



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 190

At times knowing what is the right thing to do is quite complex, for though the Bible provides us many principles to live by, it does not give us explicit answers about what we are to do in every conceivable circumstance. There are issues and situations about which the Lord has chosen not to speak, and in these matters the Lord has left us free to follow our consciences, that is, to use wisdom and discernment, applying biblical principles, to do that which we believe is right and will bring glory to God.

To act against conscience is to sin – Paul deals with such morally indifferent matters in Romans 14. Having looked at verses 1-13 in the last study, we now turn our attention to the rest of the chapter. In verses 14-16 Paul agrees with the mature Christians, his conscience having also been enlightened and liberated by Christ’s teachings, and thus for him such things were not unclean in themselves (v. 22b; 1 Timothy 4:1-5). However, he also knew that the weak believers had not yet understood this truth, and their consciences were still bound by their scruples, and thus were not enjoying such freedom in Christ. The problem with them was a weak grasp of doctrine (1 Corinthians 8:7), and so Paul says that even if something is not in itself unclean, “it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.” Additionally, in verse 23 Paul says that when a Christian who believes something is a sin but then does it, he has sinned. Even if that thing is not sinful, the person has done something which is not from faith, that is, he has violated his conscience and done what he thought God has forbidden, and thus he has committed a sin.

This is a very important biblical principle, that when we are uncertain about whether something is sinful or not, we should not do it; otherwise, we would be doing something which violates our consciences, and thus we would be committing a sin. Thus even though Paul agrees with the strong believers, he exhorts them not to use their freedom in such a way as to harm their weaker brothers (vv. 20-21).

Enjoy your freedom in private – As much as possible, mature Christians are to be sensitive toward their misinformed brothers and sisters in Christ. They are to love them, to patiently understand them, and to bear with their scruples, so as not to cause unnecessary stumbling blocks for them. In practice this means that in the presence of the immature, the mature Christians should do their best to voluntarily refrain from exercising their freedom regarding such matters (v. 22a; 1 Corinthians 8:9-13; 10:28-29).

Pursue peace and upbuilding – In verses 17-19 Paul says that the kingdom of God is not about non-essential or trivial matters, but about “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Given that Paul’s letter was directed to all Christians in the Roman church, the strong as well as the weak, he was calling the mature believers to pursue peace and upbuilding by not using their liberty in a way that would harm the immature; and he was also calling the immature believers to pursue peace and upbuilding by not imposing their own personal scruples on the church. When we properly understand these principles, and have the well-being of brothers and sisters in Christ as our goal, then it will lead to mutual love, and peace and unity in the church, and ultimately honor and glory to God.

Liberty and servitude – On the one hand, though the mature believers are to stand fast in the freedom they have in Christ (Galatians 5:1), they are not to flaunt their liberty or arrogantly force their views on the weak, damaging their spiritual growth; rather, they are to patiently come alongside the weak and teach them biblical principles about such matters, encouraging them to correctly understand their Christian freedom, recognizing that God is at work in them to that end (Proverbs 15:17 ; Romans 15:1-3; Galatians 6:2). On the other hand, though the immature believers are free to hold to their personal scruples, they are expected to grow out of erroneous views regarding indifferent matters through the study of the Word and the wise counsel of mature believers, thus developing their consciences so they do not bind themselves where God has set them free. Meanwhile they are also not to impose their views on the church, oppressing and thus binding the conscience of the strong (Proverbs 18:2).