

Principles of Participation

I Cor. 10:14-11:1

Intro. What Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount was shocking to his audience. He introduced principles of holiness that were higher than they had been taught or ever imagined. An example is what Jesus said in **Matt. 5:40, 41 - And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.** This willingness to go beyond what the law required and sacrifice for the sake of others was revolutionary. Jesus taught that personal rights could be set aside to achieve higher objectives. The missionaries I kept company with a week ago are great examples of this. They have the same rights that any of us have. But for the sake of the Gospel, they don't claim these rights. Many of them surrender the rights and comforts we typically enjoy to win people of different cultures and ethnicities to our Savior.

Ever since the beginning of **chap. 8**, one controversy has been in the crosshairs. It's the matter of whether believers should eat meat that was previously been offered to idols. This meat was often sold in markets at a reduced rate. It was indistinguishable from other food items. So here was an opportunity for shoppers to save a few bucks. With the soaring price of donkey fuel and food and with the government raising taxes...everybody was clipping coupons and looking for bargains. Some may have rationalized the purchase of idol food because it was good stewardship. But the issue of "should we or shouldn't we" was dividing the church. To those strong in grace, it was a non-issue. They argued this way...since there's only one true God, idols are nothing. So food offered to nothing can't be something. But others who were weaker in faith and more sensitive to do's and don'ts, felt it was wrong. It violated their conscience. So this issue became a source of controversy and division.

Rather than immediately taking sides with either the strong or the weak, Paul put his finger on the deeper and more fundamental issues involved. And won't you agree?...beneath the surface of most arguments, something of deeper significance is off track. We react to the smoke when we ought to be extinguishing the flame! By way of review, let me simply mention the high points as they appear in the text.

- *First*, confident in their superior knowledge, strong believers were dining at idol temples with no concern for the impact they might have on their weaker brothers and sisters. The response to this indifference is **8:12, 13 - When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.**
- *Second*, Paul addressed personal rights in **chap. 9:1-23**. From his own example as an apostle, he presents a viable option. The option is to lay aside or forgo our rights. Just because some-thing is lawful for us to do, doesn't mean it's expedient or beneficial to

the cause of Christ. Love inspires us to set aside rights. What we're free to do can be set aside for a higher cause. And what cause is higher than the Gospel and the spiritual welfare of others around us? So this section ends with Paul's example...an example we should consider carefully. **vs. 22, 23 -**

I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

Now let me pause for just a moment. On a scale of 1-10 where 10 is the highest, how would you rate your concern for the spiritual welfare of those around you? Do you see people as God sees them... lost, headed to eternal punishment, and in desperate need of a Savior? Are you willing to sacrifice something for the benefit of a fellow believer or in the interest of strengthening your witness to an unsaved person? As we consider this we need to remember that Jesus laid down His life for us.

He put our needs ahead of His own. **Rom. 15:2, 3** says, - **Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself...**

Last week I read a pastor's honest confession. He said the shortest testimony service they ever had in their church was the night he asked his congregation to share something they sacrificed for the sake of someone else. Only one man had a something to share. He said he didn't order desert the other day because the guy he was with was on a diet. That's all they came up with. I think we have to admit...the sacrifice of personal rights for the sake of others and particularly for the sake of the Gospel is not our strongest virtue! I mean, do we really live and make our choices based on the Gospel and the welfare of others? Or are we more like the Corinthians than we care to admit?

- Third, at **9:24**, Paul turns our attention to self-discipline and winning the race of life. And this exhortation isn't isolated...it's closely related to debate about food offered to idols. Here's the connection: If we are going to be serious about getting the Gospel to as many as possible...if we're going to be effective in influencing as many as we can for Christ...we'll have to practice self-discipline. We have to train ourselves to put the concerns of others ahead of the selfish-ness that comes so natural to all of us. This innate tendency to be all about #1 can't be over-come apart from discipline and determined effort. When? Every day!
- Finally, as we found last time in **10:1-13**, this need to be serious about disciplining ourselves is underscored by a warning. From the example of Israel and the Exodus events, Paul cited five advantages God gave the Hebrews. Yet despite these great advantages, God was not pleased with the adult generation that came out of Egypt. He severely punished all but two of them for their unbelief and disobedience. Paul then made application to the Church. Since the Lord is **the same yesterday, today, and forever**, His standards of holiness never change. We should never think the spiritual advantages we have in Christ make personal success automatic. To come out a winner, we have to discipline ourselves with regard to five temptations Paul listed. We must not set our hearts on evil things / we must not be idolaters / we must not commit

sexual immorality / we must not test the Lord / and we must not grumble and complain. The Corinthians were victimized by these temptations. And these temptations persist today!

