

Deciding the Doubtful

CHARLES C. RYRIE*

That the child of God under grace has the exalted position of the ages there can be no doubt. That this position is the greatest motive for holy living is also beyond question. Unfortunately, the few who have twisted the doctrine of grace until it has become a doctrine of license have obscured, but of course not nullified, this motivating power of grace.

Grace not only provides the motive but also the standard for conduct today. God has given clear instruction in His Word concerning the daily walk of the believer, and these teachings of grace, entirely separate from any other rule of life in the Scriptures, stand complete in themselves. Furthermore, these standards are the very highest in all of God's Word, and although most Christians will admit this fact, there is sometimes ignorance of the specific criteria which God has set forth for the daily life under grace.

Generally speaking, the problem of most of our readers is not concerned with matters of conduct which are unquestionably wrong. However, there is that realm of conduct which includes those things which we call questionable or doubtful and which does pose real problems which must be faced by all of us. It is sad, but true, that some actually are not willing to know what the will of the Lord is in these questionable matters, but those who are not only willing to know but also to do God's will in these particulars will find clear principles in the Word for deciding the doubtful.

It is the purpose of this article to group the many passages of Scripture which bear on this subject and formulate certain broad principles. It is our prayer that each who reads be willing to do as well as to hear His Word.

1. Principles in Relation to Yourself

In relation to yourself there are two questions to be asked in deciding a questionable amusement, habit, etc. The first

*Dr. Ryrie, who graduated from the Stony Brook School prior to his college and seminary work, and is Professor of Greek at Westmont College, Santa Barbara, Cal., is presently on leave of absence for advanced studies at the University of Edinburgh.

is: "Is it a weight?" In the twelfth chapter of Hebrews, the writer pictures the Christian life as a race. Having mentioned the instances of faith in the eleventh chapter, and having shown the better things of Christianity, he considers, in the twelfth chapter, what should be the result of proper apprehension of all this truth. He says: "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1). We are warned in these verses of the encumbrances of the Christian life, for these are the weights of which the writer speaks. Actually these weights are not sins; they are simply hindrances or encumbrances that impede the runner. In classical Greek the word used here signifies any superfluous weight or burden such as that which results from stoutness or pregnancy.

I have a cousin who weighs 240 pounds. I suppose it is all right for a man to weigh that much, but it becomes terribly inconvenient when he tries to do a very simple thing like tying his shoes. His weight then becomes quite a hindrance. Just so, in the Christian life we encounter things which, though not sins in themselves, become hindrances in running the race. It is not against any rule for a runner to carry with him weights as he runs a race in a track meet, but he certainly will not win that way. Any practice in the Christian race which, although it may be innocent in itself, will retard the runner, must be laid aside. Remember, too, that it is only by running that you learn what these things are. As long as you stand still you will never feel that they are hampering you. Run, but run stripped of all encumbering weights.

The second question to be asked in relation to ourselves is: "Is it a habit?" "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (I Cor. 6:12). Here again, as with the question of weights, we are faced with practices which are not necessarily sins in themselves but which may become enslaving habits. Literally, things which are not expedient are things which do not contribute to one's own benefit, and the criterion for judging the

expediency of things is whether or not those things may become habits. It is not a question of what harm the practice is, but rather what good is it. With all our liberty under grace it is so necessary to walk circumspectly. Therefore, any practice which tends to become an enslaving habit is something not only of which a Christian must beware but is something better left out of his life altogether. If you, as so many are prone to do, stoutly affirm, perhaps as you read these words, that you are not under the power of that thing which you are practicing, then why not give it up and prove that this is so?

2. Principles in Relation to Others

Continually, while discussing this subject, we must keep in mind that living according to these standards of grace does not in any way give the believer acceptance before God. These standards are followed not in order to gain merit but because the believer has already been accepted by God. Then, because he loves Him, he lives for Him.

Not only must the believer consider weights and habits in judging questionable practices, but he must often limit his liberty by his concern for others—both believers and unbelievers. In I Corinthians 8, Paul sets forth the principle that should govern our conduct in relation to other Christians. It is somewhat difficult to understand fully the exact situation in which the Corinthian believers found themselves, but it is evident that there was a question in their minds of whether or not a Christian was at liberty to eat meats that had been sacrificed to idols at the time that they were killed. Possibly such meat was offered at a lower price. At any rate, they had written Paul asking his advice on the matter. This presented a real dilemma for him. He had to vindicate the principles of grace. He had to avoid offending Jewish feeling. He had to guard against anything that might cause the Gentile Christians to slip back into idolatry. His answer to this problem was this: God is one; therefore, the sacrifice to the idol is an invalid transaction (vs. 4). However, he goes on to say, not all have grasped this truth and some are still in a certain sense under the spell

of the idol; therefore, for them to eat would be sin. Since this is the case, stronger Christians should abstain from eating such meats for the sake of those weaker brethren (vss. 7-13).

The summation of the argument and the great principle of conduct in relation to our Christian brethren is simply this: "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend." Thus Paul limits liberty by love, a love that is willing to refrain from that which is innocent in itself in order that the weaker brother will not stumble in his walk because of our example. Although the specific problem changes many times, the principle abides. It will be used, too, by those who sincerely love their brethren in the Lord.

Not only does God expect certain things of us in relation to our brethren, but He also has fixed certain standards for our relations with the unsaved. Paul commands us to "walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time" (Col. 4:5). What this may mean, in each individual believer's case, God must reveal to the individual heart. It will certainly include the principle that we are to give no offence to the unsaved man (I Cor. 10:32). But perhaps we can best specifically define walking in wisdom by considering Paul's own example: "For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ) that I might gain them that are without law" (I Cor. 9:19-21). This is true Christian liberty limited by true Christian love.

