

PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS TO COMMON PROBLEMS

Lesson – 12

"The Problem of Questionable Things"

INTRODUCTION:

- I. Over the years, there have been a number of TABOOS that religious-minded people have refrained from practicing for religious reasons.
 - A. For example:
 1. Amish people don't allow their faces to be reproduced in photographs or art.
 2. Some Pentecostal groups do not allow their women to wear makeup, to cut their hair, or wear pants.
 - a. Some won't even watch a television program where the women on the screen are wearing pants.
 3. Some members of the Lord's church refrain from a number of practices, some of which are considered as questionable at the very least – maybe some of the ones I'm going to mention are also considered as a taboo in your own mind.
 - a. Practices like social drinking, dancing, smoking, playing cards or dominos, going to the movies, mixed swimming (where

boys and girls swim together), celebrating certain religious holidays (like Christmas or Easter, or allowing your kids to go “trick or treat”), having a Christmas tree, wearing shorts, singing religious songs with an instrument of music in the privacy of the home, and many other practices that time doesn't permit to mention.

- B. As I said, some of these so-called "taboos" we probably agree with.
 - 1. I certainly don't agree with ALL of them, but I must admit there are a few here that I PERSONALLY believe are practices that are either WRONG or HIGHLY QUESTIONABLE at best.
 - 2. However, there are some of these "taboos" that, if someone would try to enforce, many of us would consider that person as EXTREMELY narrow-minded and VERY judgmental.
- C. So, where do we get all these ideas?
 - 1. I believe that most of them are a SINCERE attempt to deal with some of those "gray areas" – those issues the Bible doesn't SPECIFICALLY or DIRECTLY address.
 - a. Once, when I was preaching on a subject similar to this, I talked about the "gray areas" – and after services, one well-meaning brother came up to me and said, "There AREN'T any gray areas in the Scriptures."

- b. This brother had somehow resolved all the theological debates over certain passages of Scripture that have been going on for decades.
 - c. I'm always a little afraid of brethren who come across as have figured everything out – aren't you?
2. But the truth is, as long as there have been Christians, there have been disagreements as to how to handle those questionable situations.
- a. Unfortunately, some of those disagreements get so out of control that people begin to take sides.
 - (1). One side becomes convinced that their view of a questionable practice is scriptural.
 - (2). The other side is just as convinced that the practice is NOT scriptural.
 - (3). Accusations are hurled from one side to the other.
 - (4). Love for one another is replaced with suspicion, anger and bitterness.
 - (5). Both sides refuse to compromise.
 - (6). One side or the other wins the support of the majority.
 - (7). The church divides.

(8). Finally, people are left in the wake of the division with their feelings deeply wounded, and their faith severely weakened.

- II. Unfortunately, this kind of thing has been going on between brethren for nearly two thousand years.
 - A. Even first-century Christians had problems like this – take for example the church at Corinth.
 - 1. They were being troubled by a number of things, and so they wrote to the apostle Paul asking for some answers.
 - 2. Almost the entire letter of 1st Corinthians is devoted to answering the list of questions posed by the Corinthian Christians.
 - 3. Let's look at one of their areas of confusion and see how Paul addressed it.
 - a. From his answers, I hope we will discover some principles we can use in handling those gray areas we may come across.

BODY:

- I. What was the problem in Corinth?
 - A. Among the many things that troubled these brethren was one which clearly fell into the realm of personal opinion – it concerned eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

1. This issue was as relevant to their lives as the issue of social drinking, or mixed swimming, or dancing is to ours.
 - a. There were some who were STRONGLY against it, and there were some who felt it was PERFECTLY ALL RIGHT.
- B. To better understand this controversy, let's take a closer look at the issue confronting these brethren.
 1. When a sacrifice was made to an idol, only part of the meat was actually burned on the alter – most of it was left over.
 - a. Some of this left-over meat was given to the pagan priests.
 - b. The rest of it was either sent to the temple butcher to be served in what we might call “the temple restaurant,” or it was sold in the marketplace – known as the "shambles."
 - c. From there, the meat would be purchased by the citizens of Corinth, taken home and served – either privately or for a dinner party.
 2. First-century Christians were faced with three sticky problems.
 - a. First, there was the "restaurant" problem.
 - (1). Is it okay to go through the temple door and, instead of turning to the right to worship an idol and indulge in sexual escapades with the so-called temple priestesses, you turn to the left and head for the temple restaurant to enjoy a good meal?

(2). **1 Cor 8:9-10** – *But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. 10 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?*

b. Second, there was the "meat market" problem.

(1). Should a Christian shop for meat in the temple market?

(2). **1 Cor 10:25-26** – *Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake; 26 for "the earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness."*

c. Third, there was the "private dinner party" problem.

(1). Should a believer accept an invitation from someone who might be serving meat that had been sacrificed to an idol?

