

Prayers

Opening prayer

You have given us breath, great Creator of our world.
You have breathed Your Spirit into us, and made us self aware;
You have granted us life, personality, and character, to be ourselves;
You have put us in the world, alongside others in time and place;
You have blessed us with faith to trust You and receive Your salvation;
You have placed praise within our hearts, and we give You our thanks.
ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

In whatever language or whatever way you feel appropriate, tell God to love him. Take time to explain your love to God, and tell him what you really feel.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for countries in turmoil.** *Pray for Sudan, and for the many people in this and surrounding countries in the grip of famine*
- *Pray for the universities of your country, and those who are seeking to study in at this time. Pray that they will maintain the highest academic standards for the good of all*
- *Give thanks to God for the sleep that you have had in recent days. Pray for those who do not sleep well because they are in distress, and pray that God will bless all His servants with the peace of proper rest and sleep*

Meditation

When everything around us seems to fail,
And it's hard to see what God is doing
Through the fog of tension and distress;
Then may we stop, and let the Spirit take control of all.

When we find no way to fix a problem,
And it's impossible to know what can be done
Through the tension of our inner doubts;
Then may we think, and let the Spirit take our cares.

When there's no peace in us emotionally
And it's unlikely we can face our stress again
Through any means we can conceive;
Then let us yield, and give our spirits over to the Spirit.

When we can leave all things to Him
And trust our God despite the pain created
Through every form of stress or trial;
Then let us sing, and let the Spirit birth new life in us.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

²³ 'Everything is allowed,' but not everything is helpful. 'Everything is allowed,' but not everything is constructive.

²⁴ Do not seek your own interests, but those of others. ²⁵ Eat anything sold in the market without raising questions of conscience, ²⁶ for 'the earth is the Lord's and everything in it.'

²⁷ If any unbeliever offers you an invitation and you want to accept, eat whatever is set before you without raising questions of conscience. ²⁸ But if someone tells you, 'This was offered in sacrifice,' then do not eat it, out of respect for the one who told you and conscience; ²⁹ I mean the other person's conscience, not your own. If I share with goodwill, why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? ³⁰ Why should I be slandered because of that for which I have given thanks?

³¹ So then, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God. ³² Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God! ³³ For myself, I try to please everyone in everything I do, seeking not my own benefit but that of many, so that they may be saved. ^{11:1} Become imitators of me, inasmuch as I am of Christ.

Review

This part of 1 Corinthians sums up what Paul says in 1 Corinthians about the eating of meat offered to idols; he has already written about it twice before (8:1-13 and 10:14-22)! We might well be puzzled by this, because this is not something we readily understand today. Part of our study must therefore be to look at the different things Paul says about this, so that we understand why he says so much about it. A major clue to where we are heading is found at the end of today's reading, where Paul makes some summary comments, advising Christians to copy him and avoid giving offense, so that people may be saved (10:33).

The eating of meat offered to idols was certainly a 'hot potato' issue for the early church, although it is of little interest to Christians now because we know little about the meat we buy at the supermarket. Nevertheless, it remains an important issue for some, especially those living in Hindu or Islamic countries. These religions have their own distinct rules about meat. Christians in such countries benefit from Paul's advice here, where he advises that no offense be given to people of differing beliefs over food. He is concerned that Christians should keep contact with people of other beliefs for the sake of evangelism (10:25,31)!

We must now summarise all the different things Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians about the eating of meat offered to idols, for we might be forgiven for thinking that he contradicts himself! Here, Paul tells Christians that in principle they can eat anything sold in the market place. It would have been killed in a temple slaughterhouse, but this is not a problem because all things belong to God (10:25,26). This message is similar to the one given earlier in chapter 8, where Paul says that sacrifices to other gods are meaningless because no other gods exist (8:4f.). Nevertheless, his rule is that he does not want this view imposed on others who have in all conscience decided otherwise (8:10-13), even though they have 'weaker' faith. However, in the previous passage (10:14-22), Paul equated the eating of meat offered to idols as like eating something that had been offered to demons, and urged Christians to 'flee' from such idolatry! Has he therefore changed his mind?

Fortunately, if we look beyond the headlines at why Paul offers his varying advice and to whom he offers it, we may find a coherent message. The 'policy' found in each passage is designed to address one or other concern about Christian attitudes towards others. Firstly, to those who said at Corinth, '*we can do what we want*' (6:12, 10:23), he said they should submit to others in the fellowship of differing views, even though they were of 'weaker' faith (8:1f.); so Paul's purpose here was to unite the church fellowship. In the second discussion (10:14-22), Paul argues for the purity of worship; he attacks those who think they can attend pagan sacrificial meals and not compromise their own worship of God.

