

Session 5



An Outward Focus

THE POINT

Bring glory to God by seeking the welfare of others.

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Eleanor of Aquitaine—one of the most influential women of the 12th century—was Queen of France. She and her husband, King Louis VII, had a strained relationship, especially after their joint participation in the Second Crusade. While legend humorously suggests Eleanor disliked Louis's clean-shaven appearance upon his return, their real issues ran deeper—political disagreements, lack of a male heir, and personal incompatibility. Eventually, Eleanor and Louis divorced.

Soon after, Eleanor married Henry Plantagenet, who became King Henry II of England. This union shifted the balance of power in Europe, laying the groundwork for centuries of tension between England and France. Though the Hundred Years' War began nearly two hundred years later, it was fueled in part by dynastic claims that traced back to Eleanor's marriage to Henry—not a dispute over facial hair.

Still, the story—whether fact or fable—offers a valuable lesson. If only Louis VII had set aside his preference—and his razor. Facial hair may not be the issue in your life, but we all face moments where we're tempted to insist on what we want. In this passage, we'll see that one of the essentials for Christian living is to do what benefits others, even when it means letting go of our own preferences.

QUESTION 1:

When have you seen a minor squabble turn into a major rift?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

1 CORINTHIANS 10:23-24

²³ “Everything is permissible,” but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible,” but not everything builds up. ²⁴ No one is to seek his own good, but the good of the other person.

With these verses, Paul was wrapping up his teaching about food sacrificed to idols that he began in chapter 8. To drive home his point, Paul quoted a phrase that was likely a popular phrase in the Corinthian culture: “Everything is permissible.” And who wouldn’t like that phrase? It allows complete freedom to do whatever we feel like doing. Unfortunately, that was not just some first-century idea; the “anything goes” mindset rules today’s culture too.

What happens if someone suggests that a certain behavior is not good or shouldn’t be done? The other person will protest, “You can’t tell me what to do,” and rant about their rights and freedoms. Even in civil matters, Paul’s words, that not everything is beneficial, ring true. Our freedoms and rights must be exercised with a large dose of responsibility and consideration of how others are affected.

We must consider this principle from Paul’s context. He was addressing believers, those in the church. Paul had already referred to this statement—“Everything is permissible”—in chapter 6. In that context, Paul’s warning that “not everything is beneficial” and “I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Cor. 6:12) has a personal, individual ring to it. He wanted believers

to see how sinful living negatively impacted them. In chapter 10, the emphasis is on how our actions impact others.

The notion that everything is permissible carries an element of truth for the follower of Christ. Christ has set us free from all the laws and rituals created to tell us what to do and what not to do. Yet that freedom in Christ must be balanced with a responsibility that we have toward others. We are free in Christ, yet that freedom must always be exercised in ways that build up others—not harm them.

Paul’s reaction to the believers’ insistence that “everything is permissible” was to counter that not everything is beneficial nor builds up. Paul made it abundantly clear what is beneficial and constructive: “No one is to seek his own good, but the good of the other person.” Yes, we have freedom in Christ, but we must exercise that freedom in a way that builds up and benefits others. Paul told us earlier that “each one is to be careful how he builds” (3:10).

Few things damage the church’s witness more than how we treat one another. We’ll make far greater strides when we stop insisting on our own way and start seeking the good of others. After all, you have no “rights.” You surrendered

all your rights to Jesus, who calls us to follow Him in grace and love.

What has helped me in this regard is to remember that I am no longer my own. I belong to Christ. Jesus said, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Jesus told us to count the cost of following Him. When we come to Christ, we don’t just come to Him as Savior; we come to Him as Lord. He calls the shots. He owns us. We are no longer our own, but we were bought by Christ (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

This means I have given up my rights. Not my civil rights as an American citizen, but my selfish rights, which I exchange for following Jesus.

I’ve surrendered my “rights”—my insistence on what I want—to the lordship of Christ. Taking this stance doesn’t mean we make ourselves doormats for anyone and everyone to walk on, but it does call us to consider the preferences and needs of those around us.

QUESTION 2:

When have you seen someone set aside their own rights for the good of others?

1 CORINTHIANS 10:25-30

²⁵ Eat everything that is sold in the meat market, without raising questions for the sake of conscience, ²⁶ since the earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it. ²⁷ If any of the unbelievers invites you over and you want to go, eat everything that is set before you, without raising questions for the sake of conscience. ²⁸ But if someone says to you, “This is food from a sacrifice,” do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who told you, and for the sake of conscience. ²⁹ I do not mean your own conscience, but the other person’s. For why is my freedom judged by another person’s conscience? ³⁰ If I partake with thanksgiving, why am I criticized because of something for which I give thanks?

