

**Freedom to get involved: decision-making in a pluralist society – 1**  
**Corinthians 10:23-11:1**  
**7<sup>th</sup> November 2010 at 6:30pm**

**Introduction**

Good evening everyone

Just over a week ago we had Halloween.

Some Christians aren't sure about Halloween. They're not sure it's right to get involved.

But it's all just a bit of harmless fun isn't it?

Who here agrees that it's just a harmless bit of fun?

Supposing I told you that on the BBC website, a druid specifically connects Halloween with their celebration of Samhain [*sarwain*], which involves summoning spirits, drinking sacred mead and remembering the dead. Still just a harmless bit of fun?

As Christians living in our present culture, we're continually being faced with all sorts of dilemmas:

How do we deal with New Age Spirituality?

How do we deal with alternative lifestyles?

Or sexuality or the gay issue?

Or certain kinds of music?

Or clothes?

Because our culture and the God we worship disagree on a number of very important things, there's a lot of conflict and a lot of tension on how we can be a faithful Christian, who both loves our culture and loves our God.

The question is: how do we resolve this tension?

How do we remain faithful to our God yet make sure we're fully integrated in the life of Lewes day-to-day?

In 1 Corinthians Paul was writing to Christians who were in a similar situation. And in this evening's passage he gives some really great guidance to help us find our way through this minefield

As we look at the passage together we'll come across five straightforward questions that Paul says we should ask before doing something:

Is it permissible?

Is it beneficial?

Is it loving?

Is it evangelistic?

Will it tempt someone to sin?

So please grab a pew Bible and open it on page 1151 and we'll begin

**How do I handle my freedom in Christ in practice? (Vv23-30)**

The first thing Paul says in verse 23 is this: *“Everything is permissible”*

*“Everything is permissible”*: Does he really mean that?

No he doesn't! He's being sarcastic

He's simply quoting one of the Corinthians' favourite sayings back at them as he's already done in chapter 6

He didn't agree with it then and he doesn't agree with it now!

No! Not everything's permissible

### **1. *Is it permissible? (v23)***

So this is the first question we need to ask: is it permissible?

Imagine you're a Christian trying to decide whether something's right or wrong:

Should I drink that alcohol?

Should I take those drugs?

What about cigarettes?

Can I go to that show?

Is it okay to hang around with those people?

To help us decide we must go firstly to the Bible, and check to see if God says that that's not to be done

If he does, it's off-limits. It's as simple as that!

Next test: is it legal?

Not everything's permissible just because God hasn't said no to it

For example we can't drink and drive

If we're at school we've got to obey our teachers

In fact whoever we are, we've got to obey the authority that's over us.

If we go to work, our company, our boss will have certain policies and rules. We need to obey those.

And frankly that takes a whole lot of things and automatically eradicates them.

Can I get drunk? No

Can I lie on my UCAS form? No

Can I pretend I'm sick and take that day off? No

Can I lie on my tax return? No

### **2. *Is it beneficial (and constructive)? (v23)***

First question: is it permissible.

Second question: is it beneficial?

Just because something's permissible, doesn't mean that it's beneficial. Doesn't mean that it's a good thing to do. That's what Paul's saying in verse 23.

There are things that are acceptable, morally, legally and spiritually, but aren't beneficial or constructive in practice

Quick, silly, example: it's not against the law for me to smash my fist against a wall. I'm free to do that. Technically I'm not disobeying anything in the Bible. But clearly it wouldn't be beneficial or sensible to do that. It wouldn't help me and it wouldn't help anyone else

Okay, so a bit harder, and I suspect not all of you will like this: what about smoking cigarettes?

If you're over 18, you're legally able to smoke them. The Bible is silent on smoking, so there's no prohibition. You're free in Christ to smoke.

But is it beneficial?

If you want to have better breath, better lungs, better teeth, better overall health, longer life, is it better to smoke or not?

Now an occasional smoke isn't going to kill you but what if you're a pack-a-day smoker? Or more

Is that good for you? No, it isn't! It even says so on the packet!

So, we have to think through these issues

### **3. *Is it loving? (v24-26)***

Okay so third question: is it loving?

Is what you're proposing to do loving your neighbour?

