

Christian Liberty, Part 21

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Now may I encourage you to turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians and chapter 9. And follow, please, as I read that entire chapter twenty-seven verses, and then over to chapter 10 and verse 32 to verse 1 of chapter 11--just those several verses at the end of chapter ten.

"Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my work in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, yet at least to you I am. For the seal of my apostleship are you in the Lord. My defense to them that examine me is this. Have we no right to eat and to drink [that is, to eat and drink all foods, all beverages, which are clean in Christ]? Have we no right to lead about a wife that is a believer, even as the rest of the apostles and the brethren of the Lord and Cephas? Or I only and Barnabas, have we not a right to forbear working? What soldier ever served at his own charges? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat the fruit thereof? Or who feeds a flock and does not eat the milk of the flock? Do I speak these things after the manner of men, or does not the law say the same? For it is written in the law of Moses, You shall not muzzle the ox when he treads out the corn. Is it for the oxen that God cares, or does He say it assuredly for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written, because he that plows ought to plow in hope, and he that threshes to thresh in hope of partaking. If we sowed unto you spiritual things, is it a great matter if we shall reap your carnal things? If others partake of this right over you, do not we yet more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right. but we bear all things that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that they that minister about sacred things eat of the things of the temple, and they that wait upon the altar have their portion with the altar? Even so did the Lord ordain that they that proclaim the gospel should live of the gospel. But I have used none of these things. And I do not write these things that it may be so done in my case, for it were good for me rather to die than any man should make my glorying void. For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of, for necessity is laid upon me, for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward. But if not of my own will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me. What then is my reward? That when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel without charge, so as not to use to the full my right in the gospel. For though I was free from all men, I brought myself under bondage to all, that I might gain the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain Jews. To them that are under the law as under the law, not being myself under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law. To them that are without law as without law, not being without law to God, but under law to Christ, that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might gain the weak, I am become all things to all men that I may by all means save some. And I do all

things for the gospel's sake that I may be a joint partaker thereof. Do you not know that they who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Even so run that you may attain. And every man that strives in the games exercises self-control in all things. Now they do it to receive a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run not as uncertainly, so fight I as not beating the air, but I buffet my body and bring it into bondage, lest by any means after I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected. (10:32) Give no occasion of stumbling either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, even as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, even as I am also of Christ."

Let's pray and ask God's help as we come to the ministry of the Word.

Our Father, we pause again to seek You, confident You are not weary of our coming when we come out of a felt sense of our need. And You know the need of Your servant. You know the need of everyone seated in this place. And so we plead that You will come to us in our need. So minister to us that each of us will know that the Word has come to us not in word only. O God, deliver us from merely trafficking in verbal sounds. But may it come in power in the Holy Spirit in much conviction. God, do things for us. That very Word by which You created the worlds--O Lord, may that mighty, creative Word be operative in our midst today. We plead in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now those of you who love to read--and I am very thankful we do have many among you who are readers, men and women, boys and girls, who love to read. So for those of you who love to read and who are appreciative of a good book, you will understand and immediately relate to what I am about to say, and it is this: the completion of a good book brings both a sense of satisfaction mingled with a sense of sadness. You relate to that? When you've come to the end of a good read, there is a sense of satisfaction and a sense of sadness. Satisfaction because you have finished that particular literary journey, and you are the better for having made that journey with the author. Sadness because the pleasure, the enrichment, and the challenges of that journey, for at least the immediate impression of it, are all over.

Well, in a similar way, the completion of a fruitful series of studies in the Word of God is marked in the heart of a preacher with a sense of satisfaction and sadness, and in the hearts of appreciative people the same mingled feeling is present. Well, today marks the end of our journey along the biblical path entitled, "A Fresh Look at the Biblical Doctrine of Christian Liberty". And for those visiting with us who have not made the journey with us, that journey is embalmed in the impressions made on CDs, cassette tapes, and however it's made on the Internet. And we would urge you, if your interest is tweaked, to obtain the whole series by one of those means.

And in our journey, there have been basically five posts along the way by which we've marked that journey. First of all, we dealt with the reality and nature of our bondage in Adam. Secondly, the reality and nature of our freedom and liberty in

Christ. Thirdly, the goal of our liberty. In the fourth place, the two great threats to our liberty. And then a good part of the journey under heading number five, our liberty in relationship to those things neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God.

