

Lesson 1

BASIC PRINCIPLES

DEFINITION. *A doubtful thing or questionable practice is an act, not sinful in itself nor specifically commanded against in Scripture, but which may become sinful for the individual Christian if practiced or abused.*

A doubtful thing deals with a religious scruple and the Bible does not speak for or against it in any way. It falls into gray areas or things in between that the Bible neither commands nor condemns.

MAJOR PASSAGES. I Cor. 6:12; 8:1-13; 10:10-33; Rom. 14:1-15:3

I. REPRESENTATIVE LIST OF DOUBTFUL THINGS

Biblical Times: In the New Testament, which covered the time during the first century of the Church, there were only three areas of questionable practices: 1) Observing Jewish religious days; 2) Drinking wine; and 3) Eating meat which had been sacrificed to idols. It is obvious that in the last two thousand years the Church has added many more questionable practices to the list due to cultural considerations.

Modern Times: A representative list of these questionable practices in modern times are things like smoking, use of alcohol, dancing, cosmetics, women's dress, braided hair, men's dress, body piercing and tattoos, television, movies, card playing, wearing jewelry, meat sacrificed to idols, etc. Some extreme groups hassle over selling grapes to wineries, working for a brewery, the use of the eye and hook instead of buttons and mixed bathing. Probably the most controversial of all questionable practices is contemporary music, and the use of that kind of music in worship.

II. BIBLICAL POSITION ON SPECIFIC SINS

Problem. Most Christians today do not have a proper biblical perspective concerning sin in their lives. Many see sin only as outward acts, such as smoking, drinking, dancing, movies, etc. They limit sin to a few external "taboos" or "no, no" rules and feel that they have arrived spiritually because they do not practice these things. Actually the Bible

does not speak out directly against any of the so-called taboos. They all fall into the area of doubtful things.

It may be shown that some of the doubtful things may not be good for a Christian to practice, but it cannot be proven from any positive statement in the Bible. The area of doubtful things must ultimately be solved on the basis of biblical principles, for it is obvious that the Scripture is deliberately silent on these areas. Had God wanted to command against these doubtful things, He would have, but the writers of the Bible, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are led to be deliberately silent about them. Since the Bible is silent on these issues, we can have opinions on them but we cannot be dogmatic from any Scriptural position. We must not be presumptuous in judging someone in these areas. These issues are not for others to settle for us, but for each Christian to settle for himself.

Biblical Position on Sins. Where the Bible speaks, Christians are to speak and where the Bible is silent, Christians are to be silent or at least gracious. There are many areas in which the Bible does speak out loud and clear and these things are always wrong no matter when they are done or where they occur. For example, it is wrong to steal, lie, get drunk, gossip, have a critical spirit, be jealous, express anger, slander, display bitterness, envy, hate, prejudice. Premarital and extramarital sex is never right. Homosexuality and lesbianism is sin. A failure to read God's Word, pray, give monies and witness is always wrong. (Prov. 6:16-19; Col. 3:5,8; Gal. 5:19; Prov. 23:21). When Christians do these things (or any sin mentioned in the Bible) they know they are wrong and their consciences as well as the Bible tells them they are sinning.

Freedom and Moral Law. Christians often confuse *freedom and moral law* and *freedom and questionable practices*. Christians are spiritually set free in Christ. ***So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed (John 8:36)***. They are set free from the guilt, penalty and dominion of sin. ***You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness (Rom. 6:18)***. They are free from the condemnation of the Mosaic Law and the Law as a total rule of life. ***For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14)***. The Christian is spiritually free in Christ and is as free as one can possibly be in this sin cursed world. ***For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave (1 Cor. 7:22)***.

However, spiritually free people in Christ are still bound by the moral law of God that consists of all the moral commands of the Old Testament, Jesus and the Apostles. They are never free to break the moral law by lying, drunkenness, gossip, jealousy, anger, slander, bitterness, envy, hate, prejudice, murder, premarital sex, extra-marital sex, or failure to keep the Lord's Day, read the Bible, pray, tithe, witness or whatever standard the moral law sets for Christians. In Christ, Christians are described as slaves of righteousness and God. ***You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness (Rom. 6:18)***. ***But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life (Rom. 6:22)***. Therefore Christians can never be indifferent about the absolutes in the moral law.

