

FIRST I CORINTHIANS

Questionable Practices And The Unsaved I Corinthians 10:23-11:1

People often approach me and say, "Dr. Arnold, is it right or wrong for me to do such and such a thing as a Christian?" Invariably the practice does not have anything to do with what is commanded against in Scripture, but it falls into the area of things not specifically spoken for or against in the Bible. We call these indifferent things, amoral issues, neutral practices or doubtful things. I like to call them questionable practices dealing with issues such as TV, movies, dancing, tobacco, alcohol, card playing, dress, jewelry, tattoos and a hundred other man-made taboos. Are there any guidelines to help us a Christians determine what is right or wrong in the area of questionable practices? Yes, there are and they are found in I Corinthians 8 and 10 and Romans 14.

In I Corinthians 8:1-13, Paul began this whole section on the rightness or wrongness of eating meat offered to idols. As far as we know, the problem of meat offered to idols was the only questionable practice the Corinthian Christians faced. In I Corinthians 8:1-13, the Apostle dealt with the subject of questionable practices as they related to a Christian's testimony before a weak Christian brother in conscience. He concluded a Christian had the liberty to eat meat sacrificed to idols as long as it did not cause any Christian brother who had a weak conscience to stumble or fall into sin. However, if it did cause a Christian brother to stumble, the stronger, mature brother was to act responsibly and to exercise love in questionable practices and set aside that practice for the unity of the body of Christ. It is never right to abuse any liberty that may harm or injure or wound the weaker brother in Christ. However, in I Corinthians 10:23-11:1, Paul is talking about questionable practices as they relate to the Christian's testimony before the unsaved, non-Christian world. The issue at Corinth was the eating of meats sacrificed to idols and how this might affect unsaved Corinthians who saw the Christian practicing it, but the principles in this passage can be applied to any questionable practice.

There are three ways Christians deal with the whole subject of ethics and morals law, liberty and love. The legalist says that all of life is to be governed by law, so he formulates codes, rules and regulations which cover every area of one's life. Even though the Bible does not speak to the area of questionable practices, a legalist will find a rule somewhere to cover every situation. A Christian legalist does not have to think, evaluate or pray over matters because there is a rule for everything. For this person, all or most questionable practices are wrong. This is certainly an easy way to live because no choices have to be made or risks taken. The way of the legalist is not biblical and it certainly kills one's joy and enthusiasm for living. Then there is the libertine who believes in total freedom. He hates law and abhors any restraints. He is a Christian who holds to a type of situational ethics, observing very few absolutes. If the Scripture gives some command for or against something which the libertine

doesn't like, he either ignores it, compromises it or rationalizes it away. For the libertine, there are no questionable practices, for in his mind everything is right if he wants to do it. The libertine abuses his freedom in Christ so that he is always on the fine edge between freedom and breaking the moral law of God. Then there is the Biblicist who has a proper balance between law, liberty and love. He accepts the principle of law. There are things which God has commanded that we should do and should not do. Christians are commanded to love God and hate evil. They are not to lie, cheat, steal, commit adultery, involve themselves in premarital sex, hate, be jealous, gossip, harbor bitterness and hundreds of other negative commands which are part of moral law. The Christian is positively commanded to pray, witness, love, obey parents, submit to government, attend church and hundreds of other positive commands which are part of moral law. Christians cannot live without moral law. Yet, there are many areas in morals and ethics where the Christian has liberty. His liberty comes in the area of questionable practices which are neither commanded nor prohibited in the Bible. Whether a Christian partakes of these practices depends on whether his own conscience is free to participate, whether the practice will offend another Christian, whether it will harm his testimony or whether it will glorify God. The overriding principle for a Christian is that of love. Out of love he sets aside his rights and liberties for the weaker brother and for his testimony before the unsaved world.

