TWELVE

CHALLENGES

CHURCHES

FACE

MARK DEVER
“As a leading voice for reformation in the twenty-first century, Mark Dever calls evangelicals to love the church as much as we love Jesus. In this exposition of 1 Corinthians he gives clear pastoral guidance for the difficult problems addressed in a difficult book of the Bible, confronting not only the controversial issues that always face the church, but also the spiritual dangers that lurk behind them.”

—Philip Graham Ryken, Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

“Twelve Challenges Churches Face is a careful exposition of 1 Corinthians. It is both theological and practical in its goal to foster healthy churches. You will be edified and encouraged by Pastor Dever’s treatment of important issues that confront the church on a daily basis.”

—Daniel L. Akin, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina

“Few books of the Bible are as relevant to the modern church as 1 Corinthians, and few pastors are building their churches as faithfully as Mark Dever. In Twelve Challenges Churches Face, Mark takes Paul’s counsel to the Corinthians and applies it to churches today with compelling clarity and wisdom. Pastors, churches, and individuals will all be—just like the Corinthians—instructed, corrected, encouraged, and pointed to the Savior.”

—C. J. Mahaney, Sovereign Grace Ministries
Crossway books by Mark Dever:

The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made
The Message of the New Testament: Promises Kept
Nine Marks of a Healthy Church
The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel (co-author)
The Gospel and Personal Evangelism
In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement (co-author)
To Michael and Adrienne Lawrence,
dear friends for more than twenty years,
and sweet partners in the gospel who,
like the household of Stephanas,
“have devoted themselves to the service of the saints” (1 Cor. 16:15).
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Do you think the biggest problems facing your church are extraordinary situations, providing better grief counseling, or improving your singing? I think God’s Word has some other ideas of what challenges your church faces. Some more ordinary challenges. Some more theological challenges.

I’ve never bought into the idea that theology is always academic, obscure, and secondary. To me, knowledge of God has always drawn me to know God (hardly an obscure or merely academic task!). The Bible presents example after example of theology applied to life. And one of the prime examples of this is 1 Corinthians.

First Corinthians is a fascinating book. It’s a confusing book. It’s a book that is mined for proof texts on various topics. And it is undeniably a powerful book. Paul had clearly discovered in Christ the freedom to lay aside his own rights in order to love and serve others. This work of Christ’s Spirit in him brought insights into the nature of preaching the gospel, of living a holy life as a whole church, the willingness to be wronged, to forgo rightful pleasure if other people would benefit from his abstinence. On and on we could go. The love Paul knew from Christ was used by the Holy Spirit to unlock the riches of both understanding and applying the gospel to the life of a congregation that Paul knew and loved.
In this letter, 1 Corinthians, Paul astonishes the pastor (at least, he did me). When he was facing the most normal of problems (division in the church, worldliness, selfishness, and others) he reached for deeply theological responses. Paul called the Corinthian congregation to be not divided but united, not worldly but holy, not selfish but loving. That’s not the surprising part. The surprising part is how he argued this with them. He called them to forsake divisions, because God is one. He called them to forsake sin, because God is holy. He called them to forsake selfishness, because God is loving. In all of this, the governing presupposition is not that the church should operate by a rule book of spiritual manners and etiquette, but that the church is a living reflection of the living God. There is one God. He is holy and has given himself in love. His church, therefore, should reflect his own character; we should be united and holy and loving or else we lie about him! That is a powerful thought.

I hope and pray that these sermons will provoke for you encouraging meditation on God, on how he has loved us in Jesus Christ, and on how that should provoke us to seek to live in that same love.

Thanks to Crossway for initiating and pursuing this project, and special thanks to Lydia Brownback—capable, kind, and patient editor.

These are a series of sermons I preached at the Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington DC from the end of August 2005 until the beginning of January 2006, which explains the New Year’s introduction to the final chapter and also the opening illustration of chapter 11, “Death,” which was the title of my sermon on Christmas morning 2005. The sermons were used of God in my life, in our congregation’s life, and I pray that they will be used in your own life, and even in the life of your congregation.

