

Introduction to Christian Ethics
Course Developed by Ron Habinski for

Unit #8 Key Apostolic Ethical Themes
8D Questionable things and Mutual Consideration

- The subject we will explore in this unit is a very big one.
- It bears on many of the sensitive questions on which Christians often disagree.

1. In past lessons we have taken noted that believers generally agree on big ethical questions such as murder, theft and adultery.

- We have also recognized there are many ethical issues on which there is sincere and persistent disagreement among us.

Q: What are some of the sorts of ethical questions about which believers are less than unanimous?

A: [DISCUSS]

- Permissible deviations from the literal truth;
 - Acceptable forms of entertainment,
 - Birth control,
 - Abortion,
 - Acceptable dress and hair styles,
 - Acceptable food and drink,
 - Acceptable forms of criminal punishment (death penalty, lash)
 - Acceptable grounds of divorce and subsequent remarriage,
 - Sunday observance,
 - Appropriate dress for public worship,
 - The musical styles that are appropriate for public worship,
 - Giving,
 - Parenting and disciplining, and
 - Genetic engineering, stem cell research.
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- We know that ethical views among believers of the same generation, believers of different generations and over the life of individual believers.
 - This may be one reason why the expression, “*questionable things*” was originally coined and continues to be widely used among believers.
 - We use it to refer to ethical issues on which believers are known to disagree.
 - Some ethical rules or standards are obviously questionable, because some believers sincerely think that they are wrong while others sincerely think that they are not wrong.

- There are at least two big issues involved in such disagreements among believers:

1. How are we to understand such differences, or why do they arise?

2. How are we to manage and deal with such differences when we become aware of them?

- First let's consider how we are to understand these differences, and why they arise?

- The ethical teaching of Jesus and His apostles is mostly expressed in the form of ethical principles, or commands that are so generally expressed as to constitute principles, e.g. *“Love one another as I have loved you.”*

- There are also virtues and recommended ethical behaviours that are expressed in words such as purity, kindness, gentleness, patience and self-control that constitute principles that are to be applied in many different situations.

- But many specific ethical questions and issues are not specifically dealt with or clearly pronounced upon in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles.

- Consequently, believers considering the rightness or wrongness of a specific action or behaviour have to ask themselves whether any of the general principles described in the ethical teaching of Jesus have a clear application to the action or behaviour being considered.

- It is easy for us to sincerely disagree in such situations.

- We disagree among ourselves because our understanding of this body of ethical teaching is imperfect, uneven from believer to believer and changing over time as we come to understand more and more of our Lord's will for us over time.

- Individuals make decisions about ethical questions based on where they are in their knowledge and understanding, and influenced by human teachers who are imperfect and personal human desires, which may cloud our judgement.

- There are many, many things that are not forbidden either specifically or in principle, and these things come under the heading of our liberty in Christ.

- Paul is speaking about our liberty in Christ when he states the principle, *“All things are permissible for me.”* **1 Cor 6:12**

- In the Bible the word “all” usually has exceptions associated with it.

- We know Paul does not mean that adultery or murder or theft are morally permissible.

- What he means by his statement is that there is a very large class of activities and behaviours that, in principle, are entirely innocent and permissible because God has not regulated or forbidden them.

- Unfortunately, many people, especially young or immature believers, or

believers influenced by legalistic teaching, have a tendency to invent rules for every occasion and action, or accept such rules when other believers teach them.

- In the process many things that may not be wrong at all are defined as wrong, and the consciences that have been informed and shaped by such teaching faithfully testify to the individual that the forbidden actions or behaviours are sinful.
- Many examples of such man made rules are mentioned here and there in the New Testament, e.g.: observance of holy days, not eating meat sacrificed to idols, taste not, touch not, avoid marriage.
- Paul tells us that the individuals who fall prey to such thinking are typically possessed of a weak conscience.
- The corollary to this principle is that those who know that the condemned behaviours are entirely innocent and permissible have strong consciences.
- Unfortunately, this explanation is counter-intuitive to those with weak consciences.
- They tend to think that their consciences, which tell them that certain things are wrong, are correct and strong, while the consciences of others which are not delivering such negative conclusions must be incorrect and weak.
- They are inclined to reason that a conscience that actively delivers condemnations must be functioning better than one that is not delivering condemnations.
- They may be wrong in thinking this way, but they cannot see it and do not believe it.
- Our consciences are designed to point us to God's standards as revealed in His word, and when they do that and only that they are strong.
- On the other hand, when they point us to the rules of man, they are weak, however strongly they may testify to the validity of those rules.
- Paul also says that the person who sees sin where other believers do not see it is weak in faith, while those who do not see sin are strong in faith

Rom 14:2.

- What Paul is speaking about is the fact that if one is not able to believe that God would approve of a certain action, one is not free in conscience to act in that way.
- But if one believes that God would approve of an action, the action is then permissible.
- Sometimes a group or a congregation can become extremely ingrown and self-centred, thinking that their views and only their views are correct, spiritual and acceptable to God.