This warning section ends with encouragement. **vs. 13** reminds us that God is faithful. God is our number one fan and supporter. He isn't in the business of tripping us up. He's in the business of helping us not fall. **No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.**

So these are the highpoints in **chaps. 8-10**. The controversy over meat offered to idols was symptom-matic of deeper issues. The way the Corinthians dealt with this controversy exposed what was most important to them. The solution to the conflict was a matter of the heart. That's the thing about God's Word. God isn't content with outward conformity and a change of behavior. Through the penetrating truth of His Word, God wants to change our hearts. **Heb. 4:12 - For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.**

The believers in Corinth needed to get over themselves. They needed to realize they were put on earth to glorify God by changed lives and the burden to win others to Christ. If they got this right, their controversies would have disappeared. But as long as they maintained a "*me first*" attitude, they would persist on the wrong track / Christ's mission would be hindered / and utter selfishness would disqualify them for the prize. Just like the Hebrews before them, they were on track to forfeit God's reward both now and later.

In **chap. 8**, Paul initially seems to agree with strong believers who argued that food items previously offered to an idol was a non-issue. But after he exposed the deeper heart issues, he ends this 3 chapter section with a strong prohibition. **10:14 - Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.** He wants us to know that there's something inconsistent and inherently wrong with any participation in idolatry. Let's pick up our study at that verse.

1. Dual Participation - (the problem with eating meat offered to idols) - vs. 14-22

- **idolatry and oneness in Christ - vs. 14-18 - Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. Is not the cup of thanks-giving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar?**

Notice that Paul addressed the Corinthian believers as **dear friends**. Even though they were

way off track, Paul loved them the way God continues to love His fallen and wayward children. We need His kind of enduring love...a love that hates sin but loves the sinner.

The command of **vs. 14** is to **flee from idolatry**. The Corinthians we're to run to get away from it. In the first century, the feasts at an idol's temple were the most exciting events in town. It was good food at a great price in an open air restaurant! These temple feasts offered all the seductive enticements of wine, women, and song. If you wanted an exciting evening out, you went to the temple.

Now it's tempting to relegate idolatry to ancients and pagan societies. But as we found last time, since God is "the ultimate concern," anyone or anything that becomes that in our lives is a contemporary form of idolatry. God must be our "ultimate concern." The original Ten Commandments are not ten suggestions that have lost significance with the passing of time. **Ex. 20:3-6 - "You shall have no other gods before me. "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.** We are guilty of idolatry whenever anyone or anything becomes more important to us than God.

The key words in **vs. 14-22** are **participation** and **participate**. In **vs.15** Paul credits his readers for being **sensible people** who should be able to figure out what he was about to say. *First*, he reminds them that the communion cup represents our participation in the shed blood of Jesus. The juice doesn't mystically become the blood of Christ as some believe. The juice merely represents Christ's shed blood. In the same way, unleavened bread represents Christ's body that was without sin. As we partake of these elements, we testify that we have benefitted from the salvation accomplished by the death of Christ. We identify with the substance these symbols represent. And notice too, as we corporately participate in this ordinance, it signifies our union in one body...the body of Christ, the Church. The Lord's Table reminds us of the fellowship we have in Christ's body and blood.

The same was true for Israel on the Day of Atonement. As the sacrifices were offered, each Israelite identified with the sacrifice and with each other. Participating in the sacrifices at their Jerusalem Temple connected them to God and to each other as His holy people. As sensible readers think this through, we should connect the dots. We should begin to realize the inconsistency involved in partici-pation at an idol's temple while participating in the Lord's Table.

The inconsistency becomes even more apparent and extreme when we hear that demonic beings lurk behind the idols and are unseen guests at temple feasts.

- **idolatry and demonic involvement - vs. 19-21 - Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to**

be participants with demons. 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's a question for you...Who is the founder of idolatry? Where did the idea of other gods come from? Answer...it came from Lucifer who wanted **to ascend to the heavens and be like the Most High God**. Listen...every idolatrous system was perpetrated by the devil. Every false god has Satanic origin / endorsement / and backing. Behind every false god there lurks a demon. That means idols and idol worship can never be neutral or a non-issue for the child of God. The Corinthians didn't realize what they were doing. Believers who ate the food served at events at the idol's temple were participating with demons!