With freedom in Christ comes responsibility and limitations. Freedom demands a different kind of life. ***What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not (Rom. 6:1)! Pursue . . . holiness, without which no one will see the Lord . . . (Heb. 12:14).***

Freedom and Questionable Practices. Christians have freedom in the area of questionable practices, but are to use their freedom responsibly in wisdom and love. ***Everything is permissible for me—but not everything is beneficial (1 Cor. 6:12).***

III. CATEGORIZING BROTHERS INVOLVED IN QUESTIONABLE PRACTICES

The Weaker Brother. The weaker brother has religious opinions based on his background that affect his conscience, prohibiting him from freely engaging in certain questionable practices because to do so would be sin for him. He may not be weak in theological knowledge but is weak in conscience in the area of some questionable practice. To have a weak conscience is not sin but it is spiritual immaturity in the questionable practice under consideration. *The weaker brother under no circumstances should ever violate his conscience. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean (Rom. 14:14). And everything that does not come from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23).* His motto must always be: *“When in doubt, don’t!”*

The Legalistic Brother. A Christian can become a legalist about questionable practices by insisting all Christians conform to his opinions of conscience in questionable practices. The legalistic brother is not to bind or judge another man’s conscience, knowing each will give an account to the Lord for his own actions. ***You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat (Rom. 14:10).***

The legalistic brother is in sin for a judgmental attitude. He needs to have his bound conscience freed up to enjoy all or some questionable practices, or at least tolerate those who have freedom to do things that he cannot do.

The Libertine Brother. In questionable practices, it is easy to go to extremes. A libertine brother often abuses liberty by getting as close as possible to breaking the moral law without actually doing so. There is no setting aside of rights for the weaker brother. And his battle cry is, *“I have my Christian liberties and I won’t give them up for any narrow minded, immature legalist!”* He will flaunt his liberties in order to make the point that he is *really* free. The libertine brother is in sin when he despises the weaker brother, or when he pushes his freedom to the maximum breaking the moral law.

The Stronger Brother. The stronger brother's conscience appreciates his liberty in Christ and is not bound by legalistic restraints. He is free but will voluntarily limit his freedom if it causes a weaker brother to stumble. ***It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall (Rom. 14:21).*** The strong, balanced brother, who understands Christian liberty, will gladly set aside his liberty for the weaker brother. He will use his liberties in private without boasting publicly about them. ***So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God (Rom. 14:22).*** He will not destroy a weaker brother (1 Cor. 8:11) or the work of God (Rom. 14:20) for a momentary pleasure from some questionable practice. Love rules the balanced brother. ***Therefore if food (any questionable practice) makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat (do any questionable practice) again, lest I make my brother stumble (1 Cor. 8:13).***

WHEN DOES A DOUBTFUL THING BECOME SIN?

When a Christian is personally convicted in his own conscience that a particular doubtful thing is sin for him. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean (Rom. 14:14). But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). A Christian should never do anything his conscience says is wrong, even though there is no Scriptural basis to indicate it is sin. The danger is that the convicted believer will try to force his opinions on other Christians, resulting in a form of Christian legalism.

When a Christian is practicing a doubtful thing that causes his weaker brother to stumble in his Christian walk. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to stumble (Rom. 14:21).

When a Christian practices a doubtful thing and the unbeliever makes an issue out of it. If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if anyone 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 (1 Cor. 10:27-28).

When a doubtful thing gets a mastery over the Christian and he is brought under its authority. Everything is permissible for me—but I will not be mastered by anything (1 Cor. 6:12). If the Christian becomes addicted to TV, tobacco, alcohol, coffee, tea or cokes, he is brought under its power and that is sin.