(2). **1 Cor 10:27-28** – *If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake. 28 But if anyone says to you, "This was offered to idols," do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience' sake;*

II. In 1st Corinthians chapters 8 and 10 Paul offered these struggling believers some principles that are just as relevant today as they were then – especially when dealing with these kinds of issues.

A. The first principle is "The Principle of Liberty."

1. Paul's first response to the questions raised by these concerned Christians was to remind them of two things they already knew.

a. The first point Paul made was *"we know that we all have knowledge."* **(1 Corinthians 8:1a)**

(1). There are two possible ways Paul was using this word knowledge.

(a). He was either saying, "we all think we know the truth on every matter" – speaking in a somewhat sarcastic manner.

(b). Or he was saying, "we all know that we are no longer living under the code of the Law" – meaning we are no longer bound by a lot of rules and regulations, but we now have liberty in Jesus Christ.

(c). This was more than likely his meaning.

b. The second point was *"we know an idol is nothing."* **(1 Cor 8:4)**

(1). The believers at Corinth knew that the idols worshipped by the heathen nations were nothing more than wood or stone, and that the sacrifices made to them had no real spiritual significance.

(2). **1 Cor 8:5-6** – *For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), 6 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.*

2. Taken together, these two points established the fact that there was nothing intrinsically wrong with Christians eating meat sacrificed to idols, because we are now operating under a system of GRACE, not a LEGALISTIC SYSTEM OF RIGID RULES AND REGULATIONS!
 - a. Christians don't get to heaven by keeping a legalistic system of rules and regulations, we get to heaven by God's grace and our desire to obey God's Will to the best of our ability!
 3. To keep THIS principle of OUR LIBERTY IN CHRIST from being misapplied, Paul sought to balance it with another important ingredient.
- B. The second principle, is "The Principle of Love."

1. "Love edifies" (**1 Cor 8:1b**)
2. Paul is saying, "we can have all the knowledge we want – we can know our Bibles backward and forward, be able to successfully debate every controversial issue in the brotherhood" – but without "LOVE," WE HAVE NOTHIN'!"
3. That's why Paul goes on to caution those brethren who feel they have the LIBERTY to do as they please because they KNOW they're right!
 - a. **1 Cor 8:7-13** – *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. 8 But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse. 9 But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. 10 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? 11 And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? 12 But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against*

Christ. 13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

- b. Some of the brethren in Corinth had been Christians for so long that they had this LIBERTY PRINCIPLE down pat!
 - (1). They could not only go to the meat market to buy their meat without their conscience being offended, THEY COULD ACTUALLY GO IN THE TEMPLE RESTAURANT AND EAT STEAK THERE!
 - (2). They didn't have even a TWINGE of guilt that they were doing anything wrong.
 - (3). After all, THEY HAD KNOWLEDGE!
 - (a). But they didn't have love.
- b. There were other brethren in Corinth that were spiritual toddlers, fresh out of the background of idol worship, and there were others who had come from a Jewish background who had been taught all their lives that having anything to do with an idol was an affront to Almighty God.
 - (1). These brethren were sincere in their feelings.
 - (2). No matter how hard they tried, they simply couldn't get out of their minds the fact that this meat had been offered to idols.

- (3). It wasn't a question of their being narrow-minded and legalistic, they were sincere in their opposition to eating anything that had been offered to an idol.
4. So, Paul teaches these brethren a very important principle – the strongest evidence of our maturity is NOT the extreme to which we can exercise our liberty, the strongest evidence of our maturity is the RESTRAINTS we're willing to impose ON OURSELVES for the sake of those who are weak.
 - a. It should NEVER be a question of DO I HAVE THE RIGHT TO DO WHAT I WANT?
 - b. But rather, DO I HAVE THE RIGHT TO OFFEND THE CONSCIENCE OF MY WEAK BROTHER IN CHRIST?
5. Now, let's be fair – I realize there are some "professional weak brethren" in the brotherhood.
 - a. They're always grumbling and complaining about something.
 - b. They're the ones who are always saying, "You can't do that because it offends my conscience."
 - (1). I don't believe Paul is saying we need to give in to those people – they're nothing more than spiritual manipulators.
 - (2). There will always be those LEGALISTS who want to rob us of the liberty we have in Christ.

- (3). They're believers who believe righteousness is obtained by conforming to a code of conduct that THEY have written, or one that THEY have concluded from certain Biblical principles.
- (4). Paul NEVER compromised with the legalist.
 - (a). **Gal. 2:4b-5a** – Paul wrote to the Galatians, "*...of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour...!*"
- c. However, in the Corinthian letter, Paul IS saying, we need to do EVERYTHING WE CAN to avoid offending the conscience of a brother (or sister) who is GENUINELY OFFENDED – who is genuinely weak.
 - (1). This weakness may come from a lack of knowledge of Biblical principles.
 - (2). Or it may come from the inability to completely divorce ourselves from our cultural background.
6. That's the principle of love.
 - a. And, it's not just taught here, it's taught throughout the Scriptures.

