

When the Bible Doesn't Say

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Copyright 1984

First Printing: 1984 (500 copies)

Second Printing: 1988 (500 copies)

Third Printing: 1992 (500 copies)

Fourth Printing: 1997 (3,000 copies)

Published by Indian Hills Community Church

Systematically Teaching the Word

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When the Bible Doesn't Say

The Bible gives us many commands about things we are to do in the Christian life. It is clear that God's children should search the Scriptures. It is also clear that we are to walk by the Spirit and be praising the Lord. There are many other positive commands the Lord gives us in His Word.

On the other hand, there are many things the Word commands us not to do. We know from the Scriptures that immorality is wrong. When we are faced with the temptation to commit immorality, we do not have to stop and analyze the situation and pray about whether or not we should participate. God says we should not.

There are many things about which the Bible gives us no direction. These things on which the Scriptures do not give direct commands are areas that are neutral in and of themselves. We sometimes refer to them as gray areas because they are recognized as not being right or wrong in and of themselves. For example, is it all right for a believer to smoke cigarettes? Is it all right for a believer to go to the movies? Is it all right for a believer to have a pool table downstairs?

The most complete consideration of the subject we sometimes refer to as Christian liberty is found in chapters 8 through 10 of 1 Corinthians, a book written to a church which was characterized by its carnality. Paul told those believers in 1 Corinthians 3 that they were babes and that they were carnal. Those immature, carnal Christians were the ones who were occupied with living their lives in the gray areas—using their liberty or misusing it!

All of us have questions about these areas from time to time, but often those who are the most immature are the most preoccupied with indulging in things which are questionable.

Some Basic Principles

Before we look at some of the details of this section, let's get a brief overview of 1 Corinthians 8 through 10. Paul states the case in chapter 8 in the context of things sacrificed to idols. In Paul's day it was a common practice for those who worshiped idols to offer a sacrifice of meat to the idol. The portion of the animal which had been offered in a sacrifice to God that was not consumed in the sacrifice was then taken by the one offering it and either sold in the marketplace or consumed in a meal. Perhaps that pagan worshiper invited a Christian to his home to eat the meat left over from his afternoon sacrifice.

Would it be all right for the Christian to eat that meat if he were invited to do so? That is the basic question Paul is dealing with in chapter 8. In chapter 9 Paul indicates that he is free to eat the meat, but he may choose not to do so. He uses himself as a positive illustration of how a Christian is free to use his Christian liberty. In the first thirteen verses of chapter 10, he uses Israel as a negative example of Israel's conduct and guiltiness before God. In the concluding verses of chapter 10, Paul ties all of these concepts together and emphasizes an extremely important principle—you don't have to use your liberty. You are free *not* to use it.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 8:8, "But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat." The principle here is that you are not better if you eat the meat; neither are you worse if you eat it; and you are not better if you don't eat it. Eating the meat in and of itself is neutral.

Paul begins the chapter with an important principle in verse 1: "Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant [puffs up, KJV], but love edifies [builds up]." Some of the Corinthians prided themselves in what they knew about meat sacrificed to idols, but all they had was knowledge. Their knowledge made them arrogant, and in their arrogance they misused their liberty. Thus it became sin for them. Even though the meat in and of itself was neutral, their indulgence in it was a misuse of their liberty and was sin before God. Our knowledge must be used in the context of love so that the Body of Christ is built to maturity. We will see *that* as a key factor in our consideration of this subject. The impact of what I choose to do as an

individual goes far beyond the fulfillment of my personal character; it affects the development of the Body of Christ.

Some Basic Questions

Based on the concept Paul outlines in these five chapters of 1 Corinthians and Romans, there are at least eleven questions we can ask ourselves in order to determine what is right for us in any particular situation.

Will It Be a Stumbling Block?

