

Q 7.1 Is it more Christlike to defend animals or to defend people's freedom to hurt animals?

The character of Christ is one of humility, love, and mercy. He cares for the vulnerable, speaks up for the voiceless, and liberates the captives. He also prioritizes the preaching of the gospel above His own individual freedoms. It is therefore more Christlike to defend animals than it is to defend people's freedom to hurt animals.

Introduction

Failing to see the wrongfulness in harming animals,¹ people often insinuate that it is more Christlike to defend someone's freedom to harm animals than it is to defend animals from being harmed. They claim that Jesus ate fish and fed people fish², that God gave us dominion³ and permission⁴ to hurt animals, that we are more valuable⁵ than animals, and a variety of other excuses that have

¹ "...we are a lot more like Michael Vick and Joe Luter than we care to imagine... like Michael Vick and Joe Luter, we participate in animal cruelty, and we are similarly raised in a way that we do not see its wrongfulness" (Berkman, John. "Are We Addicted to the Suffering of Animals? Animal Cruelty and the Catholic Moral Tradition." In *A Faith Embracing All Creatures: Addressing Commonly Asked Questions about Christian Care for Animals*. Edited by Tripp York and Andy Alexis-Baker, 124-137. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012, page 125).

² For a more detailed analysis of this argument, see Study Guide 5.3 "*Did Jesus eat fish, feed people fish, and instruct Simon Peter to catch fish?*"

³ For a more detailed analysis of this argument, see Study Guide 1.1 "*What does it mean for humanity to have dominion in God's image and likeness?*"

⁴ For a more detailed analysis of this argument, see Study Guide 3.1 "*Did God change His mind about animals after the flood?*"

⁵ For a more detailed analysis of this argument, see Study Guide 7.2 "*What did Jesus mean when He said we are more valuable than animals?*"

been addressed at length already. For this study we will focus on the character of Christ in order to determine if it is more Christlike to defend animals or instead to defend people's freedom to hurt animals.

The Humility of Christ

While it is true that Jesus said we are more valuable⁶ than animals, and also that God gave us dominion⁷ over animals, these claims each had to do with our kingdom role. Immediately after giving us dominion over animals, God said to eat a diet that consists entirely of fruit and vegetation⁸. We must be careful not to arrogantly⁹ misinterpret these verses as justification to do the opposite, nor should we defend others' freedom to do the opposite. Instead of pridefully exalting ourselves¹⁰ above the animals, it is more Christlike to follow the example¹¹ of Jesus to humbly esteem those we serve¹². Jesus *"did not come to be served, but to serve"* (Mark 10:45, NKJV). He is the good shepherd who is

⁶ "So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:31, NIV); "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6:26, NIV); "How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:12, BSB).

⁷ "Then God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" (Genesis 1:28, NKJV).

⁸ "And God said, 'See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food.'" (Genesis 1:29, NKJV).

⁹ "But He gives us more grace. This is why it says: 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" (James 4:6, BSB, referencing Proverbs 3:34).

¹⁰ "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12, ESV). See also Luke 14:11.

¹¹ "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example so that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:14-15, BSB).

¹² "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty pride, but in humility consider others more important than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3, BSB).

willing to lay down His life to defend His sheep¹³, not to defend someone's freedom to hurt the sheep. In order to exercise Christlike dominion over animals, we must humble ourselves like a little child¹⁴ and lead the animals¹⁵ in the way of love and peace, not violence. Humility is a necessary quality to even begin to understand Christ's character¹⁶.

Bearing the Fruit of Christ's Spirit

The character of Christ is the Spirit of God¹⁷. Those who embody this Christlike character will bear the fruit of the Spirit: *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law"* (Galatians 5:22-23, BSB). The firstfruit of the Spirit is love, which is God's essential character¹⁸. Jesus says you will know who has His Spirit by whether or not they embody these character traits¹⁹. Someone who has His Spirit will bear them abundantly and cannot do otherwise²⁰, especially His love²¹. When it comes to how we treat animals, bearing the fruit of

¹³ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11, BSB).

¹⁴ "Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4, NKJV).

¹⁵ "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them" (Isaiah 11:6, NIV).

¹⁶ "He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them His way" (Psalm 25:9, BSB).

¹⁷ "how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, because God was with Him" (Acts 10:38, BSB).

¹⁸ "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them" (1 John 4:16, NIV).

¹⁹ "You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16-20, NASB).

²⁰ "I am the vine and you are the branches. The one who remains in Me, and I in him, will bear much fruit. For apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5, BSB).

²¹ "As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Remain in My love" (John 15:9, BSB).

the Spirit would mean treating animals with love and kindness, bringing them joy, being peaceful and gentle toward them instead of violent, being faithful instead of betraying them, and exercising self-control over the desires of the flesh to kill animals for appetite, fashion, entertainment, sport, or any other unnecessary purpose. It would therefore be more Christlike to bear the fruit of the Spirit²² in how we treat animals, rather than defending someone's freedom to bear the opposite fruit in how they treat animals.

