

Freedom to Edify

Devotional Reading: James 1:19–27

Background Scripture: 1 Corinthians 8; 10:23–11:1

1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1

²³ “I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but not everything is constructive. ²⁴ No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.

²⁵ Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, ²⁶ for, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.”

²⁷ If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. ²⁸ But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience. ²⁹ I am referring to the other person’s conscience, not yours. For why is my freedom being judged by another’s conscience? ³⁰ If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?

³¹ So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. ³² Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—³³ even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. ^{11:1} Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.



Key Text

I have the right to do anything”—but not everything is constructive.—1 Corinthians 10:23b

God’s Law Is Love

Unit 3: Christ Frees, Law Enslaves

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the text quoted in [1 Corinthians 10:26](#).
2. Explain Paul’s understanding of the role of one’s conscience.
3. Make a plan to eliminate one personal practice that has a high chance causing a fellow Christian to stumble.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. No Place for Selfies
- B. Lesson Context: The City
- C. Lesson Context: The Church
- I. **Exercising Freedom (1 Corinthians 10:23–30)**
 - A. Self-Centered Behavior (v. 23)
Your Self-Imposed Limits?
 - B. Others-Centered Behavior (v. 24)
 - C. Principles Illustrated (vv. 25–30)
Conscientious Eating
- II. **Exercising Responsibility (1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1)**
 - A. To Glorify God (v. 31)
 - B. To Help Others (vv. 32–33)
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Conclusion

- A. “He Made Us Better”
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Adriatic *Ay-dree-at-ic.*

Aegean *A-jee-un.*

Cenchreae *Sen-kree-uh.*

isthmus *i-smes.*

Peloponnesian *Pell-uh-puh-ne-shen.*

Introduction

A. No Place for Selfies

By definition, a “selfie” is a photo that includes the person taking the picture. Selfies have become routine in modern life, but some claim that the first selfie was actually taken in the year 1839! That was the year when Robert Cornelius, an amateur chemist and photographer, took a picture of himself in the back of his family’s chandelier store. The word *selfie* was not used back then, not appearing in print until 2002. Gaining in popular usage, the word was chosen as “Word of the Year” by the Oxford English Dictionary in 2013.

Selfies flirt with the concept of self-centeredness since by nature they always include—and often focus on—the person taking the picture. And one does not need a smartphone camera to engage in self-centered behavior. That fact has been evident ever since the serpent successfully tempted Eve into thinking that eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would benefit her, putting her on the level of divinity ([Genesis 3:5](#)). Self-centered thinking and behavior inevitably result in sin ([James 1:14–15](#)).

When the apostle Paul describes characteristics of life in “the last days,” he includes among them the fact that people will be “lovers of themselves” ([2 Timothy 3:1–2](#)). Self-centeredness in the Corinthian church had resulted in the abuse of Christian freedom to the detriment of many. That was just one of many problems that Paul had to address in his first letter to that church—self-centeredness may even have been the basis of those other problems.

B. Lesson Context: The City

The city of Corinth was one of the great centers of commerce in the Mediterranean world of the first century AD. It was located near a narrow strip of land (an isthmus) that connected two major land masses. The city had a harbor for the Saronic Gulf and Aegean Sea to the east (at Cenchreae; see [Acts 18:18](#)) and another harbor for the Gulf of Corinth and Adriatic Sea to the west (at Lechaion). Maritime traffic between Asia and Rome had a choice of routes: either the dangerous and longer route around the Peloponnesian Peninsula or the shortcut of a four-mile limestone trackway between Corinth’s two harbors. Merchants choosing the latter would pay to have their ships hauled in their entirety from one harbor to the other on this road.

Like many seaport cities, Corinth was quite worldly and eclectic in nature. Pagan temples and the

idolatry they represented characterized the city (compare [Acts 17:16](#) regarding Athens, some 50 miles to the east). The contents of 1 Corinthians indicate that many in the church there had struggled to overcome practices of their former pagan lifestyles (see [1 Corinthians 6:9–11](#)).