Mark Dever, Washington DC
January 2008
Every person operating a bus line in the city shall provide equal but separate accommodations for white people and Negroes on his buses, by requiring the employees in charge thereof to assign passengers seats on the vehicles under their charge in such manner as to separate the white people from the Negroes, where there are both white and Negroes on the same car; provided, however, that Negro nurses having in charge white children or sick or infirm white persons may be assigned seats among white people.”

That was chapter 6, section 10 of the Montgomery, Alabama, city code. The next section, section 11, gave the bus drivers the power to enforce section 10. Such laws were only a few decades old, and this specific city ordinance had been on the books for only about three years. Privately held transportation services did not generate enough profit to run the risk of alienating a large segment of their customers, so the private companies did not mandate segregated seating. Everybody’s money was green. But when publicly owned bus lines put the for-profit lines out of business, then segregated seating laws and ordinances came on the books as a result of whiter-than-thou politicking.
About 6:00 PM on Thursday, December 1, 1955, James Blake complained that Rosa Parks was sitting in the white section of the bus and was refusing to move. Four days later, she was tried on charges of disorderly conduct in violation of the local ordinance. Her trial lasted thirty minutes. Parks was found guilty and fined ten dollars, plus four dollars in court costs. Afterward a bus boycott was arranged, and for over a year the black citizens of Montgomery, Alabama, refused to ride the buses, often at great personal cost of time, difficulty, and energy, not to mention the hostility generated toward them.

On June 19, 1956, the U.S. District Court three-judge panel ruled that sections 10 and 11 of chapter 6 of the code of the city of Montgomery, 1952, “deny and deprive plaintiffs and other Negro citizens similarly situated of the equal protection of the laws and due process of law secured by the Fourteenth Amendment,” (Browder v. Gayle, 1956). On November 13, 1956, the United States Supreme Court outlawed racial segregation on buses, deeming it unconstitutional. The court order arrived in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 20, 1956. The bus boycott ended on December 21, 1956. You know the rest of the story.

This matrix of concerns—law, love, sacrifice, freedom—has always been of special concern for Christians. God has revealed himself in law. Christians are called to respect the law of the land. Yet love sometimes mandates a higher calling. Obedience to such a higher calling will often involve sacrifice, a giving up of our freedoms, in order to serve others. All of this is involved in the portion of 1 Corinthians that we will examine in this chapter.

Paul had planted the church at Corinth some months earlier, maybe even a year or two earlier, and he was writing this letter to encourage them about God’s good work among them and to warn them not to trade the wisdom of the gospel for the passing wisdom of this world. The Corinthian congregation was in danger of accepting worldly teachers and worldly standards. Paul warned them that they had a responsibility to judge their teachers by their life and doctrine and to judge each other, as well as to give of themselves in caring for one another and to be willing to lay aside their rights to that end. Paul brings this last point, the laying aside of rights, to a conclusion in 1 Corinthians 10:14–11:1.

Here we find that the Christian life is not a life of legalism. Neither is it a life of licentious self-indulgence. It is a Christlike life. A Christlike life is marked supremely by self-sacrificial love lived out for the good of others. In this section, Paul gives the Corinthian Christians five instructions: (1) flee false gods; (2) seek the good of others; (3) recognize your freedom;
(4) forgo your freedoms for the good of others; and (5) live for the true God’s glory.

I pray that as we study these passages together, we will come to understand more of God’s love for us in Christ and that his love will more fully grip our hearts and intelligently shape our love.