The Mercy of Christ who Saves

Jesus is also merciful and saves: *"Our God is a God who saves"* (Psalm 68:20, NIV). To illustrate the way God saves, we are compared to a bird trapped by a trapper: *"For He will save you from the trap of the fowler"* (Psalm 91:3, AMP). The trapper is the enemy—the devil, and the trap is sin²³. Jesus is the embodiment of God's mercy, saving us from the enemy's trap²⁴. The reason God saves us has nothing to do with our merit but rather is entirely because His nature is to be merciful²⁵. As Christians who have been saved so mercifully by our loving God, we are instructed to likewise be merciful: *"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful"* (Luke 6:36). Rather than defending someone's freedom to imprison, kill, or otherwise withhold mercy from animals, it would be more Christlike to embody this mercy by defending animals from such things²⁶. We can

²² "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17, ESV).

²³ "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1, NKJV).

²⁴ "She will give birth to a Son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21, BSB).

²⁵ "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5, NIV).

²⁶ "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had on you?" (Matthew 18:33, BSB).

do so by freely²⁷ saving animals from their trappers the way Jesus saves us from the sin the devil tries to entrap us by. It would be more Christlike to lovingly and mercifully save animals because of the love and mercy that was first shown to us: *"We love because He first loved us"* (1 John 4:19, BSB).

Christ's Concern for the Most Vulnerable

Jesus places a special emphasis on caring for the most vulnerable. Throughout the largely patriarchal history of the world, widows and orphans were individuals who lost their provider figure and were therefore among the most vulnerable members of a community. This is why Scripture says: *"Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world"* (James 1:27, BSB). In other words, those truly following the will of God will help those who are most in need of help. Jesus warned of hypocritical religious leaders who did the opposite who, rather than looking after the most vulnerable, would instead attempt to take control of all the assets of the deceased man, i.e. *'devour widows' houses'*. They would do this for the sake of fulfilling their own vain interests, leaving the wife and children destitute and without support²⁸. Consider the vulnerable animals being raised for slaughter, hunted for sport, trapped for fashion, or imprisoned for entertainment. Is it more Christlike to defend such vulnerable animals in their distress or instead to defend the actions of those who devour them the way the religious hypocrites devoured the lives of the most vulnerable for the sake of fulfilling their own vain pleasures? It would be more Christlike to embody pure and undefiled religion by caring for the needs of the vulnerable animals rather than defending someone's freedom to cruelly devour

²⁷ "Freely you have received; freely give" (Matthew 10:8b, NIV).

²⁸ "Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely" (Luke 20:46-47, NIV).

them or their homes: *“The righteous care for the needs of their animals, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel”* (Proverbs 12:10, NIV).

Being a Voice for the Voiceless

Scripture says not only to look after the needs of the most vulnerable but also to *“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, in the cause of all who are appointed to die”* (Proverbs 31:8, NIVa/NKJVb). Defending animals would involve speaking up for and liberating those who are locked in cages inside factory farms awaiting their appointed time to die, a time that is often stamped on their ear the day they are born. It would also involve speaking out against sport hunting, vivisection, circuses, seaquariums, and any other practice that exploits animals. Scripture also says to liberate those who are enslaved or oppressed: *“Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke?”* (Isaiah 58:6, NKJV). As it pertains to animals, are we coming to their defense by breaking their yokes, undoing their heavy burdens, and liberating them from their bondage? Or are we instead defending the freedoms of those who hurt them in these ways?

Jesus the Animal Liberator

Jesus gave us an example of how to embody this spirit of speaking up for and liberating oppressed animals. He entered the temple courts, overturned the tables, and freed the animals being sold there for slaughter: *“So He made a whip out of cords and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle. He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables”* (John 2:15, BSB). The sellers had turned the temple into a business that profits off treating animals as merchandise²⁹, prompting Jesus to emphatically command,

²⁹ The account of Jesus disrupting the temple is recorded in each of the four canonical gospels, yet the money changers are not even mentioned in the Luke account: *“Then*

“Stop turning My Father’s house into a marketplace!” (John 2:16, NLT). Jesus did not defend the sellers but instead defended the animals by taking a firm stand against the practice of selling animals for slaughter. As author Keith Akers rightly reminds us, *“We must remember that the temple was more like a butcher shop than like any modern-day church or synagogue. ‘Cleansing the temple’ was an act of animal liberation”* (Akers, 117).³⁰ Jesus even voluntarily walked to His own death³¹ alongside the animal victims and thereby replaced the wicked system of animal sacrifice³² with the once and for all sacrifice of His own body³³. Author Norm Phelps offers a similar insight, *“By driving away the sacrificial animals while quoting from a passage in the Hebrew Scriptures that condemns sacrifice, Jesus was launching a direct assault on sacrificial religion. He was attacking the religion of fear in the name of the religion of love. The Cleansing of the Temple was*