Verse 24: *"Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others."*

Now let's be clear this isn't a question that people in our culture tend to ask these days. But the Bible gives us a set of values that are counterintuitive to the way that we often live. The Bible doesn't just say, well, are you free to do it? And is it good for you? Then go for it....

The Bible says you have to do something else as well.

The Bible says you have to factor in other people: your friends, your family, your work colleagues, your neighbours, and others

What'll they think about what you want to do?

Maybe you are free in Christ to blast your stereo all night, but if you have open windows or live in a house with thin walls, is that really loving your neighbour? Is it really? No, it's not.

And so as Christians, we also have to factor in other people because God loves them, too – not just us!

In verses 25 and 26, Paul goes on to say: *"Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it."*

And he's stating a key principle here. It's really important we don't miss it.

What he means is this: when it comes to being involved in culture there's no such thing as a sacred - secular divide. There are no Christian versus non Christian cultural ghettos

Since everything on the earth belongs to Jesus Christ, including culture, all music, art, film, literature, food, alcohol – you name it – all of it is there to be appreciated by Christians, as long as it's in a non-sinful way that honours God.

Paul's saying that, as far as culture or styles go, as long as we don't sin, we're free to be as flexible and gracious and accommodating with non Christians, as we want to be

#### **4. *Is it evangelistic? (Does it forward the gospel?) (v27-30)***

Now this leads us very nicely onto the fourth question:

Is what we want to do evangelistic? Does it advance the kingdom? What will non Christians think of Jesus, as a result of the decision we make?

Paul says:

<sup>27</sup> *If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience.*

<sup>28</sup> *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—*

What's Paul saying here?

He's saying that if a non-Christian invites you over to dinner, feel free to go and feel free to abide by conscience. Feel free to hang around with them, be at their house, be their friend, enter into certain discussions, answer their questions, be as loving, as gracious, as merciful, as compassionate as possible....

But if things turn towards spirituality. If your hosts want you to participate in the worship of someone or something other than Jesus, you have to say no because that's a violation of both Scripture and conscience.

Let's go back to the example of Halloween that I mentioned earlier: suppose that you're invited over to a meal by a couple of non Christian friends on Halloween night.

They say "Hey we're not doing anything that night, why don't you just pop round and we'll have something to eat and drink. Nothing formal. And we'll have a good old natter"

And you think, that's fine, I'd like to do that. It's not a Halloween Party, so no issues there. So you say "Yes, that'd be great, thank you."

So, on the night, you turn up with a bottle of wine and a bag of nuts.

And everything's going great and you're having good time.

And then they say, "Oh yes, we forgot to tell you; we've invited some other friends of ours to come round later on. They've been to celebrate Samhain [*sarwain*] today, and they'll be bringing round sacred mead with them, that's been blessed by some druids. We'll share the mead and perhaps we'll even be able to say some of their prayers too"

What do you do now?

What's your response to this new situation?

Paul says you've got to say: "Hang on that's not something I'm doing. I'm enjoying having a good time with you but I worship Jesus. I'm not drinking something that's been blessed by druids or getting involved in worshipping another god. I'm not doing it. I'm a Christian." That's what you've got to say.

The point is that if we love our friends, we've got to be evangelistic in these situations, however uncomfortable. We've got to think how Jesus is being presented. Just accepting the situation and going along with it, risks your friends misunderstanding what you stand for, and even worse risks misleading them about the person and character of Jesus

You see there's a big danger here of being pulled in one of two wrong directions:

The first is to be too fundamentalist. This is the view that says: "We don't go with non-Christians because they do things that God doesn't approve of and we don't want to look at it. So we don't have gay friends. We don't go to pubs. We don't go to clubs. We don't go to rock concerts. We don't."

But then, the problem is nobody really gets saved because there's no interaction between Christians and non Christians

The other wrong direction is to be too liberal. This is the view that says: "Well, we do around with gay people. We do go to clubs. We do go to pubs. But we don't say anything about sin or Jesus, because it offends people." The problem with this view, of course, is that no one hears the truth, so again no one is saved.

If you love Lewes

If you love your friends

If you love your neighbours, your work colleagues, your postman, the people who serve you in shops, your teachers, your anything

Then we have to be honest about Jesus, the Bible and sin etc.

The question becomes: how can we love people, have relationships with them and disagree with them in a way that they still feel loved?