Flee False Gods (10:14–22)

“Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry,” Paul writes (v. 14). Paul gives emphatic instruction to the Corinthians: flee the false gods! He says it clearly, even urgently, in much the same tone as his earlier exhortation to flee from sexual immorality (6:18). Paul was warning the Corinthians who were so certain of their spiritual strength and maturity not to eat in the pagan temples or at the public feasts. Paul’s exhortation would have been a hard teaching for the Corinthians to bear because so much of the social and political life had to do with great public feasts. Such feasts were held at pagan temples, and much of the available food in Corinth came from the animals that had been publicly offered to the gods. Paul was cutting close to the bone here with his instructions. Maybe that’s why he begins with an intense “dear friends.”

He knows that his words will be hard for the Corinthians to hear and to adopt, which is why he calls them to think carefully about the issue: “I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say” (v. 15). He calls them to judge the matter carefully. This is the sort of judging with which they need to be engaged. Such judging aids in understanding the truth of a situation. Then, in order to persuade them to take the issue more seriously than some of them had been taking it, he gives them two examples—the Lord’s Supper and the Old Testament Jewish sacrifices.

The Lord’s Supper

“Is not the cup of thanksgiving 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?” (v. 16). Communion is participation in the body and blood of Christ. This verse has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Roman Catholics use it to show transubstantiation, the belief that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ while keeping only the appearance of bread and wine. Our Lutheran friends use it to show consubstantiation,
the actual substantial presence and combination of the body and blood of Christ with the bread and wine. But the abstracted or changed substances of the bread and wine do not seem to be the point Paul is making. The point here seems to be the effect of sharing in them. We participate in the blood and body of Christ.

To receive the cup and bread rightly—that is, with true faith—is to receive Christ. We share in the benefits of his saving work on Calvary. At the cross, God’s love took a particular form. At the cross God’s wrath against sin and God’s love for sinners was worked out. It was on the cross that God’s love dealt with his own holiness and righteousness. Christ, in great suffering, took our sin upon himself and carried it away. The perfect God took on flesh, lived a perfect life, and died on the cross as a substitute, taking on the punishment for all the sinners who would ever repent of their sins and trust in God. And if we repent and believe, then Christ is our savior. Taking Communion—the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper—doesn’t save you. Trusting in Christ and his death proclaimed in the supper does. In order to be saved, we do not need Christ’s physical body ingested in us; we need Christ’s righteousness accounted to us.

The Lord’s Supper demonstrates that Christ’s blood spilled and body broken on the cross are at the center of our fellowship. We are not united with one another unless we are first incorporated into Christ. As Paul goes on to say, “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (v. 17). Participating in one loaf makes us one people. We have the same Lord. Of course, the point here is not one literal loaf; the size of some of the churches we read about in the New Testament would have made that difficult. Rather, the point is the one kind of bread served at one simultaneous sitting. We have one meal, the symbol of one table, going out to multiple people, but it is singularly the Lord’s table.

This is one reason why separate observances of Communion among subsets of a particular congregation are a distortion of its intention. The unity of the body, which Communion is meant to display, is obscured when just the youth group, or a couple at a wedding, or someone in the hospital, or some folks on a retreat or in a small group take Communion. We see here the serious sin that disunity is. We see also the importance of acting together and how sins affecting our unity must not be brought to the Lord’s Table. Such sins particularly strike at what the Table symbolizes.
The second example Paul uses to show the Corinthians the link between eating meat sacrificed to idols with participating in pagan worship came from the Jewish sacrifices. The Jews participated in the sacrifices they offered by eating them (See Lev. 3:3; 7:15; 8:31; Deut. 12:18; 1 Sam. 9:10–24). The priest and the person offering the sacrifice would share in eating the offered meat. Paul goes on to say in verse 19 that idols are nothing, a point he made earlier in the letter (8:4), but the real point he is making here comes in verse 20: “The sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.” When Paul says that the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, he is simply treating idols as the prophets of the Old Testament did. (See Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:37; cf. Gal. 4:8). Paul reasons that the Corinthians could not participate in the worship of both the Lord and demons (v. 21). Doing so is an impossibility. So, he continues, in verse 22, “Are we trying to arouse the Lord’s jealousy? Are we stronger than he?” (v. 22).

