

Controlled by Love

1 Corinthians 10:23-30

Do you know that God uses trials not only to test our faith but also to reveal our faith? Besides the everyday trials of life, the events of the last couple of years, (i.e. elections, racial tensions, and the pandemic) have tested our faith. What has the testing of our faith revealed about our individual character and the condition of the Church in America at large? Have we risen above it all to shine for Christ? Have the trials of the last couple of years brought out the best in us or the worst in us?

Writing on the challenges of pandemics on society, one author and historian wrote, “The fact is that intense epidemics and grim public health crisis don't generally result in social renewal. Because they tend to make us fearful of those around us—they tend to drive us apart and bring out the worse in us. The author goes on to explain that the great plague in Athens in 430bc brought out great courage and virtue in some Athenians at first but over time the epidemic coarsened civic life. People became afraid of one another and abandoned all propriety to protect their families. The catastrophe was so overwhelming and not knowing what would happen from one day to the next the people became indifferent to every rule, religion, or law.” Yuval Levin

In light of this historian's assessment, let me ask you, how have we responded to this moment in history? Times like these are an opportunity to display that the church is not of this world, that it's not controlled by fear and marked by division, but instead that it's controlled by love and marked by unity.

Main idea: Counter-cultural Christians are governed by the love of God at all times in every area of their lives.

This morning we are going to look at five ways that counter-cultural Christians walk in love toward others, especially in regards to controversial matters.

1. Controlled by love not liberties

First of all, counter-cultural Christians are **controlled by love not liberties**. Remember that in the previous verses, Paul explained how our so called liberties in Christ can actually be a source of temptation in our lives. In the case of the Corinthians, some felt the freedom to eat meat offered by others to the worship of false gods. But although some believers could disassociate the eating of food from false gods, others could not. Therefore, their liberties became a stumbling block to other weaker and less informed believers.

In addition, indulging in certain liberties, like eating meat offered to idols in pagan temples where other sinful/cult practices occurred, could open the door to greater temptation and participation in sin and demonic activity. In light of this, Paul continues, *“All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up”* (1 Corinthians 10:23).

Notice that the translators used quotation marks for the repeated phrase, *“all things are lawful”* in verse 23. It appears that Paul is responding to what had become a **motto** for those in the church who held up their liberties in Christ as a license to engage in questionable practices. So, in view of the motto that had become a means of justifying questionable practices, Paul replies, *“All things are lawful’, but not all things are helpful.” All things are lawful, but not all things build up.*”

In other words, before a true Christian engages in any activity, he shouldn't just consider what his personal liberties are, but how his actions or inactions will impact others. Genuine Christians ask, will this decision bring others closer to the Lord or will it draw **others** away? Will it build others up or will it bring confusion, or doubt? Genuine Christians are not controlled by what they feel they have the freedom to do or not do, but instead they're **controlled by love** (2 Corinthians 5:14).

On the other hand, a person who feels like they must exercise their liberties, whether it has to do with food, or drink or entertainment choices, are enslaved to their liberties. Love for their liberties has taken the place of love for Christ. Remember, whatever takes the place of Christ in our lives is idolatry. Furthermore, whatever has become an idol, will control our lives. But when love for God, which grows by knowing His love for us, controls us, we will find more satisfaction in building others up and not just ourselves, even if that means giving up our rights and liberties.

This brings us to a second way that counter-cultural Christians walk in love in times of conflict over controversial matters.

2. Considerate of the needs of their neighbors

Counter cultural Christians are **considerate of the needs of their neighbors**. Paul continues, “*Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor*” (1 Corinthians 10:24). Like the church in Corinth, we are living in a society that is increasingly becoming self-focused and indifferent to the needs of others.

Remember that earlier we learned from one historian that “the great plague in Athens in 430bc brought out great courage and virtue in some Athenians at first but over time the epidemic coarsened civic life. People became afraid of one another and abandoned all propriety to protect their families. The catastrophe was so overwhelming and not knowing what would happen from one day to the next the people became indifferent to every rule, religion, or law.”

How many of you know, when people, who are not controlled by love, feel threatened, they go into self-preservation mode. And when people are in self-preservation mode, they’re consumed with protecting themselves even at the expense of others. In Mathew 24:9-10 Jesus warned that in the last days, because of persecution of believers, those who prove to be false disciples will turn on one another. And during these times Jesus said, “*And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold*” (Matthew 24:12).

Regarding the self-preservation mode that some people fall into, especially in difficult times or when their liberties are being threatened, Paul also wrote: *“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. “For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,”* (2 Timothy 3:1-4).