Would to God that every believer today were as willing as Paul. To the Jews he became as a Jew. It is as if he left his own position to adapt himself to the position of the Jew. To what lengths he went is not revealed, but we do know that when he preached to Jews he turned them to the Old Testament, to their Jewish ceremonies and laws, and based everything on the Jews' hope of the Messiah, showing how all was fulfilled in Christ.

← 4,

701

To those under the law the apostle became as under the law. The ones spoken of here are those who assumed a self-imposed position under the law. This is not the same group previously mentioned, for the law was addressed to the Jews. It is incidental to the present discussion but very important doctrinally to note that Paul did not consider himself under the law. However, in order to win those who put themselves in that position, he gladly left, *in the matter of his conduct*, his position under grace.

To those who were without law Paul became without law. The group in view here is the great Gentile world to whom the law was never addressed. Without law does not mean lawless, for at the same time Paul was in-lawed to Christ. In other words, he was subject to the teachings of Christ. Let there be no misunderstanding of these words. Paul is not saying: "When in Rome do as the Romans do." This kind of life which he exemplified is not a compromising and contradictory life; it is a rigid and restricting life.

This standard is one of the most elusive of precise definition and yet it is one of the most important, for the unsaved man is constantly watching the believer, and it is imperative that he walk in wisdom, difficult as that may be. How encouraging to remember that the same God who set up the standard has also promised to provide the wisdom necessary for living up to it (Jas. 1:5)! Surely the one whose heart is filled with the love and compassion of Christ will gladly become servant of all that many may come to know that Saviour.

3. Principles in Relation to God

As in the other sections, here too there are two things to be considered in judging questionable things by our relation to God. The first is: Will it glorify God? This is the great summary principle in Paul's discussion of doubtful things in First Corinthians. "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (I Cor. 10:31). In deciding the doubtful, the question of this principle is: Does this pleasure or practice fit in with the glory of God? Is it something upon which I can sincerely ask the blessing of God? There may be some things which are not wrong

in themselves but which are practiced in ungodly places with ungodly people, participation in which would identify us with the enemies of Christ. Surely such participation does not glorify God.

But what is the glory of God? It is the manifestation of any or all of His attributes. Therefore things which glorify God are things which demonstrate His character to the world. God is glorified in the believer's life when that believer acts so as to reveal truly the character of God and His will for man. The principle and definition are clear enough; the practice is up to us.

The second question is: Does it imitate God? "Be ye therefore imitators of God, as dear children" (Eph. 5:1). Actually this is the *how* of glorifying God. Since "no man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him" (John 1:18), and since Christ said: "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9), this principle might just as well be called the imitation of Christ. (Cf. John. 13:15; I Thess. 1:6; I Pet. 2:21; I Jn. 2:6.) The emphasis is not on the imitation of the deeds of Christ but upon imitating the pattern of His life, and that pattern was simply doing at all times the will of God (John 4:34). Therefore the imitation of Christ is simply to do the will of God. The accomplishing of this supernatural manner of life can never be by the energy of the flesh but only by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. When He is allowed complete freedom in the life, the fruit of the Spirit will be produced; and to own and display "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control" is the best imitation of Christ ever. This is accomplished only when the Spirit fills every part of the life. This means basic yieldedness to His way, continued obedience to that way, and continuous, conscious dependence on Him every step of that way (Eph. 5:18; Eph. 4:30; Gal. 5:16). This assures a Christ-like life.

These, then, are the biblical principles for deciding the doubtful. Is it a weight? Is it a habit? Will it offend some weaker brother? Will it attract the unsaved man to Christ? Does it glorify God? Does it imitate Christ? If the doubtful

thing cannot pass all of these tests, then it is better left out of your life. This is not legalism; this is godly living under grace. This is not bondage; this is liberty which we are privileged to exercise and to limit under grace.

It is one thing to know the truth; it is quite another thing to do it. May we be willing to let God make the applications of these truths as He knows our faults and needs, in order that in these days we may "walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called."

Question Box

No. 1334. I am puzzled about II Corinthians 11:4. It seems to suggest that the Corinthians were not to be too harsh in their judgment of those who might come preaching another Christ or another Gospel than Paul had proclaimed, but the believers at Corinth should bear with them. I do not see how this can be, in view of other Scriptures, as Galatians 1, where Paul said that such teachers should be accursed. What do you think is the answer?

Not a few have been puzzled by II Corinthians 11:4: "For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him." How can this be justified with Galatians 1:8, 9: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that that ye have received, let him be accursed." There is a great deal of difference between the instruction to the Corinthians, "Bear with Him," and that to the Galatians, "Let him be accursed."

Many expositors explain the Corinthians passage in some such way as this: "If there should come one who has a better saviour than Christ—and there cannot be; or if there should come one presenting the claims about a better spirit than the Holy Spirit—which surely cannot be; or if one should come preaching a better gospel than the one that we have proclaimed, the Gospel of God—and there is no other so wonderful; but if a man comes preaching these things, and could he be believed, then you had better receive him."

The Editor, respecting the views of other teachers, does not agree that the above explanation is the proper one. Observe that the last word in II Corinthians 11:4 is in italics—*him*. This means that it does not appear in the text. The pronoun that is here understood might just as well be, "it."

Here, we believe, is the sense of the passage: "Would to God you would bear with me," says Paul, "in the Gospel that I have been proclaiming unto you . . . I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy . . . But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is