Sermon: 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

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The reading as we have it raises some questions. Lawfulness is under consideration, but “*All things are lawful”* sounds very permissive. “Give no offense” seems to be a weak basis for assessing correctness: to *laissez faire*. Can this really be a general rule for deciding behaviour? While “doing all for the Glory of God” seems generally a good objective, trying to please everybody (all the time) is also weak and surely known to be a recipe for disaster. Are we able to make up the rules as we go along?

What is our context here and how are these rules apparently being made up?

Corinth was a very multicultural and vibrant port with all that that implies: it became a byword for a dodgy place. The letter we know as 1 Corinthians was part of an exchange between Paul and Christians there. It seems to have been at least Paul’s second reply. The letters provide answers to questions that they had raised and to problems he perceived in their churches. This one covers problems of church factions, sexual behaviour, the role of women, how to behave at the Eucharist and, as we see in the reading, food offered to idols. One of our problems is that we only have one side of the exchange: Paul’s immediate answers. We do not have the questions and any earlier discussions on them.

In Old Testament times, things were in one sense easy and clear for the Jews. They had an agreement with God. He had rescued them out of Egypt, and brought them safely into the Promised Land. This because he loved them. In return they worshiped only him and they kept his laws. He had rescued and loved – they worshiped and obeyed. Simple, clear deal.

For Paul and the Christians, God had again rescued them, through Christ's sacrifice, from sin and judgement. How must they respond? Not by keeping the laws – that had been the old arrangement and it was scrapped. They must instead live act and speak like those who belong to God. "Obedience of faith" it can be called. Under the new deal he can rescued and they are obedient to Christ

Under the old deal, and in what had become a relatively simple and stable social setup, there was a law for everything: 613 laws in the 5 books and then piles of case law carefully accumulated over the years. Now there was, in effect, just two:

And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.  
This is the great and first commandment.  
And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.  
(Mat 22:37)

New questions arise, particularly in multicultural Corinth. It had many temples (we have done a lot of archaeology there and know quite a lot about what it was like and how it ran). There were regular animal sacrifices in these temples and there was always meat left over from them. Should Christians they eat it? Some people knew that the "gods" had no real existence - so what did it matter? If there were no gods there was no sacrifice – the meat was fine to eat. There were, however, those who felt strongly that they should not eat it. What did the law say? Well, they did not have a specific law for this. It seems that they had asked Paul about this issue between them in an earlier letter and he replied here in 1 Corinthians.

We only have one side of the exchange remember - and you may not have a written version of the reading to look here. Pauls answer needs to be looked at very carefully. "*Everything is lawful*" is in quotes. Paul is echoing back to them in his answer what they had put in the arguments in their letter. He responds - yes (he agreed) but doing it does not always help. Yes, he says, but it does not always build up:

*“All things are lawful,”* but not all things are helpful.

*“All things are lawful,”* but not all things build up.

There may be no specific law clearly prohibiting either the buying and cooking of sacrifice leftovers of eating such meat at a private dinner. It seems ok – it is lawful. But is it? We can, and Paul does, fall back on the second of our two laws: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”. Love the others; support and build up their faith. If they do not mind (as Christians or as non-Christians), then you need not mind – eat the meat. If they mind - presumably as new or less confident Christians - then you should mind. To help, love and support them, don't eat it. Do this for God's glory. Do this not for your benefit or to avoid looking bad - it's for the others – it’s for the many - it's for God's Kingdom. There are very few specific laws – that is not now part of the deal, so in a way the Corinthians can be said to have it right – there are no (or at least few) laws against, so things are lawful. Christians are in a deal however. Our principle duty is to love. To love God and to love those we are in contact with – our “neighbours”. We must live act and speak like those who belong to God.

Paul ends up his advice saying “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ”. How should you act? Like I do. Not because I am so wonderful and wise and good but only because I try to imitate Christ. The answer therefore is “What would Jesus do”?

# Reflection

To write this sermon I began with several careful, prayerful readings of the strict set text. I looked to questions and points which seemed potentially difficult to understand or accept. This might be seen as an attempt at a naïve or uninformed reading. This resulted in questions about the context of the text. Though food laws (or at least acceptable behaviour with respect to food) seemed to be under consideration two separate circumstances seemed to be involved and was there a difference. The problems highlighted in the sermon introduction were raised: All things are lawful sounds very permissive, give no offense seems to be a weak basis for assessing correctness.

Noting these questions, I moved to reading two commentaries for the verses. One said that they addressed a new issue (raising questions of what the other earlier issue or issues were. It also said that the previous principle still applied – what was that? It raised additional questions but lacked context. The second gave a far more detailed commentary, but strictly that in the main. It expanded on the text but gave little explanation. It raised for me the questions of why this is under consideration and whether, as stated in the title of the section, there was a general principle for deciding conduct.

With the expanded list of questions, some of which highlight the lack of context given, I moved to look for this by skim reading the epistle up to and just beyond the text, and by reading relevant parts two fuller explanations of the letter, taking notes and looking for answers to the questions. All this was to refresh and expand my knowledge of the whole work, with respect to text. Answers were forthcoming.

Next I moved to designing a structure for the sermon. The initial reading had raised questions for me and I decided to begin by posing those to the congregation, moving back to describe the context with respect to them and closing the argument by trying to provide answers. There was some technical vocabulary in the explanations – “covenant” for example, which I tried to present in a less demanding way (“deal”). The currently popular question “what would Jesus do” seemed an attractive and relevant closing as a takeaway answer to the issue.

**Note**: The text of the sermon has been produced in accordance with submission requirements for the assessment. I would not find this good for presentation and would use closer line spacing and probably more paragraph breaks and perhaps bullet points to help in delivery.