

**Barriers to Community: Cultural Insensitivity**  
**1 Corinthians 10:23-33**  
**Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on August 21, 2016**

**Introduction**

- ❖ In the last three weeks we've been going through a brief series on community, specifically addressing barriers to experiencing genuine gospel community. We're going to wrap it up today, and I wanted to end with an emphasis on cultural barriers.
  - ▶ **It's relevant for an immigrant church like ours since we've got clashing cultures all over the place.** The dominant culture is obviously Chinese, but that idea of "Chinese culture" is far from homogeneous. Within that broad category, we have the 1st-generation (Chinese who immigrated here), the 1.5-generation (Chinese who immigrated here at a young age), and the 2nd-generation (those born here to Chinese immigrants). Depending on if you were born here or at what age you came here, the way you experience and express **Chinese culture** is going to differ.
  
- ❖ Then there are clear cultural differences between Taiwanese, Cantonese, Mainland Chinese, and Chinese who grew up in various South East Asian countries. Suffice it to say, when you speak of Chinese culture, it's multifaceted.
  - ▶ And here in the English congregation, we've been blessed over the years to fellowship with **non-Chinese Asian immigrants** and **Asian Americans**, as well as a growing number of **non-Asian brothers and sisters** in Christ.
  
- ❖ It's been an encouraging trend as more and more non-Chinese people are gathering with us – not just for a one-time, cross-cultural experience – but actually committing to live out their Christian discipleship with us in genuine gospel community.
  - ▶ And it's because of the gospel. Because they're hearing gospel-centered preaching and teaching, they're experiencing gospel-shaped love and fellowship, and gospel-driven motivation to walk as disciples of Christ. Thank God for the gospel!
  
- ❖ But as we face the changing dynamics and demographics of our congregation with a growing array of cultures – either complementing or clashing with the dominant Chinese culture – we need to have an honest conversation about culture and cultural barriers.
  - ▶ **I'm not suggesting we try to be more inclusive by pushing for a culturally-neutral ministry and creating culturally-neutral space.** Because there's no such thing as a culturally-neutral church. The moment we choose to sing an 18th-century hymn versus a song off the latest *Passion* album, we've appealed to one culture and potentially alienated another. By who we put in the pulpit, by who we ask to lead worship, by the length and format of our service, by the Bible translation we choose, by how we maintain and utilize facilities – in each of these choices we're making it's easier for some people and harder for others to call this their spiritual home.
    - **Every church has to make choices and every choice is culturally conditioned in one way or another.** So it's a fool's errand to try to create culturally-neutral space. The important thing is knowing our dominant culture (in our case Chinese), and then learning the different cultures represented in our community here and in the community to be reached out there.

- ❖ **And the more we learn about our cultural differences and come to respect and value them, the more inclusive we can be – as we try to identify and bring down any cultural barriers that unintentionally offend or alienate others.**
  - ▶ I believe that’s our mandate. If we want to be faithful as a church located in a diverse urban setting like ours and if we want to be faithful as disciple-makers of the various kinds of people that God has surrounded us with on the campus, at the workplace, in our neighborhoods – **then we need to be more sensitive towards other cultures and less sensitive to our rights, our freedoms, and our personal preferences.**
    - I believe that’s an overarching lesson to be learned from this morning’s passage in 1 Corinthians 10. I’d like to examine three guiding principles that can be drawn out of today’s text. Three principles that, if applied, can lead us towards greater cultural sensitivity and as a result, sweeter gospel community.

