

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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WHATEVER YOU DO

1 Corinthians 10:31 – 11:1

As a young man, Jonathan Edwards, the colonial pastor and revivalist, philosopher and theologian, set down a series of resolutions to guide his life. Among them was this two-part resolution:

Resolved: That all (people) should live for the glory of God.

Resolved second: That whether others do it or not, I will.

Jonathan Edwards understood that the purpose of life is to glorify God. He embraced what the Westminster Shorter Catechism affirms when it declares that the chief end of man – the primary purpose of your life and mine – is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

This is an intrinsically biblical principle, a principle set forth by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:31, where the apostle says: “Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”

Elsewhere, in Colossians 3:17, Paul says:

Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

The Message paraphrase says:

Let every detail in your lives – words, actions, whatever – be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.

Every step of the way. Whatever you do.

John Piper, the author of *Desiring God* and *Don't Waste Your Life*, the book our Young Adult Class has been studying this summer, says that God created us for His glory (Isaiah 43:7). Since that is the case, he says, it follows that every person – including you and I – should live for God's glory. Here is another way to say it: Since God designed us for His glory, our duty – our joyful duty, says Piper – is to glorify Him. We were stamped with the image of God and made to reflect and display the glory of God. We are, Piper says, “supposed to be like well-polished mirrors of God's truth” and love to the world, reflecting His character and glory, so that by looking at us and the fruit of our lives, others can see what God is like.

That is the purpose of life – your life and mine:

Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

The goal of life is not unflinching adherence to a prescribed set of rules and regulations. It is not the zealous obsession of a certain list of laws. The goal of life is not the satisfaction of our natural appetites, whether for food, sex, pleasure, power or wealth. The goal of life is not the assertion of our personal rights or the freedom to do whatever we want whenever we want. Nor is it the pursuit of happiness or personal fulfillment.

The purpose of life is much bigger than that. As Rick Warren would say, it's not about you. It's not about me. It's not about us. It is about God. As Paul says in Romans 11:36: "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things." Not some things. Not a few things. Not a lot of things. All things. "To Him be the glory forever. Amen."

So, whatever you do, in your eating and drinking, in your working and playing, in your vocation and in your recreation, in all the relationships and responsibilities of your life, let your highest aim be to bring glory to God.

Let's look for a few minutes at what that means in the context of what Paul is writing about in 1 Corinthians 10. The main theme of chapters 8-10 is Christian freedom and the proper exercise of it. The presenting issue Paul addresses here is the matter of meat offered to idols in the pagan temples of Corinth. The question on the minds of the Corinthian Christians was this: Could Christian believers in good conscience partake of meat which had been offered as sacrifices to a pagan idol?

In his response Paul affirms the freedom Christians have in Christ, but he indicates that Christian freedom is indissolubly linked to Christian responsibility. He cautions in 1 Corinthians 8:9 to "be careful... that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block" to those who are weaker or less mature in the faith.

In 10:23 Paul quotes the same Corinthian mantra he had quoted in chapter 6 (6:12) with respect to matters of sexual morality. The Corinthians, holding high the flag of freedom, loved to chant: "Everything is permissible." But Paul was quick to add: "But not everything is beneficial. Not everything is constructive or helpful. Not everything is good."

What Paul was saying was this: Not everything you have a right to do is the right thing to do. Though you may have a right or the freedom as a follower of Christ to eat meat sacrificed to idols, or to drink alcoholic beverages in moderation, or to watch certain R-rated movies, it may not always be wise or helpful or constructive to do so.

Christian freedom is never an excuse or license for indulgent behavior. Though we are saved by grace (Ephesians 2:8) and live under grace (Romans 6:14), "shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" Never! Perish the thought (Romans 6:1-2).

In the area of biblical non-essentials, in morally neutral matters where Christians have freedom, our behavior is to be tempered – even governed – by a loving concern for the well-being of others. In such situations, we need to pause and consider:

- Will the choice I make in this case help or hinder a fellow Christian whose faith may not be as strong or secure as mine?
- Will my action build up my brother's or sister's faith? Or will it become a stumbling block?

In cases like this, in the non-essentials of the Christian life, where God has not given us a definitive command in His Word, we are to seek not our own good, not our own pleasure or personal interest, but the good of others.

In 1 Corinthians 10:24, Paul says:

Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

This principle is amplified in Philippians 2:3-4:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Applied to the choices we make in the non-essentials where there is liberty, we are to live in such a way that, in the exercise of our freedom, we do not cause anyone to stumble, either morally or spiritually. The well-being of others trumps personal preference or desire.

