

1 Corinthians 10:14-11:1

Most of you will know that our dog Kezia has no tail. It all happened one Tuesday night a couple of years ago. Judy and I had gone to the prayer meeting, but somehow we managed to leave the front door ajar. Kezia decided to go for a walk. She wandered up onto the Iffley Road, probably looking for us, and was hit by a car. She is lucky to be alive.

I thought about that incident this week as I reflected again on the church in Corinth. The passage in front of us, and indeed the whole of 1 Corinthians 8-10 which we have been looking at for some weeks now, speaks a lot about freedom – Christian freedom. But I wouldn't blame you for thinking, if you have been here that Christian freedom seems very complicated. Instinctively we feel that freedom ought to be easy and straightforward, but Paul seems to hedge everything he says with caveats, and qualifications, so that in the end it hardly feels like freedom at all. Is that what freedom is all about?

But actually if you think about it we all know that freedom is dangerous, as our dog Kezia. If everyone claimed the freedom to drive as they fancied there would be traffic chaos. If you left children to play freely by a frozen lake there would be a calamity.

Dogs and small children you restrain for their own good. One of the great duties of parents is to nurture their children towards increasing independence, training them increasingly to use their freedom well. Because freedom is dangerous. It is all too easy to exercise our freedom in a way that leaves us in bondage.

That is as true for Christians as it is for anyone else. Paul has been insisting again and again in 1 Corinthians 8-10 that there is an absolute radical freedom in being a Christian.

☞ *Christians are free*

In chapter 8 he insisted that the Corinthian Christians didn't need to worry about all the idols and temples to idols that there were in Corinth. They could go into the temples if they wanted to, eat at the temple feasts that were held, take meat home which had been offered to idols and enjoy a barbecue. The idols were nothing. They had no power compared to Christ. There was nothing to worry about.

Similarly in chapter 9 Christians are free to claim legitimate financial rewards for their work – even gospel ministers – and free to live in the lifestyle of their choice! That is normal and right.

As he puts it twice in 10:23

Everything is permissible
Everything is permissible

He is probably quoting the false teachers in Corinth, but he is up to a point agreeing with them. To be a Christian is to be radically free.

Free in so many ways. Free from endless rules and restrictions. Old Testament Israel laboured under rules but that, says Paul elsewhere, was because she was still a child. When Christ came she came of age, she got the key to the door, and she didn't need restrictive parental rules any longer.

Christians are free from fear of failure too. Yes we will stumble and mess up in our life, but there is no big stick waiting for us, no punishment, only the extraordinary unstoppable love of God as we return to him.

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus

Says the apostle.

As Christians we are free even from the fear of death.

There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus

Not even death itself.

We are free...so we must use that freedom well.

☞ *So use that freedom well*



V23

Now this is not some small print clause which takes our freedom away. Any more than saying to a young adult “you are free to make your own choices, but don't choose like a four year old would.”

This passage brings together a lot of what Paul has been saying in these last couple of chapters, and as we finish this series I want us to establish a few principles about how we can live freely as mature people.

The first principle is this – Think.

☞ *Think*



Vv14-15

In Corinth, as we have seen in previous weeks, there were all kinds of temples to different idols, and the Corinthian Christians were divided over whether they could go to those temples or not. Back in chapter 8 Paul had insisted that in one sense, for a mature Christian there was no issue – an idol is nothing so they could come and go as they please.

When Paul says “flee from idolatry” some people think that he is contradicting that. We don’t need to read this as a flat contradiction, rather that there are subtleties that mature people need to think about. Hence he appeals to their “sense” and “judgment” in verse 15.

Idols may be nothing, he is saying, but the whole Corinthian practice of idolatry is designed to capture hearts. Indeed there is an interesting parallel with Christian communion.



Vv16-17

We eat bread and drink wine at communion in part because that physical activity reinforces our union with Christ. It is a “participation” in Christ. And binds us together as one people

We who are many are one body for we all partake of one loaf.

It was not by accident that the Corinthian pagans had developed their own ritual feasts in their temples. They bonded them together. They bonded them to the idols.



Vv19-20

Don’t be naïve about your hearts. We don’t have pagan temples and idols but we have plenty of things that are designed to capture our hearts. Remember that is what

Paul was talking about last week when he said in verses 6-7 “do not be a desirer of evil, do not be an idolater”.

Large parts of the advertising industry are designed to capture hearts in this way. They are not selling a product they are selling a dream.

Back in chapter 7:31 of 1 Corinthians Paul encouraged us to

“use the things of this world as not engrossed in them.”

Think about it! Do not let your heart be taken captive by anything but Christ. Because only Christ will set you free.

What is it that lures your heart away from Christ? Is it money? a dream of a relationship? Worry? Fear of something – aging, perhaps, or death, or loneliness? Idols attract, or terrify to hold people captive, or both.