The question in Greek presumes a negative answer, so be careful. Our actions will bring God’s judgment on us, just as Israel’s actions brought judgment on Israel. Be especially careful, those of you who recognize your liberty and strength; judge carefully here. We cannot survive a confrontation with God when he is against us (cf. Deut. 32:21; Isa. 42:8; James 4:4–5). We can imagine sneaking across the path of a sleeping lion if we had to, but why would we toy with the possibility of arousing the consuming wrath of God?

Brothers and sisters, if you have a religious background that includes worship by means of idols and images, Paul’s teaching is directly applicable to you. Don’t let your Christian understanding—which has liberated you from enslavement to images you now recognize as nothing more than wood, stone, or metal—be used as an excuse to ignore the spiritual reality behind them. If you do not come from such a background, what false gods are you tempted by? What do you talk about? What interests you? What excites you? Whatever you answer is what you worship. Flee idolatry, Paul says.

Seek the Good of Others

Paul’s second instruction in this section is that believers must seek the good of others. ‘Everything is permissible’—but not everything is beneficial. ‘Ev-
erything is permissible’—but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others” (vv. 23–24). Here again Paul takes up the chant being used by some of the Corinthians and responds to it.

In this second of four instructions found in our passage, Paul moves from the good of those he is addressing to the consideration of the good they do to others. While eating idol-offered meat may be permissible, as the Corinthians kept asserting, it was not necessarily beneficial. In fact, it might even be destructive. Earlier Paul pointed out that there are times when a believer might be harmed through the exercise of liberty (6:12–13). Here in chapter 10 he calls the Corinthians to reflect on how their use of liberty might hurt others. In chapter 8 Paul wrote, “If anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, won’t he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?” We must avoid actions that are so destructive to others. This is why Paul has just finished cautioning them, “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall” (10:12). Here again we have an example not of liberty being destroyed—Paul has just defended it, and is about to do so again—but an example of liberty being guided by love.

“Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others” he continues (v. 24). Seek the good of others; govern your behavior by what is good for them. He will make this argument again when he writes to the Romans (see Rom. 14:13, 15, 19; 15:1–2). Jesus had reminded his disciples of the importance of this teaching from Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In fact, Jesus said that this was one of the most important of God’s commands (see Matt. 22:39). The good of others is to determine our actions. We are to love others as Christ has loved us.

As I mentioned earlier, this was a hard teaching for the Corinthians. Eating meat sacrificed to idols at civic feasts, in lavish temples, and at public events was to great social advantage in Corinth. Yet all of this, Paul says, should be forfeited. The Christian’s main concern is the benefit of others rather than the advance of self.

I wonder how that sounds to you? All around us today we hear religious versions of “look out for number one.” Who is number one in your life? Do you put others’ needs before your own, perhaps your parents’ or your children’s? Perhaps a spouse’s or a friend’s? All of those natural relationships that require personal sacrifice are really reminders, pointers, to God and his love for us in Christ. Christ lived—and died—for the good of others.

Let us consider carefully Paul’s instruction. When we have settled in our minds that something is not wrong in and of itself, that is, that we have lib-
erty to do it, we must still answer the question about whether the action is right or wrong in a particular circumstance or at a particular time. So how are you seeking the good of others? How have you altered your plans in the last week—large or small—in order to do what was best for others?

This is an important matter to consider in our churches, in everything from how we plan our public worship services to how we practice tithing. The local church is a great context in which to serve others. We must work to help each other defeat our consumerist impulse to be served at church and instead labor to help one another and to give ourselves in love. We want to be a church marked by seeking the good of others.

Realize Your Freedom (10:25–27)

Paul acknowledges an important, even foundational, truth about Christian freedom when he writes, “Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, ‘The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.’ If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience” (v. 25). This is the third of four instructions we find in this portion of the epistle.

