

The Limits of Christian Liberty

By George Morrison

“All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient” — 1Co 6:12

It has been said by some one, I forget by whom, that a Christian has no rights, he has only duties. That is a very striking statement, and seems to sound the note of the heroic. Now in a loose and popular way, there may be some justification for that statement. It may have served its purpose as a word of warning to men who were always insisting on their rights. But for all that it should never have been spoken whatever purposes it may have served, for it is utterly antagonistic to the spirit of the Gospel of our Lord. If there is one thing Paul insists on more than another, it is the rights of the believer in Christ Jesus. He argues with a passionate intensity for the liberties of every Christian. Never is his style so animated, never so bold and luminous his thought, as when he fights the battle for his converts of their liberties in Jesus Christ. He knew that everything depended upon it, that the very life of the church depended on it. On it depended whether the church of Christ was to stand out or to be lost in Judaism. And so, sometimes by appeal to the Old Testament and always on the broad ground of grace, he appeals to his hearers to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ had made them free.

Liberties and Limitations

But then, following hard on this insistence and in some measure just because of it, we soon come to detect in the apostle the presence and pressure of another thought. Just as you have right through the Old Testament tremendous insistence on the awfulness of God, and then when God has been safeguarded so, we have the revelation of Christ that God is love. So in Paul you have first the splendid doctrine of the inalienable liberties of every Christian, and then the limitation of these liberties. So far from it being the case that a Christian has no rights, there is no man with rights so incontestable. They are to be cherished at whatever cost and in the teeth of angriest opposition. But then, having insisted upon that with all the emphasis of inspiration, Paul, with his wonderful knowledge of the heart, flashes light on the dangers of that liberty. All things are lawful to me, but all are not expedient. A Christian is one who is willing to forego. He uses his liberties as not abusing them; he recognizes limits in their exercise. And it is on these limits of our Christian liberty — limits, mark you, always self-imposed- that I wish to speak. Such limits, as I understand my Testament, are determined by one or other of three interests.

Liberties Determined by Interests in Personal Safety

There is a passage in one of the Epistles which says, "Touch not; taste not; handle not." I know no passage in the Scripture that is oftener misunderstood than that one. It has been quoted as inspired direction to those who were yielding to temptation. It has been used as the motto of abstinence societies, as though it embodied apostolic counsel. Whereas as a matter of fact, if you read the passage carefully, you will find that the very opposite is true: these are the words of Paul's antagonists, and against their view of life he is in arms. The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof— that is the ringing note of the apostle. There is nothing in it common or unclean: everything is to be received with thanksgiving. But then, having uttered that grand truth which we must never forfeit for any popular clamor, Paul proceeds to limit it in exercise by the

consideration of his immortal well being. All things are lawful to me, says the apostle, but I will not be brought under the power of any. I will not let anything usurp dominion over this temple of the Holy Ghost. In other words, this brave and thoughtful man who insisted so passionately on his rights in Christ deliberately limited these rights in the interest of his individual safety. I know few sentences in literature more touching than the closing sentence of the ninth chapter here. "I keep under my body" says the apostle, "lest...I myself should be a castaway." I keep under my body is our version, but the word in the original is far more graphic. It is a word borrowed from the prize ring: it means, I beat my body black and blue. Now whatever Paul was, he was no ascetic and certainly he never preached asceticism. I can imagine the scorn he would have poured on the wild asceticism of the Middle Ages. Yet here, lest he should be a castaway, lest he should be rejected at the end, deliberately and in sternest fashion, he limited his great liberty in Christ. Think of it — this great apostle haunted with fears of being cast away: never quite sure of himself — never quite certain that he might not be tripped some day and overthrown! It seems incredible and yet to Paul it was so far from being incredible that he crushed his body down in terror of it. "Stand fast, therefore," he says to the Galatians, "in the liberty with which Christ hath made us free." Cherish as a principle that is inestimable the fullness of your liberties in Christ. But then remember that you are only human and weak and very liable to fall, and use your liberty as not abusing it.

