

## **The Practices of the Christian Life – Discernment - 2**

Meet young Jacob. Jacob is a handsome, devoted Christian who wants God's will in His life for marriage and his future. He has tried to obey God's clear commands regarding purity before marriage, and not marrying a non-Christian. He has obeyed the Scriptural principles on understanding the pros and cons of marriage, on recognising the sacrifice it will be. But now it comes down to it, and he is confronted with two good choices for marriage – Betty and Jane. Betty and Jane are both devoted Christians who love the Lord. Both would make good wives. How does he decide? He has already followed the principles, but Betty and Cindy would both be good choices. Does he flip a coin? Eenie-meenie-minie-mo?

Sometimes, a Christian is going to face a choice which seems like it could go either way. To take one would be good; to take another would be good. To partake would be good, to abstain would be good. Christians face these issues on matters like eating or not eating certain foods, celebrating or not celebrating certain days like Christmas, Easter, or birthdays, taking a job or turning it down, participating in a certain recreation or not, investing in something or not, choosing one place of service over another. What do we do in these cases?

We have been studying the practices of the Christian life, and have come to the matter of discernment. Discernment – rightly judging the truth, wisdom and meaning of all things, is a vital practice of the Christian life. Without it, we will not love God ultimately, know Him properly, and live in His presence in good conscience. We must grow in discernment if we are to love God properly. Last week we considered what discernment is, and how we are to exercise it in the area of doctrine, and in those areas of life where God supplies us with principles to apply. We now want to consider the third area where discernment must be used – in areas where a decision could seemingly go either way.

We have already said that there is not an inch of creation that does not belong to God. Though there are some matters which are neutral in themselves – food and drink and 24 hour time periods, the decisions we make about them are not neutral. A piece of meat might be neutral, but choosing to eat it or not it is a moral decision.

The mistake some Christians make is to then to think that such areas make no difference to God. They reason that if one man esteems the day to the Lord, and another man does not esteem it to the Lord, that it doesn't matter to God. Wrong. Don't confuse freedom with indifference. God sets you free: He is not indifferent as to how we use that freedom. He respects both decisions, so long as they are made to please Him.

1 Corinthians 8 through 10 is the clearest passage for dealing with this matter of indifferent things – things morally neutral in themselves. The fact that the Bible uses at least three chapters to deal with the issue shows that they do matter.

Paul is here dealing with the matter of food offered to idols. This was a contentious matter for early Christians. You have all these pagan religions. Food is set before these idols. Obviously the idols don't take a bite out of it, so after the ceremony of offering, the food is then sold in the market, probably at very good prices. The issue that Christians were wrestling with was – should we eat that stuff? Some believers said yes, the food is cheap; it is good food, why not. Others said, no, we cannot.

Paul is going to show how we navigate decisions like this.

In chapter 8, Paul shows us that food is a neutral matter in itself:

1 Corinthians 8:4-6 <sup>4</sup> ¶ Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. <sup>5</sup> For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), <sup>6</sup> yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.

That's to say, an idol is really nothing. That statue is just a piece of wood. So therefore, food offered to nothing doesn't change the food at all. It's just food. Nothing has changed in the internal consistency of the food. It's as good for you as it was before. So like the celebration of days, or your body participating in a sport, it's neutral in itself.

Paul has admitted that the thing is neutral and non-moral. He goes on to say, that's not the point. The point is, once we moral agents use things, our choices have moral implications.

What Paul is going to do for three chapters is to show how the decisions you make over this neutral thing do matter. So while you might decide that the music is just sound waves – neutral. You might decide the clothing is just threads – neutral. But it never stays neutral once human beings use it. We are moral beings, and our decisions are moral decisions.

Paul gives us five questions to help us work through decisions that could seem to go either way.

## **I. The Example Question**

<sup>7</sup> ¶ However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

You might understand that food is food, but not everyone understands that. Your fellow Christian may not understand that. He may see great problems with that. For him the food is a link back to an old life of paganism and fornication and all manner of wickedness. The meal has associations and connotations. As far as he's concerned, no Christian should eat that stuff.

So Paul says, regardless of the neutrality of the thing, if partaking could cause your brother to violate his own conscience, you ought not to partake.

