

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

When a person is converted and is placed in the family of God – his life’s direction and pattern takes on an entirely new form. The joy of knowing sins forgiven and the hope of eternal life in Christ, puts a totally new perspective on life. However, the redeemed man soon comes to know that the Christian life is not without its difficulties and trials. One area of difficulty that faces all believers is what to do in the areas of life and society that are not expressly taught on in Scripture.

Now obviously, many practices are condemned in Scripture because they damage the righteous walk of the redeemed. Murder, coveting, fornication, adultery and stealing among others, are all clearly and expressly condemned in Scripture. The obedient Christian has no issue with such. However, there are other areas of life and society, which we will call “grey areas” where there is no clear approval or prohibition of such activity.

Believers are often puzzled and disunity is often the result of Christian people struggling with these areas. We attempt to provide some insight into these areas and some guidance as to how to come to a personal decision concerning these “grey-areas.”

THE EXERCISE OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

"For freedom Christ has set us free: stand therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1). In Christ men have liberty befitting sons of God. Such was not true of those bound by the Mosaic Law *"handle not, nor touch, nor taste."* Under the Law, a person could be defiled by things which have no moral quality. Guilt was incurred by the touching of a dead animal or a piece of holy furniture or by tasting pork. However, for us who are “in Christ” there are clearly things that are morally acceptable and things that are immoral and thus unacceptable. Furthermore, there are things that a person can do that are neither moral nor immoral. These we will term amoral.

For example, sitting on a chair, dancing, surfing the internet, and a myriad of other things are ...while they could be used in an immoral way... in and of themselves “amoral.”

CAN AMORAL THINGS AND ACTIONS BE SINFUL?

Our purity or defilement is not determined by what we see, hear, taste, our touch, but by our motive for seeing, hearing, tasting, and touching. Jesus explained that man is defiled by what comes out of his mouth rather than by what he eats (Matt. 15:1-20). Defilement is not in certain actions and things, but in improper use of and attitude toward those actions and things. Actions and things, generally speaking, are amoral. They have no inherent moral value. Is not this the point that Paul would impress upon us?

"I know, and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for any one who thinks it unclean... for the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" - Rom. 14:14, 17

Our purity of thought or defilement of purpose determines whether a thing is moral or immoral. Sin is not in things, but in people - in the heart. This is what Paul expressed when he wrote, *"To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted"* (Titus 1:15).

To show the amoral nature of actions and things, some examples are listed. These all show that the thought or motive determines whether it is right or wrong:

1. The person who kills accidentally or defensively, having no impure heart in it, remains pure in the act. It is not so with the man who kills with hatred or anger although he performs the identical act of the first man.
2. One person may use narcotics legally for medical purposes and be justified while the person with defiled purpose takes them for their thrilling effects or in an effort to escape reality.
3. Alcoholic beverage, when taken for curative purposes or in moderation, does not defile as it does when taken for intoxication. The act is the same; the difference is in the heart.
4. A person, desiring to know more about religious doctrines, may in purity go to a service where error is being taught or may subscribe to such a periodical or buy such a book. He is not judged like the person who gives mental consent to the destructive error while performing the same acts.
5. Two persons may take part in a competitive game or attend a sporting activity with different prospects. One wishes to enjoy the activity while the other feeds his gambling addiction.

All of these examples and many others show that the act itself is amoral. Its merit or demerit is determined by the heart. *"To the pure all things are pure, but to them that are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure."*

PRINCIPALS GOVERNING LIBERTY IN AMORAL THINGS

There are two test cases in the Scriptures regarding Christian liberty. These both involve amoral things - the eating of food and circumcision. The verdict in regard to the eating of meats demands (1) that a Christian surrender his liberties if they put a fellow disciple in jeopardy, and (2) that his liberty be exercised with self-control. In regard to circumcision, the verdict forbids us to bind our scruples on others so as to limit their Christian liberty. These verdicts can be applied to everything which is of like principle today. (Read 1 Cor. 6, 8, 10; Rom. 14; all of Galatians; Acts 15).

OUR LIBERTY IS LIMITED BY SELF CONTROL

Man must never be brought under the control of amoral things. *"All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything. Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food and God will destroy both one and the other"* (1 Cor. 6:12-13). Paul is saying, "God has created the body with its appetites, cravings, and desires, and at the same time God created good things to satisfy the desires; let the desires be fulfilled in moderation and self-control, not slavishly being ruled by the desires." Both the appetite and the meat to satisfy are amoral. They have no special significance before God. *"But food will not commend us to God; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse; nor, if we eat, are we the better"* (1 Cor. 8:8). Applying this principle to all instincts, desires, drives, or cravings given by God, we see that none are evil within themselves.

Consider these:

1. *The instinct of self-preservation.* It is right to preserve ourselves, to seek for our own well-being, unless we let the desire for self-preservation cause us to become deceptive, greedy, injurious to others, or disrespectful of the rights of others.
2. *Desire for food.* This is a pure thing unless we lose control of the desire and become gluttonous or steal food to eat. Because it is abused by some does not make it sinful to desire, obtain, and eat food.