Now in our reading today, Paul deals not with unity or the purity of worship, but something different, which is the evangelisation of the Gentiles. His general point remains the same; God has made all things and '*everything is allowed*'; but for the sake of the Gospel, '*not everything is constructive*' (10:23). The Christian must therefore colour principle with realism. Our reading today says that a Christian must put principle aside in order to maintain the harmony and goodwill within which the Gospel can thrive. So in a non-Christian setting, if nothing is said about the meat, the Christian can then eat as he or she wishes (10:28,29). But if the meat's sacrifice is an issue, then the Christian should refuse it; to be seen to eat might be interpreted by others as accepting the pagan rituals by which it was killed. In this way, a Christian can glorify God whatever happens, and without feeling that principles have been broken (10:29-30)!

Paul's approach to the matter of eating meat offered to idols is a warning to us about the dangers of being seen to 'stand on our principles' on anything other than the Gospel message itself. Although there is a good principle at the heart of all Paul says, he insists it must bend to meet evangelistic circumstances! We are called to copy Paul in this (11:1), and put the good of the proclamation of the Gospel first. Paul says 'become imitators of me' in many of his letters (1 Cor 4:16, Eph 5:1, 1 Thess 1:6, 1 Thess 2:14, Phil 3:17),

and it means roughly the same in each text. For Paul, the priority is always the Gospel and the evangelistic mission of the church.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- 'Do not seek your own interests, but those of others' (10:23-26)
- 'Do all for the glory of God' (10:27-31)
- 'Be imitators of me ...' (10:32-11:1).

Notes on the translation of the passage

V23 'not everything is constructive'

The Greek for this last word is 'oikodomei', which according to Greek dictionaries means 'build, erect, encourage, strengthen, or restore'. However, it seems to me that we have a perfectly good word in English in 'constructive', and this expresses these things admirably.

V24 'do not seek your own interest, but that of others.'

This is a colloquial phrase in Greek, which reads 'do not seek that of yourself, but that of the other.' Each Bible version attempts to convey this differently, but this translation attempts to keep any alterations to a minimum and retain the sense of the phrase.

V27 'If any unbeliever offers you an invitation and you want to accept'

This is close to the Greek text and is readily understandable. Many translations complicate the text by trying to explain it; hence, the NIV says; 'if some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go ...' The Greek makes no mention of a 'meal', and it is obviously what Paul is speaking about.

V29/30 'Why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience ³⁰ if I share with goodwill?'

You will see that I have allowed the sentence to carry over from verse 29 to verse 30. This is because the one question begins with 'why?' in verse 29 and the next question begins with 'why?' in verse 30, and most translations ignore this. For meaning, see study.

V33 'For myself ...'

Contrary to other translations, in which verse 32 simply flows on from verse 33 (for example, the NIV has 'even as I try to please everybody ...'), I believe this is the beginning of a different section of Paul's comments, being about himself and his own example, rather than other people in general. The Greek indicates a clear change of emphasis at this point, as in my translation.

'Do not seek your own interests, but those of others' (10:23-26)

It is easy for us to have a rather superior attitude towards Paul, and ignore what he says in this passage whilst failing to realise that the problems he faced in his day have come up in different forms repeatedly in the life of the church, even until today. The Corinthians felt that their freedom in Christ allowed them to do what they wanted, hence the 'motto' repeated a number of times in 1 Corinthians by Paul and hinted at in several of his discussions; 'everything is lawful' (6:12, 10:14). It was an understandable reaction to the Gospel of people who previously thought that God could be approached only through the rigours of the laws of Moses (if their past was Jewish) or through the rigours of some 'mystery religion' (if their past was Gentile)! However, people still respond like this to the Gospel, for example believing they have the right to organise the life of the church as they wish without regard for anyone else, just as the Corinthians did. Paul reminded his readers that such an attitude was selfish and did not help build up the whole body of Christ (10:23), and the same is true today when Christians attempt to follow their own agendas rather than serve each other. There is great wisdom in Paul's words; 'do not seek your own interests, but those of others' (10:24), and it is essential for the mission of the church. This is what Isaiah prophesied about the 'Servant' (Isaiah 42-53) and what Jesus did for us. Our responsibility, as Paul later concluded (11:1), must be to imitate Christ, the Servant, not to do what we feel at liberty to do.