- This may be what Paul is speaking about in **2 Cor 10:12**.
- In this passage he says that people who measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves to themselves are not wise.
- It is better to have some openness to the perspective of believers outside one's little group.
- One of the arguments that frequently inject more heat than light into the discussion of questionable things is the question, "***What would Jesus do?***"
- This question appears to be a worthy and independent principle, but unless a person can point to a specific teaching of Jesus or of His apostles, this question lends itself to unrestricted subjectivism.
- "***If I feel Jesus wouldn't do this, then I must not do it.***"
- I do not need to be able to explain, account for or justify my feelings about what Jesus would or would not do.
- It is enough that my feelings are sincere.
- This sort of thinking is well meant, but it is dangerous.
- It is **assumed that such personal feelings are valid and spiritual witnesses to some sort of fundamental truth or ethical insight**, and the fact that other sincere and devout believers do not share these feelings is often comfortably ignored.
- God wants our consciences to apply the ethical teachings and principles taught in His word; He does not want us to be guided by our subjective feelings any more than He wants our faith to depend on, or be based on, personal feelings.
- Experience shows that our individual feelings are changeable and unstable.
- They are influenced by a very wide range of factors including health, the weather, inter-personal relations, digestion, how much sleep we have had and how recently we have eaten.

- The points I have raised for your consideration so far have been my attempt to account for the wide range of views held by believers about questionable things.

Q: Can you think of any other explanation of the widespread disagreements among believers about questionable things?

A: [DISCUSS]

- It seems that frequent, sincere ethical disagreements among believers are virtually inevitable

- Now, let's consider how we are to manage and deal with such differences when we become aware of them. (This theme is dealt with in Romans 14 and 1 Cor 10.)

1. Avoid disputes about doubtful things with weaker Christians
Rom 14:1

2. Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind **Rom 14:5-8**

- Three points follow from this statement:

- Carefully think through your position on questionable ethical issues, do not take a position without careful consideration. If it is regrettable when Christians disagree, it is shameful when they do so without even giving careful thought to the positions they hold and disagree about.
- It is acceptable to disagree about such questions;
- Paul says what he says here although he plainly believes that eating meat and not observing any day in a special way is acceptable and permissible.
- Paul's own views on both questions are clear, but he thinks people holding the other view should be respected, in spite of it **Rom 14:14; 15:1**. The point here is that we are to cut each other some slack and treat each other with respect.

3. Obey your conscience, whatever it says **Rom 14:14b, 22f**

4. Do not judge the views of believers who claim a freedom that your conscience does not permit you to exercise **Rom 14:1, 3a, 10, 13**.

- Such persons are responsible to God, not to you.

5. Do not look down on others who do not feel free in conscience to do things you feel free to do. **Rom 14:3b, 4, 10, 13**

6. Some things that are permissible may need to be avoided as not beneficial or constructive **1 Cor 10:23; Rom 14:17; 15:1-3a**

- In other words, rather than ask what we are permitted or forbidden to do we should try to place our focus on what we should do.

- Some priorities and values are higher than others, and what is good should not replace the better: **1 Cor 6:19-20**

- We must not let our old fallen nature use our freedom to get what it desires
Gal 5:13; 1 Pe 2:16

7. Do not let yourself be mastered by anything. **1 Cor 6:12b**

- Paul is not speaking here about avoiding what we might call sinful

addictions or obsessive sins.

- The idea of addiction to addictive substances that I am powerless to resist is never really acknowledged in the Bible, although this passage says very emphatically that we should not tolerate things that control us.
- But what Paul seems to be speaking about here is the fact that perfectly innocent things may become controlling preoccupations or obsessions in our lives.
- This could apply to clothes, work, sex, food, collectables, the pursuit of various types of thrills or emotional highs, etc.
- Such things, Paul says, must not be allowed to preoccupy or obsess us.
- The question is whether the things that we devote significant time and energies to are worthy of the time and energy we devote to them.

8. Protect the effectiveness of your testimony with insiders Rom 14:16; 1 Cor 10:33 and with outsiders 1 Cor 10:32f

9. Do not be a stumbling block (i.e. one who causes another to stumble into sin).

- **Rom 14:13, 15, 19-21; 1 Cor 8:9; 10:24, 27-30**

- Paul does not mean that I must avoid each and everything that anyone else disapproves of, but that I must not knowingly lead or provoke others into doing what they believe to be sin
- Being considerate of others means that my personal liberty should be limited by my love for others.
- So I should be concerned about peace within the body of Christ and building up my brother in Christ.
- I should not flaunt personal liberties before believers with a weak conscience, and thus provoke them to judgmental thinking or to doing things that their consciences forbid.

Q: Can you think of any other advice that we should bear in mind with respect to questionable things?

[DISCUSS]