C. Lesson Context: The Church

Having planted the church in Corinth on his second missionary journey (about AD 52; see [Acts 18:1–17](#)), Paul found it necessary to write to its members while he was in Ephesus on his third journey (AD 56; [Acts 19:1–20:38](#); [1 Corinthians 16:8, 19](#)). Paul was headed toward Corinth at the time ([Acts 20:1–3](#)), but Ephesus was several days away by sea travel, and the situation couldn't wait for a personal visit. Reports had come to Paul regarding needed correctives and clarifications in Corinth ([1 Corinthians 1:11](#); [7:1](#); see also [lesson 11](#)).

In [1 Corinthians 8](#), Paul had introduced the difficult issue (for that time) of eating meat that had been offered on pagan altars to idols. Meat that was left over from a pagan sacrifice, initiated by a worshipper who had brought the sacrificial animal, was at the disposal of the officiating priests. What they couldn't eat personally they would sell in the marketplace. Such meat would be less expensive than other meat because the pagan priests didn't have any investment to recover. Some Christians wondered about the propriety of buying such meat. In doing so, were they participating in pagan worship and thus compromising their witness for Christ?

In this regard, Paul emphasizes two points in [1 Corinthians 8](#). The first is the awareness that an idol is “nothing” ([8:4](#)); therefore those who are mature in knowledge on this point were free to eat such meat. Paul's second point counterbalances the first: “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak” ([8:9](#)). This stresses the importance of demonstrating concern for those having a weak conscience. Such a person might witness a fellow believer eating meat that had been offered to idols and thereby be drawn back into idolatry. Paul had more to say on this issue, and that is today's text.

I. Exercising Freedom

([1 Corinthians 10:23–30](#))

A. Self-Centered Behavior (v. 23)

23a. “I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial.

The two statements in this half-verse are almost an exact repeat in the Greek of what Paul previously stated in [1 Corinthians 6:12a](#). The statement *I have the right to do anything* appears to have been something of a proverb among the Corinthian believers. Perhaps they created it to justify certain behaviors in light of their freedom in Christ.

In response, Paul points out something the Corinthians apparently had not considered: the issue of what is legally permissible should be considered alongside the issue of what is *beneficial*. The word being translated occurs in contexts that address things that are advantageous (compare [Acts 20:20](#); [2 Corinthians 8:10](#); [12:1](#)).

23b. “I have the right to do anything”—but not everything is constructive.

The first of these two statements is almost identical to [1 Corinthians 6:12b](#). Again, Paul does not outright challenge the truthfulness of the statement. Instead, he sets alongside it another important consideration as he calls on the idea of being *constructive* (see also three uses in [1 Corinthians 14:4, 17](#), there translated as some form of the word *edify*).

As in [1 Corinthians 8](#), Christian freedom must not be exercised in a manner that considers only what is legally allowable (see the [Lesson Context](#)). There is a bigger issue at stake: the impact of one’s actions on others.

What Do You Think?

What is the first example that comes to mind of something you are free to do but do not do because it is not beneficial?

Digging Deeper

Are you more motivated by your own benefit or others? What difference might you see in your behavior if you considered the *opposite* first?

Your Self-Imposed Limits?

“What’s your verse?” my friend snarled. “Where in the Bible does it say that it’s wrong for me to sleep next to my girlfriend as long as we’re celibate?”

My wife and I had asked our guests to sleep in different beds because they were unmarried. Our guest room is right next to the bedroom of our young children, who were learning what to believe about relationships and marriage. (In retrospect, I could have made my expectation clear in advance, but I did not anticipate that they intended to share a bed.)

In response, I didn’t quote any Scripture to him, though we had a two-hour conversation and prayed together. It seemed to end well, but he grew angry again and left for a hotel at 1:00 a.m.

Later as I pondered his question “What’s your verse?”, [1 Corinthians 10:23](#) came to mind. Our hearts can go to great lengths to justify our actions in terms of the freedoms we enjoy in Christ. But to consider what effect our actions could have on others requires spiritual maturity.

Here’s a quick self-check: When an opportunity arises to do something, go somewhere, etc., is your primary thought about what you desire for yourself or about how your choice may influence others?

—N. G.

B. Others-Centered Behavior (v. 24)

24. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.

The principle that Paul sets forth here is entirely consistent with his instruction to other churches (examples: [Romans 15:2](#); [Philippians 2:4](#)). When members of the body of Christ adhere to this principle, no one needs to be preoccupied or worried about his or her *own good*. When each person seeks *the*

good of others, nobody is neglected.

