

Guidance and the voice of God

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[0 : 00] This morning's reading is from 1 Corinthians chapter 10 and verse 14 all the way through to chapter 11 verse 1 and that's on page 1151 of the Church Bibles.

1 Corinthians chapter 10 verse 14. Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. I speak to sensible people. Judge for yourselves what I say.

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all share the one loaf.

Consider the people of Israel. Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything or that an idol is anything?

No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God. And I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too.

[1 : 13] You cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he? 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. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others. Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience.

For the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience.

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.

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

[2 : 19] Do not cause anyone to stumble, 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.

Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ. Amen. Thanks, Bethany.

Let me add my word of welcome to Robbie's. It's great to see you. If we've not met before, my name is Martin Ayers. I'm the lead pastor here. And it's our regular diet as a church. If you're just visiting, what we try and do as our regular diet is to work through books of the Bible, chapter by chapter. And we think that's the healthiest way for us to grow in Christ, grow in our faith, because it means that we don't cherry pick the bits of the Bible that we like best and miss out the bits that we find more confronting.

But we just let God set the agenda. And by working through books, we often find that the truths that God reveals about himself are connected to the implications that he gives in his word.

[3 : 26] So that's why we do that. And we're in a series at the moment in this book, 1 Corinthians. We started last autumn, autumn last year, and we got halfway through and we picked it up again last week.

You can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful as we turn to God's word. But let's ask for God's help as we spend time hearing from him. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we trust your promise that the unfolding of your word brings light and life. And we ask that you would lighten our paths this morning, that you will open your word to our hearts and open our hearts to your word.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, just imagine there's a guy in our church, Dan, and he's really stuck in with church and he's serving in lots of ways, but he gets offered a job in a different city.

It's a better paid job than the job he has at the moment in Glasgow. And there are things about the job that he's attracted to, but it would mean uprooting himself and his family from Glasgow and moving away to a different place.

[4 : 40] How does he decide what to do? Picture Jenny, a woman in our church, who gets invited by a few non-Christian friends who've been close friends over the years.

She's not seen them for ages and they invite her to go hill walking one weekend in the Highlands. But when she checks her work shifts, she realizes that with work commitments, if she goes on that weekend, she won't be at church for four Sundays.

So she'll be out of Glasgow and she won't have been able to be at church for a month. But she doesn't want to lose contact with those friends of hers and she doesn't get many opportunities to see them.

So how does she weigh up the opportunity to show them the difference Jesus is making in her life by being away with them for the weekend with the encouragement she could receive and give by being at church that Sunday?

How do you go about making these kinds of decisions? The really big life decisions that we all have to make at certain points in life and the little everyday decisions, many of which we make as we plan our diaries and just go about living.

[5 : 53] Of course, we should pray that God will enable us to make good decisions. And if God wants to, he could make really obvious what he wants us to do.

He could send an angel. We could hear him speak in an audible voice if he wants to do that. And yet the ordinary way that God is at work in our lives is he enables us to make wise choices day by day.

Now, what I really like about these chapters of 1 Corinthians is that we're looking here at a church in the first century. They've written questions to Paul.

The Apostle Paul planted this church and since the beginning of chapter 7, he's been addressing questions they've sent him about issues confronting them in Corinth. And when you look at this issue, it looks like one that is a million miles from the kind of things that we face in Glasgow today. And yet when you look at how Paul gives them counsel and then explains the reasons underlying that counsel, he really helps us think through how we make godly decisions today.

[7 : 06] The issue for the Corinthians was, could they eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, to pagan gods? If you'd walked around the city of Corinth in the first century, there were temples everywhere to a plethora of different pagan gods.

And it meant that if you did the equivalent then of just going to Morrisons or going to Iceland or Lidl and getting minced beef, the chances were when you bought it in the marketplace in Corinth, the chances were that meat had been sacrificed in a pagan temple before it found its way to the market.

And the Corinthian Christians, they've come to know the living God through Jesus Christ, the God whom Jesus reveals. They've turned from their paganism. They're asking, is it still okay to buy that meat and eat that meat at home?