THE CHRISTIAN'S WORKING PRINCIPLE 10:23-24

"Everything is permissible" -- not everything is beneficial. All questionable practices, even the eating of meat sacrificed to idols, are lawful for a Christian. There is no questionable practice which a Christian does not have liberty to do. There are no limitations and no restrictions in the area of questionable practices. However, the actual doing of any questionable practice may not be profitable, expedient or beneficial to the one practicing it. The question is not whether some things are inherently harmful for the Christian to do (for if they are, it is sin) but whether they are profitable. Do not ask, "Will it hurt me?" but "Will it benefit or profit me? Will it really do me good? Will it be a blessing to me spiritually, physically and emotionally, and will it hinder my testimony for Christ?" An indulgence in any questionable practice may be a disadvantage to the gospel. If it is, it is to be forsaken for the cause of Christ. It is a wonderful experience for a Christian to come out from under the bondage of Christian legalism into freedom in the area of questionable practices, but with this freedom comes tremendous responsibility not to abuse it and to set aside a practice if the cause of Christ is in any way hindered by it.

"Everything is permissible" -- but not everything is constructive. All questionable practices are O.K. for the Christian to do (he has freedom) but will these things build up and edify other people? Will his life build up or tear down other folks as they carefully observe him? The Christian must not only ask whether the questionable practice builds him up but also whether it builds up others. If it does not build up, then it is more important to avoid such a practice rather than to assert one's rights and insist on the use of Christian liberties.

Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others. Each Christian must seek to promote the best interest of other people, not selfishly promote his own interests. Are we Christians genuinely concerned about others and are we living in such a way that others will see our concern, love and interest in them? A Christian may do away with all questionable practices without danger to himself or others, but he cannot indulge in them without offending some people.

I'm not suggesting we give in to Christian legalists, but I am saying that we have a responsibility to all men, even Christian legalists, to use our liberty wisely. The Christian should be asking, "How can my life be the best possible testimony to the lost world?"

THE CHRISTIAN'S LIBERTY 10:24-26

Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience. The best meat markets in town were right near the pagan temples where meat was being sacrificed to idols. The sacrificed meat was sold to the meat market by the pagan priests to support themselves financially. The problem was that the Temple Supermarket was the best place in town to buy a T-bone steak. Paul says the Christians should go to the meat market, buy what meat they want and ask no questions. They should not make an issue with the butcher as to whether the meat was sacrificed to idols. If no questions are asked, then the Christian's conscience would not be hurt, for he knew that meat offered to idols was nothing. If the Christian would say to the butcher, "Has this meat been offered to idols?" he raised a false issue. The unsaved butcher would think the Christian had flipped his lid and was operating on a half load of bricks. Christians were not to ask fussy questions, be over scrupulous or raise false issues with the unsaved.

Suppose you and your wife were asked to go out to eat with your boss and his wife. He wants to take you first class and decides to go to a swanky restaurant that serves alcoholic beverages. As a Christian you should go (if your conscience permits it) but you should not make a big issue over the fact that alcohol is served in that place or that you do not drink because you are a Christian, nor should you get on your soap box and preach to your boss about the evils of alcohol. This is not an issue for the boss and his wife. You should go and have a good time. If the boss offers you a glass of wine and it is not against your conscience, you may partake. If it is against your conscience just say, "No thank you." There are many people in this world besides Christians who do not use alcohol.

For, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it." Paul says eat the meat. The Lord is the Creator of all things and He has given us all things richly to enjoy. Whether it is food we eat or beverages we drink or clothes we wear, God has given it and we can enjoy it as His people. He has created things for our use, pleasure and enjoyment, but the tendency of sinful people, even Christian men and women, is to abuse the things God has given us to enjoy.

Paul did not tell these Christians, "Separate from anything and everything which has to do with the pagan temple!" nor did he say, "Cut off relationships with all people who still practice idolatry!" nor, "Isolate yourself from the unsaved world!" He seems to be saying, "Do not run from real life. Live right out in the midst of it. Do not try to avoid being normal, natural people, enjoying the normal, natural things around you. You will never escape by trying to get away from the temptations. They will pursue you wherever you go. So relax, enjoy life, and do not raise over scrupulous questions, always trying to examine with a microscope as to whether it is going to be dangerous or hurt you. Be cool, be laid back, enjoy life, but be willing to apply the basic principles in relation to questionable practices. Does it profit? Does it build up? Does it glorify God? Does it cause a brother to stumble? Does it hurt my testimony before the unsaved world?"