And as we come this morning to the final message in this series of studies, We will do so by considering together a biblical and practical response to two legitimate questions. As I have reflected on the material we've considered together, I've tried to imagine what would happen were I to take an adult class and just open it up for questions arising from this series of studies on the subject of Christian liberty. And while, of course, I cannot predict with accuracy all of the questions that would be raised, I'm quite confident that these two questions, in one form or another, would be raised by this congregation. Of the two questions, the first is a more intellectual, academic question, but very legitimate, and the second is eminently pastoral and practical. The first I will raise and respond to in a relatively brief amount of time, and the majority of our time will be taken up with the second question.

Question number one that I'm quite confident someone among you would raise is this: "Why has Pastor Martin not incorporated into this series of studies more of the truths contained in 1 Corinthians chapters 8, 9, and 10?" I'm quite confident that someone would raise that question. In previous preaching on the subject of Christian liberty, I have treated 1 Corinthians 8, 9, and 10 as parallel passages to Romans 14 through 15 and verse 7, especially when addressing matters neither forbidden nor commanded in the Word of God. And when we read those two sections of Scripture, the Corinthian section, the Roman section, we find many similar words and phrases and similar apostolic counsels. However, the title of this present series has been "A Fresh Look at the Doctrine of Christian Liberty". And involved in that fresh look was my going back to the Corinthians and Romans passages, hopefully with fresh eyes to look upon those passages and to receive fresh insight to them. And as I did so, I came more and more to the conviction that, though there are indeed some parallels in terms of the counsels that Paul gives and some of the terminology that he uses that they are not, strictly speaking, parallel passages, the first Corinthians section is dealing very specifically with a very well-defined issue.

It's announced in the opening verse of chapter 8. Look at it with me: "Now concerning things sacrificed to idols..." Here in this section of the letter where Paul is taking up issues concerning which the Corinthians had written him. He now is taking up the subject of things sacrificed to idols. The Romans 14-15:7 passage does not have the word "idol" or any of its familiar words at all. Whereas here in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, the root word for idol has at least five different usages: idolater, things sacrificed to idols, etc. And there are no fewer than twelve usages of words that have as their root the word "idol". So the specific, focused, narrow concern of 1 Corinthians chapter 8 in particular, and then large sections of chapter 10, is not the more general question of things neither commanded nor forbidden, such as food and days and wine that we found in the Romans passage, but the whole question of food offered to idols.

And as I studied the passage and sought fresh light from some of the newer commentators, or one new commentator in particular, I was persuaded that my previous treatment of those passages, though not heretical or marked by serious error so that I'm tempted to pull the tapes--no--the position and the perspectives that I brought to bear in the handling of those passages are shared in many of the responsible commentators. However, there is a lack of precision that would not allow me to use these passages as parallel passages to the Romans 14 and 15 passage. So for any who have raised the question, and if you didn't, I've raised it for you: why did I not use more of those materials? The answer is, I could not do so with a good conscience because I've come to the persuasion that the issues dealt with are of a very distinct and more narrow focus. Now if the Lord spares me and it seems appropriate, perhaps sometime in the future, it will be my privilege to expound those chapters in your hearing. But for now, they must rest and await another time. That's question number one. That was the easy one. Let me say in passing, for any of you who are serious students and would like to look into this more before I get around to preach on it, I commend to you the commentary by David Garland, which is in the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series, pages 350 to 362. And hopefully we'll get a copy of that in the church library. We do carry it in our bookstore.

Now then we come to question two, and this will take up the bulk of our time this morning. And this is intensely pastoral and practical. And the question is this: while remembering our mutual responsibilities to one another as the weak and the strong, are there other major concerns which ought prayerfully and constantly to be considered before we exercise our Christian liberty in any given area of our lives? More simply stated, is the bridle upon the exercise of our liberty composed of more than the stuff of the claims of the weaker brother? We saw in our study of Romans 14 through 15, that there are tremendous claims laid upon the strong in the exercise of their liberty when they are in the presence of weaker brethren.

Now my question is this: are there any other issues that ought to influence both weak and strong in the exercise of our Christian liberty? Are there other factors other than asking the question, "Am I in the presence of a weak brother a strong brother? Going to Romans 14, this is what I should do; this is what I should not do." Are there any other major concerns according to the Scriptures that we as God's people are responsible prayerfully and constantly to keep in mind before we exercise our Christian liberty, whatever it may be, in any area of our lives, remembering that fundamental principle that my liberty is an internal issue before God? It has to do with my heart in the presence of God with respect to things about me. The exercise of my liberty is an external matter dealing with deeds and acts before men. And while I must never give up the essence of my liberty (it is blood-bought liberty, and I am to cling tenaciously to it--"Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made you free"), I must nonetheless be sensitive to the fact that there will be many circumstances, both personally and relationally, which demand that I restrain the exercise of my liberty. And there are at least three major concerns which ought constantly and prayerfully to

be present in every child of God when contemplating the exercise of his Christian liberty.