### Setting the Context

- ❖ So let’s look at our passage. **Here Paul is addressing a controversy brewing in the church of Corinth over the issue of eating of food that had been sacrificed to idols.** In ancient Greco-Roman culture, everyone regularly frequented pagan temples that were dedicated to various gods and goddess.
  - ▶ They didn’t have restaurants like we do today where you can easily gather with a large group of people and share a meal. Your only opportunity for that kind of fellowship would be in a pagan temple at a sacrificial meal. The choices cuts if meat were always given to the priests, but worshippers would feast on the rest.
- ❖ **Now remember, most of the believers in the church of Corinth were Gentiles converted out of pagan backgrounds.** So before their conversion, these temple feasts were a part of their normal routine and social lives. It’s where they would connect with neighbors. Where they would network with associates. So understandably it was hard to shed the practice.
  - ▶ But Paul raises his concerns in chapter 8. **He’s talking to the Christians who were still partaking in these feasts with their old pagan friends.** To justify their behavior, they insisted they weren’t there to worship idols. They know better by now. They know that idols are nothing, that they have “*no real existence*” (8:4), and that there’s only one true God and Jesus is Lord (8:6). They probably argued, “*Of course my pagan friends still treat the feast as a form of worship to idols, but to me it’s just a good meal with good friends that I’m trying to reach out to.*”
- ❖ Paul says their knowledge is correct. Idols are nothing and food is just food. What you eat won’t draw you closer or push you further from God (8:8). But he goes on to prohibit these temple feasts for two reasons. **First, eating sacrificed food in a pagan temple could cause a weaker brother or sister to stumble** (8:7-13). Paul warns that weaker Christians, who can’t disassociate the food from the idolatry, could see you eating in a temple and copy you.
  - ▶ But since that weaker brother still considers it a form of idol worship, you’ve just caused your brother to stumble. So by being only concerned with your own rights and freedom, you inadvertently cause another Christian to sin, which itself is a sin (8:12).

- ❖ **Second, eating sacrificed food in an idol's temple opens you up to the demonic.** Paul mentions this earlier in chapter 10. In 10:14, he prohibits eating in pagan temples – not because the idols represent real gods – but because demons (who are very real) lurk behind false idols (8:20). So just as participating in the Lord's Table fellowships you with Christ and his body, participating in a pagan feast fellowships you with the devil and his demons.
  - ▶ **So according to Paul, the act of eating sacrificed food in itself is not wrong, but if done in the context of a temple feast, then it is.** It's evil. It's not because the food is evil but because the context of a pagan temple is evil.
  
- ❖ Before we go on to our passage, let me stress an important point here. **Paul is demonstrating that, in certain scenarios and under certain conditions, morally neutral activities that are not issues of conscience in themselves – can be abused and can lead you to sin.**
  - ▶ For example, when we studied chapter 11 we saw how eating a hearty and sumptuous meal is not right or wrong in and of itself. But if you're sharing the Lord's Supper with the church and you're filling your stomach while a poor brother sits nearby with his stomach empty – then a morally neutral act like eating has become a sin for you.
    - Or let's think of a more contemporary example. I'd argue that drinking alcohol is a morally neutral act, but we all know that in certain situations it would be wrong – like if it led to drunkenness or if you're under the age limit. So we have to be nuanced. **There are certain scenarios, situations, and contexts where a matter goes from morally neutral to strictly prohibited.**

### Guiding Principle #1

- ❖ But in our passage, in chapter 10:23, Paul shifts focus – no longer on the specific issue of whether you can eat and drink in a temple feast (his answer is No) – **but now the issue is whether you can eat food sold in the marketplace that had been previously used in those temple feasts.**
  
- ❖ Back then, it was common for leftover meat from the temple to be sold in the marketplace. Now that wouldn't bother most Corinthians. **But there was a subset in the community that had a big problem with eating this kind of sacrificed meat.** That would be the Jews.
  - ▶ It was strictly forbidden because of its association with idolatry. Remember, the early church began as a subset of Judaism. **So in the church, there were plenty of Jewish Christians who still couldn't eat this kind of meat with a clean conscience.**
    - That's why they were meticulous about investigating the source of any meat they were going to purchase. Where did you get it? Was it a pagan temple? They had to know. And it's not hard to imagine, if invited to a private home for supper, they would grill their host with the same set of questions.
  
- ❖ So within the same church in Corinth, we have some Christians (from a Jewish heritage) appalled by the behavior of other Christians (from a Greco-Roman heritage) as they indiscriminately shopped in the marketplace and ate as guests in private homes – all without any concern if the meat they were eating had been sacrificed to idols.