Or does that kind of defile me or make me unclean? Is there a wrongness to that as a Christian? And we see in the letter that the Corinthians had a big emphasis on the freedom that Jesus has given them.

So he quotes what they're saying in verse 23 of our passage. I have the right to do anything. And he's already quoted that earlier in chapter 5. And they had it that right in a sense that Christians are profoundly free.

[8 : 29] When you come to Jesus, he sets you free because all the other things that we might choose to live for in our lives, the idols of our age, enslave you. And in Jesus we find the true freedom to serve the living God.

We're free because Jesus sets us free from having to earn ourselves right with God by our own merit. We don't have to do that. We can trust Jesus' merit for us.

And when it comes to living to please God, God has set us free. There is considerable freedom in living to please him. But from our passage this morning, we're going to think first about the limits of

our freedom as Christians, then about the priority that we should have with our freedom, and then thirdly, about the model for our freedom.

So first, the limits of our freedom. And the limits here are not to provoke the Lord to jealousy. The limit comes in verse 14 of chapter 10.

If you just have a look down. Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. And then he gets specific in verse 20 that the problem is not when you buy meat from a market that might have had a previous use in the temple, but rather if you went to a temple and you joined in with a feast off the back of the meat having been offered to an idol.

[9 : 56] So look at verse 20. He says, the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God. And I do not want you to be participants with demons.

So Paul's saying they're free to eat meat sacrificed to idols that they buy in the market. We see that in verse 25 over the page. Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience.

For the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. The issue that's different here in verse 20 is when eating the meat involves participation in idolatry.

This was a culture where lots of things would have happened in temples. You might be in a workplace and your boss says, can you come with me in the evening?

We've got a business meeting with some clients. We're taking them out for the meeting. And the room that's used might be the court of a pagan temple. And as the meeting begins, there might be a pagan ritual and the meat might be sacrificed and then people would feast together.

[11 : 04] So the religious activity of paganism was kind of woven into day-by-day life in a way that was hard for the Corinthians to avoid. And Paul is saying here, we have to be careful never to engage in idolatry.

We might wonder why that matters when an idol isn't actually real. The idol that people are worshipping isn't really there. And Paul affirmed that view in chapter 8 verse 4.

He said, there's nothing really there when people worship an idol in 1 Corinthians chapter 8. But here in chapter 11, he actually says that there's something dark behind the idolatry that there is demonic activity.

There are evil spiritual beings at work in false religion. And Paul reasons with us as Christians not to join in with that. And the reasoning he gives is about what's going on when we have the Lord's Supper together as Christians, when we eat bread and drink wine as a church.

So he says in verses 16 and 17 that the Lord's Supper is a participation or an act of fellowship or communion.

[12 : 15] And we often call it communion as a church. We say it's communion on the fourth Sunday of the month in the morning. And the communion or fellowship has two dimensions.

The first is in verse 16 and it's communion with Jesus. It's fellowship with Jesus. Verse 16. Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ?

And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? So when we eat bread and we drink wine it's a special time of fellowship with Jesus as we remember the benefits to us of his love and his redemption.

We're not just remembering it. We're kind of having fellowship with Jesus now as we eat and drink together. We'll do that next week as a church.

Then in verse 17 Paul adds that it's a fellowship with each other as believers. If you look at verse 17 because there is one love we who are many are one body for we all share one love.

[13 : 27] So when we have communion together when we have the Lord's Supper we're looking for ways that we can express looking up and having the space to reflect on our closeness to Jesus and our oneness with him and to look around and do this together and see that all of us together who are eating bread and drinking wine are people who have found together that Jesus is all sufficient and he is all satisfying and that's a special fellowship with each other.

And Paul's point here is that the same participation goes on in a pagan ritual with the demonic powers that are behind that false religion that if you join in you're starting to have that same fellowship with a demon.