THE CHRISTIAN'S TESTIMONY 10:27-30

If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising questions of conscience. If a Christian in Corinth was invited to a private dinner party in an unbeliever's home, the unbeliever being an idol worshiper, the Christian has the liberty to go. If the unbeliever served meat that had been offered to idols on the table, the Christian was to ask no questions as to whether this thing was doubtful. Again, the Christian is never to raise a false issue with an unbeliever over any questionable practice.

The early Christians were not hyper-separationists. They had unsaved friends and went to their homes for socializing. Surely if Christians are uptight, self-righteous and legalistic, they will never receive any invitations into the homes of unbelievers. Only if they are friendly, openhearted and outgoing, with a real love and concern for people, will they get invitations into the homes of the unsaved. Non-Christians desperately need the Christ we Christians know and we cannot give Him to them if we are bogged down with an infinite number of taboos. We must never raise any false issue with an unbeliever because the only issue for a non-Christian is his relationship to Jesus Christ. If invited, the Christian is to keep quiet, not making an issue, waiting patiently for an opportunity to present Christ clearly. For sure, no Christian should get on his soap box and make a separation speech about the evils of some questionable practice. This would be terribly offensive to the unsaved man and could drive him far from the Lord and His salvation.

The Lord Jesus had the most difficult time with the religious folks of his day—the Pharisees (first century fundamentalists). They were hyper-separationists who lived by the letter of their man-made laws. Christ never opposed any true teaching of the Old Testament, but he viciously attacked the Pharisees for their hyper-piousness and critical attitudes. The Pharisees could not get over the fact that Jesus ate with publicans and sinners. Christ met the spiritual needs of men and women and He went where sinners were. He did not do what the world did, but He moved among worldly people in love. For this, He was called "worldly."

But if anyone (unbeliever) says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience" sake—the other man's conscience, I mean, not yours. If someone at the dinner table says, "Do you know this steak was offered as a sacrifice at the temple yesterday?" he has raised the issue, and the Christian must make his stand. Why would an unbeliever raise this issue? The unsaved at Corinth knew how the Christians took their stand against every form of idolatry, and by raising this issue he was testing whether a Christian was wholeheartedly for Christ. Also a non-Christian may have a high standard of what he thinks a Christian should be and false expectations for the Christian, and if the Christian partakes of some doubtful thing, the unsaved person's conscience may be offended. The Christian's conscience may be clear, but the unsaved man's is not. Because the Christian loves Christ more than he loves a steak, he does not partake of it to maintain his testimony. When the unbeliever makes an issue of any doubtful thing, then it becomes an issue with the Christian and it is to be refused. Now the Christian can launch into a clear presentation of the gospel.

For why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience? What Paul is saying is that he will not exercise liberty if that liberty is going to be censured or judged by another person. Furthermore, rather than let an unsaved man incorrectly judge his conscience, it is better to set aside the questionable practice. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil (Rom. 14:16).

Suppose you were going to a movie (a perfectly good one) and an unbeliever sees you. He lumps all movies into the same category—sinful. They are all right for him to see, but he thinks Christians ought not to see any movies at all (a false concept). If the unsaved man raises the issue, perhaps this is a reason to set aside one's freedom for the good of the gospel.

If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for? Paul in his own heart could thank God for any questionable practice, for he had the liberty to partake of it, but if he knew that this practice was hindering his testimony before unsaved men and women, he was willing to forsake it.

THE CHRISTIAN'S MOTIVATION 10:31-33

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. When a person eats food or drinks a beverage, he should be able to do it for the glory of God. If it cannot be done to the glory of God, then it ought not to be done at all. Everything the Christian does, his actions and plans, his schemes and desires, is all to be done to God's glory. How different this world would be if every Christian lived his life with this principle: I want to do everything to glorify my God. Christians should ask themselves, "Can I see this movie and glorify God? Can I go to this place where there is much revelry and glorify God? Can I wear a bikini and glorify God?" Another way to put it is, "Can I do a thing or go some place and, if Christ were standing next to me, invite Him to do it with me or go with me?" This kind of Christian living is not based on rules and regulations but on a deep-seated desire to glorify Christ. A mature, strong Christian lives his life to glorify God.

