

Maintenance Required
Lesson Seven - Legalism
1 Cor 10:14-11:1

Normally, when you hear sermons on legalism, the emphasis is on us taking up our rights because of our freedom in Christ. And while that is a legitimate Biblical emphasis that must be taught, Paul is very cautious with how he applies this pastorally in Corinth. As we saw last week, there were believers causing younger Christians to stumble into sin and idolatry by eating meat offered to idols. While Paul makes it abundantly clear that eating meat offered to idols is not per se sinful, especially because there is only one God, it was causing immature believers, who still saw idols as real in a certain sense, to sin against their consciences by eating meat as if it was offered to an idol. As we will see today, it may have even gone so far as to cause them to eat meat in the temple itself, which Paul categorically condemns for idolatry, sexuality, and testing the Lord.

Ultimately, what Paul wants to teach us is that love for your neighbor and for the lost should rule the day. 1 Cor, 9:21, "To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,)" We are no longer under the rule of the Mosaic Law, but we are under the rule of Christ!¹ This calls to mind what Paul says in Galatians 5:13-14, "13 For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. 14 For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

Legalism has been removed by the freedom we have in Christ, but it must be ruled by the law of Christ, to love our neighbor as ourselves. What this meant last week is that we are to put aside eating meat offered to idols, not always, but in the context of causing another brother to sin. We also saw since we are under the law of Christ, we are not to participate in idolatry, murmuring, and sexual immorality like the Israelites. And that is tied to another type of situation created in this conflict, which is not just eating meat from the temple, but eating meat in the temple.² Actually, when you realize this situation is in the background, it helps explain why Paul seems to be talking out both sides of his mouth.

Topic - The law of Christ and love for others rules liberty; therefore, we are to avoid license in our walk with the Lord. We are taking a maintenance check on our church. And one of the

¹ Moo, Douglas J. *A Theology of Paul and His Letters: The Gift of the New Realm in Christ*. Biblical Theology of the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2021, pg. 136.

² Ibid. 138.

things that we should be so careful about is making sure we are not just defined by “not being a legalist”. That is good, but that is only one side of the coin. It is easy to avoid legalism to the extreme and forget we are called to love our neighbor and avoid license.

The law of Christ bids us to avoid license. (defined as sin, I can do whatever under grace)

Remember last week we left off the example of the people of Israel, which seems like a really weird insert into the text until you remember the historical background. Not only were people eating meat from the temple, it seems that the church members at Corinth were eating meat in the temple.³ Now, Paul makes it abundantly clear, not only through the example of the Israelites, but also in our passage that this is completely unacceptable. This, remember, is based off of the context of avoiding the temptations of Israel, idolatry, immorality, murmuring.

Read 10:14-22

We are called to flee idolatry! It seems pretty clear from the overt command that Paul has something different in mind than just eating meat from the temple but also inside the temple. The emphasis that Paul wants to give them is two-fold, on community and spirituality. Because eating meat in a temple participates in the spirit world of demons and a community built around sinful lusts (aka, like Israel), they are to avoid this completely. And Paul masterfully reminds them of two other practices from Judaism and Christianity to bring this point home. He first starts with the Lord’s table.

Read vs. 14-17 - Now, I want to be clear, we as Baptists are not sacramental in theology. We do not believe that the elements themselves either physically or spiritually become the body and blood of Christ, nor are they a means of grace. They are symbols that push us toward the person of Christ. Which shows us that being symbolist in your view of the Lord’s table, far from making it less spiritual, actually is a very spiritual event for it is a time for you to not only commune with the Lord but also His church! That is why He says that we partake of the blood and body of the Lord, for communion is a time to examine ourselves and confess sin. The “blood of Jesus” still “cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7-2:1) and the broken body of our Lord is still applied to us, for we are in Christ. But not only that, it is a show of solidarity and unity within the body of Christ. We stand in allegiance to Jesus and fellowship with Jesus as a body, therefore the meal of the Lord’s supper matters. This meal is communal and spiritual for it points us to Christ and His church.