The teaching in v. 24 that “no one is to seek his own good, but the good of the other person” can be applied to countless situations in our lives, but Paul tied it to two specific situations relevant to the Corinthian believers: the purchase of meat in the public marketplace and the opportunity to eat with unbelievers. Often, meat in the market had been dedicated to a pagan idol—but not all of it. And without a label announcing, “Offered to an idol,” the distinction was rarely clear.

Jewish people had a way around this. One of the restrictions placed on them was to only purchase meat in kosher markets. Even today, most Jews will only eat kosher food, those foods allowed in the Torah, and properly slaughtered and prepared.

The apostle Paul, however, had no complications regarding the food in the public marketplace. Kosher or not, dedicated to an idol or not, food was food to Paul. Jewish families often cited Psalm 24:1 as a mealtime prayer,

“The earth and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants, belong to the Lord.” While they quoted the psalm as a prayer of thanksgiving, Paul used it to underscore the value of all foods. Meat is meat, and the fact that the meat may have been dedicated to a false god, doesn’t alter its reality. It’s still meat created by the one true God. The Corinthian Christians need not raise questions about the meat’s history. One’s conscience was clear to simply enjoy the food on the table.

All of that changed if someone explicitly pointed out the source of the meat. Paul used the scenario of sitting in an unbeliever’s home. Obviously, Paul had no problem with sharing a meal with an unbeliever. Some Christians today might want to guard their hearts and minds by severely limiting their interaction with unbelievers, but Paul’s passion for the lost was such that he embraced opportunities to eat with them. He spoke earlier in this letter against associating with sexually immoral people who claimed to be Christians, but it was OK to associate with non-Christians. “Otherwise, you would have to leave the world” (1 Cor. 5:10).

In Paul’s example, the believer is free to eat with an unbeliever—and enjoy the meal! But that freedom changed “if someone says to you, ‘This is food from a sacrifice.’” The injunction is not to eat the meat. What changed? It’s still just meat.

We might consider why someone felt the need to point out the meat was dedicated to an idol. It could be a weaker believer who hadn’t yet come to the conviction that the dedication to a false god means nothing. Therefore, for the sake of the conscience of that weaker believer, the Christian was to set aside his “right” to eat the meat.

QUESTION 3:

How can we keep from offending others unnecessarily in a culture that is so quick to take offense?

Another possibility is that the unbeliever who was serving the meal wanted his guest to know that the dedication of this meal was important to him and a matter of his worship and beliefs. This meal then, was an extension of his worship. For the Christian to know that, and yet eat, would compromise his own witness, confession, and commitment to the one true God. Continuing to eat would show acceptance of the unbeliever’s erroneous beliefs. Even worse, it could encourage the unbeliever to continue in his idolatry.

Paul would gladly eat any meal with thankfulness. “If I partake with thanksgiving, why am I criticized because of something for which I give thanks?” (v. 30) He had freedom—and he was thankful in that freedom—but he would also gladly set aside that freedom for the sake of others. He didn’t insist on his freedom or argue against the judgment and criticism of others; instead, he chose to set aside his rights “for the good of the other person” (v. 24).

QUESTION 4:

What are some ways our personal decisions could negatively affect other people’s relationship with God?

Engage

WHATEVER YOU DO

Rate yourself on each issue raised in this passage:

I seek to get away with what is “permissible” in the Christian life.

ALWAYS — REGULARLY — SOMETIMES — RARELY — NEVER

I work to seek the good of others above myself.

ALWAYS — REGULARLY — SOMETIMES — RARELY — NEVER

I focus on bringing God glory, and not myself.

ALWAYS — REGULARLY — SOMETIMES — RARELY — NEVER

I seek to build myself up more than focusing on building up others.

ALWAYS — REGULARLY — SOMETIMES — RARELY — NEVER

I seek what will benefit many, and not only myself.

ALWAYS — REGULARLY — SOMETIMES — RARELY — NEVER

Read through the answers above, and circle the area where you’d like to prayerfully focus your thoughts and attention this week.

Journal any thoughts about this area of your life:

1 CORINTHIANS 10:31-33

³¹ So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.

³² Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or the church of God, ³³ just as I also try to please everyone in everything, not seeking my own benefit, but the benefit of many, so that they may be saved.

