for us and loves us and seeks to win us back and have fidelity in our hearts towards Him.

II. Paul also reminds us that our loyalty is not only to God and God's loyalty to us, but then that loyalty transfers to our brother (verses 23–24).

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The watchword at Corinth was “‘Everything is permissible.’” Paul qualifies that as “Not everything is beneficial. ‘Everything is permissible’—but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others” (1 Corinthians 10:23–24, NIV). Here we’re back to base one of the Scripture where Cain said, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The answer, then, is the answer here and the answer always: Yes, we are our brother’s keeper.

What, then, is the action of a free Christian? Paul leaves the context of going out to a pagan banquet in a heathen temple and comes to two other matters that had troubled the Corinthians. Buying meat in the meat market and attending a dinner at a friend’s house.

“Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, ‘The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it’” (1 Corinthians 10:25–26, NIV). Here, Paul is saying, “Live life as if the light were green. Don’t come to everything and immediately say it’s wrong. Don’t go to the meat market and assume that all the meat is wrong.” There’s sort of a negative way we can live the Christian life. We get very closed in and assume that everything is wrong. That there’s something bad in having a good time, that a Christian should never do something that, on its face, is valuable and enjoyable. Paul says, “Live life on the green-light level. Keeping in mind that, if you’re obeying the principles that have just been laid down (which could be very dangerous, if you forget the principles we’ve just given), if you’re living by those principles and you come to something where you know your loyalty to the Lord is right and His heart loyalty to you is right and your heart loyalty is toward your brother or sister, then given those loyalties in the right order, live life on the green light level.” That’s what Paul is saying. “Don’t raise questions about meat in the meat market. For the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” (1 Corinthians 10:25–26). All belongs to Him, anyway, so you can eat without your conscience being troubled.

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III. Paul also says that the terms of our actions as free Christians live as salt in the world (verses 27–30).

“If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if anyone says to you, ‘This has been offered in sacrifice,’ then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience’ sake—the other man’s conscience, I mean, not yours. For why should my freedom be judged by another’s conscience? If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?” (NIV). In other words don’t give thanks for the meal if the man raises questions about it—because you don’t want, in that context, to give thanks for the meal. It will trouble him.

Paul is saying, though, in this passage, a very important principle that we ought not to lose. That is, it is right and proper for a Christian to eat in a non-Christian’s house. The only differential is if there are questions asked about something that is served. Paul has done here a very important thing. He’s said, “Stay away from the pagan temples,” but he’s saying, “Don’t stay away from pagans.” How can you ever win the unbeliever if you isolate yourself in an insular Bible city? “Let’s have a Bible city—to get in, you have to be a Christian.” Let’s not let anybody in who’s not a Christian, because we’re going to have a Bible city.” That’s not Paul’s approach or attitude toward the world. If an unbeliever invites you, he doesn’t say, “No, you shouldn’t eat with non-Christians. You shouldn’t table fellowship with them at all.” Jesus Himself ate with sinners and tax collectors. But there is a friendship level here. And by the way, an unbeliever is not going to invite someone over to their house who is an uptight, self-righteous, legalistic Christian. So this admonition is given. “If an unbeliever invites you, go. Live as salt in the world.”

This whole section, then, is closed by Paul giving some goals for a Christian.

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A. The first goal is to live for the glory of God. So whether you eat or you drink or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God.

The Westminster confession has it right. The chief purpose of man, our reason for being, is to glorify God. And to enjoy Him forever.

A great many people try to live their life in sealed compartments. This is the compartment I'm in when I'm in church. This is the compartment I'm in when I'm with my family. This is my compartment at work. Maybe the compartment that we're in at work, or in our leisure time, has a far different personality in it than the person we are when we're here on Sunday morning. What this admonition is telling us to do is to not compartmentalize our life and save some part of our life for "religion," and then be a different person here than we are in our home or in our work or in our leisure time. But to consistently be doing everything for the glory of God, whatever it is. To consciously see that as a life lived out for His glory.

One preacher's wife said of her husband, "When I see him in the pulpit, I wish he would never come out of it. And when I see his behavior at home, I wish he would never go into the pulpit." That's living life in sealed compartments.

B. Paul presents another goal for us, to live for the strengthening of other persons. "Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God" (1 Corinthians 10:32, NIV).

Three categories. It's hard to do that. It was hard to do that in Paul's day, because the Jews had a whole different worldview than the Greeks sometimes, to do something that would please a Greek would be to offend a Jew and vice versa. So here is this sort of sense of "become all things to all persons." Not that I become a chameleon or become hypocritical, but that I recognize that approaches to different people require different kinds of tact. The overall purpose is strengthening other persons, not tearing them down in their faith.

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Then Paul, in the last verse of 1 Corinthians 10 and the first verse of 1 Corinthians 11, says, “I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (NIV).

C. Here we are exhorted to live as an example, that others might be saved.

The three goals in life are: to glorify God, to strengthen those around us, and to be a witness for Jesus Christ in the world. Not simply a verbal witness, but a lived witness as well. It is in this giving forth of life that we find our freedom and our liberty.

There are two seas in Palestine. One is fresh and has fish in it. Splashes of green adorn its banks.

Trees spread their branches over it and stretch out their thirsty roots to sip up the lapping water.

Along its shores, the children play as children played when Jesus was there. He loved it. He would look across its silver surface when He spoke to his disciples on its banks. He fed a crowd of five thousand there. The river Jordan makes this sea coming from the north. It feeds this very sea, and causes its water to even appear sparkling from the hills. People build their houses near this water. Birds build their nests. And every kind of life is happier, because this sea is there.

The river Jordan leaves this sea and flows on to the south into another sea. Here, in this other sea, there is no splash of fish, no fluttering leaf, no song of birds or children’s laughter. Travelers choose another route, unless on urgent business. The air hangs heavy over the water, and neither man nor beast nor bird will drink its water.

What makes the difference in these neighboring seas? Not the river Jordan. It empties the same good water into both seas. Not the soil in which the seas lie or the country round about. This is the difference: the Sea of Galilee receives, but does not keep the Jordan. For every drop that flows into the sea, another drop flows out. The other sea is shrewder. It keeps hoarding its income jealously. It will not be stimulated into any generous impulse. Every drop it gets, it

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keeps. The Sea of Galilee lives and gives. This other sea gives nothing and it is called “Dead.”

There are two seas in Palestine, and there are two kinds of people in the world.

Freshness or deadness is determined by living for something and for someone outside of ourselves, giving glory to Him, existing for others and strengthening them, living as a witness.

Closing Prayer

Thank You, Lord, for reminding us, again, through Your Word, who we are. That it is by Your grace that we stand. I think of the testimony, earlier this morning, the person said that one moment he knew he was not a Christian and the next moment he knew that he was. I pray, even now, as we share together, for the friends here today who have come as confused persons or persons who have never really made a conscious dedication of their life to You or believed in You. That in this moment of the Spirit’s presence, there would be the opening of spiritual eyes and the recognition that Your life flows into us and flows out of us and we’re kept clean and pure and vibrant and alive by Your presence. Strengthen Your body through this teaching, today, as well, Lord Jesus, that we might be discerners of our culture and our time. That we may have the grace, continually, in our experience to recognize who we are and who You want us to be. And the wisdom and the discipline to live life as a hymn of praise to Your name. We ask this, Lord Jesus, in Your name. Amen.