Principles Versus Safeguards

Now as that was the apostle's practice, so it ought to be the practice of all Christians. It is along these lines that in Christ Jesus we ought to seek to regulate our lives. There are many who would exalt into a principle what may be only a salutary safeguard. There are many on the other hand who in the name of liberty pave their way to misery and ruin. But he who is wise — he who is taught of God — will be careful to avoid these two extremes, for neither of them has the mind of Christ. On the one hand, he will assert his liberty. He will say all things are lawful unto me. He will give no place in the charter of his rights to the touch not and the taste not and the handle not. But then recalling the awful possibility that in his voyage he should be cast away, he will impose upon himself stern limitations. He will remember how the best have fallen and fallen tragically in unexpected ways; he will remember that life is full of peril and that for the surest foot the ground is slippery; and so in the interests of individual safety — and we cannot afford to trifle with our safety — he will say all things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient.

And may I say in passing that such action is in full accord with the teaching of our Lord. I say it because there are so many nowadays who want to distinguish between Paul and Jesus. Now it is true that through the life of Christ there breathes the spirit of most glorious freedom. Think of His teaching on the Sabbath for example; think of Him at the marriage feast at Cana. There is a geniality, if I may put it so — a human breadth in His teaching and example which has no better witness than just this, that it made every Pharisee indignant. All that is gloriously true, yet remember that this is also true. Never was there a teacher sent from God who could be so stern and severe as Jesus Christ. It was not the ardent and impetuous Paul — it was the gentle and genial Savior who said, "If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off; if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out." Is there anything radically bad in the right hand? It is the organ that I stretch out in prayer. Is there anything radically evil in the eye? God has made it, and what He made is good. And yet according to the word of Jesus, the hour may come when for a man's own safety it were wise to forfeit the gladness of the eye and cut away the glory of the hand. Mark you, if thy right

hand offend thee — there is no talk of anybody else. It is in the interests of a man's own life that he must use this drastic limitation. And so you see Paul is but echoing what he had learned from his Redeemer when he says, in the interests of personal safety, all things are lawful but all are not expedient.

Liberty Limited in Interest of Christian Brotherhood

The classical instance of this Christian attitude is found in this first Epistle to the Corinthians. It is so interesting and so significant that you will bear with me if I give it in detail. The apostle pictures a Corinthian Christian invited to dinner by a friend. That friend is a heathen man and in comparatively humble circumstances. Now in the food that was set upon the table it was almost certain there would be temple meat: meat, that is, of beasts that had been sacrificed and then sold to the market by the priests. And the difficulty for the Christian guest was this, was he at liberty to eat that meat? If it had been offered to idols in the temple, would not eating it mean fellowship with idols? It was about that difficulty that they wrote to Paul, and his answer is supremely noble. Go to your dinner, he says, and ask no questions. Eat what is set before you and be thankful. If you start worrying about things like that, you will do conscience irreparable mischief. The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof.

But now suppose that next to that Christian brother there is sitting another and a weaker Christian. He is struggling to be true to Christ, but the pull of the old life is terrible. And he turns to his stronger brother by his side, and he says to him anxiously, "That is temple meat." The question was (and it was a daily question) what was the stronger brother to do then? If he partook, his neighbor might partake, and that might be opening the gate to ruin. He would go home beset by the dark sense that he was again in fellowship with devils. But, on the other hand, if he did not partake out of consideration for that weaker conscience, what became of his liberty in Christ? So they wrote to Paul about that also, and I think you know how he replied. As a Christian man, he said, you are duty-bound to consider the weakness of your brother. Knit into fellowship by Jesus Christ, called to the bearing of each other's burdens, God forbid that you should use your liberty to offend one of these little ones. Mark you, there is no word of personal safety now. The stronger brother was perfectly secure. For him an idol was nothing in the world, and he could eat and drink with a good conscience. The only question was, how would his action affect the tempted and weak Christian by his side, and Paul says that is to be determinative. It might be very annoying to be hampered so. One might regard his neighbor as a nuisance. It was hard that a man should not enjoy himself because he had a weakling looking on. And it is then that Paul, in that great way of his, lifts up the matter into such an atmosphere that the man who is tempted to chafe at his restrictions bows his head in shame. Have you forgotten, says the apostle, that for that weak brother Jesus died? Have you forgotten that Christ endured for him the agony and the anguish of the Cross? Compared with that, how infinitely little is any sacrifice that you are called to make in the restriction of your Christian liberty.