The first question is taken from 1 Corinthians 8:9: "But take care lest this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." Two kinds of Christians are implied in this verse—stronger Christians and weaker Christians. The stronger Christian is the one who can eat this meat without it bothering him. He realizes that this meat is just meat and that idols are nothing. He knows that an idol is simply a piece of wood. If you put your meat on the burner in front of an idol and take it off again, the meat has not been changed in any way. There is only one God. The piece of wood carved into an idol is not a god; therefore, it does not change the meat at all.

Weaker Christians were those who believed it was defiling to partake of that meat; they thought it was wrong to eat it. They did not yet have the more mature knowledge of the character of idols or of meat sacrificed to idols.

The mature Christian has to ask himself if eating that meat will become a stumbling block for the weak. Verses 10 and 11 describe what it means to be a stumbling block: "For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died." Verse 12 clarifies the issue: "And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ."

In these circumstances, the question is no longer a matter of freedom, it has become an issue of sin. If you, with your knowledge of meat and idols, cause a weaker Christian to decide he should eat it even though he feels he should not, you encourage the weaker

Christian to defile his conscience. Thus he ruins his Christian life. "For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined" (v.11).

If I am a stronger Christian, I must be sensitive to the needs of the weaker Christian. I may have the freedom either to do it or not to do it. But the weak Christian doesn't have that freedom. He is locked in because he is convinced it would be wrong for him to do it. From his perspective, he doesn't have a choice. For the stronger Christian, it is not an issue. He can forego it as well as indulge in it. If I am a stronger Christian, I certainly do not want to be guilty of sinning against Christ by wounding the conscience of the weaker Christian.

You may feel that this guideline could eventually encompass a lot of things, and it could. But is there anything in this neutral area that is so important to you that you have to do it regardless of its impact upon another Christian and regardless of whether or not it leads him to sin against Christ? These ideas are more serious than we first considered. We must ask ourselves whether our indulging may lead the weak Christian to do something he does not have the maturity to understand yet.

Will It Raise Questions About Motives?

The second question is suggested by 1 Corinthians 9:12: "If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things, that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ." Paul is giving an example of the rights he has as an apostle, one of which is to be paid for his ministry. Yet he has decided not to accept money from the Corinthians because there is a danger that the motives for his ministry might be misunderstood. Some may conclude that the only reason Paul is carrying on his ministry is for the money. Thus the second question: Will it cause misunderstanding regarding my motives for serving Jesus Christ?

Paul continues his argument in 1 Corinthians 9:18: "What then is my reward? That, when I preach the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel." The important principle Paul is emphasizing is that even though he has the liberty to do it, he is ready to forego that liberty and not make full use of his rights.

It is amazing how often Christians pride themselves on their maturity, but they are ready to fight for their rights. They feel they must prove the other Christians are legalistic. They think the others do not understand that it does not matter if they participate in a particular activity or not. They want to make sure everyone knows that they have liberty as Christians to do it. But until we understand that we have liberty *not* to do it, we really do not understand liberty. If participating in any questionable activity raises questions about my motives in the ministry and my service for Jesus Christ, then I ought not to do it.

Is It Profitable?

The third question is taken from 1 Corinthians 10:23: "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable." Paul said the same thing in 1 Corinthians 6:12: "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable." The word translated "profitable" means to help, to confer a benefit, to be advantageous, useful or profitable. Will this thing carry me along in my Christian life?

The point is not whether there is something harmful; the point is whether or not it is helpful. Paul says there are a lot of things he is free to do, "but not all things are profitable" (1 Cor. 10:23). We should not want to fill our lives with those things which are not profitable. Therefore, we must ask ourselves, How will this help me as a believer in my growth and development? Will it move me along toward the goal I have of maturity in Jesus Christ?

Will It Edify Others?

The second sentence of 1 Corinthians 10:23 contains the idea for the fourth question: "All things are lawful, but not all things edify." The word "edify" means to build up. The idea is very similar to the preceding one but makes it more specific. Will this activity build up other believers? Will it build me up? Will this help believers to further maturity in Christ? This question opens up a lot of areas for our consideration. If the activity we are considering will not edify us or others, then we can set it aside.