Now here's another question...Who is behind the movie and music industries and the production of media that is so anti-God, anti-Christ, and immoral? Who is the main purveyor of the sexual immorality, violence, drunkenness, and godlessness that entertains America? As Paul said to the Corinthians...we too are **sensible people**. So we should figure this out for ourselves. We should ask..."Can I in good conscience participate in and support such things? Should I allow myself to be entertained by media that is godless and patently against the Lord I claim to love and serve?"

In **vs. 21** Paul wrote, **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**. In Paul's rhetoric, it isn't that the Corinthians shouldn't participate. He wrote, "You can't do it!" The **cup of the Lord** and the **cup of demons** are polar opposites. Like oil and water, **the Lord's table** and the **table of demons** have nothing in common. Since participation at the Lord's Table signifies our union with Christ and every other believer, what does participation at the idol's temple signify? It makes us one with demons and with the crowd that disowns Jesus and bows to false gods. Since this is the height of inconsistency ...believers need to make a choice...which is it going to be? Will we identify with Jesus and His followers, or will we identify with Satan and his?

The challenge of these verses is very much like the ultimatum given by Joshua. Here's what Joshua said to the Israelites... **Josh. 24:25 - "But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."** Joshua challenged Israel to make a choice. Would they serve the impotent gods that are nothing but props promoted by Satan? Or would they serve the omnipotent Lord who loved them? May we all say with Joshua..."**But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.**"

- **idolatry and divine displeasure - vs. 22 - Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy?**

Not only is participation in idolatry inconsistent, but it arouses the **Lord's jealousy**. There's a juvenile and unrighteous form of jealousy that is characteristic of insecurity and immaturity. It's

always wrong. But there's also a righteous form of jealousy. Since we belong to God by creation and redemption ...since our relation to Christ is compared to that of a bride and a bridegroom...it's entirely right for God to be jealous when our affections are given to other lovers. When we remember who God is and what He's done for us, it is only right that we love Him supremely and exclusively.

And the last thing we should ever do deliberately is to provoke His righteous jealousy! That was the cause behind the severe punishments God sent on His people during their wilderness wanderings.

Despite all their advantages and the ways God proved His love for them...the Israelites played the harlot and chased after false gods.

So Paul asks...**Are we stronger than He?** Just in case you haven't nailed down the answer to that question...It's NO! You don't ever want to go into the ring with God. Are you kidding me? You want God on your side, not against you! But we say, "This is the age of grace and love. God never turns against His people." Oh yeah? Here's a NT verse - **1 Pet. 3:12 - For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.**" Why do you think we have the warning section given at the beginning of this chapter? Though saved eternally, God disciplines His disobedient children. He disciplines those whose life-style is out of harmony with His truth. This becomes evident in **11:28-30. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.**

In the closing verses of **chap.10**, Paul summarizes and applies two defining principles that should govern our conduct when it comes to debatable things like food offered to idols.

2. Defining Principles - (the principles governing Christian liberties) - vs. 23-33

- **Is it beneficial and does it edify others? - vs. 23, 24 - "Everything is permissible"--but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible"--but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.**

From his letters, we know Paul was big on the freedom we have in Christ. **Gal. 5:1- It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.** Unlike those who were under the OT system of Law, our lives are to be led by the Spirit and not regulated by hundreds of specific commands. The primary law that governs Christian behavior today is the law of love. As we know from **Gal. 5:14 - The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."** So many things are **permissible** to us under grace. Yet while doing a thing is **permissible**, we must train ourselves to ask if doing it is **beneficial**. If I do this, will it enhance

my own spiritual life and will it promote something good in the lives of others who see me or know that I'm doing it? Will doing it edify them?...that is, will it build them up or will it tear down something God is building in them? Will it help an unsaved friend come to Jesus, or will it hinder them from coming? If we really love others and put their interests above our own, these are the questions we'll ask. The answers must then govern our behavior. To flesh this out, Paul presents three situations...situations where these principles apply.

- **Three situations:**

1. vs. 25, 26 - (food sold in the marketplace) - Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it."