Concern number one is this: my commitment to my own spiritual safety and perseverance in holiness will demand, not suggest, specific restraints upon the exercise of some of my liberties in Christ. Every child of God is called to a life of actively pursuing universal holiness. I hope none of you sitting here questions that statement. Every true child of God is to be committed consciously to pursue a life of universal holiness. Hebrews 12:14: "Follow after peace with all men and the holiness without which no man shall see the Lord." 1 Peter chapter 1: "You shall be holy in all manner of living for I am holy." This is the clear command of God. Every true child of God is committed to his own perseverance, believing that God in Christ is preserving me and that He who has begun a good work in me will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ. I am equally persuaded that I am consciously and deliberately to persevere in the path of faith and obedience. Matthew 24 in verse 13: "He that endures to the end, the same shall be saved." "Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). Now then, assuming, assuming you understand those things, your commitment, my commitment to my own spiritual safety and perseverance in holiness, will demand specific restraints upon the exercise of some of my liberties, because this pursuit of holiness, this determination to persevere in the way of faith and obedience, is in a context of real and constant danger.

I love that edition of Pilgrim's Progress, that pictorial edition for children that is entitled Dangerous Journey. If you're a Christian, you have embarked upon a dangerous journey. There is danger from a devious and a determined devil. He is devious (Ephesians 6:11). Paul speaks of the wiles of the devil, and he is determined. 1 Peter 5:8: "Be sober, be watchful, your adversary the devil as a roaring lion walks about seeking whom he may [literally gulp down]." There is a devious and determined devil.

There is a seductive and a pressuring world, a world that Paul describes in Romans 12: "Do not be conformed to this world." J.B. Paraphrased (well-known): "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold." This world system, the system of men and things devoid of the Spirit of God, committed to an anti-God perspective in all of life apart from those pockets of God's common grace, is both seductive and constantly pressuring us to conform to its contours.

Then we have an aggressive, indwelling principle of remaining sin, or what in some context is called the flesh. Galatians 5:17: "The flesh lusts against the spirit, the spirit against the flesh. And these two are contrary, the one to the other, so that you may not do the things that you would." The language of our Lord Jesus: "Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Now in the light of these dangers, I will discover as a Christian that there are certain liberties, things that are not forbidden in the Word of God. But if I indulge in them, they leave me vulnerable to actual sin. Hence, I must restrain the exercise of my

liberties with respect to those activities for my own safety and for my own perseverance in holiness.

The sin is not in the thing. The sin is in me. The sin comes when, through the devious, determined activity of the devil, what is good in itself becomes the occasion of sin to me through the seductive pressure of the world and from the aggressive activity of my indwelling sin or my flesh. And therefore, if I'm dead in earnest about my own spiritual safety and persevering in the way of holiness and obedience, there are things that I am free to do that I will not, I cannot do.

It has nothing to do with the weaker brother. It has to do with the claims of a commitment to a life of universal holiness and to perseverance. For example--I'm going to get specific. The minute I do, some of you think I'm making rules. I'm not making rules. I'm simply giving examples of what may be the things for some of you. Follow? What may be--Internet access! It is drawing down into a vortex of bondage into sensuality and all forms of wickedness, men and women by the millions. And there are some of you sitting here who know that it is a source of temptation for you that hitherto you have not been able to overcome with any degree of consistency. It is a source of constant pull that is distracting to you, just the fact that you know you're a few clicks away from that which is unclean and that which is dishonoring to God, or a few clicks away from wasting time in the pursuit of something that for some reason or another is of personal interest to you, and the fact that you know you can have almost limitless access to information about it, you waste precious time.

My friend, get rid of it! Stop coming back in your devotions and whining and saying, "Oh Lord, I fell again. Oh Lord, I fell again. Oh Lord, forgive me." Stop the nonsense! In God's name, stop it! Rear back on your hind legs and say, I'm so free in Christ, I can get rid of it. That's how free I am. I have no moral duty to have access to it. Some of you have a moral duty. It's your job, and you must have access to it. Therefore, you can trust God to give you grace, and if you can't, you need to change your job. Change it! My friend, getting to heaven in the way of holiness is not optional. The job you've got may be. You may have full liberty in Christ.