1 Corinthians 8:9-13 But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. <sup>10</sup> For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? <sup>11</sup> And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? <sup>12</sup> But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. <sup>13</sup> Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Here is the first question to consider when deciding neutral matters: what kind of example will I be if I do this? Would the activity possibly embolden another person to go against their conscience and sin, or even fall back into a sinful pattern?

If I celebrate this day, or drink this thing, will it encourage others to be more devoted to Christ. If I wear this thing, will it help or hinder other Christians? If I do this sport, or go to this place, will it encourage others to follow Christ? If I watch this thing, or listen to this thing, is there a chance that another brother or sister be led away from Christ through my example?

So this music or this atmosphere, or this clothing, or this event seems harmless to you? Fine, but

what will it mean for the consciences of others? If they hear it, or see you in it, can it create a craving in them for something destructive? Will it authorise an indiscriminating use of that thing in their lives? If it is questionable, are you not willing to deny yourself it, for the sake of clarity and gentleness with another conscience? That leads us to the second question.

## II. The Responsible Freedom Question

Paul knows that his readers will argue for their own rights. He knows they are going to say, why should what others think affect what I do? And in other places, Paul argues against being a man-pleaser. But what Paul does right through chapter 9 is to give a personal example of the question of responsible freedom. Paul says – I have rights, I have the freedom to do certain things, but I am responsible with my freedom. I use it lovingly, carefully.

It's his right to be supported financially, it's his right to have a wife, but what does he do?

**1 Corinthians 9:15** <sup>15</sup> *But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void.*

**1 Corinthians 9:19-23** <sup>19</sup> *For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more;* <sup>20</sup> *and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law;* <sup>21</sup> *to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law;* <sup>22</sup> *to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.* <sup>23</sup> *Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.*

He denies himself. He limits himself. He humbles himself to fit the needs of those he serves. He is willing to clip his freedoms in certain ways when it comes to Gentiles, and clip his freedoms in other ways when it comes to Jews.

Paul is making this point: Don't use the neutrality of food to trample the consciences of your fellow-Christians. Yes, it is your 'right' to eat that food, since it is only food, but if your right will mislead others, and harm them, and lead them back into sin, then you forgo your rights. You deny yourself your liberty so that others may be served.

**1 Corinthians 10:32-33** <sup>2</sup> *Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God,* <sup>33</sup> *just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.*

Yes, you are free to celebrate that day, but don't use your freedom as an excuse to do evil. Yes, you are free to eat and drink, but don't use that freedom as an opportunity to do evil. Yes, have the right to take that job, or buy that gadget, or take that trip. God does give us richly all things to enjoy. But make sure that you are using your freedom with a careful eye to others. Make sure that your freedom is used with a real sense of love. Am I going to do this or not do this simply because I can, or because I can and it will be responsible to do so?

Mature Christians know that they are free, but they never consider their freedom independently.

The example question, the freedom question help believers navigate an issue where some believers said yes, and some believers said no.

## III. The Identification Question

In chapter 10, Paul almost looks like he has begun a new topic. He's talking about Israel in the wilderness and Moses. But he is still talking about food offered to idols. He shows in verse 1-14 that God judged the Israelites for their idolatry. Israel was double-minded, halting between two opinions. He then goes on to say that the Lord's Table identifies us with the Lord.

*1 Corinthians 10:16-18 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? <sup>17</sup> For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread. <sup>18</sup> Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?*

If eating at the Lord's Table identifies us with the Lord, what does eating at an idol's table identify you with? Demons. Although the idol is nothing, what lurks behind the whole system of idolatry is demonic. To be identified with idolatry is to be identified with demons.

*1 Corinthians 10:21 <sup>21</sup> You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons.*

So here is another point he is making about so-called neutral things. Our deeds associate us with certain things. Though the food is just food, and the idol statue is just stone or wood, the whole thing is associated with idolatry and demon worship. And even though the food itself is fine, if your act of eating identifies you with idolatry, you will provoke God to jealousy.

You can argue about the basic neutrality of a music style, but the additional question is: Is this music associated with certain ways of life, or attitudes or emotions that are hostile to the gospel? How has it been used? How does the world view it? What is it usually used to sell? The particular piece of clothing or adornment is just material or metal, but does it identify you with some group, or movement, or people hostile to the gospel? Who is known for wearing it? How does the unbelieving world construe it?