Will It Be for the Good of Others?

The fifth question is found in the next verse: "Let no one seek

his own good, but that of his neighbor” (1 Cor. 10:24). The word which is translated “seek” means to strive for or aim at something; to desire or to wish something. It is a command in the present tense which could be translated, “Let no one be seeking.” We are not to be seeking our own good, but that of our neighbor. Will what I do help him? The question is not whether or not I enjoy it. I am to be constantly pursuing or desiring that which is for his good. Will my actions benefit him?

Is It for the Glory of God?

The next question is really the central question, so I am putting it in the middle of the series. Its basis is found in verse 31: “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God.”

This question: Is it for the glory of God? is so general that it is answered by your response to the other questions. But this is really the heart of the issue—the glory of God. God is glorified when I function for the good of others, to build them up and help them in ways that will not offend the weaker brother. Those qualifications help me to know if I am glorifying God by my actions.

Will It Be Offensive?

The basis for the seventh question is in 1 Corinthians 10:32: “Give no offense either to Jews or Greeks or to the church of God.” The preaching of the cross is offensive to those who are perishing, but the Bible tells me that I am to be involved in proclaiming the Gospel to those who are perishing. In that sense, Paul’s life was offensive. But in this area—a neutral area in which conduct is not demanded by the Scriptures—will it be offensive?

Will my neighbor, even though he is an unbeliever, find this offensive? Notice that this is concerned with Jews, Greeks and those who are in the Church of God. So unbelievers, as well as believers, are in view here. If unbelievers are offended by the message of the cross, I cannot really help that. But I must ask myself if this will be offensive to them. There are many things which I may be free to do that I do not have to do if doing them would antagonize others or be offensive to them. I need to be careful that any offense is the offense of the Gospel, not offense caused by my personal actions.

Will It Result in Salvation of Souls?

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:33: "Just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved." Will my actions result in the salvation of souls? Paul says we are to view everything in light of how it will affect the ministry of the Gospel and the salvation of those we are trying to win to Christ. We are to be looking for their profit so that they may be saved.

Will It Master Me?

The ninth question comes from 1 Corinthians 6:12: "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything." Does it have the potential to dominate me? Frequently I am asked if I think smoking is wrong. I really believe it is wrong, not because the Bible says "Thou shalt not smoke" (which it does not say), but because smoking masters the one who smokes. It takes control of his life. Some say, "Oh, I could quit if I wanted to." Why not try wanting to for the next year? Smoking tends to become addictive.

It is interesting that the word translated "mastered" is in the future tense. I must be alert as to whether this activity has the potential to master me. It may not master me initially, but does it have the potential to eventually master me?

I do not drink alcohol socially or otherwise because I feel it has the potential to master me. It does not master me now because I do not drink it. I do not believe it would master me if I had a social drink this evening after church, but I believe it has the potential for mastering me, so I avoid it. Once something has mastery of your life, then you are in trouble. That is why you have to consider its potential harm in advance.

Paul tells us that he will not be mastered by anything. To be mastered means to have right or power over something or someone. Will what you do exert power over you? If so, it is wrong. Anything that becomes addictive or has the potential of becoming addictive is wrong for a believer. I do not want to involve myself in those things which will master me because Jesus Christ is the only one who is to be my Master.

Will It Promote Peace?

This question is suggested by Romans 14:19: "So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another." Will this questionable activity promote peace? You will notice that in this verse the building up of believers is connected to peace. We are to enhance the peace of the body of believers and promote its unity and oneness. Will the activity you are considering promote that? It is unfortunately true that often when professing Christians indulge in things that are questionable, they build a barrier around themselves from other believers. They are uncomfortable in the presence of others because their own activities do not promote peace in the body. Taking advantage of their freedom does not help promote peace in the body; rather, it hinders it.