Read vs. 18 - This is also seen in the Levitical Priesthood. They ate of the meat that was offered in sacrifice, and benefited spiritually from the altar! Obviously, this also entails forgiveness of

³ Ibid. 131-132

sins and spiritual blessings in Yahweh. But this is also communal, for all who sacrificed on the altar ate the food as a group of people, the priesthood. No one else could eat the meat in that setting!

Read vs. 19-21 - Remember, Paul has communal and spiritual contexts in his mind, to which I would also add he has ceremonial religious practices in his mind as well.⁴ Paul is thinking with specific contexts in mind. And this final one is in the context of not privately buying and eating meat that is from the temple, but partaking in a ceremonial festival inside the temple! Paul keeps this distinct by reminding them that the meat in and of itself isn't real, but it is offered to demons! We shouldn't be naive to think there is no spiritual reality behind false religions, far from it!

Illustration - eating a halal burger privately vs. eating in a mosque for a religious ceremony.

It seems that the church at Corinth had people eating at pagan religious ceremonies, which was a huge problem. Not only were these probably promiscuous (think of the command to avoid lust from the nation of Israel), but it also tempted the Lord and flirted with idolatry, for the ceremonial meat was offered to the pagan gods of Rome. Notice what Paul says about this!

Read 21-22 - Because you are a unique body marked off by the Lord's table, you should not partake of the table of Satan! Are you stronger than the Lord? Are you really going to test the patience of God like the nation of Israel? They had gotten so enamored with their freedom in Christ that they used it to hurt others, but more than that, they used it as an excuse to flirt with paganism. For the weaker brothers, this probably led them to fall right back into worshipping idols. The stronger Christians may have objected "The meat is nothing...I am free in Christ!" "This won't push me to fall into sin again, I am strong in the Lord!" But would you, knowing the rest of the letter, call the church at Corinth a strong church? No! They have gone down in history as one of the most morally impure churches in the Bible.

This was a huge problem because, as Paul points out, they are testing the Lord. They cannot be part of the body in Communion and partake of the pagan worship ceremonies. Really, it came down to a question of their allegiance to the Lord. They were trying to hold onto two worlds that should not be held together. But even more than that, they were fellowshiping with Satan, placing themselves into the stronghold of the enemy. And it is worth remembering that verse that came before, "12 Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. 13 There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a

⁴ Mangum, Douglas, ed. *Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament*. 3 vols. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020.

way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. 14 Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry.”

Get out of the temple! Get away from idolatry! This isn't about you being cute and strong in your liberty, this is you rebelling against God and showing your allegiance really doesn't belong to Him. This is not about being “not a legalist”, this is about you showing the world you belong to Christ and His church. This is about fleeing from temptation and not placing ourselves in situations that would tempt our flesh. Romans 13:14, “14 But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.”

Application

Not being a legalist and making no provision for the flesh are two very different things. Sometimes we, who were maybe raised in a traditional environment, can tend to emphasize “We are not legalists!” I can go to movies, wear pants, listen to secular music, I am not a legalist! And I would say that is good! We are to stand fast in the liberty of Christ, but we must remember that our freedom is for the sake of loving others and avoiding sin. (Galatians 5:13)

While we must consistently call out legalism (one of the greatest insights I have received is that legalism isn't always about what you wear, but is an issue in each one of our hearts), we must ensure that we are staying as far from sin as possible. In fact, that is why legalism is avoided! Our holiness for Christ is fueled by the gospel and faith in Jesus and His love, not on our own merit or self-centered effort. Grace causes us to move away from sin not towards it!

We forget that liberty is for holiness! It is helpful to remember Paul's warning in the previous verses, “12 Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. 13 There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. 14 Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry.” One of the largest roots of sin in our modern day culture is the assumption that we are above sin. That we are somehow immune to the pull of Satan. But it seems here from this that there are certain behaviors we would categorize as “Christian liberty” that are inviting the influence of the demonic in our lives.