As followers of Christ, our lives belong to Him, and every aspect of life is to be lived for His glory. Even how we eat or drink will bring glory to God. As it is today in our culture, sharing a meal in ancient culture was a way to get to know someone and interact with them. I have discovered that my conversations with people are enhanced when chips and salsa are on the table. But if I eat that meal in a way that offends or hurts those present, I have failed to engage them in a way that glorifies God.

In making his point, Paul said something that might appear contradictory to other statements he had made. In an earlier letter to the churches in Galatia, Paul wrote, “If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Gal. 1:10). Yet now he was telling the Corinthians, “I also try to please everyone in everything.”

Unfortunately, we have often acted like there is a dichotomy between pleasing God and pleasing people, as though they were on opposite ends of the spectrum. But they can go together! In other words, by seeking to please others, we can be pleasing God.

In Paul’s desire to please others, he wasn’t compromising his faith or practices. Paul was attempting to get along with people, build bridges, and ultimately seek their benefit by leading them to Christ.

We also must keep Paul’s words in this passage in context. Through our study in this session of 1 Corinthians 10, we know Paul was addressing the freedom we have in Christ—a freedom he was willing to set aside if his actions might offend or cause someone to stumble.

Is there a better way to seek to please people? If I’m striving to lead people to trust Jesus, I am pleasing God and bringing glory to Him. In conclusion, we can ensure we are abiding by the principles Paul outlined by asking ourselves two questions:

1. Does what I am doing seek the good of my brothers and sisters in Christ?
2. Does what I am doing bring glory to God?

Both questions must be answered in the affirmative. We can’t say our actions bring glory to God if they are self-centered. On the other hand, those actions that support and encourage others in their own walk toward salvation and their walk with Christ definitely honor Jesus. Pointing others to Jesus always honors Him.

QUESTION 5:

What does it look like practically to do everything for the glory of God?

LIVE IT OUT

How will you seek to simultaneously glorify God and seek the welfare of others? Choose one of the following applications:

- **Examine.** Evaluate your views on church, politics, and other areas where you hold strong beliefs and opinions. If you identify areas where you are “pushy” or insistent on your rights or views, seek God’s forgiveness.
- **Glorify.** Live your life on mission, living in such a way that you are intentional in giving God the glory in all aspects of your life.
- **Engage.** Engage with your neighbor or co-worker in a spiritual conversation. Invite the person to have coffee or lunch. Steward the relationship in such a way that you can paint an accurate picture of Jesus.



UNCONTAINABLE

by Angela Unruh



A RAGTAG GROUP assembled in one of our local church basements for lasagna and salad. It wasn't in the affluent part of town. The addiction recovery members related to one another under the fluorescent lights with the guarded warmth of people who carry heavy burdens. I had come to talk to them about the topic of giving and receiving grace.

I ate with them and chatted with a few people. Their measured conversation came in low tones. Not everyone wanted to talk. One 50-something woman with "Constantia" scrawled on a name tag sat at a distance from everyone else. She spoke when spoken to, in broken English, head down. Her demeanor announced to everyone that she was nobody and didn't belong there.

As the group finished their meal, they migrated to the cluster of metal folding chairs and settled in. To illustrate God's choosing to bestow unmerited favor on the likes of us, I'd brought a new all-in-one tool set in a canvas tool bag. I'd planned to wrap up my talk by saying that we need to put our gift of grace into use. With the group now at attention, I walked over to the woman as she sat by herself, and spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear.

"Constantia, this is for you." I held out the kit. Constantia looked up at me, a startled look in her eyes. "Me? You want me to hold it?"

"You may have it." She reluctantly opened her hands as I held out the bag.

"I give it back at the end?" she asked in a low voice, brow furrowed.

"No. I'm giving it to you." She pushed it out on her knees, her face laced with confusion and concern.

"Do I have to pay?"

"No. It's yours as long as you are willing to take it." People shifted in their chairs and watched with raised brows, wondering how this withdrawn lady was so flawlessly playing her part in

what appeared to be a skit about grace. I hadn't planned for it to look that way.

I thought giving someone a tool bag would be a brief and lively illustration about unmerited favor. I stepped back, wondering to myself how a woman I'd never spoken to previously could so fully articulate that feeling we have about God's gift to us.

"We didn't rehearse this. Constantia, it's a free gift to help us understand the grace that God chose for us when we didn't even see it coming."