Brothers and sisters, we are living in the last’s days. And in these last’s days the hearts of those who are not controlled by the love and the Spirit of God will grow colder and colder. But times like these are also an opportunity for those who know the love of God to display before a watching world that the church is extraordinarily otherworldly—that it’s not controlled by fear and marked by self-preservation, but instead it’s marked by unity and compelled by a love that seeks the good of our neighbors even at great personal expense.

This brings us to a third way that counter-cultural Christians walk in love, especially in times conflict over controversial matters.

3. Conscious of the Conscience of others

Counter-cultural Christians are **controlled by love not liberties**, they are **considerate of the needs of their neighbors** and thirdly, they are **conscious of the conscience (weakness) of others**. Paul continues: *“Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience”* (1 Corinthians 10:25-27).

It appears that Paul is speaking here to the **legalist** in the church who **imposed** extra biblical standards on themselves and others. And in the subsequent verses it appears that he’s speaking to the more **progressive** who feel free to exercise their liberties without regard for others. We will see in a moment what Paul has to say to the

progressive wing in the church, but notice first of all his exhortation to the **legalist**: “*Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience*” (1 Corinthians 10:26).

Remember, some in the church, because of their freedom in Christ from Old Testament dietary laws, felt they could eat whatever they wanted without regard for themselves or others. But then you had the more **legalistic** that imposed on themselves and others extra biblical standards. Therefore, they avoided buying meat in pagan markets for fear that it was associated with pagan worship.

So, Paul is encouraging the **legalist** to be free from their self-imposed standards of right and wrong and buy the meat without bothering to ask any questions. They didn’t have to ask any question because it doesn’t matter if the meat was offered to idols. They didn’t have to ask any question because if you knew the truth, you knew that idols are nothing and all good things come from God. To explain this, Paul quotes Psalm 24:1, “*For ‘the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof’*” (v.26).

Notice that to free the legalist, who were binding their conscience and the conscience of others with extra biblical standards, Paul **informs** their bound conscience with biblical truth. It’s important to note here that to have a healthy conscience that is operating as God intends, it must be biblically informed.

Now to better understand why Paul is concerned about the conscience of believers, it’s important to define what conscience is and how it operates. The human conscience, which was **formed** by God, is an inward capacity to know right from wrong. But the human conscience, although it was formed by God, was also **deformed** by sin. And because our conscience is deformed by sin, in order for it to operate as God intended, it must be **transformed** by the Holy Spirit and **informed** by the word of God. And that is what we see Paul doing first with the legalist, who had biblical knowledge, but were binding

their conscience and the conscience of others with extra biblical standards.

Notice that in verse 27, Paul tells the legalist that if an unbeliever invites them over for dinner and they are disposed to go, to eat *whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.*" (1 Corinthians 10:27). Imagine the opportunity we would have to be a witness for Christ if an unbelieving neighbor invited us into their home for dinner. Apparently, it was these types of opportunities that were being given to some in the Corinthian church, but because of their legalism, they were asking unnecessary questions about the food graciously being served to them. And their questions, which perhaps turned into debates, led to unnecessary obstacles for presenting the gospel.

It's important to also note here that there's a **difference** between *personal convictions* and *moral absolutes*. We may have personal convictions that are derived from biblical principles, but are not necessarily based on moral absolutes. And having personal convictions that are not based on moral absolutes is not necessarily legalism. But it can be legalism if we impose our personal convictions on others, especially when they're derived from biblical principles, rather than moral absolutes.

To help clarify the distinction between personal convictions and moral absolutes, let me give you one example. When I first got saved, I attended a church where several of its members, including the Pastor had strong personal convictions about not owning a television set. Does the bible clearly teach that a Christian should not own a television? No. But the scriptures clearly commands the moral absolute "*to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage against your soul*" (1 Peter 2:11). And the bible also exhorts believers *to make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires*" (Romans 13:14b).

Based on these moral absolutes, some in the church decided that what was best for their families was not to own a television, which can

clearly be a source of moral corruption. Whereas others concluded that they could have a television in their homes, set limits on its use, and still obey the moral absolutes.

Now when it comes to matters of personal convictions, we must be truthful and careful how we present them before others, especially when they don't hold the same convictions as we do. Even if our personal convictions are not based on clear moral absolutes, that doesn't mean that the bible has nothing to say about it. Christians, who know the Bible, should be men and women of strong personal convictions.

However, often the subject of personal convictions can be confused with legalism. While studying for this message, I came across an article that helps to clarify what legalism is and what legalism is not. In this article, Bill Busshaus shared the following thoughts on the proper and improper ways to understand legalism.