I think of some of you young people. You are absolute fools to sit down with unstructured time, unmonitored access to the Internet. You're fools. Well, I'm free to do it. Yeah, you're free to destroy yourself, bloody your conscience, ensnare yourself in some of the most vicious, crippling bondage known to man. Now, am I saying if you've got access to the Internet, I'm judging you? No. God knows I'm not. But I'm asking you to judge yourself, and judge yourself honestly. Be honest! How many weeks, how many months has it been that you've been able to walk away from your computer with a clean conscience? Get honest! Stop playing head games! Get honest! Get honest. Get honest.

What about your movies? "Oh, I have Christian liberty to watch my movies, go to the movie theater, go to Blockbuster, rent a film or two." Yes, you do have that liberty. Nobody upon coming into the membership of this church is asked to take a vow, "I'll

never watch anything that comes out of Hollywood. I won't do it." But you need to get honest. What are you watching under the guise of your liberty? And you do have liberty? You don't have liberty to wallow in filth. But your liberty may touch things that for one person is not an occasion of stumbling, but for you, the way God's put you together, the mental images that flash for only thirty seconds are with you for a lifetime. For you, for you, safety. Perseverance may mean making something pretty close to a vow that it's off limits for you.

Alcoholic beverages. I'm going to say something to you young people. Even the world acknowledges that alcohol is a potent and dangerous thing. You've got to be twenty-one before you can touch it. The Bible that says in Psalm 104, "[One of God's great gifts is] wine that makes glad the heart of man." It says in Proverbs, "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, whosoever reels thereby is not wise." May I say to you, young adults, you have no moral necessity to touch any alcohol. May I urge you to wait until you are at least thirty and your character is well established and proven patterns of self-control are embedded in your soul and mark your life; then prayerfully consider whether or not you ought moderately to imbibe. You've got a history in your family of alcoholics? There is some clear evidence. There is a genetic predisposition. You may have it. You don't need the glass of wine. You don't need the glass of beer. Why toy? Show that you're so free in Christ that you can say, "There's so many dangers that I can't control. This one I can for me. I'll be a teetotaler, not because the evil is in the alcohol, but the potential for the evil is in me. And I'm in a place of danger."

When I see the doctrine of Christian liberty in the rising generation of you young adults being used for all kinds of carelessness in the Christian life, it disturbs me and it scares me. I'm speaking out of my heart to you. Oh yeah, you'll be called a legalist. They'll call you a legalist. Just smile at them and say "No, I'm free in Christ, so free that I can say no for the good of my soul. Rejoice with me, that I'm that free."

Years ago, many years ago, decades ago, I used to have a subscription to Time magazine, long before it was acceptable to have bared flesh in the so-called proper news magazine. But I never looked at my Time magazine until my wife went through and censored it. And a preacher heard about that and word got back to him. You know what he said about me? He said that man's sick. I'm sick because I don't want one image impinging on the walls of my mind that this devious, determined devil and my active, indwelling sin could seize upon. There's already enough there for them to work with. I don't want to give them any more.

I ask every professing Christian in this place this morning, is your commitment to your spiritual safety and your perseverance in holiness such that you willingly forego the exercise of personal liberties in pursuit of that safety and that perseverance? Or is your passion to indulge every pursuit in any and everything but what is clearly forbidden, even when it puts you in danger of sinning and in danger of apostatizing? If you are truly free in Christ, you are free from the addiction to place yourself in a willing posture of unnecessary exposure to sin. You are free to deny yourself your

liberties which leave you vulnerable to sin. And if you can't, and if you won't, it's because you're a slave. And there is no other answer.

So in answer to the question is the bridal upon our liberty in its exercise composed of anything more than the stuff of the responsibilities to the weaker brother? I would answer that the Bible says in a resounding yes there is. And first of all, it is the commitment of a true Christian to pursue a path of spiritual safety in a dangerous world and to pursue his perseverance.

Concern number two, and it overlaps some, and I struggled originally, had it amalgamated with number one, and I said, no, I've got to separate it. And I'm fully aware that it's a distinction at some points without a difference, which any rhetorician would tell you, don't make any distinction without a difference. Well, I say to the rhetorician, you try to handle this thing and you'll be sympathetic to me and with me. And it is this: my commitment to my own spiritual health and growth in grace will demand specific restraints upon the exercise of some of my liberties.

