

Navigating The Gray Areas Of Life

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Christian young people and their parents face a host of decisions every day that challenge even the most discerning believers. The Bible is very clear on matters such as lying, stealing, coveting, murder, adultery, immorality and many other behaviors explicitly called "sin". But what about all those daily decisions that fall in between the "black" and "white" of scripture? We usually refer to these as the "gray" areas of life, or issues which are matters of Christian freedom. How do we make wholesome, wise, and Christ-honoring decisions when the Bible seems less definitive, giving us freedom of conscience in some areas? It is not enough to simply ask "what's wrong with it?" or to reason "I haven't found a Bible verse prohibiting it, therefore it's ok". The following is a brief list of helpful questions which promote honest reflection, and compel us to think biblically and critically not only about each decision but the motives behind them.

Regarding each decision ask:

Will it be a spiritual advantage to my life? In other words, will I be enhancing my growth by doing this or that? Will it cultivate more strength, endurance, discipline, and discernment? Will it build rather than tear down my life? Sleep may be a good thing but too much of it will not be profitable. There's nothing wrong with recreation and leisure time but without careful parameters one could be spiritually weakened (1 Corinthians 6:12-20; 10:23-31).

Will it slow me down with excess baggage in the Christian race? We are to live our Christian lives by faith. There are certain activities or behaviors which may not be wrong but could become excess distraction and temptation for some. Living a faithful life for the Lord requires diligence, perseverance, struggle, and focus. We should avoid behaviors and activities that add bulk to an already challenging set of spiritual priorities (Hebrews 12:1-3; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Will it potentially enslave me? According to God's word we are not to allow anything to "master" us (1 Corinthians 6:12). Whatever your decision about a gray area of life, you must stay away from that thing which will bring you under its power. Because of sinful desires which are *at war* with God's spirit within us (James 4:1) we can easily underestimate the enticement of everyday experiences. Many people have quickly come under the bondage of entertainment, media, food, money, romance and a host of other enjoyments God has richly given to us. We often rationalize by conveniently overestimating our spiritual ability to say no (as in the case of Demas - 2 Timothy 4:10).

Will it hypocritically cover my sinful desires? In other words, am I doing it “in the name of” true biblical freedom when the truth of the matter is I’m really satisfying sinful desires? We are to be honest with ourselves. We are not to put a veil over our sinful motives while pretending to be truly “free in Christ” (1 Peter 2:16). It is very common to turn liberty into license (Galatians 5:13). If you spend a good bit of time defending your “privilege” to exercise a Christian liberty, perhaps you ought to let go of it for a time as a means of testing your motives. Is it truly a “freedom”? If so, it should be easily dispensed with for the sake of maintaining integrity before the Lord.

Will it violate Christ’s supreme rule in my life? Every believer should be submitting every day to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. However, not everyone agrees on just what the Lord wants. Some are convinced in their conscience that something is wrong and others have a freedom of conscience to do that same thing. We must ask ourselves, “for me personally, is this something the Lord would be pleased with?” If we have any doubts we should not do it (Romans 14: 20-23). If you believe that the Lord’s will for your life would not be violated, then you’re free to proceed (Romans 14:5). But be careful here, Paul warns us to be *completely* free from doubts. In other words, we should not be involved in some “gray” activity without having sought counsel, studied God’s word, prayed, and scrutinized all possible pro’s and con’s before proceeding. If important issues are bypassed and the conscience is violated, the result is sin (Romans 14:23).

Will it impair my judgment or hinder the Holy Spirit’s control of my will? We are taught by Scripture that we must yield our will to the complete direction of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18; Romans 8:6-14; Galatians 5:16-25). Any activity that may diminish our ability to remain alert and sensitive to the things of God should not be taken lightly. This principle can have broad and specific application for the Christian. For example, unregulated relationships with unbelievers can cloud one’s judgment, plant seeds of confusion about the truth, and “de-sensitize” us to the Spirit’s conviction (1 Corinthians 15:33-34). Consider also the very real dangers associated with chemical substances (e.g. pain medication, alcohol, tobacco, etc.) which may lower inhibitions and skew our moral compass. We must be careful to avoid if possible all potential hindrances to the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Will it build up other Christians by its example? We must never exercise a Christian freedom at the expense of another’s faith. What you do in front of others is not simply a matter of your freedom in Christ to live as you choose, but rather an issue of building up other believers in their spiritual maturity. We must be careful not to unwittingly encouraging another toward a behavior that may violate their conscience, thereby putting “a stumbling block in a brother’s way.” (Romans 14:13).

The pattern of our lives sets an example, and it is a tremendous encouragement to carefully limit our liberty out of love so as to never hurt a brother or sister in the Lord (Romans 14:15; 1 Corinthians 10:23-33).