What Do You Think?

What fears prevent you from considering others' benefit before your own?

Digging Deeper

What examples of God's care (from the Bible and your own experience) help you to overcome these fears?

C. Principles Illustrated (vv. 25–30)

25–26. Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.”

Paul continues to affirm Christian freedom regarding an issue of his day (see also [Lesson Context](#)). See the [Lesson Context](#) regarding how the meat being *sold* could be recognized as being associated with a pagan sacrifice.

As we read the two verses before us, we may be inclined to think in terms of the clean/unclean issue regarding food in [Mark 7:19](#) and [Acts 10:15](#) as setting aside the dietary restrictions of [Leviticus 11](#) (compare [Romans 14:14](#)). But that’s not the point here. Rather, Paul is reaffirming the reality of a Christian’s freedom to buy and *eat* marketplace food, regardless of its association with paganism. [Psalm 24:1](#) is quoted in support of this reality.

27. If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience.

Paul then sets forth a hypothetical scenario in which an unbeliever invites a Christian *to a meal*. Whether such a meal takes place “in an idol’s temple” ([1 Corinthians 8:10](#)) or elsewhere isn’t Paul’s stress at the moment. Rather, he is stressing that this could be considered an “open door” that presents an opportunity to share the gospel. This may be compared to the times when Jesus was invited to dine with those considered “sinners” ([Luke 5:29–30](#)). Again, one’s freedom in Christ allows eating *whatever is put before* him or her.

Conscientious Eating

“It’s called *taulo*,” my host said as he handed me a plate of noodle-like medallions. “From cow intestines.”

I took the plate, thanked him, and sat in the shade of a tree. The medallions were chewy and fibrous, not unlike the texture of a towel. But I ate them without offending my host in southeast Tanzania. I had a harder time with pots of okra slime in North Africa. Even today I gag at the memory of the taste and texture.

Let’s make sure, however, that we distinguish matters of *conscience* from matters of *taste*. The above two foods weren’t to my taste, but I ate them anyway to avoid insulting my hosts. What Paul is talking about, however, is what should not be allowed to bother our moral center in Christ. If we

allow something to bother us that should not be considered immoral, then we risk losing a chance for a gospel-interaction with unbelievers.

There are plenty of culture-specific ideas “out there” that are foreign to both you and me. The question is, Which ones are bothersome to my conscience, but not to God?

—N. G.

28–29a. But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience. I am referring to the other person’s conscience, not yours.

Paul briefly departs from his main line of thought to deal with a related issue: another person’s *conscience*. Suppose the host at a meal informed his Christian guest that the meat being served had been part of a pagan sacrificial offering. In that case, the believer is to refrain from eating. Given the host’s statement, to eat of this meat could be seen by the host as an acknowledgement of the idol by the Christian. Thus the host is potentially led astray (see especially [1 Corinthians 8:7](#)).



Visual for [Lesson 13](#). Use this visual as a jumping off point to discuss the questions associated with verses [28–29a](#).

Older editions of the Bible also have the phrase “for the earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness

thereof” (KJV), which is from [Psalm 24:1](#). The earliest manuscripts of the New Testament do not include this phrase in verse 28. But since there is no doubt that it is indeed quoted at [1 Corinthians 10:26](#), above, we are certain it is part of Paul’s thought.

What Do You Think?

In what circumstances do you defer to another person’s sense of conscience?

Digging Deeper

What parameters help you determine whether to defer to another or instead to defend your freedom to choose differently?

29b–30. For why is my freedom being 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?

Sorting out the complexities of Paul’s statements is a matter of some debate among many students. One proposal is that Paul is now resuming his main line of thought after the parenthetical verse-and-a-half just considered. In so doing, the apostle restates his freedom to eat his own choice of food and not be paranoid about what others think. Thus there’s a certain tension between freedom and restraint. We saw this tension earlier in the first verse of this lesson ([1 Corinthians 10:23](#)). At the point of [10:29](#), where we are now, Paul seems to be leaning a bit more toward the *freedom* side of the two actions because of freedom’s evangelistic potential.