Now again, as with our commitment to perseverance, the Bible is clear that you and I are responsible to maintain spiritual health. There's that very searching exhortation in Revelation chapter 3, in the message of the risen Christ to a church that has a reputation that far exceeds its present spiritual condition. And this is what the Lord Jesus says to the church of Sardis (verse 2): "Be watchful. Establish the things that remain which were ready to die. For I have found no works of yours perfected, complete before my God. Remember how you've received and did hear and keep it and repent!"

Here the Lord's call to repentance focuses upon coming back into a state of vigorous spiritual health: "Be watchful. Establish the things that remain which were ready to die." There is spiritual sickness which if not arrested will result in death. And He calls upon His people in a responsible way to come back into a condition of spiritual health and vigor. You remember John's third letter? He says, "I will that you be in health and prosper even as your soul prospers." There's such a thing as a prospering soul, or in the language of 2 Peter 3 (and it's a present imperative), "But grow in grace and in knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

You've got a child that's concerned that he or she is not up to the means in terms of height and weight and stature of his or her peers, and you turn to that child and say, "Now stop this nonsense. Grow." Give them an imperative as a parent: "Grow or else." It doesn't work. They don't have the means. But God says to us, His children, "Grow" in an imperative because He's put the means in our hands by which we can grow and develop spiritual stature and strength.

And what are the means provided to attain these goals? Well, they are negative and positive, just as with physical growth in health. If you're going to be healthy and if you're going to grow, you must refuse to ingest anything that contributes to making you weak and sickly. There's the negative. And that's exactly what Peter says in 1 Peter 2:11. He says, "As pilgrims and sojourners abstain from fleshly lusts which war

against the soul." There are things that may not be sinful in themselves, but for us they are not nourishing. They have a negative influence upon our spiritual vigor. They dampen our ardor in prayer. They make Christ distant. They make desire to be with His people to wane and to slacken. And we must identify those things, and we may look at them in themselves, and they may be a matter of Christian liberty. It may not be one of the things listed when Paul says, put to death therefore your members which are upon the earth, fornication, uncleanness, wrath. No, it may not be something clearly, specifically forbidden, but for us it acts as a form of slow poison upon the system. And we've got to look at it and say, yes, I have liberty in Christ to do that thing, to go to that place, to watch that, to hear that, to engage in that. But I find that the effect of it is negative upon the vigor of my spiritual health. It stunts my growth. Therefore, for me, for me, my liberty in Christ is to say no to it.

And the positive side is, there must be a disciplined assimilation of the things appointed by God for spiritual health and growth. And you know what they are? The prayerful, reflective reading of our Bibles, time to be alone with God, establishing and nurturing spiritually-minded friendships that elevate and challenge us and cause us when we come away from them to say, "Oh God, I want to grow like John is growing. I want to grow like Mary's growing. Lord, thank you for John. His presence always is a prod to me to be more serious about my devotional life. Mary's presence is always a prod to me that I might be more earnest and consistent in my prayers."

Now again, I'm going to get specific. I think we would all put the arrival of a daily newspaper at our doorstep in the area of Christian liberty. Anyone comes to me and says, "Pastor, you elders ought to get on so-and-so. You know they've got a paper coming to their doorstep everyday." We'd say, "Sorry, we've got nothing to say to them. That's their liberty." But it may not be in the best interest of your spiritual health. You may find that that newspaper because you've got an interest in the world in which you live, it's difficult to let it sit there until you've had meaningful time with God. And you've tried in the past, but you don't have the strength to just let it lie there rolled up in the plastic wrapper until evening when there may be time or may not be time. Getting to your newspaper is not priority number one in your life, but meeting with God in the secret place is. Feeding on His Word, having communion with Him in the secret place, that's the non-negotiable priority. So for you, newspapers gotta go. That's a liberty that you have got to relinquish for the health of your soul, for the vigor of your spiritual growth.

For others of you, it's the ads. You never know on any given day in the Star-Ledger, in the New York Times, the two papers I get on a Monday. You never know when you're going to be smacked with stuff that 20 years ago you could only get in pornographic magazines. There it is. You turn the page and you're smacked with semi-bare breast and seductively attired women. There it is. If that's a stumbling block to you, you cannot as quickly as it registers what it is turn it over, but you find yourself ogling and looking the second time, get rid of the paper! Poison to your soul. So what? You're a little bit ignorant of current events. Still going to get to heaven

healthy. And the Lord won't say, shame on you, you got here. You weren't quite on the cutting edge of all the current events. The Lord won't scold you, I assure you.

