

Special Focus Session

July 3, 2022

INTERDEPENDENT INDEPENDENCE

1 Corinthians 10:23-33

No people are more independent than Americans. Our country was founded on the liberating principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all people. We will come to blows in defense of our individual rights, but we will fight alien armies to defend the rights of our neighbors, even if we disagree with them.

So when the Bible offers us “freedom in Christ” (see Gal. 5:1) we might act as though Christ has freed us to do whatever we *want*. But what He has actually done, is free us up to do what we *ought*. Just as the right to swing your fist ends when it reaches someone else’s nose, so Christian liberty ends when it infringes on others. The title of this week’s study, *Interdependent Independence* means just that. As individuals, our Christian freedom is always limited by the effects it has on others. Hence, believers must always be willing to yield to the “weaker brother” (see Rom. 14:13). The issue at hand in Rome was the eating of meat sacrificed to idols.

In person (vv. 23-24). Paul began his discourse by reminding his readers that they were free from the bondage of the law. Therefore, technically, the Jewish dietary laws and various rules dictating food were no longer in effect for believers. But just because something is permissible doesn’t mean it is *profitable* (v. 23). The original word has the idea of *beneficial for the task at hand*. Hence, some activities may be perfectly acceptable for a Christ-follower but should be discarded simply because they are not *helpful at the time*. The second thought is similar: just because something is permissible doesn’t mean that it *builds up*. While the following verse refers to others, this statement has no direct object. Hence, once again, some activities may be perfectly acceptable for a Christ-follower but should be discarded simply because they do not *build up* oneself, or other believers, or the church, or the kingdom. The general rule governing behavior then, is given in verse 24. One’s own good should never be sought ahead of the welfare of other believers. For reflection: Read Matt. 20:20-28. How does Jesus’ discussion with the mother of James and John relate to this principle?

In public (vv. 25-30). Some arguments argue well from both sides. Early believers differed on their view of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Some said there is only one true God, and idols are all false anyway. The meat that was taken to the pagan temples was good quality and the leftovers were offered for sale. Since they didn’t worship pagan gods, and those pagan gods were phony anyway, some believers felt the liberty to buy it openly and serve it to their families (see 1 Cor. 8:4-8). Others were appalled by that! Perhaps they had been saved out of those pagan religions and had been and delivered from those pagan rituals. They wanted no part in anything related to such worship and strictly avoided anything that might compromise their walk with Christ. So what does the responsible believer do? He yields to the weaker brother. Paul’s advice is specific. Where no matters of conscience are concerned, there is complete liberty (vv. 25-27). But when someone would clearly be offended by the behavior (whether involving food or some other activity), the mature believer should avoid anything that might offend the conscience of another, even if he disagrees. Verses 29 and 30 are difficult. Basically, I take them rhetorically: “Why would I set myself up to be condemned by a weaker brother? Why would I

use such a circumstance that would allow others to ridicule me?” In other words, it’s just not worth it! For reflection: *What kinds of activities and behaviors might fall into this category today? Do you find yourself abstaining from certain things for the sake of others? Do most believers?*

In praise (vv. 31-33). This section summarizes *why* it’s not worth it to offend a weaker brother. Back in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul said, “Food will not make us acceptable to God. We are not inferior if we don’t eat, and we are not better if we do eat. But be careful that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak” (8:8-9). Here, the apostle points out three additional reasons why the mature believer does well to yield to the weaker. The first is for *worship*. Whatever we do, we do for God’s glory (v. 31). The second, is for the reason of *worth*. We are to build up others, not ourselves (v. 32). The third, is for *witness*. It’s hard to win people to Christ when our behavior is selfish and offensive! (v. 33). For reflection: *The idea of “weaker” means less mature spiritually. How do we identify weaker believers? What are some inherent dangers of assuming we are the mature ones?*