With respect to the issue of meat offered to idols, Paul offers some very practical and pastoral counsel. First, he says in 10:14: “Flee from idolatry.” Though they lived in a pagan city with a pagan religious culture, Paul urged the Christians in Corinth to avoid the pagan temples and steer clear of their idol feasts.

Paul was saying that you cannot be spiritually schizophrenic. You cannot have one foot in the church and one in the pagan temple. You cannot have your heart divided between two conflicting and contradictory faiths. In 10:21 he says:

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too. You cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.

Here Paul is confirming and reaffirming the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:24. There Jesus said you cannot serve two masters. You cannot worship two gods at once. You cannot worship both God and money. Or God and anything else.

Many people think you can, but you can't. There is room for only one throne in your heart. Jesus desires and demands and deserves our total allegiance. You cannot serve both God and yourself. You cannot ultimately please both God and the crowd.

So we are to flee from idolatry of every kind and have nothing to do with it. Ray Stedman says there are three reasons why. First, any form of idolatry – that is, putting anyone or anything in the place that rightly belongs to God – will displace your love for Christ and compromise your commitment to Him. Second, any form of idolatry will arouse the righteous jealousy of God (10:22). In giving the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, the Lord said to His people: “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God” (20:5). Nothing arouses the jealousy of God like the wandering of our hearts and our pursuit of other gods. Third, any form of idolatry may become a stumbling block to others, both believers and non-believers alike. In 1 Corinthians 10:32 Paul says whether it is Jews or non-Jews, the churching or the unchurching, already believers or not yet believers, we are to do nothing that would cause anyone to stumble by our behavior.

The first part of Paul's counsel, then, is to scrupulously avoid idolatry. Second, he says it is OK for Christians to eat meat sold in the meat market, meat which was likely left over from the pagan temple sacrifices. As Eugene Peterson expresses it in *The Message*: “You don't have to run an 'idolatry test' on every piece of meat.” It is a part of God's good creation for you to receive and enjoy (10:25-26).

Third, says Paul, in 10:27-29, if you get an invitation to dinner, go ahead and eat. But if someone eating with you, whether your host or another guest, tells you the meat was offered as a sacrifice to an idol, don't eat it. Politely refrain. Not because there is anything wrong with the meat, but so that you will not offend or hurt the one who told you, whose conscience may be violated by your eating.

In other words, more important than the first century believer's freedom in Christ to eat meat which had been sacrificed to idols, more important than any choice we make in the realm of biblical non-essentials, is the well-being of others. When we choose to place the moral and spiritual well-being of others above our own desires or interests, we follow the example of Christ Himself, and God is glorified.

Our freedom in Christ to do this or that is not the highest value. We are to seek the good of others above our own. We are to be careful to do nothing to place obstacles in the way which would hinder or prevent anyone, Jew or non-Jew, from embracing the gospel, or keep believers – members of the church of God – from growing in grace and godliness.

Others above self. And God above all. Our guiding principle must be:

How can I honor God through this action?
How can I bring glory to God in this situation?

Notice that it is not inherently wrong to try to please others as long as in doing so we do not compromise the Word of God or violate the clear commands of God. Paul

acknowledges in verse 33 that he tries “to please everybody in every way.” He did not set out to offend anyone. But he also knew in his own experience the truth Abraham Lincoln expressed centuries later: “You can’t please all of the people all of the time.”

The glory of God is the purpose of life. To glorify God is the joyful duty of man. How, then, do we glorify God? We glorify God when we love Him above all else (Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30). We glorify God when we trust in Him wholly for our salvation and for all of life. We glorify God when we express the gratitude of our hearts to Him. We glorify God when we obey Him – gladly – in the big things and the little things of life. We glorify God when we put the interests, needs and desires of others above our own.

There is this also: We glorify God when we consecrate our work, our labor, our vocation to Him. About five months before his assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr. offered this advice to an audience of junior high school students in Philadelphia:

If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures. Sweep streets like Beethoven composed music. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well.

Even more, I would suggest, sweep streets with such a devotion to excellence that they will be moved to say: Here lived a street sweeper who swept for the glory of God.

There may not be any street sweepers or would-be street sweepers here today, but I think you can make the proper application to your life.

“Whatever you do” – in all the choices you make, in your eating and drinking, in your work and in your play, in all your relationships and responsibilities – whatever you do, let it be your first and highest goal to do it all for the glory of God.

Resolved: That all people should live for the glory of God.

Resolved second: That whether others do it or not, I will.

May it be so in us – in your life and mine – this week, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

To the glory and praise of God. Amen.