II. Exercising Responsibility ([1 Corinthians 10:31–33–11:1](#))

A. To Glorify God (v. 31)

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

Our last section maintains the tension between freedom and restraint. But now a vital context is presented: that of doing *all for the glory of God*. Christians today are rarely, if ever, faced with the issue of eating meat offered to idols. But there are modern parallels. And no matter what difficult (and easy) choices we face, we must honor this imperative.

The privilege and duty of all creation to glorify God is a theme that permeates Scripture (examples: [Psalm 19:1–6](#); [Romans 11:36](#); [2 Corinthians 1:20](#); [4:15](#)). This requirement transcends all times, places, and cultures. Sharing meals was one way the first-century believers brought glory to God ([Acts 2:42](#); contrast [1 Corinthians 11:20–22](#)), and it can be so today as well. Paradoxically, we are the freest when we think least of ourselves in our desire to please the one who is our Creator, Ruler, and Redeemer ([1 Thessalonians 4:1](#); [Hebrews 11:6](#)). In so doing, we follow the example of Jesus who “did not please himself” ([Romans 15:3](#)), but who humbled himself in an unparalleled way ([Philippians 2:5–8, 11](#)).

What Do You Think?

How can your mealtimes remind you to give glory to God in *all* situations?

Digging Deeper

How can other mundane tasks become reminders to glorify God?

B. To Help Others (vv. 32–33)

32a. Do not cause anyone to stumble,

Here we see another vital imperative regarding conduct. In contrast to the positive imperative of the previous verse, this one is stated as a negative—what not to do.

To grasp the full meaning, we must consider the nature of the phrase *do not cause anyone to stumble*. The Greek word being translated is rarely found in literature of the era. It occurs in the New Testament also in [Acts 24:16](#) and [Philippians 1:10](#). In all cases the foundational idea is that of neither causing offense (in terms of not causing to stumble) nor taking offense (meaning to have a clear conscience). A closely related word, spelled nearly the same, is found in [John 11:9, 10](#); [Romans 9:32; 14:21](#); [2 Corinthians 6:3](#); and [1 Peter 2:8](#). All these occurrences refer to stumbling in a spiritual sense. These passages as seen in their respective contexts indicate that the offense is not to be understood as merely an insult or affront; Paul uses different words for that action.

32b–33. whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.

The imperative is all-inclusive, and the reason is clear: Paul wants to be able to have the widest hearing possible for the gospel. Given his desire that everyone—Jew and Gentile alike—*be saved*, Paul states later in this letter that “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” ([1 Corinthians 9:22](#)). Were he to focus on his *own good*, he would be no better than the false prophets of the day. He was determined not to be a stumbling block ([2 Corinthians 6:3](#)). This is what he means by not seeking his own profit ([Romans 14:1–7](#); [1 Corinthians 8:13](#)).

Paul points to himself as an example of the kind of conduct he desired the Corinthians to imitate. This was not egotism on his part, simply an honest, straightforward assessment of the kind of man he was. Elsewhere he refers to himself as having served the Lord “with great humility” ([Acts 20:19](#)). A cynic would characterize that self-assessment as Paul’s having developed a sense of humility he could be proud of. But Paul’s actions match his words (next verse).

C. To Follow Jesus (11:1)

1. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

Paul never desired to build a following for himself, as he made clear at the beginning of this epistle ([1 Corinthians 1:12–17](#)). He was interested only in building disciples of Jesus—people who shared his passion for knowing Jesus and proclaiming his gospel of grace to others. He lived out the lifestyle he was encouraging his readers to follow: a life that glorified God in every way possible, including the need to edify others. To do that is to embrace the freedom that Jesus promised to all who choose to follow him ([John 8:36](#); [Romans 8:21](#)).

What Do You Think?

Who is the most Christlike role model in your life? What do you see in that person that reminds you of Jesus?

Digging Deeper

How can you follow his or her example even if that role model is not present with you?

Conclusion

A. “He Made Us Better”

A certain Christian publication featured a series of tributes to a Christian leader who had gone to be with the Lord. That this man’s life and ministry had an impact on countless numbers of people was clear from the words written about him. Among the tributes included was one statement that caught my attention: “He made us better.”