IV. PRINCIPLES FOR SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF DOUBTFUL THINGS

Principle of Liberty (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23). All doubtful things are lawful for the Christian to practice. There are things a Christian can do that will not hurt him personally or disturb his own relationship with God. Questionable practices will not cause a Christian to fail his Lord in any way, for we know *“the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof”* (1 Cor. 10:23), and the Christian has freedom and liberty in Christ (Gal. 5:1).

Principle of Love (Rom. 14:13, 21; 1 Cor 8:9). Because of the strong (mature) brother’s love for a weaker (immature) brother (often times the weaker brother is legalistic), he will forego his rights and freedom in order to help the weaker brother understand grace, keep him from stumbling and be constantly thinking of the unity and peace of the Body of Christ. The stronger brother, advanced in the application of doctrine, refrains from doing certain things, not because they are inherently wrong but because he wants to help other believers and not hinder them. The mature believer has liberty but he is to temper that liberty with love (Gal. 5:13).

Principle of Expediency (1 Cor. 6:12). This principle seems to apply mainly to the unsaved world. There are certain rights a believer has but he willingly gives them up that he might not ruin his testimony with the lost. A mature Christian refrains from doing certain things, not because they are wrong but because they offend an unbeliever and keep him from seeing the true issue in salvation, which is Jesus Christ and His work on the Cross.

Principle of Edification (1 Cor. 10:23). While all questionable practices are lawful, it may not be wise to do them if the action tears down rather than builds up the weaker brother. Any action that hinders the growth of another believer is not edifying the Church of Jesus Christ.

Principle of Mastery (1 Cor. 6:12). While the Christian has the liberty to practice any doubtful thing, if in practicing it, he is brought under its mastery and power, and in any way becomes addicted even in the slightest, then he must forsake the practice. If the practice leads to a habit that brings the Christian under its control such as addiction to nicotine, alcohol or caffeine, this is obviously is no longer Christian liberty but a breaking of the moral law of God. What is an addiction? There is *physiological addiction* when a person says, “I can quit the habit any time I want.” But in reality the person cannot quit and does not want to quit (the body requires the substance). There is also *psychological addiction* when a person says, “I can quit whenever I want and have done so on occasion to prove it, but I do not want to quit because it is a pleasurable experience.” The person’s body does not require the substance, but the mind and emotions really want it.

Principle of God’s Glory (1 Cor. 10:31). Can a Christian eat or drink or whatever he does (any questionable practice) and do it all for the glory of God? The moral law of God must still govern one’s freedom in questionable practices. A Christian should ask, “Can I take Christ with me in whatever questionable practice I choose to do?”

SOCIAL PROBLEMS DUE TO WRONG UNDERSTANDING OF QUESTIONABLE PRACTICES.

Attitudes. The problem of questionable practices is as much a matter of attitude as it is theological understanding. Certain Christian personalities either lean towards legalism or libertinism. The key is to get biblically balanced.

Pride. Most people, who do not practice certain questionable practices, generally are very proud people. The reason for this is their lack of understanding of what sin really is. Many Christians raised in a Christian home (which is a tremendous advantage) or are from a “churchy” background, have grown up in a sheltered environment and often times redefine sin. There are two basic reactions to this sheltered existence. First is rebellion. Young Christians often react negatively to all the taboos, and when he/she is out from under the wing of parents there is rebellion. Perhaps the person has equated Christianity with legalism and throws Christ out with the taboos. Second is a Pharisaical attitude. A person goes along with the legalism, developing a “holier than thou” attitude towards others. These Christians can easily get puffed up with pride.

Often the proud Christian finds it very difficult to understand a person who has been marvelously saved out of the world system but does not shed certain habits immediately after conversion. Many times these self-righteous Christians will not accept the fact that a person has been saved unless the behavior pattern in doubtful things of the new convert is totally changed.

Cultural Differences. There is always a cultural pattern on doubtful things, and this will vary with the geographical location. Wherever the country or whatever the culture, the Christian must approach the Scriptures honestly and objectively on the subject of questionable practices, asking himself, “What does the Bible teach? What are my prejudices and how do these compare with the clear teachings of the Word of God?”