And the problem with that is that God does not tolerate idolatry. He's always been clear that one day the God of all of this is going to judge the world for idolatry.

and on the day that we meet with God we mustn't think that we'll be able to somehow take him on. So in verse 22 he says do you really think you're a good match for God?

Verse 22 are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he? We don't often feel comfortable thinking of the Lord as a jealous God.

[15:01] We have a song that we sing as a church Jesus strong and kind. If we use this verse it would be Jesus strong and jealous which we don't I can't think of a Christian song we sing about God being a jealous God.

But the jealousy of God is the other side of his commitment to us his faithfulness his steadfastness. God's jealousy is not like the jealousy of an actress at an award ceremony who storms out because she didn't win the BAFTA and hates the person who did because she wanted that award.

God's jealousy is like the faithful husband whose wife comes home one day and tells him that she wants an open marriage now and she's about to go on a romantic two week holiday in the Caribbean with a guy that she's met through a dating app.

The jealousy of God is an appropriate jealousy when he sees that the affection that is rightly due to him from his people who he's loved and created and redeemed and cared for that that affection is being given to someone else or something else instead of to him.

He wants us to be exclusive in our love for him just as he loves us. And the apostle Paul uses the language of fleeing from idolatry because he wants us to have an appropriate fear of the day that we will stand before God and he will reveal the secrets of our own hearts.

[16:40] So we should ask ourselves when might I need to be on my guard not to participate with idolatry? I think of a friend who goes to yoga but towards the end of their yoga session there is this bit where it gets a bit spiritual.

There's a kind of bowing and some words said that she doesn't understand so she doesn't join in with that bit. Are there superstitions in your friendship group or practices in your family that you need to kind of stop joining in with just to show that you're not participating?

Horoscopes, healing crystals, that kind of thing. If you go to the wedding ceremony of a Hindu friend at what points can you join in and support them as a friend?

At what points do you need to think well I can't be at that bit because I don't want to participate in idolatry? Or suppose a friend said to me who I'm trying to share Jesus with I'll go along to your church one Sunday if you come with me to my Mormon temple.

Or I'll come to your church if you come with me to my mosque and visit. At what point if you did feel that you could visit you know a Mormon temple or a Jehovah's Witness service or a mosque at what point do you have to say I'm not going to join in with that bit because I can't I can't be seen to be participating in this.

[18:15] It wouldn't be right. And not all of our idols today are so obvious when do good things in our world become God things for the people around us so that what should be just enjoyment of something good from God is actually being worshipped in a way that we have to withdraw from.

I think back to times with me as a so I'm a big football fan but I look back at kind of young adult life and it was clearly an idol for me.

so I remember you know songs that I sang I would still go to a football match now and sing to support my team but actually there's some songs that I wouldn't join in with now because I think well we've got to a point here where we're just worshipping a team.

I remember one of our players whenever he came to take a corner we'd all do this at him. Well is that just levity or actually when you look at what's being devoted to football supporting by the people I was going with at what point do we have to step back and say look this is idolatry I'm not participating.

Difficult questions but these are the principles and that's our first point the limits of our freedom but when it comes to lots of decisions in our Christian lives we are free and so how do we exercise that freedom?

[19:41] That's our second point the priority with our freedom the saving good of others. Now Paul turns to reassure the Corinthians so as long as they're not participating in idolatry they are free to eat whatever they like.

So verse 25 he says eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience for the earth is the Lord's and everything in it and in verse 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 so

essentially what you eat or drink is a matter of indifference to God enjoy your freedom but then he adds this new priority for Christians with that freedom it's the priority of what's actually good for others so in verse 23 he quotes them saying I have the right to do anything but he says but not everything is beneficial I have the right to do anything but not everything is constructive in other words not everything will build other people up or draw them closer to Jesus no one verse 24 no one should seek their own good but the good of others and he gives this specific example that you're enjoying kind of delicious roast lamb at the home of a non-Christian friend your conscience is clear to eat it but then someone else at the meal says to you that food it was brought it was it was sacrificed at the temple before it came here and they tell you because their own conscience is troubled to see you eating it they're surprised