If you indulge in a questionable activity, will the peace of the local body of believers be enhanced or will it be hindered? Will it raise questions and conflicts? If you have any doubt about how it may affect the peace of the body, then it would be better to forego it. Remember, you have the liberty *not* to do it. Surely you would not want to sacrifice the peace of the body for wrong, private and personal desires.

Does It Violate My Conscience?

The last question is based on Paul's statement in Romans 14:23: "But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin." If you were to do it, would you feel you have done the wrong thing? Can you say with perfect openness before God that you believe it is all right for you to do it? If there is any question in your mind or if your conscience is saying no, then you should not do it.

Some Basic Guidelines

Take note of the fact that these are questions you can ask yourself in order to evaluate *your* conduct. There is a danger with a list of questions such as these. The tendency may be to take the list and evaluate the lives of others by it. "Aha!" you gloat, "I am sure he violates principles two, seven and nine, so he is wrong." That is not the correct approach. These are questions you are to ask yourself in order to evaluate your own life. You may think other Christians are

doing things they should not, but the test is for you. How do you measure up?

Avoid Legalism and License

Our concern should be that believers use their freedom properly. Of course, there is a danger that we can become legalistic. Guidelines become legalism when we set a list of rules in areas where the Scriptures do not speak and indicate that these are standards which will make you more pleasing to God. There is nothing wrong with standards, laws and regulations. The problem comes when you indicate that adhering to those rules or standards makes you more acceptable to God.

Sometimes our young people go off to Bible college and after encountering a few rules complain, "Oh, they are legalistic." The college very well may tell you that you cannot do this or you cannot do that; or you must do this and you must do that. Such rules are not necessarily legalism. When I went to Bible college, we were not allowed to attend movies. There were also some other things we were not allowed to do. But they never said it would make me more acceptable to God not to do those things. They simply said that those were the rules of the school, and as long as I chose to stay there, I would have to abide by them. That is not legalism. The school administration had the perfect right to set those rules.

Such rules were no more legalistic than being asked to sit on a seat rather than in the aisle when you come to church. Sitting on the seat does not make you more acceptable to God, it just makes you more acceptable at church! Therefore, we must be careful not to identify every law or regulation that a Christian might set down as legalism. But when the standard which is set down is designed to make you more acceptable and more spiritual before God, then it becomes legalism.

We do not want to drift to that extreme. By the same token, we do not want to swing the other way either. I was terribly disturbed recently when a Christian who was formerly an alcoholic went into the home of some believers and was served a drink of alcohol. It was devastating to him. Such action violates the principles of conduct we have seen here.

Free Not to Exercise Freedom

Not long ago, someone approached me with some of these questions and asked if I would have a glass of wine. "I don't want to, thank you."

"Come on," he responded, "you're a Christian. The Bible says you have the freedom to do it."

"Sure," I said, "and the Bible also says I have the freedom *not* to do it, so I choose to exercise my freedom not to."

If I began to drink, it would have a direct impact on my ministry. Smoking would also have a direct impact on my ministry. Some of you would have a hard time with that. Therefore, do I need to do it? "Well," you say, "Charles Haddon Spurgeon smoked; G. Campbell Morgan smoked. And those were great men of God. Therefore, I can smoke too."

Believers are responsible to be sensitive in these areas. We do not want to become nitpickers on these issues. I simply used drinking and smoking as illustrations, because they are the questions that are probably raised most often. I do not believe that they are any worse or any better than other questionable areas we should consider. We need to be careful that we demonstrate maturity and love in our relationships by sometimes not doing what we know we have the freedom to do. I must evaluate myself, my ministry and my service to Jesus Christ and not others in *their* ministry for Him.

My desire is that we are becoming biblically knowledgeable people, that we are learning the Word and increasing in knowledge. But I also desire that we be increasing in love. Then we can be using our knowledge in a biblical way to honor and exalt Jesus Christ, to build up one another in love and to reach the lost with the message of His salvation.

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