Will it lead others towards Christ? This is a very difficult issue. The Bible teaches that we are never to get into a situation where our innocent behavior is “spoken of as evil” (Romans 14:16). For example, if what we are doing, though not sinful, could misrepresent the Lord, His church, His people, or His truth, to the world then we should avoid it. Not only are we to build up less mature believers in the body but we are also to have character that is above legitimate question in the eyes of unbelievers (1 Peter 2:12-24; 3:13-17; 4:15). Some things are not evil but can easily be associated with questionable elements of society or even worldliness. Remember, if Christian freedoms are truly “freedoms” then we should be as ready and willing to give them up as enjoy them.

Will it be consistent with Christ-like character? We want to imitate Jesus Christ in all our desires, words, thoughts, and deeds. If we say we belong to Christ then our first consideration when deciding whether to do this or that should be what the scriptures teach about our Lord’s attitude toward His heavenly Father, toward obedience, toward people, toward the truth, etc. Is this consistent with who He is, His likeness? Could this bring His name and the gospel into question? Will others see what I’m doing and question my commitment to follow Him? (1 John 1:6; 2:6).

Will it magnify the glory of God? We should live in such a way that the word of God is honored (Titus 2:5) and God’s glory is on display (1 Corinthians 10:31). We must ask if the activity or behavior could undermine God’s name. Could God’s honor and praise be diminished as a result of this? Some things may seem mundane and rather non-spiritual (i.e., eating, working with hobbies, leisure, etc.) but Christians must always be alert as to how God can be gratefully praised for all He has provided. We must avoid anything that could detract from bringing Him thankful praise for everything we have the freedom to enjoy.

A Word about Unity in the Body of Christ:

*Beyond these questions, believers have the liberty to make decisions in those areas where the scriptures give no clear direction for what is sin. Anyone who is less free in their conscience is **warned** not to judge others who are free, but rather be thankful for God’s leading in their life (Romans 14: 3b-4). This is very difficult for the “less-free” to balance. What their conscience perceives as sinful easily becomes a universal standard for everyone because their conscience is strongly affirmed by strict avoidance of such activities. Consequently, they will feel less fearful and more comfortable when others adhere to the same conduct. However, each believer whose conscience is not as “free” as others must **first** acknowledge their internal boundaries and be honest about the tendency to judge others without biblical warrant*

(Romans 14:3b-13a). They should confess the sin of judging and seek the forgiveness of those whom they have offended. **Second**, they should thank God for their present state of maturity and for using the conscience to protect them from potential dangers unforeseen. **Third**, They must press on to maturity in the Scriptures by studying each issue so as to properly inform their conscience along clear, biblical lines. **Finally**, they should be patient as the Lord works in their hearts to cultivate discernment and balance, **never violating** their spiritual sensibilities in the meantime.

Regarding those with greater liberty, equally, Romans 14:13b-21 and 15:1 warn them not to think less of others without freedom, but rather love them by **first**, never being an offense or spiritual hindrance. Wherever a complaint arises, careful and thoughtful interaction should follow so that an understanding is reached for God's glory. The conscience of one should not "rule" another in areas of liberty, but **love should prevail** in every consideration, even if it means eliminating the exercise of certain liberties (e.g. Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:12-13). **Second**, serious consideration should be given to whether a liberty is the best choice in a particular context. Some Christian freedoms may be unquestioned because of cultural "norms" or common Christian practice, while the freedom in other contexts may be imprudent because of the spiritual background and history of certain groups and peoples. For example, the mealtime consumption of wine may be the "norm" and so one's liberty (all other spiritual questions above having been considered) will most likely be a non-issue. On the other hand, in a culture where the abuses of alcohol are decried by both the saved and the unsaved, such liberty may cause greater questions and bring an unintended but very real reproach upon Christ and His Church. **Finally**, those with greater liberty of conscience should carefully discern the difference between a "clear" conscience and a "seared" one. Some participate in "gray" activities with ease because they have consistently and with cavalier involvement suppressed the warnings of their conscience. This is often rationalized by appealing to the absence of an explicit text prohibiting the practice. How can we know the difference? According to 1 Timothy 1:5-7, when the conscience is silenced the result is "fruitless discussion" (vain and senseless talk), pride, and arrogant but ignorant assertions about truth (see also 1 Timothy 4:2-3). In other words, the more someone engages in activities which their conscience warns them against, the more they become blinded to the truth, cannot see the dangers, and therefore, perceive themselves to be "free" though they are deceived. Conversely, the evidence of a clear and maturing conscience is simply humility, submissiveness, and obedience (1 Peter 2:16-19; 3:16-17). Where these are absent it is a given that one's conscience may "feel" free but is simply suppressed. In conclusion, Paul spoke of each of these realities within the Church and we should not be surprised at the struggle. Remember, we shall all give an account of ourselves before God! (Romans 14:10)