What about the TV? Dulls your appetite for prayer, dulls your appetite for seeking God, dulls your appetite for doing good reading. It's so much easier to thread images through your eyes than to sit down and bend your mind to a good book that's going to challenge you and stir you. Or time that you know you ought to spend with that son or that daughter in entering into their life. Pressures of work and keeping up the house and keeping the yard half decent and all the rest. Got to grab blocks of time by the forelock if you're going to have meaningful interaction with your children and the TV constantly stands as your rival. My friend, get rid of it. If the only way you can discipline is get rid, get rid of it.

For some of you, it's that thing. You know what this symbol is, don't you? Everybody in our society goes around with a phone stuck in his ear. In the car, on the street, in the shop, in the home--phone stuck in the ear. My friend, you can't have disciplined communion with God and disciplined, governed use of your tongue if you just use the phone as an unrestrained, undisciplined blabberbox. "In the multitude of words, there lacks not sin." That's what my Bible says. My Bible says, "If anyone does not sin with his mouth, that's the perfect man." We've got to start taking this stuff seriously, folks. Am I at liberty to have a cell phone? Yeah, you're at liberty. That's your liberty. But if your liberty is impeding your growth and eroding vigorous spiritual health, then you need to say, "No! I am free enough in Christ to say no."

So I ask you, each professing Christian, is it your commitment to nurture your own spiritual health and your growth in grace? A commitment serious enough that you are willing to forego lawful liberties in pursuit of them? If not, why not? Is your Savior glorified by your chronic, sickly spiritual state and by your stunted growth? Jesus said, and I read it this morning in my own devotions, "Herein is My Father glorified, that you bear [little, nubby, shriveled, barely discernible fruit]." No, Jesus said, "Herein is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit." (A vigorous branch in the vine, constantly pruned, nourished by the life of Jesus by intimate communion in prayer, for that's the context) "If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask what you will and it shall be done to you. Herein is My Father glorified that you bear much fruit and so shall you be My disciples." Oh, how the Lord Jesus is glorified when His people are spiritually vigorous, when they're healthy, when they're evidently growing in grace.

What a joy it was last night. One of the brothers called me on the phone, and to be able to tell him, "So and so, you know, my wife and I am praying through the directory. And we prayed for you night before last. And I want to tell you something. We gave thanks to God for your evident growth in grace in the last year or two. It has gladdened our hearts to know and to see your growth in grace." Could I honestly say that of you if I really knew you better than I do? If that makes the heart of a pastor glad, what does it do the heart of Jesus Who died to have a people incorporated into

Him as branches into vine that will so share the outflow of His life that they bear much fruit. Much fruit. Much fruit.

So there's got to be concern for you. See, you not only have the concern of the weaker brother, but there's the concern of your own safety and perseverance in a dangerous walk. The concern, secondly, of your own spiritual health and growth in grace. But now, thirdly, my commitment to the progress and success of the gospel in others will demand specific restraints upon the exercise of my liberties in Christ.

Now we come to 1 Corinthians 9. I've been quoting verses to you. Now I want you to get the impact of these verses with your own eyes. Here in 1 Corinthians chapter 9, there are two major strands of emphasis. Emphasis number one is, Paul relinquishes the use of his God-given rights to make a way for the gospel into hearts without unnecessary prejudice. That's emphasis number one. And emphasis number two is, Paul gives up liberties to gain a hearing for the gospel.

Now let's look how he states it. Verse 3: "My defense to them that examine me is this. Have we no right to eat and to drink?" That is, to eat all meats, to drink all beverages, to eat and drink to the glory of God in moderation for the sustenance of strength and health. "Have we no right? Is it not our liberty to eat and to drink?" And the obvious answer is, of course it is. "Have we no right to lead about a wife that is a believer?" And the answer is obvious. "Of course you have a right, Paul. Marriage is honorable and the bed undefiled. It is not good for a man to be alone. Sure, you have a right to marry in the Lord. The rest of the apostles have done it, and even Peter, the first pope. Or I only in Barnabas have we not a right to forbear working? Don't we have a right to give up normal means of employment, to be supported by the gospel?"