This situation is the easiest of the three and I love it. If meat sold in the market isn't marked POTI,

(or Previously Offered To Idols), consider it fair game. Don't ask...don't make a fuss about it... don't show off your super-spiritual sensitivity. Just buy it / take it home / cook it / and eat it. Why?...because **"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it."** "It's all good!" God gave it to us to enjoy.

2. vs. 27 - (dinner served at an unbeliever's home) - If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of con-science.

The setting for the second situation is dinner at an unbeliever's home. Now some of us might be thinking to ourselves...*"You'd never catch me dead in that situation! I only dine with Christian friends!"* Now listen to me...maybe that's one reason more people aren't being won to Christ. Perhaps we've

taken separation to mean isolation. When I was in Atlanta, one of the BMW field directors made a comment that went like this. *"The church in America is slightly schizophrenic. We send missionaries to foreign fields with financial and prayer support expecting them to make contact with numerous unbelievers. But stateside, we huddle together and the only people we engage are saved already."*

Here, Paul envisions a situation of a believer dining at the home of an unbeliever. He assumes the believer is interested in winning his neighbor to Christ. Should the believer ask if the roast they serve him is Kosher, USDA, or POTI meat? Paul's answer is pretty clear...don't you dare ask! This is common sense and good manners. Can you think of a more effective way to insult your hostess than asking her where she bought the entrée? What would you do if she told you it was previously offered to an idol? Would you turn up your nose and refuse to eat it? That's a great plan! You're right on track to win friends and influence people! NO!... Paul says, **eat whatever is put before you** and don't give it a second thought. This makes total sense doesn't it? But there's a third situation.

3. vs. 28-30 - (food declared to have been an idol offering) - But if anyone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the

man who told you and for conscience' sake--the other man's conscience, I mean, not yours. For why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience? If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?"

This the setting for this situation could be the marketplace or while dining at an unbeliever's home. He writes, If **anyone** (weak believer or unbeliever) informs you that the meat is POTI... don't eat it. They wouldn't bring it up if it wasn't an issue to them. But in their mind, it obviously was an issue! Their conscience is sensitive about it. In their view, it's wrong to eat POTI meat.

But you say, "My conscience is clear! I will lose no sleep over it. An idol is nothing! The only consequence of eating POTI meat is an occasional belch, but that happens with USDA finest too! Why should my freedom be judged as sinful by some weak Christian who really needs to grow beyond these silly hang-ups? If I can honestly thank God for something, why should anyone think less of me? Have you ever felt that way? I have! And that's how the Corinthians felt about it. Because they felt it was OK, they didn't care what impact the exercise of their liberties had on anybody else!

Now here's the point...the impact our participation has on the other guy's conscience matters...it matters a great deal. The exercise of our personal liberties can cause a weaker believer to stumble. It may even hinder an unbeliever from coming to Christ. How we handle these controversial matters turns us inside out. They expose our hearts. How can we say we love people and are concerned about their spiritual welfare while being unconcerned about the impact our behavior has on them? We must each take these principles home with us. Since eating meat offered to idols isn't an issue today, we need to ask God to show us how these principles apply today in our cultural setting. But there's one final principle for governing the exercise of Christian liberties.

- **Does it bring glory to God, cause anyone to stumble, and does it further the Gospel? - vs. 31-33 - So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God--even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.**

These final verses summarize the teaching of **chaps. 8-10**. Whatever the liberty happens to be, I need to train myself to ask the question, "*Will doing this bring glory to God?*" In other words, "*If I do this, will it show others who God is or will it somehow obscure the truth about Him?*" To put this in terms Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mt...*If we respond to a lawsuit the way everybody does, how have we glorified God? If we go the distance the law requires and not a step further, how does that glorify God?*" Answer...it doesn't. Our response is ordinary, common and just what you would expect. Holiness on the other hand, is always out of the ordinary, uncommon, and unexpected. And we can be sure of this...anything we do that causes somebody to stumble doesn't glorify God either. Anything we do that's all about me can't glorify God. It can't glorify God if we refuse to give thought to the welfare of others. And

finally, it can't glorify God if doing it doesn't help unbelievers around us see Christ and want to be saved!

The principles of participation all revolve around God and others whether they're saved or unsaved. The driving purposes behind the principles are glorification / edification / and evangelization. So let me ask you...If we had a testimony service the focused on things we sacrificed for the sake of others and their salvation, how long would it last? How much would we have to share? May God help us to be doers of His word and not hearers only.

Let me conclude with a companion verse from Romans. **Rom. 15:2, 3 - Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself...**