Here Paul is making room for one of the Corinthians’ major assertions. Christians, Paul says, have the freedom to eat anything. The Corinthians were free to eat anything sold in the market. The market in ancient Corinth, as in other cities, was where one went to get meat. The meat found there had, as I noted earlier, most likely come from sacrifices offered in one of the city temples. Some of the offered meat was eaten by the one giving the offering, still more of it by the priest; but much of it, perhaps most of it, was butchered and sold, with the proceeds supporting the temple and its priests.

Those shopping at the market rarely knew the source of the food they were buying. But they did not really need to know because, says Paul, citing Psalm 24:1, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it” (v. 26). This was a well-known verse among first-century Jews. It was recited by many of the pious before eating. It served as a pre-meal prayer, acknowledging the Lord for his provision (cf. Pss. 50:12; 89:11). God alone is the source of the meat. Jesus, too, taught, “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’? For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body” (Mark 7:18–19). And in a vision God said to Peter, “Don’t call anything impure that God has made” (Acts 10:15).
So Paul could agree with the Corinthians’ assertion, telling them to eat anything put before them at the table of an unbeliever.

Today, as always, our food comes to us by the hand of God. Apart from him, we would have nothing, and in acknowledging this truth, eating can become an act of worship. On the other hand, if you’re not a Christian, even eating your lunch will be accepting provisions from your Enemy.

Food laws, which are a part of so many religions, are not part of Christianity, a fact that well represents the gospel of Jesus Christ as a gospel for everyone, in every place, across all cultures. In our churches we want to teach the liberty that a Christian has in such matters, because teaching about liberty clearly protects the gospel. There is no place for the little legalisms we allow to creep in and attach themselves to the free gospel, and they should have no place in our life together. We don’t want to forbid what Scripture allows. Instead, we want to encourage the responsible, joyful use of God’s creation as a way of worshiping him. The beauty of God’s creation is meant to be a reflection of God’s character. Realize that we are free!

Forgo Your Freedoms

The fourth instruction we find in this portion of Paul’s epistle is to forgo our freedoms for the good of others. “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?” (vv. 28–30).

We come to the section that in one sense can be most difficult to understand, particularly verse 29. Verse 28 is straightforward: if your host tells you that the meat you are about to eat has been sacrificed to an idol, do not eat the meat, Paul says. In this way you serve as a witness to those in the home at which you are eating. To eat the meat would appear to be countenancing and approving of idolatry, either before non-Christians or before young Christians who might not yet have fully understood the implications of Psalm 24:1.

Paul has just finished telling the Corinthians that they are free to eat such meat in their own homes and even at someone else’s home, but now he makes an exception. If your host tells you that the meat has been sacrificed to idols then you shouldn’t eat it. Okay, no problem. Then Paul says you
Legalism

should abstain for the sake of the conscience of the one who told you the origin of the meal. That still makes sense. But then comes the difficult part, where Paul asks, “Why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience? That sounds like an objection to his freedom that is being imposed by the conscience of the other. How can Paul write these words just after telling the Corinthian Christians to govern the use of their freedoms according to the conscience of another?

Two basic explanations are given. The first is that verse 28 and the first half of verse 29 are a parenthesis expressing an exception to the exercise of Christian freedom. The statement is viewed as a disjunction, which it is meant to be. The other explanation is that Paul is thinking of the idea of being judged in the sense of being controlled by the conscience of another. He is not controlled by someone else; instead, he chooses to lay down his rights when those freedoms and rights are opposed to the good of someone else.

Either way, Paul clearly makes an appeal to the Corinthians to forgo their freedom in the case of the man who informs them that this meat has been sacrificed to idols. Paul wants the Corinthian Christians to determine their actions by what would be of most help to their non-Christian friends. Eating the meat might confuse unbelievers about the gospel. They might think that Christianity includes idol worship, allowing Christians to participate in it. This misconception might make Jesus appear to be just another addition to the pantheon of pagan gods. Let your actions be determined by what will help your non-Christian host.