3. *Desire to possess.* This is the instinct God gave us to cause us to provide for our needs. If one is "brought under the power of" the desire, he may become a thief, covetous, stingy, or an extortioner, or he may destroy his health in order to possess. The flagrant abuse by some does not make the proper exercise of the instinct unholy in others. The pure heart will permit only the proper exercise of the desire.
4. *Mating instinct.* The desire for sexual fulfilment is given by God for the establishment of the home and the propagation of the race through marriage. If, through lack of self-control, one is brought under the power of his instinct so as to become lustful or immoral, he has abused God's arrangement.

For this cause Paul emphasized the necessity of the mind's mastery over the flesh. *"But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would"* (Gal. 5:16-17). So he says, *"For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh"* (Gal. 5:13).

Is everything that could lead to sin evil? The affirmative answer to this has led many people to censure many amoral activities while inconsistently sanctioning other practices of the same nature. Any amoral activity could lead to sin.

1. The preparation and enjoyment of wholesome meals could, and often does, lead to over-eating. Must one refuse to eat? To prepare a fine meal for guests may lead them to over-eat. Should one ration the meal of his guests?
2. Earning a good salary might lead a person to love money.
3. Even though some have had wine prescribed for them by a doctor, they refused it on the ground that it could lead to sin. The contention is true, but does that justify the surrender of the liberty for any use of wine?
4. All kinds of competitive games are used as instruments for gambling. Any game could lead to addictive gambling. Who can say which game would tempt a person to compulsive gambling more than others? Must one refrain from all games and sporting events?

5. Many have fallen into immorality and adultery while selecting a companion. Dating can, and often does, lead to sin. Should the young person avoid all companionship to avoid falling into moral sin?
6. In times past the Church declared that the study of the Bible leads to sin by misunderstanding it through private interpretation. The pitfall is there. More people who read it misunderstand it than understand it. But does that make reading the Bible sinful?
7. Some music and entertainment of the world clearly encourages and promotes rebellion and licentiousness. But does that prohibit the listening to music and entertainment completely.

We cannot destroy the desires, drives, and instincts discussed earlier. In exercising them, we should *"watch and pray that you enter not into temptation."* We must strengthen ourselves to live as Christians worthy of the honour Christ bestowed on us as free sons, not as servants under a yoke of bondage. Here we see the necessity of purity of mind and purpose, of mental discipline and self-control. *"For God gave us not a spirit of fearfulness; but of power and love and discipline"* (2 Tim. 1:7).

Disciples must be taught to respect the high calling and liberty that God has extended to them. Purity of heart will maintain an enlivened conscience toward all things. A disciple should not let the preacher, or anyone else, be his conscience. He must have one of his own *trained by Scripture*.

The test case to illustrate this is the eating of meats which had been sacrificed to idols. Realizing that meat could not contaminate him spiritually, the Christian could eat such meat with no regard to the idol. But a weak brother, who has just escaped from idolatry, seeing his brother eat the meat, thinks that he is eating with regard to the idol. Being thus misinformed, he may be led to eat with respect to the idol. Thus he has been encouraged to sin by his unsuspecting brother. If the man is aware of the weak brother's conviction, he should not eat. This does not forever ban the man from eating meat, however. After he instructs the weak brother properly, he can continue to exercise that liberty.

"Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother's falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall" (1 Cor. 8:13). Did Paul become a vegetarian? Or did he not use discretion in his eating and continue to teach the truth about Christian liberty? Continuing his discussion into Chapter 9, he declared his right to eat and drink. Out of regard for our brother, practices which put

undue strain on his weakness must be avoided. Even our laws hold us liable for creating attractive hazards such as leaving a ladder up where a child might climb and fall. Although teasing a person is an amoral thing, it would be wrong to tease a temperamental person until he becomes angry and loses his temper. This class of activity is practiced without evil motive, but it shows lack of regard for others and is not expedient because it may cause the death of a brother.

LIBERTY OF OTHERS MUST BE RESPECTED

We have not the right to limit the liberty of others by binding our scruples on them. The Jewish disciples had a doctrinal conviction that circumcision should be bound (Acts 15:1). Others realized that *"in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail"* (Gal. 5:6). Circumcision in itself is amoral, neither helping nor hindering. But the binding of this scruple was about to split the whole church. These Judaizers *"slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage..."* (Gal. 2:4-9). Did Paul say, "Oh, well, since circumcision really does not make any difference, we had better surrender our liberty and accept this yoke lest the church be split through the offense of these brethren"? He did not! *"...To them we did not yield submission even for a moment,"* Paul declared (Gal 2:5).

If they could bind circumcision, others can bring us into bondage to their scruples in demanding that our liberties be limited in studying in classes, using individual cups for communion, helping the fatherless, cooperating in evangelism, building up a large congregation, having food in fellowship in the building, and what else might be your local scruple. Although the abuse of any amoral exercise - and these are all amoral - can lead to sin, we are not condemned by a sensible exercise of it.