- ❖ **There were strong opinions over this and some were calling it a matter of right and wrong.** Now for Paul, he'll add some nuances, but he'll basically disagree. He doesn't see this as an issue of right and wrong. He sees it as a matter of theological and moral indifference. It's just food. You don't need to investigate its origin. Meat is meat. Just buy it and eat it.
  - ▶ Look at v25, "*Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience.*" It's the same if you're the guest of an unbeliever. "*If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.*"
    - Now Paul is not suggesting that ignorance is bliss. **He's not saying don't ask questions so you won't be guilty if it turns out the meat was sacrificed to idols.** When he says to eat "*without raising any question on the ground of conscience*", he means that the issue is seriously not a matter of conscience. It's morally and theologically neutral. Just buy and eat.
  
- ❖ That leads us to our first guiding principle to help address any cultural barriers: **1) What we often treat as issues of right and wrong are really just issues of culture and cultural differences.** That is what's going on here. What was being posed as an issue of theological right or wrong was simply not so. It was *not* a matter of conscience but a matter of culture.
  - ▶ There were two clashing cultures in the Corinthian church. You have believers of Jewish descent and believers of Greco-Roman descent. Their cultures clashed. They differed in the way they worship, in what they eat and drink, and in the how they fellowship. **Paul's not denying the differences. He's just saying don't elevate them to issues of right and wrong. Treat them instead as issues of culture.**
  
- ❖ The same goes for us. I think many of the disagreements in the church boil down to cultural differences. **But because one side (or both) elevates the issue to a matter of theological or moral right and wrong, no one is listening anymore.** We get defensive because no one wants to be on the side that's theologically or morally wrong. **Our divisions won't be bridged until we begin to see that our differences are only differences of culture.**
  - ▶ There's no denying that there are certain ways we do church here that appeal to some cultures more than others. Our worship style, preaching style, our emphasis on small groups, the programming we offer for your kids – make it easier for some cultures and harder on others. Think about the way we maintain this building, the way we decorate it, the food we serve for lunch, even the name on our marquee. **None of it is an issue of right or wrong. But it certainly is an issue of culture.**
  
- ❖ **If we don't make this distinction we'll end up binding another person's conscience – not to God's truth in Scripture – but to our own personal and cultural preferences.** But in so doing, you not only harm the individual's faith but the unity of the church. It's overblown and unnecessary. **There's no need to alienate others and accuse them of being in the wrong when really they're just in another culture.**

## Guiding Principle #2

- ❖ But like I said, there are nuances that need to be made. Paul does that. Even though he rightly identifies this division in the Corinthian church as a matter of culture – **his conclusion is not that you just be true to yourself, true to your culture, and don't worry about what others think.** That's not the guiding principle.
  - ▶ Listen to what he says in v23. “<sup>23</sup>*All things are lawful,*” *but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up.* <sup>24</sup>*Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.*”
- ❖ Paul is likely quoting something the Corinthians wrote in a previous letter. “*All things are lawful.*” Their argument is that all things – not prohibited in Scripture – are permissible. In this particular case, Greco-Roman Christians were insisting that they have every right to eat and drink whatever they want.
  - ▶ Paul's not disagreeing *in principle*. But he does add a qualifier. He says all things are lawful but not all things are helpful or build up others. He then rephrases his qualification in v24, “*Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.*”
    - **In other words, it's not about what you're allowed to do. It's about what allows you to do the greatest good to your neighbor.** And if that means limiting your freedom or laying aside your preferences, then so be it.
- ❖ This is our second guiding principle: **2) Being free in Christ doesn't mean you're free to simply seek your own good, but that you're free to constrict your own freedom if it does more good for others.**
  - ▶ We have to stress this principle because sometimes we misuse our Christian freedom as a means to justify our cultural insensitivity. **Being free in Christ doesn't mean you're free to do whatever you want as long as it's not a sin.** Christ didn't die just to set you free to live a life where you use your freedom just to serve yourself.
- ❖ That was our condition *before* he died for us. We were all born enslaved to sin and selfishness. **Without Christ, we're *not* free to seek the good of others because our sinful, selfish bent always turns inward to serve ourselves.**
  - ▶ But if you're in Christ, the power of sin is broken and you're truly free! **True Christian freedom means I'm finally free in Christ to act in any way necessary – even if it means denying my rights and restricting my freedom – that I might build up others and do them spiritual good.**
- ❖ **So there are times – when there's a clash of cultures in the church – when the Christian thing to do is to lay down your rights and preferences to serve the good of others.** I'm not talking about some sort of external rule imposed on you but an internal rule that comes from a heart redeemed and transformed by God. It's called the rule of love. **And in the rule of love, charity comes before privilege.** You have privilege, but it's a privilege given so you can seek the advantage of others.