Her eyes sparkled with moisture, and she grasped the bag tightly in her lap. (I had no idea that after we fleshed out grace in class, this woman would expand the illustration even further in her own life.) Then we read from John 1, how Jesus came in both grace and truth: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth. . . Indeed, we have all received grace upon grace from his fullness, for the law came through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (vv. 14,16).

Jesus, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, came to be with us before we even understood the gift He was bestowing. He lived with siblings. He got dirt under His fingernails. He submitted to imperfect parents. He suffered hometown rejection. All before He gave His life in the greatest human injustice in history.

Even in the Old Testament, God offered His presence and grace simultaneously. He tabernacled with His people. And when Moses asked God to show him His ways, God gave Moses grace and favor through His presence, saying, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex. 33:14).

God wrote perfect truth on tablets of stone, but Jesus called out the imperfection of sin by writing in sand. What grace! Shouldn't the sin have been written in stone too? How is it that we who are so unworthy of God's grace receive it? Only by recognizing His sufficiency to give it and acknowledging our need.

Because Jesus offered His presence in the midst of humanity's mess, He brought grace formed by truth. This grace came from Someone who knew the depths of need of each individual in His ministry, making the gift richer and more complete than the trite grace we often offer one another. Martin Luther said, "Preach a true and not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners."

Acknowledging our need makes it possible to cherish the gift of grace. Hebrews 4 says that for those of us who "hold fast to our confession" (v. 14), Jesus made it possible for us to "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace in our time of need" (v. 16).

The unmerited grace
that God gives us isn't
meant to be hoarded
or admired on a shelf;
it's meant to be used
to bless others.



In Romans 12, Paul wrote, “For by the grace given me, I tell everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he should think” (v. 3). Paul knew about grace. He’d received a large portion himself. He viewed himself as the chief of sinners (see 1 Tim. 1:15) and then, using God’s grace like we might use that bag of tools in Constantia’s lap, He put the grace to use in ministry. Peter, who had publicly received Jesus’s personal grace, reminded his readers that “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5). Peter testified in that same chapter that he’d written of the true grace of God, saying, “The God of all grace, who called you into his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, strengthen, and support you after you have suffered a little while” (v. 10). Just as grace transformed the once power-hungry, posturing Paul and Peter, the power of grace can change us too. The unmerited grace that God gives us isn’t meant to be hoarded or admired on a shelf; it’s meant to be used to bless others. I ended my tidy talk about grace. Constantia thanked me profusely on her way out, and we all went home. Several weeks later, I ran into the pastor from that church.

“Do you remember Constantia?” he asked me.

I nodded. “Of course.” He shared that Constantia lived in poverty and had since died. Her family members hadn’t known it would be their last Christmas with her. They recalled each receiving one gift from her: a single tool from a tool bag, no doubt the same one I’d given her at the recovery meeting. I pictured her diminutive figure bent over the weighty bag on her lap that night, her eyes glowing. Was she already making a plan to give away the tools? Suddenly, the object lesson for that night seemed to illustrate a point I hadn’t emphasized. I picture Constantia taking her gift home with her. She had walked that night. The bag wasn’t light. Maybe before she even arrived home she decided who would get the larger items like the tape measure or the hammer. Though

most of us would see a tool set as one item, she saw it as many. Her large gift became small gifts for many.

We were, by nature, children of wrath—in essence, we were first offenders. But in God’s great mercy, He lavished His great grace on us—not for us to enshrine that grace as evidence of our special status, but to humbly give out of the grace that He showered on us. Yes, our grace looks pitiful in the light of His generosity, but both receiving and giving grace are part of that holy calling He’s given us. Almost every book in the New Testament opens with a greeting of grace and peace. As receivers of grace, Christ’s messengers modeled the giving of grace. I agonized over seeing a gap in the message that I should have delivered. And I thought of Constantia, how alone she’d looked that night. Why didn’t she get a hug from me or others? Why didn’t she get the conversation she needed at dinner? I wondered if I should have done more. For a few days, sad thoughts swirled while I thought of this woman and the poignancy of the lesson she’d unknowingly shown me. And then I realized that part of my capacity to practice grace and truth was remembering my own need for grace—both giving and receiving it.

Not only is there the grace of salvation, but there is the everyday, ordinary grace that God bestows for error, for deficits, and for being in a human state of imperfection.

Our boldness in approaching God’s throne of grace? It is based on our faith in a sinless High Priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses (see Heb. 4:15). He extends His grace and ultimately reveals His glory to all of us who believe.

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