And then he enlarges on that right from verse 7 all the way down to verse 11 and 12a: "If others partake of this right over you, do not we yet more. Nevertheless, we did not use this right, We bear all things voluntarily that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ." He says, "I want the gospel to be able to go unimpeded into as many places and many hearts as possible. And if I can demonstrate that I'm not like these Greek and current rhetorical charlatans who go around from city to city and charge a fee to make their speeches, if I and Barnabas can work with our hands to show we're not in it for what we get from you, but for what we give to you of the gospel of the grace of God." He says, "We don't use the rights. We give up our liberties to make a way of unprejudiced access for the gospel." Then he goes on to say, enlarging then on this same matter of support (verse 14): "So the Lord did ordain that they that proclaim the gospel should live of the gospel." Verse 19: "Though I was free from all men..." Now he brings in an additional thought:

"I brought myself under bondage to all, that I might gain the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain Jews. To them that are under the law, as under the law, not being myself under the law, that I may gain them that are under the law. To them that are without law, not being without law to God, but under law to Christ, that I might gain them that are without law, to the weak I became weak, that I might

gain the weak, and become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some, and I do all things for the gospel's sake."

See what he's saying? He says, "I have all kinds of liberties in Christ. Dietary laws, ceremonial laws don't have a lick of claim over me. But in the company of my Jewish fellow countrymen, I am prepared to subject myself to all of those restrictions, to that yoke of bondage, giving up all kinds of liberties that I might gain them." Gain them for what? That they might be saved. That they might be saved. "Until I have their ears, I can't get the gospel in. And until the gospel gets in, they can't be saved. So if I want them to be saved, I've got to get their ears. And if I'm going to get their ears, I must not do anything that unnecessarily turns the ears away from me." He's not talking about changing his message. He's not talking about doing some fool, God-dishonoring, shallow things like gospel clowning and gospel miming and all that other nonsense that comes under the rubric for many of this world--"Become all things to all men, and I might say some." No, no, Paul is talking about great sacrifice that he might get his unadulterated, offensive message of the cross to Jew and to Gentile alike. And he's prepared to give up liberties on the left hand and on the right? To what end? That he might gain them, that he might see them saved.

We recently studied in the adult class an example of this where Paul was willing to submit himself to a Jewish vow and all of the external things that went with it in Acts 21. And in this commentary by Mr. Garland that I mentioned, he lays out a conjecture. It can't be demonstrated from Scripture, but it has much to commend it. Listen to what he says: "The clearest example of what Paul means by becoming as a Jew and one under the law is his description of the 39 lashes he suffered at the hands of the Jews. 2 Corinthians 11 and verse 24. Here the Apostle clearly states in these words: 'Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one.'" Now there is no record of those whippings in the book of Acts. So when we look into the rabbis in rabbinical literature for some hints as to what could have happened that Paul would have received in Jewish synagogues, this scourging or this whipping, this is what Mr. Garland suggests is the answer:

"We can only guess that the synagogue inflicted this punishment for Paul's proclaiming his faith in the crucified and risen Christ, which they presumably considered blasphemous, and his altered understanding of the hope of Israel that now included uncircumcised Gentiles as the people of God. Paul's motives for submitting to this discipline are a little more difficult to penetrate, but rulings from the Mishnah may help. The Mishnah lists 36 sins, including blasphemy, that warrant being cut off from the people without warning. What is important to note, however, is that flogging averted both a harsher punishment at the hands of God and being cut off from the people (Leviticus 18:29). The Mishnah rules, 'And thy brother seem vile unto thee when he is scourged, then he is still your brother.' This axiom clarifies what it means for Paul to become like one under the law, though he himself is not under the law. He bowed to synagogue discipline to maintain his Jewish connections. Jews were given special privileges to settle their disputes in their own courts. If one wanted to stay a member of the Jewish community, one had to submit to its discipline. Paul

accepted these penalties to keep open the option of preaching the gospel message in the synagogue. For Paul to submit to this punishment five times testifies not only to his mettle but also to his extraordinary sense of obligation to his people. They are his kindred for whom he has great sorrow and unceasing anguish and could wish he were accursed and cut off from Christ if it meant their being saved. His identification with Christ so controls his spirit that he would cut himself off from Christ if he could to save his people."

Sobering thought, isn't it? Five times submitting to Jewish flogging. Why? To maintain his status as a Jew, that he could still walk into the synagogue and be respected as a rabbi and stand up and preach the gospel, "becoming all things to all men." You talk about giving up liberties for the sake of the gospel. These are the kinds of things the Apostle is talking about.

