

Restrain Yourself

I want you to imagine a beautiful scene. To the left is a picture of beauty: a little gingerbread house with children playing in the backyard. Surrounding the house and children is a fence that guards them from wandering too close to the steep cliff on the right side of the scene. At the bottom of the cliff are sharp rocks and crashing waves. If someone fell from the cliff to the rocks and sea below, it would be a great tragedy. Inside the fence, the children can do anything they want; they have free run and are perfectly safe as long as they remain inside. Let's give the fence a name: law.

One day, the fence is removed, and the children are given permission to go anywhere around their gingerbread house. They're warned of the danger near the cliff, but they ask, "We can go anywhere we want, can't we?" Yes, they're told, even to the edge of the dangerous cliff, though it's not convenient to do so. If they fall, it will be a great tragedy. Ladies and gentlemen, do you see how the children in the gingerbread house by the sea parallel the Christian life? The fence called law has been removed, which prevented us from wandering too close to the cliff called license. But just because there's no fence doesn't mean we ought to wander close to the cliff. Just because we can doesn't mean we should. Just because we're able doesn't mean it's wise, safe, or intelligent to do so. If those children want to enjoy their newfound liberty fully, now that the fence called law is removed, and avoid the tragedy of wandering near the cliff, they'll have to exercise self-restraint.

Do you remember Paul's guideline for the proper use of Christian liberty in 1 Corinthians 6:12? If not, please turn there. The Apostle Paul wrote: All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. You and I can do anything we want, so long as it is convenient for the cause of Christ and will not enslave us. But if you've been given liberty and there's no fence to restrict your activities, what will ensure you don't go too far, don't get too close to

the cliff called license? What will keep you from doing something that's not convenient or that will enslave you? Temperance. Self-restraint. Paul has gone to great lengths in this letter to the Corinthians to show the extent of our Christian liberties, and now he shows how to ensure we don't go so far with our liberty in Christ that we pervert it into license. Why? Because self-restraint is a critical ingredient to Christian service, as we'll see in our text, 1 Corinthians 9:15-27. Please turn there and stand as we read this portion of God's word together. Paul writes: But I have used none of these things: neither have I written these things, that it should be so done unto me: for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void. For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me. What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel. For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you. Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway. Please be seated.

Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul stressed the importance of self-restraint in two ways. First, by instruction in verses 15-23, he listed the

proper motives that encouraged him to practice self-restraint. Here are the five motives that drove him to exercise temperance. First, glorying (verse 15): Paul practiced self-control, refusing payment from churches he started, lest it diminish his ability to brag on God. He didn't want anything to interfere with boasting about God, not because he was paid, but because he wanted to. When was the last time you bragged on God? The second motive was necessity (verse 16): Paul preached because he had to, by God's grace, not for personal glory. The third was responsibility (verse 17): Paul was entrusted with the gospel, a dispensation to steward God's stuff. The fourth was liberty (verse 18): Paul knew liberty was fragile and used it carefully, like a precious item, to avoid abuse. The fifth, most important motive was souls (verse 19): Paul made himself a servant to all, using liberty to win the lost, not to avoid submission.

These motives drove Paul to exercise his Christian liberty with caution, care, and restraint—one facet of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23): love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance; against such there is no law. In verses 20-23, Paul lists the methodology involving self-control. Notice the variations in conduct (verses 20-22): Paul altered his behavior around different groups—Jews, those under the law, those without law, the weak—conforming without compromising to minimize cultural or religious barriers. He didn't become a Jew or lawless but acted "as" one to reach others. Notice the unchanging conclusion (verses 22-23): Paul became all things to all men to save some, for the gospel's sake, using liberty to lessen the distance to others, stopping short of license.

Paul next stressed self-control by illustration, comparing a Greek athlete to a committed Christian. For the Greek athlete, familiar to Corinthians, the prize (verse 24) is won by only one runner, a corruptible crown like an olive wreath that fades. Christians, however, all win an incorruptible crown by running the spiritual race. The payment (verse 25) involves temperance: athletes practice extreme self-restraint for a fleeting prize, while Christians do so for an eternal one—temperance followed by triumph. For the godly Christian, Paul (verses 26-27), his practice was to run openly, not uncertainly, like a

marathoner unseen until the finish. Like a boxer, he didn't shadowbox but landed punches, seeking submission. He kept his unruly body under control, not letting it dominate him, lest he be a castaway—disapproved, failing God's test.

Most so-called Christians use imagined liberty to avoid service, not to serve God or seek the lost. This reflects a lack of temperance, a deficiency in the Spirit's fruit. We know we have liberty in Christ, but restraint is crucial to avoid running hog-wild. Liberty is for seeking the conversion of the lost with temperance, without compromise. Adapt to the lost—skip the ham sandwich with a Jewish person, wear a scarf in Iran, delay yard work for a Seventh-day Adventist—not to conform them to you, but to bring them to Christ. Practice self-restraint to represent Christ effectively, whether tightening standards (cleanliness, modesty, emotions, vocabulary) or loosening up to show joy. Use liberty to bring folks to church under the gospel, not to justify inaction. Let's pray. Father, thank You for Your goodness and the clarity of Paul's words. Help us understand and apply Christian liberty to live, love, and serve You effectively, avoiding legalism and license. Spare us from those extremes, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.