With much light comes much responsibility. The strong brother has been given special light on the subject of questionable practices but he must use this light in a responsible way, even restricting his freedom if necessary. It is like light that comes into the eye. The more light that comes in, the more the pupil restricts. So it is with Christian maturity. The more light we have, the more we willingly restrict our lives for the cause of Christ and the love of the brethren.

Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews (unsaved), Greeks (unsaved) or the church of God (saved) The Christian is to live a life which brings the least offense to the unsaved and the saved. As Christians, we are not to deliberately offend anyone. We cannot help offend at times because we have to be faithful to Christ, but in the area of questionable practices, our lives are to be lived in such a positive way as to not give offense by misuse or abuse of Christian liberty.

Even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Paul pleased all men as best he could in questionable practices so as not to offend. He does not mean that he pleased all men in the preaching of the gospel or in his stand for genuine Christian morality. What he is saying is that in the area of questionable practices, he would not be a stumbling block of any kind. He loved Christ and the gospel more than his own rights and liberties, so he set them aside (if necessary) to reach people for Christ. His one goal in life was to win men to Christ and to build them in Christ, and he was willing to pay any price to achieve that goal. He would not have anything in his own life that would keep an unbeliever from responding to Christ as Savior and Lord.

If a person has his heart set on the conversion of people to Christ and the salvation of all men, this will go a long way in regulating his conduct in the area of questionable practices. It will affect his dress, his intake of food and beverages, his style of living, his entertainment and his interaction with the world. This will all be done not by rules and regulations but by a heart which wants to please Christ and win men to Him. This is the best and highest motivation for Christian living.

THE CHRISTIAN'S EXAMPLE 11:1

Follow my example, The Corinthian Christians (and all Christians) are commanded to imitate the example of the Apostle Paul. He abandoned his rights, set aside his liberties and made unbelievable sacrifices because he loved Christ and others. Anything that would offend or cause another to stumble or be injured, Paul would gladly and voluntarily set aside to reach a soul for Jesus Christ. We are to follow his example.

As I follow the example of Christ. What Paul did, he only copied what he saw in the supreme example of Christ who set aside all His rights and liberties as the God-Man to die that sinful men and women might be saved. Jesus Christ is the perfect example of love and concern for others. We can only follow Paul because Paul followed Christ.

Part 2

CONCLUSION

If you are not a Christian, I want you to clearly understand what a Christian is and what a Christian does. First, let me say what a Christian is not. A Christian is not a square, an isolationist or a legalist who goes around with a sour face with no joy, judging everyone with a critical spirit and shouting, "Repent, repent!" A Christian is a person who has by faith trusted in Jesus Christ alone for salvation and has bowed to Jesus Christ as Lord, giving Him the right to rule in one's life.

A Christian is not one who does or does not do certain so-called taboos -- TV, movies, wine, cards, dance or whatever. He may or may not do these things, depending on his own conscience, his desire not to cause another brother in Christ to stumble, and his testimony before the unsaved. A Christian is a follower of Christ who wants his life to conform to God's law, who wants to enjoy his liberties if possible, and who loves others enough to set aside those liberties if necessary.

A Christian is not a narrow-minded legalist or a rip snorting libertine, but a person who has met the resurrected Christ, who has been forgiven his sins, whose destiny has been set towards heaven, and who has a definite purpose for living to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. A Christian is a person who desires to do everything to glorify God. He does not always do it, but that is his desire.

I can assure you that you may do none of the so-called taboos and be lost, and you can do all of them and be saved. It may be proven that some taboos may not be beneficial, but they neither put a person in heaven or in hell. One is lost or saved depending on what he or she does with Christ. Receive Christ and come alive spiritually. Receive Christ and you will begin to experience the most liberating life in all this world! Receive Christ and find the real joy to life! The basic answer to life and death is found in Christ alone.