So Paul, in verse 25-30, gives us a real-life situation of identification. You're invited to dinner by an unbeliever. You want to go. Paul says, go. If they put food in front of you, eat it. If you buy food from the market, don't ask questions, just eat it. Don't ask any questions. Food is food. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

But, if that unbeliever tells you – this was food offered to idols – don't eat, because now it is a matter of identification. Now, not because you think the food is sinful, but because he wants to see if you will identify with evil – you do not eat it. Don't eat it, because the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof – there's always something else to eat.

*1 Corinthians 10:22 <sup>22</sup> Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?*

So by application, does this sport, or this hobby help me or hinder me in evangelizing unbelievers? Does this leisure activity provide an opportunity to interact with unbelievers and show them that believers are different? Does this kind of bodily appearance make the Word of God look beautiful or ugly? Does it identify me as one of Christ's? Can this hobby or this career choice help me to depict God's Word to other people? How will this thing or activity be identified? With what will it be associated?

Even though food is food, Paul wants his readers to think through these things. What kind of example will I set? Am I being charitable with my freedom? With what is the eating of this food identified?

#### IV. The Edification Question

*1 Corinthians 10:23-24* 23 ¶ *All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. 24 Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being.*

Paul has helped us consider eating from the point of view of example, responsibility to others, and identification. In verses 23 and 24 he gives us the edification question.

Very simply it means – though this is lawful, will it be spiritually profitable? Will it cultivate and grow the right things? Will it produce the right fruit in your life? Will doing this, wearing this, seeing this, attending this, drinking this, partaking in this, will it be to my spiritual advantage?

Paul asks the Corinthians to consider if eating this food will help or harm. If it slows them down spiritually, if it does not build them and others, is it worth doing?

**1 Corinthians 6:12** 12 All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.

Paul here says that there many lawful things, but he will not allow any of those lawful things to become an addiction, something that controls him, enslaves him, dulls his usefulness and slows him down.

Physical exercise is a lawful thing. But if it ever gets to the point where it no longer edifies, but enslaves, then it is harmful. Having some kind of collection is lawful. But when that collection begins to so divert and distract you from the Lord, it has become harmful. Your computer games, your Facebook time, your dogs and cats, your baking and cooking, your gardening – all lawful. But only lawful insofar as they build and do not break down.

Ask yourself, when you finished doing this, watching this, completing it, do you feel built up, physically, emotionally, spiritually refreshed. Or do you feel somewhat dulled, spiritually alienated from God?

The final question comes in verse 31.

#### V. The Glorification Question

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

Paul says you have considered this eating of food offered to idols from the point of view of example, responsible freedom, identification, edification, and then finally, glorification. When all is said and done, even the mundane and simple thing like eating and drinking can be done to the glory of God.

Even in your eating, says Paul, show forth the greatness of God. Even in your eating, show forth your love for God, use it to magnify God's worth.

How do I know that?

Well, is this something Christ Himself would do? If Christ were in your physical presence, could you comfortably do this in front of Him? Is this really under Christ's Lordship? Or alternatively, is it something Satan wants me to do? Does it give Satan an advantage? Does it advance Satan's

purposes? Then it is definitely not glorifying God.

These questions are not meant to paralyse us into not making decisions. They are supposed to set us free to enjoy God's world, and do even the neutral things like eating, exercising, socialising, playing, and relaxing to God's glory. Does God care about the decisions we make in these areas? What does verse 31 say? Whatever you do – do all to the glory of God.

Do you see why the Word of God is truly sufficient for all of life? Do you see why the Bible is God's will communicated to us, giving us everything we need for life and godliness?

In some places in the Bible, God is straightforward and gives us commands. In many other places, He gives us principles, and then says – pursue wisdom, be wise and discern, understand the Word, and understand the world, and bring the two together. And even when that is done, and you feel you could go either way, there are at least five questions you can ask to help you decide.

If Christians pursued decision-making with discernment, perhaps we would not see the worship wars we do. Perhaps we would not see the grave lack of purity, with its resulting powerlessness and fruitlessness. We would see Christians increasingly becoming like their Master, pleasing Him in every way.

As Christians, we want to be pleasing to God not just in one or two areas, but everywhere. That will mean putting into practice the kind of things we've studied here. Discernment – a vital practice of the Christian life.