

Sermon 34: 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1: Making Godly Choices

OUTLINE

For the good of our neighbor
For the sake of conscience
For the glory of God
For the sake of saving others

INTRODUCTION

How does one make good decisions? This is what Paul is answering as he concludes this section, chapters 8-10 on meat offered to idols. The Corinthians have been making some poor choices. The latest of which, is because they think they have a little knowledge that idols are nothing they can simply strut into idol temples and eat the meat offered there. Paul is now going to give the Corinthians 4 key principles that summarize all of what he has been saying so far that will equip them to make better choices. Their choices have not only got them involved in dangerous activities and embroiled them with the demonic; it has also been a destructive example to those weak converts saved out of idolatry. These 4 principles make up our four headings. We will make godly choices if we decide based on what is good for our neighbor; secondly if we make decisions mindful of conscience, yours and others; thirdly if we do all things for the glory of God; and fourthly, that we should consider how our decisions will influence the salvation of others. For the good of our neighbor; For the sake of conscience; For the glory of God; For the sake of saving others.

For the good of our neighbor

V23-24, 'All things are lawful,' but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. ²⁴ Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.' Paul has been explaining the spiritual nature of the Lord's Supper; and that going into idol temples and eating and drinking is participating with demons. Paul has pushed back at one of the major pillars of the so called knowers who claim that idols are nothing, therefore they can continue with their practices. Paul here now takes on the second pillar of their argument articulated in that phrase 'all things are lawful.' You will notice that our translations have put it in inverted commas to indicate that this is likely Paul quoting something they were known to say. We have seen this quote before when Paul was addressing the matter of sexual immorality, 6:12, "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything.' We said then that this was likely a true statement of Paul's when understood in relation to things like OT dietary laws now wrongly applied to things like sexual sin and idolatry. Paul pushed back at this abuse by showing other things that have to be considered when making decisions, does doing that thing edify you spiritually; does that thing enslave you. Paul recognizes that sometimes there is no clear command in scripture against something but gets us to see that there are other important principles that must influence how we make decisions. Paul here adds a third push back to the abuse of this saying, but not all things help your neighbor; not all things build up your neighbor. In 1 Cor. 6 Paul said something similar but was more focused on the matter that not all things build you up and edify you spiritually; Paul is here bringing our neighbor into view. V24 makes clear that Paul is trying to get the Corinthians to consider how to make a good decision, not simply by considering

whether something is forbidden; not whether it is a case of personal liberty and one could be allowed to do a certain thing, but whether you are achieving your neighbor's good.

Paul pits personal liberty against love. When Paul says in v24. 'Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.' He is saying nothing more than what he will say later, 'It [love] does not insist on its own way.' He is coming back to what he said at the beginning of this discussion, 8:1, 'Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up.' Liberty ends up being a cloak for vice when it ends up harming others. If we had to ask Paul whether the liberty to seek an abortion ought to exist, here is his answer. God in dealing with us sought our good; He paid the price of our debts, even though the punishment for our sin should have been upon us. When you are faced with a decision about something that there may not be a clear command about, one of the things we should be asking ourselves is, is this the loving thing to do that will seek my neighbors good? The good we want for them is of course primarily their spiritual good. Will my actions bring them closer to God, help them to see the way of holiness more clearly, remind them to avoid not indulge in sin?

For the sake of conscience

Paul has just said that you should not eat meat offered to idols when you are going into their temples and associating with them during religious ceremonies. But what about all the other situations where the Corinthians might encounter meat offered to idols? Is all meat forbidden in every situation? Was Paul implying that none of us should eat meat ever again? In this next part Paul very helpfully gets us to think about how to negotiate applying godly principles to decision making as we try and navigate our way through a godless world. V25-26, 'Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. ²⁶ For "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." Paul deals with three different scenarios and meat offered to idols. The first scenario he has dealt with is the case of eating the meat in a religious context. He has clearly ruled that this is wrong and should not be done, it is idolatrous, dealing with the demonic and unloving to those who could be made to stumble. Here is the second scenario. A lot of the meat that would be sold in the market would be offered to an idol. This is the meat market not an idol shrine, what about that meat? Is all meat forbidden in case it was offered to an idol?

Here Paul's second principle is the one of personal conscience. He does not advise us to become investigators who go out and ensure that there is no contamination from idols. He does not fear contamination in this way because it is not connected to an idol's shrine and its worshippers. Paul tells us that we need not raise the question because we know that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. This is a quote from Ps. 24:1. Paul has a deep theology of common grace recognizing the goodness of God's creation and His sovereignty over it. Paul does not have a small view of God and think that the devil has authority over things making them unclean for the believer, 1 Tim. 4:4-5, 'For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.' Rom. 14:14, 'I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.' Here Paul is trying to help the Christian feel set free. Yes they should have nothing to do with the meat when in an idol temple, but if meat is being sold in the meat market, we

don't even have to raise the question of whether it has been offered to an idol because this is God's creation and He is Lord of all, we can eat it as a gift of God.