I thought you were a Christian and you're eating that and at that point because of their conscience conscience you should stop either because it's a Christian and for them it would be wrong because it's going against their conscience so would you kind of draw them into going against God in their own heart or because it's someone who's not a Christian and it's kind of scandalous to them that you as a Christian would eat that so Paul says at that point limit your freedom out of love for them so if I go out on a lunch time on a weekday here and buy a lamb samosa for lunch from a shop owned by a Muslim in the woodlands area and I'm tucking into it and a Muslim sees me eating it and says what are you doing I thought you were a church pastor that's halal meat well personally my conscience is clear about eating meat that's halal I don't think that when the animal is killed the words that are said to make it halal are sacrificing the animal and also

I'm not participating in that I think there's distance between my eating it and what went on so my conscience is clear but if someone else is raising it with me because it's troubling them that I'm eating it and it would kind of become a barrier for them looking at Jesus then I need to stop because the spiritual good of others is incomparably more important than my lunch and for the same reasons any of us at any time might feel that it's right to choose to limit our freedom that we know we have in Jesus because of the good we can do for others by conforming to rules and limiting ourselves so it could apply to drinking alcohol if you have a friend with you from a Christian culture where it's seen as wrong to drink alcohol it goes against their conscience it might be that you would limit your freedom for their sake or it could be about how we spend our money that if we need to buy a new car or we want to go on holiday and we're weighing up what to spend on a holiday it might be that you feel your conscience is free to spend more money on a nicer holiday or more money on a nicer car but then you realize in conversation with a

Christian friend that they are finding it discouraging that you would spend that money or you realize that in the workplace it's going to be weird for one of your colleagues it's going to undermine your witness that Jesus is enough when they hear how much you spent on your holiday and at those points even if you feel your conscience is clear it would be appropriate to limit your freedom for the good of others if we think about how different Christians think about rest on a Sunday and activities that it's still fine to do on a Sunday as long as you get to church or for some you shouldn't do that because the whole day is a day of focusing on the Lord and those things might inhibit that are there times that with an issue like that or should you celebrate Halloween or can your kids go to a Halloween party that in these kind of conversations with one another we would think well

[24 : 55] I think I'm free but I'm going to limit my freedom for the good of others so we have a new priority with our freedom and it's not my own enjoyment it's the spiritual good of other people and now Paul brings this section of the letter to a close with this great summary so our third point the models for our gospel freedom the Lord who came to serve so Paul wants us to live out verse 31 if you just have a look down so whether you eat or drink or whatever you do do it all for the glory of God what does that look like well in verse 30 he talks about being thankful if I take part in the meal with thankfulness and I think that's a really helpful test of whether it's right to do something if we feel that we can give thanks to God as we do something or give thanks to God when we choose not to do it that we thank God that he is enough and we don't have to that's a great way of glorifying him in our decisions if we're about to do something and we feel it feels a bit weird to thank God for this thing well maybe you shouldn't be doing it maybe that's your conscience helping you see that this isn't a good thing to enjoy can I give thanks to

God for it and then Paul reminds them and us of the mindset that he modelled with his freedom in verse 32 do not cause anyone to stumble whether Jews Greeks or the church of God so that's kind of Jews Greeks that's the world out there as they look in at Jesus the church of God brothers and