- (1). **Eph. 4:2-3** – *"With all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."*
- (2). **Rom. 12:10** – *"Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another."*
- (3). **Phil. 2:3-4** – *"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."*

III. Now comes the BIG QUESTION – "What should I give up?"

- A. The Bible is very clear when it comes to calling certain things sin – adultery, fornication, drunkenness, etc.
 1. But in other areas, right and wrong are not spelled out quite as clearly – and it's in those areas where we need a little help.
- B. While the Bible may not give us SPECIFIC ANSWERS, it DOES offer us some GUIDELINES to govern us in deciding what we should give up.
 1. For example, we should give up anything that will cause US to stumble and be weakened.

- a. If there is some activity that is going to weaken us spiritually, and lead us into sin, then we need to avoid it.
2. Here's a second guideline, I should give up anything that causes my brother or sister in Christ to stumble and be weakened.
 - a. These are the kinds of things that I may be able to do in the privacy of my home, but not in public.
 - b. I believe this is what Paul had in mind in **Romans 14:22** – *"Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves."*
 - (1). If you want to do something that you know is going to offend some other brother – keep it to yourself, let it be between you and God, **DON'T START PREACHING YOUR PERSONAL CONVICTIONS TO EVERYBODY ELSE!**
 - (2). If **YOUR** conscience doesn't bother you, then **DO IT** If you're wrong, the matter will be just between you and the Lord.
 - (3). But, whatever you do, **DON'T FLAUNT YOUR "LIBERTY"** in front of the eyes of others if they don't see it the way you do.
 - c. Several "hot issues" would probably fit in this area – and I don't have to tell you what they are, I think you know!

3. Here's the last principle: **1 Cor 10:31** – *"Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."*
 - a. If God isn't going to be glorified by what we're doing, then we shouldn't be doing it.
 - (1). To put it another way, ask yourself this question, "How am I going to glorify God as a child of His, and as a disciple of Jesus Christ by what I'm doing?"
 - (a). If you can't think of a way, then ask yourself, "What's my REAL MOTIVE for doing what I'm doing?"
 - (2). And always remember, **YOU CAN'T GLORIFY GOD WHILE YOU'RE OFFENDING HIS CHILDREN AND CAUSING THEM TO BECOME WEAKENED AND STUMBLE!**

CONCLUSION:

- I. You know, everyone of us here fit into one of the three categories we talked about earlier.
 - A. We're either WEAK, a LEGALIST, or someone who is governed by a **LOVING FREEDOM IN JESUS CHRIST.**
 1. If you're WEAK – then keep an open mind as you continue studying the Scriptures.

- a. Think and meditate on sound Biblical principles, and pray for the wisdom to understand and be able to properly apply the principles God reveals in His word.
 2. If you're a LEGALIST – then humble yourself in God's eyes and pray for the Lord to soften your heart.
 - a. By studying the life of Jesus Christ, you'll see that the Son of God not only came to bring GRACE and PEACE – He lived it!
 - b. Ask the Lord to help you become more loving and tolerant with your brothers and sisters in Christ who don't see things quite the way you do.
 - c. Develop a genuine spirit of compassion, and never be too big to say, "I may be wrong," even though you may be right.
 3. If you're one who is guided by a genuine spirit of LIBERTY – then don't flaunt that liberty before others.
 - a. Let your convictions (whatever they may be) be between you and God (and perhaps other Christians who feel the same way as you).
 - b. Don't feel you've got to CAMPAIGN YOUR CAUSE.
 - c. If you really believe in the "Liberty" you claim you do, then give others the "Liberty" to hold on to their convictions – especially those that condemn your convictions.
- B. I guess it all comes down to GRACE!

1. I DON'T CLAIM:
 - a. To have all the right answers on all the issues.
 - b. To have a perfect theological understanding of every principle found in Scripture.
 - c. To be perfect and live a sinless life.
 2. But I DO claim the GRACE OF GOD!
 - a. None of us are going to get to heaven on the basis of our doctrinal perfection – because if we dug deep enough we would ALL find something to disagree on.
 - b. But we are going to get to heaven by the blood of Jesus Christ, and by the grace of God.
- C. So, if God is going to accept us by His grace – as imperfect as we are – why can't we accept each other the same way?

II. Have you taken advantage of the grace of God?

- A. Have you been washed by the blood of the Lamb – received the forgiveness of your sins by coming to Jesus in complete obedience?
 1. If you haven't, then why not accept the free gift of God's grace today?
 2. If you have accepted that gift, but you've cast it aside to go your own way, why not come back and take hold of it once again?