- ❖ In v27 Paul gives that example of being invited to eat at a non-Christian's home. In that setting, you eat whatever they you serve without raising any questions. And just a verse earlier, in v26, he gives us the biblical basis, "*For, 'The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof'*", which is a quote from Psalm 24:1. **We're free to enjoy meat regardless of where it came (temple or ranch) because it all comes from our Creator.**
- ❖ But immediately Paul reminds us of our second principle in v28. "<sup>28</sup>*But if someone says to you, 'This has been offered in sacrifice,' then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—<sup>29</sup>I do not mean your conscience, but his.*"
  - ▶ Paul didn't suddenly change his mind. And he's not saying that eating sacrificed food in a friend's home is fine *until* someone who *does* think it's wrong speaks up, and now suddenly it becomes an issue of right and wrong. No, that's not what Paul's implying.
    - He *does* say you should refrain from eating for the sake of conscience, but he adds v29 to emphasize he's *not* talking about the Christian's conscience. **He still insists that this is not a matter of conscience but of culture.** But because of that fact, because eating that meat is a morally neutral act – because it won't make you holier or less holy – then you're free to refrain and restrict your own freedom if you think it might offend someone at the table.
- ❖ Let's talk about what this principle could look like if applied in our day. Imagine if you're attending a small group or fellowship group social. It's pretty casual. You're going to enjoy a meal together, play some games, maybe watch a movie. Now imagine at this social are people from different cultures, and you're aware that certain individuals, due to their cultural background, feel it's wrong for Christians to drink wine, play poker, and watch R-rated films.
  - ▶ I think they'd be hard-pressed to build a scriptural argument against those activities. I'd argue they're morally neutral in themselves. But, as we said, in certain contexts a morally neutral act could lead to sin, like if the drinking led to drunkenness, if the poker led to illegal gambling, or if the film glorified violence or incited our lust.
- ❖ But even if you carefully avoid those dangers, the simple act of drinking wine, playing poker, and watching an R-rated film could offend someone's conscience. In that case, the principle Paul's teaching here is, yes, you're free in Christ. **It's lawful for you. But not everything lawful for you is loving towards others.** If certain actions and activities are morally neutral and irrelevant to your discipleship, then if there's a chance they might offend or cause someone to stumble – just refrain. Put self-restrictions on your own freedom.
  - ▶ **Being a Christian is not about asserting your rights and privileges (and everyone else needs to stop being so judgmental).** No, being a Christian means I'm living *not* to please myself but to please and serve the good of others. **Any limits on my freedom are limits governed – not by legalism – but by love.**