Now that the battle is won, what attitude will Paul demonstrate? Rather than further driving the wedge to split the church, he made concessions to promote healing by love. After proving that circumcision could not be bound on Titus, he took Timothy *"and circumcised him because of the Jews"* (Acts 16:3).

Then later, Paul took a collection from these Gentiles and took it back to the very ones who were excluding them from the kingdom of God. He must have had more motives in this than charity toward the poor. On bearing this gift to Jerusalem, he agreed to purify himself in the temple as a concession to make peace (Acts 21:26). All of this was done after he had won his case.

Charitable concessions can be made without the surrender of liberty. These are necessary to preserve the unity of believers.

Principles cannot be applied with legalism. They are applied through grace. So Paul exhorts, "... *be united in the same mind and in the same judgment.*" (1 Cor. 1:10). "*The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God...*" (Rom. 14:22). Also, "*As for the man that is weak in the faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions*" (Rom 14:1).

If we were to be bound by the scruples of everyone, we could not use a modern translation of the Bible, allow a quartet to sing in the assembly, eat in a church building, drink a serving of wine, put a cross on the building, have drums with our singing, lift up hands in prayer, clap hands in praise, use modern hairstyles, give money to the Red Cross, and so on without end. But few of these restrictions would be due to the scruples of the weak brother. They would come from preachers, elders, and other staunch individuals who would limit our liberty by binding their convictions on us.

MAKING CHOICES IN GREY AREAS

So with all of that as background – how does the believer determine what choices to make in any given circumstance? Some would say, "No, the Bible doesn't address them. Do what you want to do—you're free in Christ!" While it is true that the Bible doesn't specifically list every possible decision you'll face in life, it does address all choices with principles that govern Christian freedom. When you run your choices in the "gray areas" through the following grid of principles from God's Word, we trust you'll find both clarity and true freedom to live your life to God's glory.

1. Will it bring bondage?

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything. (1 Cor. 6:12)

In the second part of this verse, Paul is saying, "I will not be brought under the power of anything." If what you are considering can be habit forming, why pursue it? Don't allow yourself to be in bondage to anything or anyone. You are a bond-servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, and Him alone.

2. Will it defile God's temple?

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body. (1 Cor. 6:19-20)

Don't do anything that you know will harm your body or bring shame—it is the only instrument you have to glorify God. Romans 6:13 says, "Present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God." How you choose to use your body should always reflect your concern to honour Jesus Christ.

3. Will it violate my conscience?

He who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23).

First Corinthians 10:25-29 contains three references to abstaining from a certain practice "for conscience sake." Never train yourself to violate your conscience. If your conscience is troubled by what you consider, don't do it. If you aren't sure about it, don't do it. It is hard to overstate the value of a clean conscience, but it is worth keeping your conscience clear so that your relationship to God will not be hindered. If you'll keep yourself in prayer and the study of God's Word, you will inform your conscience so you can "walk as children of light...finding out what is acceptable to the Lord" (Eph. 5:8, 10).

4. Will it cause anyone to stumble?

Food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak (1 Cor. 8:8-9).

This is the principle of love. As Romans 13:10 says: "Love does no wrong to a neighbour; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law." If you know that your choice—what you consider "in bounds" and approved—causes another Christian to stumble and sin, love that brother or sister enough to restrict your own freedom. That is not very popular in our self-absorbed society, but it is biblical. To continue to indulge in a legitimate freedom that causes problems for another Christian is a sin. For "by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore," Paul said, "if food causes my

brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble." (1 Cor. 8:12-13)

5. Will it bring glory to God?

Therefore, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

That verse is clearly both the summary and the goal of all the principles stated above. Isn't our heart's cry to glorify our Lord and Saviour with our lives? Think about your decision—Will He be glorified, honoured, and praised through it? May we say along with Jesus, "I glorified You on the earth." (John 17:4)

6. Will it benefit me spiritually?

All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify (1 Cor. 10:23).

A "profitable" thing is useful, helpful, or to your advantage to do; and the idea behind "edify" is to build up spiritually. So based on this verse, ask yourself, "Will doing this enhance my spiritual life? Will it cultivate godliness? Will it build me up spiritually?" If not, you should seriously question whether that behaviour is the best choice.

7. Will it further the cause of evangelism?

Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; 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 (1 Cor. 10:32-33).

Whether you are aware of it, what you allow or disallow in your behaviour affects your witness for Christ—and the world is watching. It's an issue of testimony—what your life says about God. Your testimony either tells the truth about God, or it tells a lie. The choices you make in the "gray" areas should reflect your concern not to bring offense to God's reputation but to bring Him praise instead.

So what questions do you have?

Run them through the principles above and enjoy your freedom in Christ – the freedom to be what He created you to be!



Our desire is to encourage and build up the people of God – allowing them to exercise their liberty in Christ while becoming increasingly separated from the world and becoming themselves increasingly Christlike. Be warned – friendship with the world is enmity with God.