And dear brothers and dear sisters, if we are united to the same Savior, then there is in us at least a flickering of that commitment to the progress and success of the gospel in others, that when it demands of us the restraint of certain liberties, then surely to gain with a view to saving, we're going to relinquish those liberties. It's meant for some parents sitting here, letting children marry and follow the will of God with their spouses, though it has put oceans between them. For some of us, it has not put oceans, but it has put an awful lot of distance. For some of us, God knows what it has meant that the gospel might have both entrance and progress by the power of God.

The gospel makes its most dramatic advances when Paul's spirit prevails. And that's why I want to speak to you young men and women. What are you going to do with your life? Are you going to be nice, polite, middle class, respectable Reformed Baptist Christians? Or does there burn within you a passion, "O God, if it would please you, through the ordinary means that you've established of the oversight of the church and the counsel of godly men and women, Lord, if it please you, I'm prepared to relinquish a thousand things that are my liberties, that Christ might have a people among some of the unreached peoples of the world.

As I read those two books that I've recommended to you, *Lords of the Earth* and *Peace Child*, and thought of those two men, one of whom laid down his life for Christ, and the privilege they had of going into the midst of Stone Age people, I mean Stone Age headhunters, held in demon worship and in all forms of ungodliness, and seeing Christ get a people, being the first one to put in their hands portions of the Word of God and eventually the whole New Testament in their language, to be the first one to ever see them gather and sing the praises of Jesus, to spend your life to give to Jesus in the last day a people--what a privilege. What will the trinkets and the stuff that had to be relinquished, what will it appear like in that day?

I ask you, dear young men and women, is there burning in your heart a disposition--that's all I'm asking--that would count it a privilege to kiss it all goodbye that you might be an instrument in the hands of the living God to give to Jesus the reward of His

sufferings. And though that may not be the will and purpose of God, surely for all of us, whatever our calling, whatever our station, whatever our gifts, we're all called to be part of the great enterprise of seeing the gospel go forward. What kind of liberties may you have to relinquish to really, to really get into the lives of your neighbors with all of their messed up, tragic lives and begin to draw close enough to tell them about the Savior?

I say in answer to this second question, are there any other factors that ought to influence us constantly as we wrestle with the issue? Shall I exercise my liberty in this, that, or the other area? I answer there are at least three other components to that bridle upon our liberty. Our commitment to our spiritual safety and our own perseverance in the way of faith and obedience, our commitment to our own spiritual health and growth in grace, and our commitment to the success and progress of the gospel in others.

Now, as I bring the message to a close, I want to ask you a question. My question is this: what have you been thinking while I've been preaching this stuff? Get honest. Don't speak out loud to me, but speak to yourself. What have you been thinking? Have you sat there thinking, "Man, oh man, this is extremism of the most blatant... If that's what Christianity is, you can keep it." I want to tell you something. That's what Christianity is, my friend. Just as there is no vigorous biblical Christianity without Christ on a cross dying for sinners, Christ in a tomb, emptying that, vacating that tomb on the third day, ascending to the right hand of God the Father Almighty, there is no biblical Christianity without a Christ who died a substitutionary death, was buried and raised and seated at the right hand of the Father. There is no biblical Christianity without self-denying attachment to Jesus without a pursuit of holiness that makes us trample underfoot any so-called liberty that will hinder us from pursuing that holiness; trample under our feet, by the grace of God, those things that would erode our health and spiritual vigor, and those things that would impede the progress of the gospel.

My friend, there aren't two brands of Christianity, only one. And you want the cheap brand that says, "Oh, I'm going to go to heaven by what Jesus did, but I'm going to go the easy way." I've got news for you, my friend. My Bible says, he that would save his life shall lose it. That he that will lose his life for My sake and the gospel's the same shall save it."

And there I close with the text at the end of chapter 10 in the first verse of chapter 11. Notice what the Apostle says: "Be followers of me." He says to all of the saints at Corinth, "Be imitators of me, even as I am of Christ." In all the ways in which the Apostle modeled the willingness to relinquish rights for the sake of others, he was but reflecting his Savior Who left the rights of all that was His in heaven to come to this sin-cursed world, to walk among us, to take the flack of the kind of stuff we read from John 7. We read last week, "Say we not well, You have a demon! You're born of fornication!" And then the horrific trial that led to His immolation upon the cross. My

friends, it is that Savior Who by His Spirit working in us can enable us to follow the Apostle Paul and imitate him even as he imitated Christ.

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