Legalism is:

1. Distorting the gospel by adding conditions to free grace: Acts 15:1, 7-11; Gal.1:6-7, 2:11-16, 4:8-11, Gal. 5:2-4; Col.2:16-17
2. Substituting man-made regulations for the Word of God: Matthew 15:1-3
3. Majoring on the minors and neglecting the more important issues: Luke 11:42
4. Overly concern with the externals while disregarding matters of the heart: Matthew 23:27
5. Regarding with contempt or judging a brother based on matters of personal conviction: Romans 14:1-5
6. Trusting in ourselves that we are righteous based on religious performance: Luke 18:9-14
7. Hypocrisy, *the* leaven of the Pharisees: Luke 11:53-12:1

Legalism is not:

1. A zeal for the commandments of Christ: Matthew 5:19; I Corinthians 7:19
2. A ministry that teaches others to follow Christ in obedience: Matthew 28:20; 1 Thes. 4:1-2
3. Strong personal convictions (as long as they are not required of others): Romans 14:2,5
4. Man-made restrictions for personal protection from sinful habits (as long as we do not begin to view them as binding on others): Romans 13:14; I Corinthians 6:12
5. A zeal for good works: Eph. 2:10; Titus 1:16, 2:7, 14, 3:8, 14
6. Limiting our liberty for the benefit of others: Romans 14:15, 21, 15:2; Acts 16:1-3
7. Obedience: John 14:15, 23, 15:10; I John 2:3-5, 5:2-4

Now, although Christians who know their bibles should be men and women of strong personal convictions, that doesn't mean that they're justified in breaking fellowship with others or self-righteously judging others who don't hold the same convictions.

And certainly, if an unbelieving neighbor invites us to dinner, or accepts our invitation, it probably wouldn't be wise to get into a passionate debate about matters of personal conviction, like politics, which can become an obstacle to presenting the gospel. How many of you know, "You don't clean a fish before you catch it." Our mission as Christians is not to convert people to a political party, but to win people to Christ.

This brings us to a fourth way counter-cultural Christians walk in love toward their neighbor, especially regarding controversial matters.

4. Careful not to unnecessarily offend

Counter-cultural Christians are **careful not to unnecessarily offend**. After addressing the legalist, who were bidding their conscience with extra biblical standards, Paul's focus shifts to those who had a carefree attitude about exercising their liberties. Paul continues:

“But if someone says to you, ‘This has been offered in sacrifice,’ then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience— ²⁹ I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? ³⁰ If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?” 1 Corinthians 10:28-30

Remember, there were believers in the church, who because of a lack of biblical knowledge, could not disassociate eating meat from the worship of false gods. In other words, their conscience would not permit them to eat certain foods. And because their conscience would not allow them to partake, they could be offended by others who did partake or be pressured to also partake in violation of their conscience.

The bible is clear, that we should not partake in anything in violation of our conscience. And we should not force anyone to violate their conscience even if we believe that their conscience has been misinformed (Romans 14:14). Moreover, if we're living according to the law of love, we will be careful how we exercise our liberties so as to not unnecessarily offend, defile, or coerce a person whose conscience forbids them to partake in the same liberties as we do.

With this in mind, notice that Paul wrote, *“But if someone says to you, ‘This has been offered in sacrifice,’ then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience”* (1 Corinthians 10:28). Is Paul saying that what **others think** of our liberties in Christ should be the **deciding factor** for what we are truly free to do or not to do? No! Our liberties in Christ are not determined by the sensitivities of others, especially others whose consciences are not biblically informed.

However, we are to carefully consider the sensitive conscience of others when exercising our liberties, especially when we become aware that exercising our liberties may have an adverse effect upon others. Paul makes clear in verse 29 that the giving up of our liberties for the sake of others, is not about our own conscience, but about how the conscience of another may be affected.

Now, with this in mind, notice that Paul follows up his exhortations to give up one's liberty for the sake of the conscience of another with the following question: "*For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience?*" (1 Corinthians 10:29b). Most commentators agree that this question is not easy to interpret in light of what Paul just exhorted believers to do, namely to give up their liberties for the sake of the conscience of another. So, in view of the immediate and broader context, should our liberties, as Paul asked, be determined by someone else's conscience? Paul is not contradicting himself by these follow up questions. Rather, Paul is affirming that our liberties themselves are not determined by the conscience of another, while stressing that we should consider the conscience of others in determining whether or not we should **exercise** our liberties.

In light of this, it appears that Paul's rhetorical question here was probably asked to reaffirm what he stated earlier in the chapter when he wrote that there is nothing wrong with the food itself which was sacrifice to idols (1 Corinthians 10:26). Believers are free in Christ.

Notice also that in verse 30, Paul asked another related rhetorical question to reaffirm a believer's liberties in Christ: "*If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?*" (1 Corinthians 10:30). In other words, what Paul is saying here is that if a believer can eat meat sacrifice to idols because he knows that an idol is nothing and he does so with a thankful heart and a clear conscience before God, no one should judge them for doing so as long as they are not violating their conscience or the conscience of another.