### Guiding Principle #3

- ❖ This leads to our last guiding principle. This third one ties together the other two, giving us a framework to help us make decisions, as a church, that are inclusive and culturally sensitive.
  - 3) The way we “do church” should be shaped by whatever choices best serve the glory of God and the work of his gospel.**
    - ▶ That's just another way of rephrasing v31, “*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*” We all have cultural tastes and preferences, and we should enjoy them and even preserve them with a thankful heart to God.
      - But if the good of others is better served by you *not* expressing certain cultural tastes and preferences – then do so cheerfully – **knowing that your willingness to constrict your own freedom demonstrates that your identity as a child of God and a member of his global family is far more important and fulfilling than your identification with a particular culture.**
- ❖ I know some people are going to object to this. **It feels like you're asking me to deny my heritage, to suppress my culture.** No, that's not what Paul's saying at all. A Jewish Christian can be proud of his Jewish heritage and seek to preserve Jewish traditions in his family. Just as a Chinese Christian can be proud of her heritage and seek to express and preserve aspects of Chinese culture in her family. There's nothing wrong with that.
  - ▶ **Paul's just saying there's something more important than your heritage and culture traditions. It's your identity in Christ and the work of the gospel to seek and save the lost.** That's the principle that guided Paul's life.
    - Look at his words in v32, “*Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.*”
- ❖ That's how a Christian thinks. **We aim to give no offense to the religious, the irreligious, or to fellow believers in the church of God.** Of course, our preaching and sharing of the gospel is going to offend in itself. We can't help that. But we seek to give no intentional offense.
  - ▶ **And by that we're not talking about hurt feelings.** The concern is not that we might hurt someone's feelings, but that our cultural insensitivity as a church might make it harder for someone to receive salvation through the gospel or we might end up alienating a fellow believer.
    - The same concern is in view when Paul says in v33 that he tries to please everyone in everything he does. He doesn't mean pleasing their expectations or having them think highly of him. He means he doesn't want to do anything that might stand in the way of someone being saved or built up in the faith.
- ❖ That's why Paul says in chapter 9:22 that he will become all things to all people so that by all means possible he might save some. **That's the rule of love in action – placing Christian charity over Christian freedom for the salvation of others in Christ.** Paul says in chapter 11:1 that was the example Christ left for us.

- ❖ Jesus willingly limited his divine freedom, entered our fallen world, took on the nature of a servant, so that he could atone for sins and achieve salvation for those who trust in him.
  - ▶ **So if we're in Christ, our sins are forgiven, and we're no longer under the bondage of sin and selfishness.** Now we, as a church, are free to follow Paul's example, to follow Christ's example, and to make choices in how we do church and conduct ministry in ways that best serve the glory of God and the work of his gospel.
  
- ❖ Church, let's make an honest assessment. *Are there any unnecessary cultural barriers in our community that might stand in the way of someone being saved or built up in the faith?* I'm not talking about our Chinese congregation and the obvious barrier there for anyone who doesn't speak Chinese. I already mentioned, in a previous message, how that's justified by their missional focus to contextualize ministry for an unchurched people group in our city.
  - ▶ No, I'm talking about barriers among us in this English congregation. **A lot of what we do and how we do things in church reflects Asian American culture – particularly Chinese American tastes and preferences.** It's not right or wrong. It's not a matter of conscience. Just a matter of culture.
  
- ❖ For those of you who are not Chinese, I hope you understand that it would be impossible (and inappropriate) for us to suppress our Chinese culture in an effort to create some sort of culturally-neutral space. That's impossible.
  - ▶ **As long as we're predominantly Chinese, there's probably going to be a Chinese feel to things.** I want to be straight with you. But I also invite you to teach me (us) more about your culture and to graciously help us recognize ways in which we unintentionally and unnecessarily offend or alienate you. You have to speak up and trust that the Chinese brothers and sisters in this church are united with you in Christ – through a gospel bond that runs infinitely deeper than any bond of culture.
  
- ❖ **And for those of us in the majority, who are Chinese, the onus is really on us to put our identity in Christ and our gospel mission ahead of our cultural tastes and preferences.** If we're not intentional, if we just let nature take its course, we'll always trend towards an ethnocentric, self-pleasing approach to doing church.
  - ▶ We like certain styles of worship, certain styles of preaching, certain ways to fellowship and conduct ministry. And we don't like to change or to be subjected to different styles that reflect different cultures. We like our own.
    - But I hope you see that our guiding principle should be to seek not our own good but the glory of God and the gospel good of others. **I don't expect to ever suppress our Chinese-ness in the way we do church, but I sure hope to complement that with an array of cultural expressions that reflect the diversity of our city and our neighboring communities.** May God be glorified in us through genuine *and diverse* gospel community!