Jesus entered the temple courts and began to drive out those who were selling there. He declared to them, ‘It is written: ‘My house will be a house of prayer.’ But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’” (Luke 19:45-46, BSB). This omission indicates that those selling animals were the primary antagonists and the money changers were more peripheral to Jesus’ purpose in disrupting the temple business. If His main purpose had been to condemn dishonest business practices, it would have been more fitting for Him to quote one of the many Scripture passages about weighted scales and corrupt trading. But instead, when Jesus mentions the ‘den of robbers’, He is referencing Jeremiah 7:11, a chapter about God wanting obedience rather than animal sacrifice: *“For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices”* (Jeremiah 7:22, NKJV).

³⁰ Akers, Keith. *The Lost Religion of Jesus*. New York: Lantern Books, 2000.

³¹ “Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father” (John 10:17-18, NKJV).

³² “Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but my ears You have opened. Burnt offerings and sin offerings You did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come—it is written about me in the scroll: I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your law is within my heart.’” (Psalm 40:6-8, BSB); “In the passage above He says, ‘Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings You did not desire, nor did You delight in them’ (although they are offered according to the law). Then He adds, ‘Here I am, I have come to do Your will.’ He takes away the first to establish the second” (Hebrews 10:8-9, BSB, referencing Psalm 40:6-7).

³³ “And by that will, we have been sanctified through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Hebrews 10:10, BSB).

history's first direct action to liberate animals, and Jesus was the first animal liberator" (Phelps, 50).³⁴

Preaching the Gospel

One of the main purposes of Jesus' life was to preach the gospel³⁵. He told His followers to do likewise: "*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature*" (Mark 16:15, NKJV). Defending people's freedom to hurt animals instead of defending animals hinders our ability to preach the gospel effectively to animal defenders³⁶. Many animal defenders see Christians as hypocrites³⁷ who claim to serve a merciful God³⁸ but who justify their cruel attitude toward animals by claiming that God approves of this cruelty. These animal defenders are perplexed as to why Christians as a whole aren't more compassionate toward animals. Their reasoning is that if Christians serve a merciful God whose essence is love³⁹, then why do they resist showing love⁴⁰ when it comes to animals? If the unbelieving animal defender is on the side of showing love and compassion to animals and the believer is on the side of withholding love and compassion, then how is the believer going to communicate the love and compassion of God to the unbelieving animal defender? It is therefore more Christlike to set aside our freedom⁴¹ and become an animal defender for the sake

³⁴ Phelps, Norm. *The Longest Struggle: Animal Advocacy from Pythagoras to PETA*. New York: Lantern Books, 2007, page 50.

³⁵ "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose" (Luke 4:43, ESV).

³⁶ "But take care that this freedom of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Corinthians 8:9, NASB).

³⁷ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are" (Matthew 23:15, NIV).

³⁸ "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36, NIV).

³⁹ "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8, NIV).

⁴⁰ "Do everything in love" (1 Corinthians 16:14, NIV).

⁴¹ "Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall" (1 Corinthians 8:13, NIV).

of the gospel, even if primarily for the purpose of winning animal defenders⁴². As the apostle Paul rightly warns, *“If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died”* (Romans 14:15, NIV).

Choosing Goodness over Freedom

Our freedom should not be used to hurt animals, nor to defend such violent unchristlike practices. The flesh and the Spirit are contrary⁴³. It is more Christlike to use our freedom to humbly defend animals rather than to defend the hurting of animals: *“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love”* (Galatians 5:13, NIV). As authors Williams and DeMello optimistically put it, *“Perhaps when we realize that our food, clothing, entertainment, and other choices affect animals, the planet, and other people, we might be moved to make choices based not only on what we are free to do, but what would be good to do”* (Williams, 345).⁴⁴ Author and animal advocate Brittany Michelson exemplifies this optimism through her attitude of service to the cause of animal liberation: *“I live for the day when animal exploitation ceases to exist and when nonhumans are valued and respected for the individuals they are. Until that day, I will continue to take action”* (Michelson, 61)⁴⁵.

⁴² “To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (1 Corinthians 9:22-23, NIV).

⁴³ “For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want” (Galatians 5:17, NIV).

⁴⁴ Williams, Erin E. and Margo DeMello. *Why Animals Matter: The Case for Animal Protection*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2007, page 345.

⁴⁵ Michelson, Brittany. “Living in Alignment with My Values: My Path to Animal Rights Activism” in *Voices for Animal Liberation*. Edited by Brittany Michelson, 51-61. New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2020.

Conclusion

As followers of Christ, we should bear the fruit of the Spirit, show mercy to animals, act with Christlike humility, speak up for and liberate the vulnerable, and choose goodness over freedom: *“He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Micah 6:8, BSB).