But now, although one's own biblically informed conscience and not the conscience of another determines the limits of one's liberties, **the law of love** is the deciding factor in how a devoted follower of Christ will exercise their freedoms (1 Corinthians 8:1; Romans 13:8-10). Although we may have the liberty, the love of Christ sets us free to forgo our liberty for the sake of another person's conscience.

In his helpful article, Bill Busshaus also shared the following biblical principles that can guide us in matters of personal convictions derived from Romans Chapter Fourteen and Fifteen where Paul also spoke on issues of conscience.

Regarding matters of personal convictions:

1. We must accept one another when we differ on matters of personal conviction. 14:1, 15:1, 7
2. We must not be on a campaign to convert others to our position. 14:1, 22, 15:1
3. There are stronger and weaker positions. 14:2, 15:1
4. We must not judge others or view with contempt those who differ with us on these matters. 14:3
5. We are individually accountable to God, and will indeed have to give an account of our behavior to Him. 14:4, 10-12.
6. We must be convinced in our own minds; that is, there must be no doubt in our minds as to the acceptableness of our position. 14:5
7. It is possible for Christians with **differing** conscientious convictions to be pleasing to the Lord. 14:6
8. The goal is to ascribe to Christ His rightful position as Lord. 14:7-10
9. Don't let your liberty of conscience cause a brother to stumble. 14:13, 21
10. All things are clean that are not forbidden, but I can't proceed with a doubting conscience. 14:14
11. Do not practice your liberty in such a manner that will cause offense; this would violate the law of love. 14:15, 20
12. Temporal matters are not central to the Kingdom of God, but it is the eternal things wrought by the Spirit that should be our focus. 14:17
13. Remember that your personal convictions are between you and God. 14:22
14. Never violate your conscience. You cannot do so without sinning. 14:23
15. We should strive to be at peace, and to please the other for his edification. 14:19, 15:1-2

With these principles concerning personal convictions in view, notice that Paul concludes with what ought to be the ultimate deciding factor regarding matters of Christian liberty and conscience.

This brings us to a fifth and final way counter-cultural Christians walk in love toward their neighbor, especially regarding controversial matters.

5. Committed to do all to the glory of God

Counter-cultural Christians are **committed to do all to the glory of God**. After addressing both legalistic Christians and also Christians who were overly focused on their liberties, Paul concludes:

“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³² Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, ³³ just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.” ¹ Corinthians 10:31-33

Like we see in the Corinthian church, often what is dividing churches today are not issues concerning moral absolutes, but controversial issues, like mask and vaccine mandates. As important as individual liberties, freedom of conscience and personal convictions are to human flourishing, there is something greater that should override and control every decision that we make, namely the glory of God.

Paul concludes that *whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (v.30)*. What does it mean to do all to the glory of God? It means that because of God’s praise worthy attributes, like His amazing love, we are to do all to the praise of God and in a way that demonstrates the worth of God. To do all to the glory of God means that we are to live counter-cultural lives—lives that demonstrate the beauty of Christ and that draws people to Christ.

When Paul says in verse 32, *Give no offense to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God*, Paul does not mean that Christians

should compromise truth or disregard absolute moral standards to please everyone and offend no one. Our ultimate aim in life should not be to please everyone, but to glorify God. But when the glory of God's love in Christ is our **motivation** and spreading the fame of Jesus is our **mission**, we will willingly give up our rights and liberties so as to not be unnecessarily offensive.

As Stephen Um explained: “Christians can love their neighbors for the glory of God because Jesus loved us—his enemies—for the glory of God. We can disadvantage ourselves for others because Jesus ultimately disadvantages himself for us. There's no longer any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). It's immensely encouraging to know that because Christ has gone to trial for us, we are no longer on trial. As a matter of fact, the court is adjourned. We are free to love our neighbors and to glorify God. We're no longer in the courtroom. We are newly motivated lovers because our affections have been steered by the beautiful picture of Jesus going to trial in our place and giving us all the advantages that he had. He gave up his rights so that we might utilize our rights not to be [tribalistic] and abuse or ignore other people, but rather to lovingly serve them and be disadvantaged for their good. We now can live a life of freedom that doesn't abuse our liberties, but instead uses them for the glory of God by loving our neighbors.”

Conclusion

We are living in difficult days. People are lovers of self and pleasure more than lovers of God. But times like these are an opportunity to display before a watching world that the church is so extraordinarily counter cultural—that it's not controlled by fear and marked by division, but instead it's compelled by love and marked by unity.

O brothers and sisters, controlled by the love of God and not legalism or even our liberties, let us strive for peace. Let us fight to maintain the unity of the faith in the power of the Spirit by not seeking our own

advantage, but by being willing to be disadvantaged for the good of our neighbors and the salvation of the lost and do all to the glory of Christ!