The correct response to such a situation is not the establishing of another law, nor is it the restriction of this freedom in an absolute sense. Because, as Paul has just argued, the meat itself is pure. It is from God and can therefore be eaten in thanks to God. However, the decision must be based on the needs of the dinner host and on the truth of the gospel; refraining is best if eating the meat might blur this truth.

A legalistic response to such situations is to classify something as wrong in all situations; however, the answer Paul gives here is not legalistic. It is an answer springing from the loving use or nonuse of a Christian's freedoms, always having in mind the good of the other. Paul wants to make sure that no one mistakes what he is doing by his eating (v. 30)—he's worshiping God and giving thanks to him. He is not worshiping a demon!

We are called to modify how we behave in order to avoid confusing unbelievers about what it means to be a Christian. We desire others to understand the gospel by our words and lives, so we will work to try to be accurate messengers of the great news about Jesus Christ. We want our
unbelieving friends to have a restored relationship with God, and we want them to know that this is our intention—something much more important than our comfort and convenience.

How can you use your freedoms for the gospel? Every situation you face comes with an opportunity. Are you willing to be flexible and to inconvenience yourself in order to help others come to grasp the gospel? What freedoms are you unwilling to forgo in order to share the gospel with others? Do you have to be able to drink that, or wear this, or shop here, or own that? What if those things might confuse the Muslim or the Mormon or the backslidden Baptist with whom you are sharing the gospel? Is your priority the exercising of your freedoms or reaching the lost?

In our congregations, too, we want to discourage actions that might lead to division among us. We want to encourage edification and the pattern of acting for the good of others. For some, this will affect the way that we think about drinking; for others, it may alter our conversations about politics that assume that everyone shares our positions. We want to be congregations that forgo our freedoms for the good of others.

**Live for God’s Glory**

Paul’s fifth instruction in this section is that we are to live for the glory of God. “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (v. 31). Brothers and sisters, flee idolatry, and instead live for the true God’s glory. Love others for God’s glory. Benefit others by following the examples of Paul and Christ who set aside their freedoms. This is how you can worship the true God.

In all we eat and drink and do, we are to do everything for the glory of God. Even our eating is set apart to the glory of God. Our desire to glorify God by blessing others outweighs our desire to eat the meat Paul describes. God is glorified as his worth is evidenced and shown. As Paul writes later to the Colossians, “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” (Col. 3:17; cf. 1 Pet. 4:11).

How do we glorify God? We discover and expose his character, his actions, his holiness, and his love. We broadcast his love in Christ. We tell the truth about him, and the truth about God is glorious! He doesn’t need any makeup. There is no need to distort the truth about God or to lie about him. Let’s give ourselves to this great work. Spurgeon said, “While we can
The founder of George Washington University, Luther Rice, “was an exponent of the current orthodox theology of his day. The attributes (especially the sovereignty) of God, human depravity, and the atonement, with allied themes, were the chief subjects of his addresses; but above all else, the glory of God.”

One contemporary said about him:

Well do I remember the impressions made upon my mind the first time I ever heard him preach. I could not refrain from remarking subsequently, to several brethren, that he seemed to keep the glory of God more distinctly in view, in his preaching, than any individual I had ever before heard. This was his great, his peculiar characteristic—a thirsting for the advancement of the glory of God.

Paul instructed the Corinthians, “Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God” (v. 32). In other words, do not act in such a way as to cause people to misunderstand the gospel—not Jews or Greeks or other Christians. This is the same principle that inspired Paul’s actions of which he spoke earlier:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. (9:20–21)

He sums up his views and his approach to life, writing, “For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved” (v. 33). Paul presents himself as a model for us in this.