So when making a decision, are you doing something knowing that it not a violation of God's law, is your conscience clean? You can have an ill-informed conscience and things that are not actually sin can be sin, and you can overcome this by informing your conscience. Paul expands this to include others as well though. V27, 'If one of the unbelievers 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.' This is now the third scenario Paul envisages. The first was eating meat in temples, the second is buying meat in the market and the third is eating meat, not in temples but in social settings where others, namely unbelievers are eating with you. Unlike the Exclusive Brethren you are allowed to eat with people who are not believers. Unlike the Jews who were over scrupulous and needed all sorts of assurances about what was being eaten before they could accept an invitation. Paul shows that the Christian has liberty and can sit down and eat with non-believers without asking questions, just like buying meat at the market. V28, '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, and for the sake of conscience.' Here Paul introduces another principle to help us make godly decisions. Paul is mindful of what the unbeliever might think by our actions. Why the host might inform the attending Christian about the meat we are not told. Is it to provoke a crisis and embarrass them; to get them to expose themselves as a Christian a provoke hostility; is it an innocent revelation? Either way, because the unbeliever might think that you are sinning against your own God; or because it appears that you endorse syncretism as they do, for the sake of their understanding and conscience, do not eat. Here Paul is trying to tell us that we have an image to maintain and that our actions can confirm or deny the truth we believe. Paul is concerned that we not even be mistaken for practicing syncretism along with everyone else, but that we must act in such a way as to show that as believers we cannot participate in idolatry. Paul goes on to clarify that this is not because idols are anything, or that we are actually participating in idolatry by eating in this social not religious setting. No, he recognizes that the unbeliever's understanding and conscience must be considered in our decision making, v29a, 'I do not mean your conscience, but his.' Does this mean that Paul is concerned that because someone somewhere might think that any eating of meat might look an endorsement of idolatry that all meat must not be eaten by Christians universally? No, Paul is only concerned about that limited social situation not the rest of how a Christian makes choices. V29b, 'For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience?' This concession for this peculiar scenario is not to be allowed to be a rule that binds the rest of the Christian's life, v30, 'If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?' As in Paul's other teaching he recognizes that the truth of God's word is what we are subject to not every misunderstanding of others. God's truth must bind our conscience and dictate our behavior, for He alone is the Lord of our conscience. But this does not mean that we should not be sensitive when in the presence of unbelievers and that we should make every attempt to not uphold any lies by our actions. We make godly choices by living with a clean and informed conscience and sanctifying God in the consciences and understandings of others. Paul makes this more explicit in the next verse.

For the glory of God

V31, 'So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.' The Corinthians wanted to live by a single rule that helped them navigate all situations. They thought, 'all things are lawful' was that principle. But trying to find a single truth to help you in every single situation is impossible if that principle starts with man and not with God. Paul has demonstrated how this principle has failed, personal liberties can be pursued in such a way that we are loveless to others, that we hamper our own spiritual progress, and by becoming enslaved and dominated by things. If you want one rule to live all of life by, here it is: do all to the glory of God. This is what we should be doing anyway. When it comes to making godly decisions there is no mystery to it, we are to live for the glory of God. 'Q. 1. *What is the chief end of man?* A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.' This is one of the most important things we can every know. I remember being asked in primary school, what is the meaning of life? It was a question that haunted me for years I remember coming back to it over and over again. I remember trying out different ideas. I even went down some wrong tracks trying out a number of different spiritualities and philosophies. If only someone had told me that God had made me and this is why I am here, to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. If only the people of this world would wake up and see this truth. How much harm have people done to themselves and others because they have not lived by this truth? Sin lies to us and tells us that only sinning can truly make us happy but the WSC reminds us that our greatest joy lies in knowing and loving and obeying and glorifying God as the focus of our existence. Sin lies to you and tells you that it is living for your own will, satisfying your own desires, rooting your identity in living for yourself that you will find your greatest happiness. What a lie! The paradoxical truth is that in not aiming at our will but God's will we will fulfil the purpose of our existence, find our greatest happiness, and do the greatest good. And the only way we can glorify God is for us to recognise our sinfulness, our lives of rebellion, how serious our sins are and see in God's grace and mercy His willingness to save and the Saviour He has provided in Jesus dying for our sins and to restore us to this life. To turn from our sins and turn to Him seeking the forgiveness that He freely offers to all who repent and believe.