Limited by Love

And so we are taught this second lesson about the limits of our Christian rights. We are bound to limit them not only for our own sakes; we are bound to limit them for our brother's sake. No man liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. If we believe in the Fatherhood of God, then we believe in the brotherhood of man. And only he has the mind of Christ to whom that thought of

brotherhood is regulative, not only in the exercise of power but also in the exercise of liberty. There are many things in life that are quite lawful and on whose lawfulness we must insist. There are things that you and I could practice safely, and be all the happier for our practice of them. But if to our brother they be fraught with peril and if they make it harder for him to do what is right, then for our brother's sake, if we are Christians, we are called to the limitation of our liberty. Mark you, there is no room in Christianity for the over-scrupulous and worrying conscience. We are in Christ, and the Son hath made us free, and we are never to lose the gladness of that freedom. All that the Scripture insists upon is this, that we are to use it in the bonds of love and never to hesitate to limit it if so doing we can help a brother. You say that is hard? I grant you it is hard. The Gospel admits that it is hard. It may be irritating when we want to live to have to consider the weak brother so. And then, flashing upon us in its glory, there comes the thought that Christ has died for him — and after that we do not find it hard. Once realize the sacrifice of Christ and all our little denials are as nothing. He gave His life up for that weaker brother, and shall not we give up our liberty? It is thus that we come to have fellowship with Him and to know Him better as we take our journey, for fellowship grows not alone but by what we get: it grows also by what we yield.

Limited in the Interest of the Gospel

In the ninth chapter of this epistle we have a great instance of that motive. Paul has been arguing with overwhelming power for the right of the preachers of the Word to receive payment. He appeals to Scripture- he argues by analogy- he urges the great plea of common sense. He gives a demonstration irrefutable of the right of Gospel preachers to be paid. And then with one of those swift turns of his which help us to know him and to love him, he says, but I — I have not used this right lest I should hinder the Gospel of Christ. There is an instance also in the life of Jesus which will help you to understand my meaning. It is when He was asked to pay the temple tax. It is only Matthew who narrates that incident, and it is natural that he should tell it for Matthew had been a tax-gatherer himself once and would be interested in taxes all his life. Well, when Jesus heard of the demand, you remember what he said to Peter? What thinkest thou, Simon, of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute — of their own children or strangers? Peter saith unto him, Of strangers; and Jesus answered, Then are the children free. What He meant was that He was free, for the temple was His Father's house. He could have claimed exemption as a right. It was part of the liberty of sonship. But then had He insisted on His rights, is it not easy to see what would have happened? Jesus saw in an instant what would happen. He had proclaimed the sanctity of law: now men would say He was a lawbreaker. He had urged obedience to Moses' representatives: now He would be openly defying them. And so, not with His eye upon His own but with His eye on the unbelieving world, the tax was paid lest they should be offended. In other words, Christ limited His liberty in the supreme interests of the Gospel. Deliberately did He forego His rights when to assert them might have been a stumbling block. He was come to seek and save the lost, and though the lost might hate Him and revile Him, He would do nothing howsoever lawful that might make them harder to be won.

As it was with Jesus, so must it be with you and me. If we are members of the body of Christ then we have a duty to the world. It is no part of a believer's calling to consult the opinion of the world. A man may sometimes bear the greatest resemblance to his Lord when his action is laughed at by the worldly wise. All we are taught is that in our use of freedom we must remember those who are without, and how, by what we allow ourselves in Christ, they are like to

be affected towards the Gospel. If the kind of life that we are living makes it less easy to believe in Christ; if our behavior whether at work or play is silently hardening anybody's heart, then, though everything we do is justified and well within the boundaries of our liberties, in the eyes of Jesus there is something wrong. All things are lawful, but all are not expedient, sometimes in the interests of our safety. All things are lawful, but all are not expedient, sometimes in the interests of our brother. All things are lawful, but all are not expedient, because around us there is a Christless world and men with their poor blind eyes are judging Christ by what they see in His professing people.