However, this doesn’t mean that we live to please others for the sake of our own self-advancement. Such man-pleasing is routinely condemned in Scripture, and it tends to hurt rather than benefit both ourselves and the one we would please. It hurts us because the pleasure of the one whose favor we are seeking becomes our goal rather than that person’s good. Our ultimate goal should always be the pleasure of God. It also hurts the very ones we want to please because it gives them a sort of godlike influence over our actions, something they were never meant to have and which they cannot use well, and which only deludes them as to their own status and place in
the scheme of things. God alone is to have that place, just as the apostles said to the Sanhedrin when they were exhorted to preach no more in the name of Jesus: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29; cf. 4:19).

Let’s not delude our friends, our spouses, or our bosses by causing them to think that their pleasure is our ultimate goal. You and the one you would please are not the only two beings in view—there is always God to consider.

This does not mean that God’s laws don’t matter. We have no liberty to lay them aside. But we do have liberty to lay aside the use of things God has approved. (We can never rightly take or use those things God has forbidden, and we must take or use those things God commands us to take or use.) But in that great category of liberty, those things that we may do, that are “permissible,” as the Corinthians put it, those things we should sometimes lay aside whenever the good of another calls for it. Such love guiding the use of our liberties is the way of Christ, and so it glorifies God.

Look at how Paul closes this section of the letter with an exhortation: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (11:1). Follow my example, he writes. Paul tries to be like Christ in this matter of living in love, and the Corinthians should, too. Paul practices what he preaches. Christ our sacrifice is also our example. I wonder what kind of examples you see around you? We should follow them only as they lead us to Christ, and never when they lead us away from him.

In all of this concern about how we behave, we must remember that Christians are not to be legalists. We have been liberated to follow Christ. We have our liberty, and we curtail it not out of legalism, but out of love—love for our fellow Christian or for the non-Christian with us. Ultimately, we curtail it out of our love for God.

Johann Sebastian Bach, a devout evangelical believer, used to sign his works, “S.D.G.,” from the Latin Vulgate phrase found in Romans 16:27: Soli Deo Gloria—“to the only God be glory.” This became Bach’s motto. He signed his works—whether sacred, such as “The St. Matthew Passion,” or secular, such as the lighthearted “Coffee Cantata,” with the letters S.D.G. All works, he maintained, should be to the glory of God. And that included the rearing of his family. Bach was a happily married, faithful husband and father. By his first wife, Barbara, he fathered three children. A year and a half after her death he married again and had seventeen more children by his second wife—all to the glory of God.

Friends, why do you think Christ gave himself for us? To save us? Yes; but why did he do that? Because of his love? Yes; but even his love for us is
ultimately for the glory of God alone. Oh, my Christian brothers and sisters, meditate on what God has done in Christ. Soak yourself in his self-giving love. Put yourself around Christians who live like Christ—giving themselves in love for the good of others. What about your own example: are you a good model for others to follow? How are you not leading others to be like Christ? Are you being deliberate about loving others, trying to serve them as a good model?

In our churches, we must encourage individual discipling, working to help one another to help others. To that end, we must keep the gospel of Jesus Christ and his cross work for us at the center of our fellowship. We must gather to talk, to come to know one another so we can all live to glorify God even more. Flee from idols but embrace the true God. Live for him. Live for the true God’s glory.

Conclusion

America continues to reflect on the life of Rosa Parks, even after her death in 2005. Much has been made of Mrs. Parks’s action. In the language of the 1950s crusaders, her action did much to lift up a “downtrodden race.” We don’t really talk that way anymore. Today we speak more about how she made us a better nation. More equal and free. But what about Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians? It seems to suggest that Mrs. Parks should simply have given up her seat for someone else, sacrificing her rights for the good of the other person.