You will notice that this rule for our lives, doing all things for God's glory is not only in the big things, but the smallest details of our lives. These actions of eating and drinking, actions we do thoughtlessly every day. These actions which seem so innocent we can see in Corinth are causing tremendous problems, they are leading to idolatry, causing others to stumble, loveless divisions, abusing the Lord's Supper, etc. if only every believer would ask themselves this question before they ate or drank: will this glorify God? Glorifying God is putting His glory on display and showing Him as God and worthy of all worship and love. Honouring an idol and participating with idolaters does not uphold the truth that God is the only God that exists and who alone is worthy of all praise. Eating and drinking selfishly so that others are caused to stumble does cause us to misrepresent God. God is a God of love that seeks the good of His church and instead of being vessels of blessing to that church we become stumbling blocks who seek our own will not His. Look at every choice you make, you make every choice for a reason, is the central reason for everything that you do in consideration of God's will, God's purpose for you, God's glory? Even the small actions that you take for granted; are you doing them mindful of God's will remembering that doing all things for His glory honours Him, and benefits others and even yourself? Paul is calling upon each one of us to live in light of the truth of who God is, to live Coram Deo, before the face of God. To make every choice in His presence, to make every choice with reference to His will and glory. And

how helpful this is when we face difficult situations like the Corinthians. They are trying to navigate when and where they are allowed to eat meat offered to idols. There are a numberless amount of scenarios that one would try and plan for, or we could take the simpler road of only having one guiding principle that will guide us in every single situation, do all things for God's glory. The point of what Paul is saying here is not a way to make your life more complicated, but rather a way to make sense of a complicated world where the opportunities for sin are ever increasing. Some may view this as a burden, but in truth it is a tool to help you make sense of the overwhelming amounts of choices that face us every day.

For the sake of saving others

V32-33, 'Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God,'³³ just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.' Paul brings the three principles he has been articulating into a final one. Living for the good of others; living for the sake of conscience; living for the glory of God leads him to live so that every choice is that others might be saved. For a nationalist every action must end in the good of their beloved country; for a selfish person every choice and action must end in their personal satisfaction; for Paul, a Christian and a minister of the gospel, every decision of his life is guided towards the grand goal of seeing others saved. This is the best way that he can show love to another person by seeing them find their highest good in the gospel. Any action that would lead someone to depart from Christ would be one of the worst things he could cause. To live in such a way that there are no hindrances or stumbling blocks from people becoming Christians, this is the rule by which Paul lives considering the consciences and understandings of others. One of the greatest ways we can glorify God is by being a tool in God's hands to bring others into salvation. As someone has put it, God is more glorified through the salvation of one sinner than the creation of a whole universe. When a sinner is saved another rebel becomes a worshipper and another voice joins the chorus of the new creation. Another image bearer stops obscuring God's image and begins to refract in greater degrees the beauty of God. Through Christ dying on the cross for that sinner we see God's holiness, God's righteousness, God's love, God's mercy, God's grace, God's wisdom. We see a God who is so generous that we cannot measure it. By the inheritance we receive in Him we see more of His abundant favour to sinners. By the giving of Himself in the Son dying for us, the Spirit abiding within us, and God being our portion for eternity any thoughts of God being stingy or selfish or removed are silenced. The over throwing of satan, sin and death in the salvation of sinners we see God fighting against evil for His people, we see Him fulfilling His promises and silencing all doubts about His goodness. When a sinner is turned from self-destruction to the path of fulfillment on God's ways; from the selfish destroying of others to the selfless serving of others; from lies to truth; from ugliness to beauty, God is magnified. When our weakness is exposed as having damned and trapped us and being incapable of saving us and then God comes to rescue His strength and grace are shown. And friends, Church, this is the purpose we have as well. Christ rose from the dead and gave us marching orders, inviting all of us to play a part in this glorious task of saving others. We will not all be front line evangelists, but we all have a part to play as we become the church that sends out the gospel, nurtures young disciples and bears witness to the truth of Christ's Lordship by being His obedient, holy and loving people.

Paul is a Jew to the Jews to win Jews, a Greek to the Greeks to win Greeks, He will deny himself in any way to strengthen the church; all that some might be saved. And is this only for Paul, it is because he is a fixative sort of personality, is it merely because He is an apostle, is this same controlling orientation to be the desire of every Christian's life? The answer is yes. 11:1, 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.' Not because Paul says so, not because Paul wants to make us into his image, we are to live an others focused life to the glory of God embracing self-sacrifice and difficulty if necessary, because Christ did this for us. Phil. 2:3-8, 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.' We cannot die on the cross for others sins but we can live a self-sacrificing lifestyle that puts aside our own agendas to focus on others coming to know this glorious salvation in Christ. The challenge for us is, are we? Like Paul can you see this truth, this purpose, are you like him taking every part of your life and making every decision with this single goal in mind?

So how do you make good decisions? By making choices that are for the good of others, for the sake of conscience, for the glory of God, for the saving of others, or by asking yourself, WWJD?