And I want to be clear, Paul's command of “Flee idolatry” is absolutely clear. American Christians, including Faith Baptist, can be so caught up in liberty we run straight to idolatry. This could be watching shows like Game of Thrones, which is basically porn, in the name of liberty. This is having “just one too many drinks” in the name of freedom. This is going places with lost

friends or coworkers you have no business being in. This is dating couples living together or pushing the boundaries of purity. I have even seen some live together before marriage, but “Pastor we aren’t having sex.”

I can skip church because God set me free from the law, and obviously Sunday night services must be from the law of Moses right? We can skip church for the summer because of sports because it’s more about my own personal relationship with Jesus. Church membership isn’t commanded, that’s legalism. Hopefully you can see I am being sarcastic. All of these make the assumption that we are stronger than we really are.

All of this is there to show that our freedom in Christ must be ruled by the law of Christ. We now have the privilege of living in the love of Christ and love for others. Idolatry is a poor substitute for our Lord. This is not about your conscience or mine, this is about living in the clear light of God’s commands. God’s commands are never fuzzy, and how dare we ever use the liberty of Jesus to excuse our sin.

Practically, is there any place, person, activity, etc. that would compromise my holiness? “Oh Josh, I can handle it.” You have a lot of Bible, but also a lot of people I have seen fall because they thought of themselves as strong, when in reality we are all weak.

Practically, this means seeing yourself as fundamentally sinful. Overconfidence is the mother of all sin. I can’t tell you how many come to me for counseling with this assumption. I have it figured out, I don’t need to grow, I don’t need the recommendation from the Bible, I’ve got this. Every time someone says that to me, they come back to the next session and say something like, “Ya, you were right, I got hit with temptation and fell again.”

But not only is Paul concerned about fleeing idolatry, he returns to the foundational lesson of this section, that love trumps liberty.

The law of Christ bids us to love our neighbor, which includes the saved and the lost.

Read vs. 23-33 - The final setting is eating in the home of an unbeliever. He interacts with the arguments of the Corinthians, saying while all things are lawful, not all things edify. The simple point is that our liberty can be used to harm others, including the lost! In the home of an unbeliever, they are permitted to eat the meat they offer, unless the host mentions it was offered to idols. In that instance they were to refuse to eat, and the reason is for the conscience of the unbeliever. Imagine how confusing it would be for a pagan to watch the Christians, who believe Jesus is the only God, eat meat they see as offered to a pantheon of gods. That would

not only call into question the allegiance of the Christians, it would also keep the lost from receiving Christ as the one true God.

I think this is very applicable to today. Are there any actions that you take part of as a believer that compromise your fidelity to Jesus? We are so focused on being the cool, relevant guy in the office we forget our actions have eternal consequences. Do your coworkers know there are certain places you can't go to with them? A night out on the town getting wasted? To a movie that is not clean, to a party that you know is going to be covered in sin. In those moments, the temptation that Christians often have is "Well, I don't want to be rude." If that's what you think you have missed the point. In an attempt to be nice, we compromise the name of Jesus, for lost people will only think "Man, Jesus isn't that relevant to him because he acts like everyone else." It could actually hinder someone from coming to Jesus. For pete's sake, the number one objection to the church is what a bunch of hypocrites! Maybe it's because they are right!

May we never give an uncertain sound about Jesus through our actions. May we be pure, steadfast, immovable in our holiness, even if it costs us friendships.

And Paul concludes by reminding them of the overarching principles of this section.

Read vs. 31-11:1 - Paul is calling them to live as he did for the glory of God. If you eat this meat, do it for God's glory. If you want to practice your liberty, love comes first to young believers and unbelievers. Would this compromise and immature believers' holiness or cause an unbeliever to be unnecessarily offended or confused by my lifestyle? Ultimately, all of this is rooted in a command to flee idolatry. May we never allow the clarion call of "No legalism" to uproot our personal holiness in Christ. The law of Christ rules the day, which means love for God and others comes first.

Take some time to do an inventory as a group through the discussion questions.