Freedom in Christ, however, does have its rewards. Paul was reluctant to allow the Corinthians the luxury of using their freedom as a motto, but he did accept that a Christian was indeed set free by Christ (see Romans 3:21-26 and many other similar texts). Here in our passage, Paul consciously used a 'hot potato' issue as a starting place for making a number of points (see above), but he was happy to say that actually, how an animal was slaughtered was really of no ultimate significance (10:25). He did not have the moral issues we have today to do with the manner in which animals are farmed and slaughtered, so he rejoiced to quote

Psalm 24:1 'the earth is the Lord's and everything in it.' Moreover, for him, this was a statement of glorious freedom. In the Jewish tradition reflected in Genesis, everything in creation comes from God and is good; and men and women have been given authority to do with it as they please (1:28, 2:15), but responsibly and in accord with the will of the Creator. Because of this, a Christian was free from the constraints of popular beliefs about the slaughtering of animals.

'Do all for the glory of God' (10:27-31)

Paul's comment 'do all for the glory of God' (10:31) comes at the end of the most difficult and most complex part of this text. However, it is enormously helpful in providing a context for what Paul wanted to say about the mission of God's people. To begin with, the scene is set in verse 27 with the Christian being invited to share a meal in a Gentile or pagan setting, and although we see this as like a social matter, Paul did not. For him, interaction between the Christian and the non-Christian was a Gospel opportunity, not, as we might say, to 'shove it down people's throats', but to demonstrate the truth of Godly living and the value of Christian faith and community.

Paul did not imagine that a Christian would be invited by someone who was ignorant of the sensitive issues about the dedication of meat and meals. The assumption was that if the host said nothing about the origins of the food, then he would be acting in a manner sympathetic to sensibilities of the guest; in other words, he was receptive to Christianity. Why would I say this? Because the usual practice in those days was for incantations to be said over food and after food, whenever a formal meal (especially with a guest) was held. The absence of such pronouncements would be notable and send a clear signal. In such a setting there was no point, said Paul, of offending the receptive host by raising the issue of where the meat had come from (10:27); because the offense created might compromise the clear opportunity to witness to faith. However, if someone invited a Christian to a meal and then recited the usual incantations to the god to whom the meat was slaughtered, the signs were obvious. It was like a challenge to the Christian to accept the belief system of the host, and that should not be accepted, said Paul. With all due respect, in such circumstances, food should be declined (10:28).

When we read verses 29 and 30, the translations offer us a rather complex array of suggestions about what Paul says in response to this situation, but I have identified two questions, one of which spans the verse division between the two (see notes above). The first question is, 'Why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience, if I share with goodwill?' By means of this question, Paul indicates that when attending such a meal with goodwill, a Christian is under no obligation to submit freedom in Christ to the attitude (conscience) of the host, and can refuse to share a meal dedicated to a god who does not exist, with a clear conscience. Secondly, Paul asks 'Why should I be slandered because of that for which I have given thanks?' This question implies the Christian's refusal to eat the sacrificed food, saying 'it's not worth it', and rejecting the idea that a Christian could simply ignore the dedication of a meal to an idol or god. If a Christian tried to do this by silently blessing the food and eating it with everyone else at the meal, this would be regarded by some of those present as an acceptance of the god honoured at the meal. Such compliance might well draw complaints from other Christians and prevent any effective witness to the faith that might have been possible. It was just not worth the aggravation.

Paul envisages a Christian attempting to deal with the real situations with which they were faced in his day. His advice is to preserve the integrity of the Christian witness and example, but doing this in a way that was not arrogant or presumptive but polite and inoffensive. As we saw earlier, the priority was not civility or friendship, but the integrity of the Gospel message.

'Be imitators of me ...' (10:32-11:1).

It is very hard to maintain a firm stance on something and do this without giving offense, but Paul insists that this is what should be done. He knew that giving offense was often the result of a poor or negative attitude rather than a stance of principle, and this is why Paul spoke as he did; 'Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God' (10:32); in other words, he believed offense to be entirely counter-productive in any situation. The three categories of people he quoted covered all people, from his point of view. Paul's position was very logical, because he said at the beginning of this passage; 'do not seek you own interests, but those of others' (10:24), and such an attitude surely precludes any form of giving offense. We will only offend people when we have lost the ability to sympathise with them!