Flee idolatry – flee to Christ.

But Paul also says – relax

☞ *Relax*



Vv25-27

On the other hand it is possible for someone to become utterly obsessed with doing the right thing in unhealthy ways. In Corinth meat which had been offered to idols was commonly sold in the marketplace. “Buy it and eat it” says Paul, “without asking questions. You are free.” This is the Bible’s version of a “don’t ask don’t tell” policy. Similarly if you are invited to a meal – just go and enjoy it and don’t ask questions.

Don’t be obsessed by inadvertent sins. They have no hold over you. If you later decide that what you did was probably wrong you can seek God’s forgiveness and that is done. If you did what you did with a reasonable conscience at the time, then God is not going to be angry.

Get a sense of proportion. If something is in danger of capturing your heart – flee. But otherwise relax.

I am concerned about clothes made in sweat shops. There are some real injustices there, and I am delighted that people are campaigning to hold British manufacturers accountable. But frankly at the moment I simply cannot tell whether any of the clothes I am wearing was produced like that. So I am not going to be obsessive about it. If someone comes up to me and says “do you want to buy a cheap shirt made in a sweatshop” I will refuse. If a particular company is exposed I will avoid it. But I cannot eliminate all contact with sin – I make reasonable efforts and then I relax.

And then says Paul – love

☞ *Love*

Notice how the priority for Paul, as it has been before, is the conscience of the other person.



Vv28-29a

We must not do anything that leads someone astray. As Paul has said before “love builds up” and he went on to say in 8:13 that he would never eat meat again if it lead someone astray.

Is that some wicked infringement on our freedom? No it is simply the way of freedom. Our culture is full of iconic loveless and miserable figures. Scrooge in A Christmas Carol, Gollum in the Lord of the Rings selfishly obsessed with his precious ring.

You are not free if you pursue narrow selfish aims, you are enslaved by your selfish desires and they will leave you utterly miserable.

Think...relax... love... these are the ways of mature free people.

But then he concludes these three chapters with a set of summary statements which could be summed up like this – live life to the max.

☞ *Live life to the max*

Three things he says in these verses.

Firstly do everything for the glory of God



V31

Notice he says “whatever you do”.

There is massive freedom in this. He is not saying get involved in gospel work because this brings God glory. He is not saying live this particular narrow lifestyle because only this glorifies God.

He is saying enjoy a meal to the glory of God. Have a drink to the glory of God. Go on holiday to the glory of God. Go to work for the glory of God. Spend time with friends to the glory of God. Go for a walk to the glory of God. Enjoy your hobbies to the glory of God.

Every one of those things could become an idol. But actually every one of them is a gift of God to received with thankfulness and enjoyed by us with praise in our hearts.

Yesterday apart from preparing this sermon – which was hard labour for the glory of God – I dug the allotment, walked the dog, met about half a dozen friends on the street, went to view some wonderful paintings on view for Art Weeks, cooked dinner for Richard and Catherine Weston and watched Barcelona thrash Manchester United. Were those non-sermon things just a distraction from glorifying God, or a necessary nuisance, or worse still slightly sinful digressions from serving God? No! I praised and thanked God for all of them – he has made a wonderful world to enjoy full of wonderful things and wonderful human institutions from football to art – and I went to bed full of praise to God.

But there may be some painful choices too for the glory of God. Perhaps you will choose a less prestigious career path for the glory of God, live somewhere more difficult for the glory of God, lose a friend because of God, even leave your career for a life of gospel ministry – for the glory of God.

The question for a free Christian, is “how can I use my freedom to maximise God’s glory in my life?”

Then do everything with others in mind.



Vv32-33

I want you to notice one thing in those sentences. Paul says I am not seeking my own good but the good of many. As he has made clear in these chapters the “many” does not exclude him. In other words as he gives himself for other people it is not only them who benefit but that benefit comes back to him too. Paradoxically we lose nothing by choosing to love others sacrificially. Indeed we gain everything.

And then finally he sums these three chapters up in one simple sentence.



11:1

Christ is Paul’s model and he and Christ are ours. There never was a more free, attractive, fully human person than Jesus Christ. A man who was not swayed by all the money and power in the world. A man who lived simply and yet was rich in so many ways. A man who did not rise to a position of power and yet influenced millions. A man who was often troubled, and tired, and frustrated, and sad, and yet who was at peace, and full of joy, and utterly in control of his destiny. A man who was hated by a good number but loved by thousands upon thousands.

He lived life to the max.

I want you to know every single one of you here that if you are a Christian you are free – perhaps freer than you ever imagined. And I want you to live your life truly free.

Think – don’t let your heart be taken captive.

Relax – don’t be obsessive.

Love – find your happiness in the happiness of many.

And live life to the max – the glory of God.