sisters in Christ verse 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 follow my example as I follow the example of Christ Paul told us about his example in the previous chapter in chapter 9 and the more I've got into 1 Corinthians the more I think chapter 9 is really key to understanding the whole letter if we just turn back there just back a page you can see verses 19 to 23 of chapter 9 Paul sums up there how he used his freedom so earlier in the chapter he explains that he had the right to be paid as a preacher of the gospel and as an apostle but he didn't ask for money because he didn't want that to get in the way of his witness and now here in verse 19 he says though I am free and belong to no one I've made myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible to the Jews I became like a Jew to win the Jews so he brings himself back under all the Jewish traditions and laws so that he can live alongside them and witness to them and not scandalize Jesus before them verse he goes on to those under the law I became like one under the law though I myself am not under the law so as to win those under the law to those not having the law I became like one not having the law though I am not free from God's law but I'm under Christ's law so as to win those not having the law and then the summary halfway through verse 22 I've become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some so Paul had freedom in Christ but he wants them to see and wants us to see that rather than asking how can I use my freedom like they were asking he asks how can I limit my freedom lovingly where that would help engage people with Jesus and build up brothers and sisters in their faith limit my freedom where that would be more constructive for others and not be a stumbling block so here in chapter nine he's basically looking at the world around him and thinking what rules do people live by can I submit myself to those rules so that I live alongside them and it opens a door to talk about Jesus and that principle is one that we can apply in lots of ways prioritizing how we witness to others about Jesus I think of a friend who his job changed in the pandemic to work from home and he's still working from home full time and he told me over the summer he's now applying for other jobs people because he wants to be back in an office so that he has the opportunity to actually get to know his colleagues better and be a good witness to them about

Jesus or another guy I know he was in hospital and got given his own room in the hospital ward but he asked if he could be put back in a shared room so that he could share his faith with other Jesus so we've come to the end of this section of 1 Corinthians and we've got a table on the sheets just under the points from this morning there just summing up where we've got to from Paul's principles about how we make godly decisions the first question we should ask is does scripture allow this is it participating in idolatry for me to do this secondly we should ask is my it's clear so we might be in a situation where actually the bible is silent on something we could do it but it would go against our conscience to do it and in that case we shouldn't do it but if our conscience is clear as well then next question from what we were just looking at can

[30 : 50] I do this with thankfulness to God the thankfulness test and if after those first three questions we can go ahead then Paul gives us three more things we can think about three things to ask ourselves firstly is this beneficial to me spiritually we got that from chapter six how will doing this affect my own spiritual life secondly love how is this affecting other Christians is anyone being discouraged by me doing this are people being built up by me doing it or not doing it and thirdly witness how is this affecting my witness to others so if we think back to Dan who had the job offer in a different city he might need to be asking questions like what are the costs for me moving away for the ministries that I'm involved in at my local church are there ways that I'm serving

Jesus fruitfully here that I would lose if I moved away to a different place are there relationships with not yet believing friends in Glasgow that it would be sad to leave behind because I feel that I'm getting somewhere with friends in telling them about Jesus conversely do I know there's a healthy church in the place where I'm going a place where I'll be it an area that's more gospel needy than where I currently am and if the salary is higher with the other job he could also be thinking does that increase in salary mean I can give more money to support gospel mission and ministry and for Jenny with her decision do I go on that weekend away with my friends where I'll miss church again well how much is it going to affect me other people around me at my church to know that I made that decision and that

I won't be there to encourage them but weighing that up against a realistic view of am I getting anywhere with my not yet believing friends are they actually interested in Jesus am I having good conversations with them that it would be really worth me having the time to follow up on and as we

find ourselves in situations where we feel you know I think that the loving thing to do here is to limit my freedom but that feels really costly let's remember those final words of our passage that Paul says follow my example as I follow the example of Christ when we feel that we should limit our freedom look at Jesus Jesus Christ enjoyed unbridled freedom but when he came into he came as a slave a servant of all he allowed the authorities to take away his freedom as they arrested him and when he was lifted up on the cross he was mocked by passers by who said if he's the son of God let him come down off the cross and save himself and knowing he could free himself and live he chose death to himself so that he could save us and give us freedom and so now with the freedom he's given us he calls us to look to treat others as he treated us with his freedom willing to lay down our rights where it might lead them to be saved let's pray together lord jesus we praise you and thank you for the freedom you have given us when we come to you in faith would you fill our minds and hearts with your spirit that he would enable us to make godly decisions day by day choices that honor you choices that build up and encourage your people decisions that bear witness to a watching world that you are a great savior that knowing you is of all importance and all surpassing joy for your name's sake amen