From my Christian perspective, it is clear to me that Mrs. Parks, a deaconess in her church, by her refusal to move helped our brothers and sisters in Christ. She certainly helped our black brothers and sisters. But I think she helped even more her Christian brothers and sisters who were in the majority culture. All Christians, regardless of race, are used to suffering. We often have to endure it in a fallen world. But for Christians to inflict unjust suffering on others—including their brothers and sisters in Christ—this is something far worse. It stains our souls, and even worse, it lies about Jesus to the world. It was in this way—by showing us what we were doing—that Mrs. Parks’s refusal to move served white Christians. She showed us how we were wrongly inflicting suffering on others. And so, though she helped black Christians in America, she has helped those of us who are white infinitely more in revealing to us our lack of love, and from that revelation flows conviction and change.
We should live not to abuse others but to bless others. Paul laid aside his right to financial support and to eat meat sacrificed to idols because of his love for the Corinthians, whether Jews or Gentiles, believers or unbelievers. And Christ, well, Christ laid aside his liberties of unbroken fellowship with the Father, of sinlessness, and even of life to effect his design of love in the lives of all those who would repent of their sins and trust in him. Christ is the great example of acting self-sacrificially in love for others. We do see Christ’s love reflected in others. We see that love in the example of Paul and perhaps in Rosa Parks. Maybe you can see it in the lives of those around you. I pray that others will see Christ’s example of self-sacrificial love in your life and in mine.

Forgoing your rights out of love for others is a Christlike thing to do, because through your actions God’s glory appears, as people get even the tiniest glimpse of Jesus. It is that picture of God’s love in Christ that we, as individuals and in our churches, want to display, because God is like that to us in Christ. We want to show others the gospel, even as we tell it to them, because doing so manifests and displays God’s glory.

That is why Christians live lives of love—love toward others and ultimately love toward God. Are you living a life of love? I wonder why.
Twelve Challenges Churches Face

As a leading voice for reformation in the twenty-first century, Mark Dever calls evangelicals to love the church as much as we love Jesus. In this exposition of 1 Corinthians, he gives clear pastoral guidance for the difficult problems addressed in a difficult book of the Bible, confronting not only the controversial issues that always face the church, but also the spiritual dangers that lurk behind them.

PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN, President, Wheaton College

"Twelve Challenges Churches Face is a careful exposition of 1 Corinthians. It is both theological and practical in its goal to foster healthy churches. You will be edified and encouraged by Pastor Dever's treatment of important issues that confront the church on a daily basis."

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"Few books of the Bible are as relevant to the modern church as 1 Corinthians, and few pastors are building their churches as faithfully, as Mark Dever. In Twelve Challenges Churches Face, Mark takes Paul’s counsel to the Corinthians and applies it to churches today with compelling clarity and warmth. Pastors, churches, and individuals will all be—just like the Corinthians—instructed, corrected, encouraged, and pointed to the Savior."

C. J. MAHANEY, President, Sovereign Grace Ministries

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MARK DEVER is senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC. Along with his pastoral responsibilities, Dr. Dever also serves as the executive director of 9Marks, a ministry that helps pastors and leaders cultivate health in the local church. His other Crossway titles include Nine Marks of a Healthy Church, The Deliberate Church, The Gospel and Personal Evangelism, and What Is a Healthy Church?

DIVISION, OBEDIENCE, LEGALISM. These are just a few of the many problems that plague churches today just as they plagued the Corinthian church in the first century. And these problems are to be taken seriously, which is why Paul addressed these issues briefly, offering the Christians of Corinth much-needed admonition, instruction, and encouragement.

Drawing from 1 Corinthians, pastor Mark Dever—a leading voice on the subject of church health—tackles twelve major challenges we must fight to overcome in the church today. For if unchecked, these challenges will cripple our churches and stifle our ministry to a needy world. But if we immerse ourselves in God’s Word and heed Paul’s instruction, God will heal even the sickest church and transform it into a powerful vehicle for proclaiming the gospel of Christ.

Dever provides practical ways for individuals and churches to respond biblically to the challenges they face. Writing for everyone in the congregation, Dever shows us that the health of the local church should be the concern of every believer and that God can overcome the most difficult of challenges.