

1Corinthians 6:12-20

“Am I Free?”

Let’s have a show of hands. Have you ever had to pick up the phone real quick to solve a problem? **(pause)** Have you ever had to write a carefully worded e-mail to, “put out a fire”? **(pause)** Have any of you ever written a letter to a newspaper to voice a concern, or to a store to complain about a broken product or poor customer service? **(pause)** Well, that is exactly what is going on here. Paul is writing to the church in Corinth to put out a few fires and to try to set this church straight.

Let’s begin with this. There were no cell phones. There was no e-mail. They did not even have a post office in the first century A.D. If a person needed to send information to another town they had to write a letter and then send someone to carry the letter to the next town. Aside from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Revelation, all of the New Testament is made up of letters. These letters were sent from one of the apostles to resolve a problem in a specific church, and then the letters were circulated from town to town. These letters from the apostles were almost always written to correct a false teaching or bad theology, or to build up the people in a specific situation.

One of the theological fires burning at Corinth had to do with a group of folks whose faith was Christian-“like,” or Christian-“ish.” This group of people were called Gnostics. The Gnostics would argue that their version of the Gospel was the only correct one. Paul was writing to set the people at Corinth straight. The Gnostics believed a lot of crazy stuff. They would take something Jesus said and then twist it out of context to justify their own bad behavior. Please keep in mind the Bible as we know it today did not exist at the time Paul is writing. The Law, the Writings and the Prophets – what we call the Old Testament was well agreed upon and considered standard or cannon by the first century. There was no changing the Old Testament. What we call the New Testament was still being written down. The editorial process was still in full swing. God was working in tremendous ways at that time in history. Paul’s first letter to Corinth came some 20-30 years after Christ’s death. There were a lot of people who had only been told what Jesus said. Some were the children of someone who had heard Jesus speak, or who had seen the miracles. The fact that so much of what Jesus said had not been written down and accepted as cannon meant there was an opportunity for the Gnostics to try to bend the things Jesus said.

For example, the Gnostics took Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 15:10-20 and twisted it. In Matthew 15:10-11 Jesus says,

“Hear and understand: not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth defiles a man.”

This is the teaching Jesus gave publicly. The Gnostics took this teaching and ran with it. Somehow, the Gnostics came up with the idea that if it does not matter what you eat, or what goes into your body then it must not matter if someone is promiscuous. If it does not matter what goes into the body then it must be okay to sleep around. **(pause)** Yeah. I am still not sure how they got there. But that is what they were teaching.

Word of this practice and teaching in Corinth was sent to Paul by letter. Paul writes back this first letter to the Corinthians and devotes this section of the letter to addressing this issues of food and fornication. If you read this section carefully you can almost hear the Apostle Paul say, “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!?! JESUS DID NOT SAY THAT!!!! I DID NOT TEACH YOU THAT!!” The Gnostics had twisted Jesus’ teaching to justify their own bad behavior. Please. Please do not look at this passage and think it is just about eating healthy and not

sleeping around. The Apostle Paul is trying to correct this Gnostic teaching, but Paul is also trying to make a deeper point.

Paul knew a lot about following the rules. If we look at Paul's life in ministry as recorded in the book of Acts Paul's ministry shifts away from rule following. Don't get me wrong. The Law is still important. The Law is absolutely important, but the Law is no longer the end all and be all for Paul. Here's some proof of Paul's growth. Paul writes, "But he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (1Cor 6:17). Paul is not talking about the Law of Moses. Paul is talking about the God the Holy Spirit. That is how Paul can say, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful," and, "I will not be enslaved by anything" (1Cor 6:12). I think Paul discovered there is more to a relationship with God than mere rule following. Obedience for obedience sake is not what God is after. God wants a relationship with us. Paul had discovered just how great a relationship with God can be. When Paul received word the church in Corinth was getting hung up on what they eat, and was running around being promiscuous I think Paul recognized all of this rule bending and acting out was a symptom of a deeper problem. Where was the Corinthian's relationship with God?

Paul uses some pretty clever word play to try to help the Corinthians figure this out. The Gnostics had convinced at least some of the Corinthians it was okay to sleep around with prostitutes. This behavior is not what God intended. The reason this behavior is bad is not just because it breaks the Law of Moses. This behavior is bad because it puts the Corinthian's grasping for physical satisfaction ahead of their desire for God. God is calling out to them, and their immorality was getting in the way of God's reaching out to them. When we choose to satisfy ourselves first and put God last we are putting a wall up between ourselves and God. **(pause)** To put it another way we are chaining ourselves to a wall in a basement to keep ourselves from running back to God. The longer we are down there the colder it gets. The floor gets harder. The chains cut into our wrists. It's miserable to be cut off from the love of God. Paul declares, "I will not be enslaved by anything." Sisters and brothers why would we say anything different? **(pause)** Why would we behave in any way different?

The truth is the more we grow in our relationship with God the more we find ourselves obeying the Law of Moses and more. It stops being about rule following and starts being about growing closer to God. When Paul says, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful," it likely means, Yes, Paul can do as he pleases, but when Paul chooses to do things which take Paul away from the Love of God it takes Paul away from what Paul really wants most. Those things which do not draw Paul closer to God stop being helpful.

So here's the question for us. Are the choices we are making taking us further away from God? Are we becoming enslaved to our passions, preferences, and wants? Or are we making choices which bring us closer to God? In your experience which is better? Which choices have brought more life and love into your life? Which choices have brought you pain, and left you feeling miserable? Think about that this week. The season of Lent is coming? What might need to be changed? What choice might need to be made? Please, ask yourselves this question. What am I enslaved to? What can I not do without? What is getting in the way of my relationship with God? What might I do to grow in my relationship with God? What works for me, and how might I grow even closer to God? With the season of Lent right around the corner it is time to ask ourselves. "Am I really free?"

In the name of Jesus Christ,
Amen.