To make others better is part of what it means to edify others—the key word in our lesson title. Sadly, we are surrounded by influences that make us anything but better. The behavior on display in media of many kinds often features and even glorifies the worst in human conduct. These won’t make us better except possibly as cautionary tales. As followers of Jesus in a fallen world, we will not win every person with whom we share our faith in Jesus. But we can, as salt and light, seek to make the people we encounter better, or at least add some brightness to their lives, because we brought something of the spirit and character of Jesus into their lives.

Paul’s primary concern in our lesson text is making the edification of others a priority within the body of Christ. The example he gives of eating meat offered to idols is not an issue for most believers today. Modern equivalents might be those places and things that observers come to associate with us when they see us—places and things that work against holiness. Do we have Christian freedom to attend movies that are rated other than “G”? Yes, indeed. But how will doing so affect the openness to receive the gospel of those who see us at such movies?

This is, of course, an all-the-time challenge. It involves our lives out in the public arena, which must be lived with a sense of duty both to glorify God and as a witness to others (believers and unbelievers). It involves the kind of freedom that is anchored in personal holiness (1 Peter 1:15–16), without legalism or hypocrisy (Matthew 23:16–26). It involves foregoing our “rights,” as Paul did (1 Corinthians 8:9; 9:15, 18), for the good of others.

Think of the person who introduced you to Christ. That person wasn’t perfect, and neither will you be. But that doesn’t mean the standard of Matthew 5:48 should be lowered! Resolve to be like the one above who “made us better” as if eternal destinies are at stake—because they are!

As we ponder these things in our hearts, may it be said of us as Paul said of himself near the close of his life, “I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory” (2 Timothy 2:10).

B. Prayer

Father, thank you for the freedom in Jesus that liberates people from slavery to sin. In this world where freedom is often misunderstood and abused, help us to represent our freedom in Jesus in a way that honors you and edifies others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

To edify others is one way to glorify God.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Have volunteers share about a time they participated in an activity simply because they could do so. This could be as small as running a 5k or as complicated as taking an extended vacation across the world. Ask them to reflect on what impact—good, bad, or indifferent—their actions had on others, including family, friends, strangers, etc.

Continue by writing the headers *Lawful* and *Builds Up* on the board and discussing the similarities and differences between actions in these two lists. Ask: In valuing personal freedoms, how are we challenged to overemphasize that which is lawful for the individual but perhaps harmful to ourselves or others? If needed, have a personal example ready to start the conversation. Encourage learners to think about their own challenges. Talk about how that relates to the heading on the board.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Just Because You Can” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated. After time is called, allow time for group discussion.

Explain that today's Bible study examines how Paul's message to the Corinthians roots this message in our faith, including our call to be salt and light to others.

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read [1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1](#) out loud. Divide the class in half. Distribute hand-outs (you create) of these questions for in-group discussion: 1—How does Paul contrast self-centeredness with other-centered thinking ([1 Corinthians 10:23–24](#))? 2—How can one create a balance between exercising one's freedom in Christ and not hindering another person's growth in Christ?

Ask one half of the class to research the morality of Corinth and its inhabitants at the time of Paul.

Ask the other half to research the Corinthians' practice of selling meat in the open market that came from animals sacrificed in pagan temples. Supplement their research with information from the lesson commentary. Then invite someone to read aloud [1 Corinthians 10:25–30](#). Lead a discussion to answer these questions: 1—Why was this meat practice a problem for some Christians and not for others? 2—What would have been the telltale signs of crossing from a celebratory feast into a gluttonous one?

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “How Shall We Act?” exercise on the activity page. Have learners work in pairs or groups of three to complete as indicated.

Ask a volunteer to read [1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1](#). Discuss what it means to do whatever you do to the glory of God. Have learners give examples from the Bible of glorifying God.

Into Life

Draw parallels between first-century Corinth and our culture today. Brainstorm together a list of social practices that may cause others to stumble or question either your faith or their own. If applicable, refer to the list created at the beginning of the lesson. Be careful that this doesn't become a discussion of what is right or wrong.

Distribute note cards and pens to participants. Allow a minute for learners to write down a personal practice that causes fellow Christians to stumble or question their faith. Then allow a few minutes for participants to write a plan to stop that practice.

Close with a prayer time asking for God's guidance in implementing those plans. Include prayers for understanding and tolerance when encountering others who do not always share their convictions about what is beneficial in the Christian life.