

Q. What does Paul mean when he says that all things are lawful?

A. In 1 Corinthians, Paul is often responding to questions and statements the Corinthian Christians had written to him in an earlier letter. This is what he is doing in 1 Corinthians 6:12. So, he quotes what they said to him, and then he responds to it: "'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are expedient. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be brought under the power of anything."

In other words, the Corinthians had told Paul in a letter that they believed the principle, "All things are lawful for me." Paul's response is basically, Okay, you say all things are lawful, but I say that not all things are expedient and I will not be brought under the power of anything. Paul is correcting the Corinthians' misconception of our liberty as believers under the New Covenant. We are free from the Law of Moses, we are free from condemnation, we have enormous freedom, but we are not free to break the law of love—love toward God and toward our fellow man.

We know from 1 Corinthians 5, that the Corinthian assembly was guilty of allowing a member to have a continuing sexual relationship with his father's wife (probably his stepmother). They did this because they considered it broadminded, an attitude they were proud of. In chapter 6, we get the idea that perhaps they based their broadmindedness on the principles, "All things are lawful for me," and, "Foods for the belly, and the belly for foods" (verse 13). In other words, from the correct doctrine that all foods are lawful, they wrongly extrapolated that all sexual behavior is lawful. God made food for the belly, and the belly for food, therefore, perhaps they thought that God made sex for the body and the body for sex without limitation!

We have to admire Paul for his patience. Instead of lambasting them, he unwearingly sticks close to their reasoning so they will understand, and he explains to them that, when it comes to sex, the principle is this: "The body is not for sexual immorality, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body" (verse 13). He then further explains what can be summed up this way: Sexual immorality is a sin against

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one's own body; our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit; thus, sexual immorality is a sin against the Holy Spirit. We are to avoid sexual immorality and glorify God in our body and spirit which are God's (verses 18-20).

Going back to verse 12, I want to mention that "lawful" comes from the Greek word, *exesti*, which literally means "it is right or permitted." "Expedient" is from *sumpherō*. It means, "what comes together (for good)" and, thus, "what is profitable." "Brought under the power of" is from the word, *exousiazō*, "permissible authority" or "control." This word comes from *exousia*, which means "authority" or even "jurisdiction." And *exousia*, in turn, comes from *exesti*, the word that we just saw is translated as "lawful." Paul is making a play on words: You say that all things are permissible, but I say that not all things come together for good; you say that all things are permissible, but I say I will not allow anything to dominate me with its permission. The *New American Standard Bible* translates the verse as, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything." If we are not careful, we can allow our freedom to become our slave.

Paul repeats this teaching in 1 Corinthians 10:23: "'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are profitable. 'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things build up." In the Greek, the first part of this verse is identical to the first part of 1 Corinthians 6:12 ("expedient" in 6:12 and "profitable" in 10:23 are both from *sumpherō*). At the end of 10:23, "build up" comes from the Greek word, *oikodomeō*, which literally means "to build a house." So, all things are lawful, but not all things build up the house.

The specific issue Paul is addressing in this chapter is whether Christians can eat meat that has been offered to idols. Paul prefaces the argument with an account of the Israelites in the wilderness who fell to idolatry when Moses was away from them on the mountain longer than expected. They "sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play" and committed sexual immorality and idolatry (verses 7 and 8). Make no mistake about it. The actions of the Israelites at that time were a type of and warning for Christians in our time. Jesus has been gone a long time. Let's eat and drink and rise up to play (see "Bread and Circuses") (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/breadandcircuses.htm>). But Paul admonishes, "Let us not test Christ, as some of them tested, and perished by the serpents. Don't grumble, as some of them also grumbled, and perished by the destroyer. Now all these things

happened to them by way of example, and they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come" (verses 9-11).

You don't think this can happen to us today? You don't think you can fall? "Therefore let him who thinks he stands be careful that he doesn't fall," Paul warns in verse 12. We may be Christian, but we are still human, and we can fall into temptation. We must be careful. In the verses that follow, Paul talks about idolatry, and we should apply what he is saying to whatever idolatry we are tempted by.

Then we come to verse 23 where the Corinthians say that all things are lawful for them. Paul once more meets them on the ground of their argument and points out that what may be lawful may still not be profitable and build up the house or edify. The crux is found in verse 24: "Let no one seek his own, but each one his neighbour's good."

It is certainly fine for me to eat meat that has been offered to an idol if I don't know that. But if someone informs me of that fact, then I am not to eat it because doing so may cause an elect person present to think I am eating the meat because I believe the idol to be real and that it has made the meat special to me. This could cause that person to stumble in his walk to Christ. So, considered narrowly, I have the liberty to eat meat offered to an idol, but the larger perspective reveals that I might offend someone and, thus, eating that meat is a violation of the royal law, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (James 2:8). Yes, I have liberty, but I must at all times have others' welfare uppermost in my decision-making.

In our age of intense, hot-blooded, and sometimes aggressively guarded independence, we do well to keep Paul's ending words in this chapter: "Give no occasion for stumbling, either to Jews, or to Greeks, or to the assembly of God; even as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved" (1 Corinthians 10:32-33).

Back in verses 16 and 17, Paul reminded us that when we take the Lord's Supper, it is a sharing (*koinōnia*—"communion") of the blood and the body of Christ, "Because there is one loaf of bread, we, who are many, are one body; for we all partake of the one loaf of bread." Fierce individualism, despite the influence the "American spirit" has had on modern Christianity, is not a Christian virtue.

In summary then, what did Paul mean when he repeated the Corinthians' claim that all things are lawful? He meant that, since we

are not under the law but under grace (Romans 6:14), and since there is no condemnation for those in Christ (Romans 8:1), we can indeed say that all things are lawful—BUT NOT those things that violate the law of love. How can we as Christians do those things that are harmful to others or turn them aside from the truth (offend them)?

Yes, Paul taught, "For sin will not have dominion over you. For you are not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14). But he went on to say, "What then? Shall we sin, because we are not under law, but under grace? May it never be! Don't you know that to whom you present yourselves as servants to obedience, his servants you are whom you obey; whether of sin to death, or of obedience to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that, whereas you were bondservants of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching whereunto you were delivered. Being made free from sin, you became bondservants of righteousness" (Romans 6:14-18). We are free from the law, and all things are lawful, but we are bondservants of righteousness, obeying from the heart so that we willingly adhere to the law of love.

For you, brothers, were called for freedom. Only don't use your freedom for gain to the flesh, but through love be servants to one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in this: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Galatians 5:13-14

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