

## Lesson 4

### **WHEN IS IT RIGHT TO REFUSE?**

#### **1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Rarely a week went by in my 38 years of pastoral ministry that some Christian approached me and said, “Dr. Arnold, is it right or wrong for me to do “such and such” a thing as a Christian?” Invariably the practice had nothing to do with anything that is commanded against or for in Scripture, but it fell into the area of things not specifically spoken against in the Bible. We call these indifferent things, amoral practices or doubtful things or questionable practices. Are there any guidelines to help us as Christians determine what is right or wrong in the area of questionable practices?

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 that 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 but this is not Biblical.

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 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.

Then there is the *Biblicist* who has a proper balance between law, liberty and love. He accepts the principle of law. There are things that God has commanded that we should do and shouldn’t 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. The Christian is positively commanded to pray, witness, love, obey parents, submit to government, attend church and hundreds of other positive commands. 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 for or against in the Bible, and whether a Christian partakes of these practices depends upon whether his own conscience is free to participate, whether the

practice will offend another Christian person, 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—but 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 that a Christian does not have the 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 inherently in themselves are harmful to me (for if they are, it is sin) but whether they are profitable. Ask not, "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 this freedom and to set it aside if the cause of Christ is in any way hindered by it.

***"Everything is permissible - but not everything is constructive."***-- All questionable practices are right for the Christian to do (he has freedom) but will these things build up and edify other people? Will the Christian's life build up or tear up other people as they carefully observe that life? The Christian must not only ask, "Does this questionable practice build me up but does it build up others?" If it does not build up, then it is more important to avoid such practices rather than to assert one's rights and insist upon the use of Christian liberties.

***"Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others."***-- Each Christian must seek to promote the best interests of other people, not selfishly promote his own interests. Are we as 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. This does not mean that all Christians must give in to the bullying Christian legalists, but the stronger brother has a responsibility to all men, even Christian legalists, to use their liberty wisely. The Christian should be asking, "How can my life be the best possible testimony to the lost world?"

### **THE CHRISTIAN'S LIBERTY - 10:25-26**

***“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 pagan priests to support their priesthood sold the sacrificed meat to the meat market. 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 in itself. If the Christian, however, would say to the butcher, “Has this meat has been offered to idols?” he has raised a false issue. The unsaved butcher would think that the Christian was at best picky and at worst crazy. Christians were not to ask fussy questions, be over scrupulous or raise false issues with the unsaved.

***“For, the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.”***—Paul says that the Christian should 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. God has created things for our use, pleasure and enjoyment, but the tendency of sinful men, even Christ Christian men, is to abuse the things God has given us to enjoy.

Paul did not tell these Christians, “Separate from anything and everything that has to do with the pagan temple!” “Cut off relationships with all people who still practice idolatry!” “Isolate yourself as Christians from the unsaved world!” Paul did not say that the only way to defend against the world is to get away and stay away from certain things that are destructive, that are strongly tempting. Paul seems to be saying, “Do not run from real life.” “Live right out in the midst of society.” Do not try to avoid being normal, natural people, and enjoy the normal, natural things around you.” “You will never escape by trying to get away from all the temptations. They will pursue you where ever you go.” Paul is saying that the Christian should relax, enjoy life and not raise scrupulous questions, always trying to examine with a microscope as to whether the questionable practice is going to be dangerous or hurt you. What Paul seems to be saying is, “Relax, enjoy life but be willing to apply the basic Biblical principles in relation to questionable practices. Does it profit? Does it edify? 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 put 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 worshipper, the Christian had the liberty to go. But he also had the liberty not to go – “you want to go.” If the unbeliever sets meat 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 we are friendly, openhearted and outgoing with a real love and concern for people will we get invitations into the homes of the unsaved. *Non-Christians desperately need the Christ we 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. In any social situation with unbelievers, the Christian is to keep quiet, not making an issue, waiting patiently for an opportunity to present Christ clearly. For sure, no Christian should harass the unbeliever 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 farther from the Lord and His salvation.

***“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.”***-- If some unbeliever at the dinner party says, “Do you know that this T-bone steak was offered as a sacrifice at the temple yesterday?” Now the unbeliever has raised the issue. If the unsaved man makes an issue of the questionable practice, then this becomes a true issue and a Christian stand must be made. Why would an unbeliever be raising this issue? The unsaved at Corinth knew how the Christians took their stand against every form of idolatry, and by making an issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols, the unsaved person 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 to partake of some doubtful thing may offend his conscience. The Christian’s conscience may be clear but the unsaved man’s is not.

Because the Christian loves Christ more than he loves a T-bone 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 doubtful thing. Paul says the same thing in Romans 14:16: ***“Let not then your good be evil spoken of.”***

***“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 the 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 goal was always to accurately present the gospel to the unsaved without having it confused with questionable practices.

***"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."***--

If a person eats food or drinks any 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. All that the Christian does, his actions and plans, his schemes and desires, are 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?" Or, "Can I go dancing in a place where there is much revelry 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.

***"Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God."***--

The Christian is to live a life that brings the least offense to the unsaved and saved. As Christians, we are not to deliberately offend anyone. We cannot help it 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 so as not to 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 true gospel or in his stand for genuine Christian morality. What Paul 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.* Paul's 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.

***"Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some (1 Cor. 9:20-22).***

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 that wants to please Christ and win men to Christ. This is the best and highest motivation for Christian living.

## THE CHRISTIAN EXAMPLE - 11:1

***“Follow my example,”***--The Corinthian Christians (and every Christian) 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. And we are to follow Paul's example.

***“as I follow the example of Christ.”***--What Paul did, he saw in the supreme example of Christ who set aside all his rights and liberties as the God-Man to die that sinful people might be saved. Jesus Christ is the supreme example of love and concern for others. We can only follow Paul because he followed Christ.