This is very complicated and hard.

It's the hard part of living in our society.

How do we say: "I love you, but I disagree with your lifestyle?"

"I love you, but I disagree with the choices you're making"

It's a very hard line to walk.

### **5. Will it tempt someone to sin? (v32)**

Okay, onto our last question: will what we want to do, tempt someone to sin, and get into trouble?

Verse 32: *"Do not cause anyone to stumble..."*

So we think, "Should I drink this?"

Well, I'll tell you what, if you're out for a meal with a recovering alcoholic, you don't order a bottle of wine. You don't order alcohol, period!

If someone's weak in an area; if somebody's tempted in an area, we don't go there because we're just going to get them in trouble.

So, even though we may be free to do it. Even if it isn't a problem for us, we don't do it.

*"Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God," (v32)*

It doesn't matter who it is: young, old, man, woman, gay, straight, black, white, rich, poor — it doesn't matter who we're with—if we're a Christian, we're always thinking:

"Am I going to cause that person to sin?

Am I going to get them in trouble?

Am I strong where they're weak?

Am I going to cause them spiritual harm?

Then I'll abstain because I love them and I don't want to cause them any trouble" .....

*Look at verse 33: "... For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved."*

That's the bottom line.

The one thing that matters most to the Christian is whether or not more people will meet, love, follow, worship and serve Jesus Christ.

That's the issue.

So when we're out with our non-Christian friends, we're always thinking:

"However I act, think, do, where we go, what we eat, what we drink—I just want to do everything I can to introduce them to Jesus so that they'll meet him.

That's my number one priority.

So, I'll give up whatever freedoms I need to.

I'll be flexible, but I won't sin, because that'll give them a bad picture of Jesus."

Let's be clear, what we want is for a lot of people to meet Jesus. That's what we want.

That's what we want.

Okay, so let's summarise where we've got to:

When we're making our choices on what to do in any given situation, we have to operate by conscience, by wisdom and by prudence.

And it's a really hard part of being a Christian in our culture because there's two groups of people:

One says: "Do whatever you want, God doesn't care." They're wrong.

The other says: "Don't talk to anybody who sins because you don't want to catch it like a cold." They're wrong too!

We have to learn to steer somewhere between these two groups. And we do that by asking these five questions:

Is it permissible?

Is it beneficial?

Is it loving?

Is it evangelistic? (How will non-Christians perceive this? Will I be showing them the love and truth of Jesus simultaneously?)

And finally, will it tempt someone to sin?

### **Conclusion**

Now the especially sharp-eyed among you will have noticed that I missed out verse 31.

It's really a summary of this whole passage:

Verse 31: *"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."*

We're to do everything for the glory of God

How do we do this? How do we do everything for the glory of God?

The answer's in our final verse: we *"Follow the example of Christ"* (v11.1)

We're to use our freedom to promote Jesus Christ

In fact that's Christian freedom in a nutshell: being freed from ourselves to glorify God by being like Jesus Christ.

So let's finish by looking at his example; at how he lived:

Jesus hung around with people who drank, but he never got drunk.

Jesus hung around with women who were sexually out of control but he didn't have sex with them.

Jesus had loving friendships with men but he didn't have sex with them.

Jesus had a job but he never ripped anybody off.

You see Jesus, who is God, fully involved himself in the culture of his day.

In fact that's exactly the theology of the incarnation: the Word becoming flesh and living among us (John 1:14)

Jesus celebrated the holidays.

Jesus ate the food. He drank the wine. He hung around with people.

He went to the parties. He had friends. He loved people, but (and this is the point) he didn't sin and he didn't lie and he wasn't a coward and he wasn't compromised.

And the result was?

The result was that most people hated him!

So, welcome to the Christian life.

Because that's what God calls us to, isn't it?

That's the way of the cross

Jesus said *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first."* (John 15:18)

In fact Jesus even says woe to you when everyone speaks well of you!

As Christians, we're to follow the example of Jesus.  
Using those five questions, we're to go as far into the culture as we can, like Jesus did,  
without sinning, knowing that not everyone's going to love us.

But knowing that in doing this we're sharing Jesus with others  
And knowing that in doing this we're obeying and glorifying God

## **Prayer**