Paul lastly reiterated his own beliefs about how he presented himself when working in evangelism and mission. What he said in verse 33 about trying to please everyone was a combination of what he said earlier in this passage (10:24) about seeking the interests of others first, and what he said in 9:21-23; 'to those outside the law, I became as one outside the law ... so that I might by all means save some'. It is not popular advice today to suggest that we try to please not ourselves but everyone else for the sake of the Gospel. Indeed, people will often say 'you can't please everyone' as if it is a truism. But this is exactly what a Christian is called to do, according to Paul!

Finally, the comment in the first verse of chapter 11 surely completes this passage rather than introducing what comes next. Paul called on his followers as he did frequently (see above) to copy him 'inasmuch as' he copied Christ. The point of this verse is best made by the use of the word 'inasmuch' because it ensures we understand that Paul was not calling all Christians to be like him from a human point of view, but only in so far as he personally attempted to copy Christ. I am not sure that our proper response to this word is to suggest to people now that they should attempt to copy Paul. The reason Paul said this was because people always find it hard to understand what it means to be 'like' Christ, and they find it easier if they have a good example to see and copy; in this way, he asked them to copy him in order to copy Christ. For us, it is different, and we have other examples to see. All around us there are some good examples of godly people, and the wise Christian leader should both attempt to be one who can be 'copied' because they are perceived to be godly, and suggest others who live the life of Christ and are a good example of Christ-like living. Examples are important.

Discipleship

Application

In my experience as a Christian minister, I have had the privilege of working with students who have felt called to take the Gospel out to others. Naturally, many have felt called to take the Gospel to people like themselves, young people. In leading missions and helping such students to learn the lessons of what happens when you attempt to preach the Gospel today, there are many hard things to learn. For example, you cannot assume that people are receptive to the Gospel, and you can waste your time trying to get people to respond to what you have to say if they have already made up their minds that they will have nothing to do with Christian faith. There are many things to learn, but the advice here in this passage is as good as you can get. The three headings I have outlined above say a great deal, and although Paul deals with the issues in a strange way (from our perspective), his advice is sound. No missionary stands a chance of being effective for the Gospel if their main interest is themselves, their ego, their performance, or their reputation amongst a team, for example (see 10:24). The activity of mission and evangelism and the growth of the church is the task of God, and unless what is done is to His glory, and with that express purpose, we strive in vain (10:31).

Finally, the best way to help people understand how to do the work of mission is to give them good examples (11:1). It is possible, in my view, to read selectively through the biographies of great saints of God and missionaries whether of ancient past or recent past, and learn important cultural lessons about how to put Christ's call into effect. Some may regard me as being out of date when I say this, but I do not feel that autobiographical books describing the special ministries of people today will normally be much help. The passing of God's time has yet to tell us which leaders of today are doing a work that is effective, and we are mistaken if we think that large numbers at events, or large number of people at a church, mean that something is happening that God intends to be an example to the rest of the world.

As for the killing of animals, the issue Paul had may not be 'live' for us today, but I do believe that all God's people should be very careful about the issue of how animals are slaughtered for meat today. It seems to me that many are sacrificed on the altar of the 'gods of mammon', sometimes in quite appalling conditions, and it might be right according to what Paul says here, to say 'no' to some food products. I am not a vegetarian, but you do not have to be to understand these issues and act on them today. There may also be other issues worth pursuing where Christians need to be discerning about the 'gods' that lie behind them, even today.

Questions for groups

1. Discuss in your group how we can get to know the interests and needs of others better, for the sake of the Gospel.
2. How do we demonstrate to the world that we are wanting to give glory to God through what we do?
3. Who are those we should imitate today? Discuss in your group some of the people and personalities of Christian history who are a good example of faith.

Discipleship challenges

- *Try to find out what your own church does to spread the Gospel and 'grow' the church of God. Such a task may be hard or easy, but it is important. Each of us should be able to understand what the fellowship of our church does, and why, and we should all have some part in God's mission.*
 - *Pray for people you know who are not Christians, but are well disposed toward the faith and the church. Ask the Lord to help you and others determine how best to present the call of Christ to them in an inoffensive and effective way*
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Final Prayer

Heal our wounds of life, Lord Jesus and cleanse them at their source. Bless us, we pray, by turning our hearts from despair to hope, from unhappiness to joy, from brokenness to wholeness, and from darkness to light. This is Your glorious work, and we praise Your Holy Name Lord Jesus. AMEN
