

Grace and Christian Liberty, No. 1

During my formative years, preachers denounced games making use of playing cards for they were supposedly tools of gambling and sin. My Mom was convinced by the preachers. So, in the 1950s while I was living in Louisiana, when Mom learned that Lea and I were playing canasta with others in our congregation, she wrote me a letter expressing motherly concern.

In response to her concern I devoted study for several weeks in developing a lesson which I titled, "The Exercise of Christian Liberty." Actually, it was the first discourse that I had ever written out fully. Eventually, I sent it to Reuel Lemmons who published it in *Firm Foundation* on February 7, 1961. Almost a quarter of a century later, it was included as Chapter 7 in my first book, *Free in Christ*, and I also learned that a Bible professor in ACU had been making copies of it for his students through those years. So, many of you have read that discourse.

As an extension of my recent writings about sin and guilt, I want to review that article with you in two segments with some expansion and revision.

The Exercise of Christian Liberty

"For freedom Christ has set us free: stand therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1). In Christ men have liberty befitting sons of God. Such was not true of those bound by the Mosaic "handle not, nor touch, nor taste." Under that Law, a person could be defiled by things which have no moral quality such as by the touching of a dead animal or a piece of holy furniture or by tasting pork.

I. Can Amoral Things and Actions Be Sinful?

Our purity or defilement is not determined by what we see, hear, taste, our touch, but by our *motive* for seeing, hearing, tasting, and touching. Jesus explained that man is defiled by his thoughts rather than by what he eats (Matt. 15:1-20). Defilement is not in certain actions and things, but in improper use of and attitude toward those actions and things. Actions and things, generally speaking, are amoral. They have no inherent moral value. Is not this the point that Paul would impress upon us? *"I know, and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for any one who thinks it unclean ... for the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit"* (Rom. 14:14-17).

Our purity of thought or defilement of purpose determines whether a thing is moral or immoral. Sin is not in things, but in people — in the heart. This is what Paul expressed when he wrote, *"To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted"* (Titus 1:15). Shakespeare only expressed this truth when he said, "Nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

To show the amoral nature of actions and things, consider these examples. These all show that the thought or motive determines whether it is right or wrong.

1. The taking of life is judged by the purity or defilement of heart. The person who kills accidentally or defensively, having no impure heart in it, remains pure in the act. It is not so with the man who kills with hatred or anger although he performs the identical act of the first man.
2. One person may use narcotics for medical purposes and be justified while the person with defiled purpose takes them for their thrilling effects or in an effort to escape reality.
3. Alcoholic beverage, when taken for reasons of health or in moderation, does not defile as it does when taken for intoxication. The act is the same; the difference is in the heart.
4. A person, desiring to know more about religious doctrines, may in purity go to a service where error is being taught or may subscribe to such a periodical or buy such a book. He is not judged like the person who gives mental consent to the destructive error while performing the same acts.
5. Two men may look upon a woman with strong sexual desire toward her, one being pure, the other guilty of sin. One desires to have her as his wife; the other desires to satisfy his lusts.
6. Two persons may take part in a competitive game or attend a sporting activity with different prospects. One wishes to enjoy the activity while the other feeds his gambling addiction.
7. One preacher may preach to save souls while the other tries to build himself up in honor by preaching. Though the sermons may be identical, the motive makes one right and the other wrong.

All of these examples show that the act itself is amoral. Its merit or demerit is determined by the heart. “To the pure all things are pure, but to them that are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure.”

II. Principles Governing Liberty in Amoral Things

When a new kind of case is tried in the courts, it becomes a *test case*. The decision rendered toward it is used to judge all other cases which involve a like principle. There are two test cases in the Scriptures regarding Christian liberty. These both involve amoral things — the eating of food and circumcision. The verdict in regard to the eating of meats demands (1) that a Christian surrender his liberties if they put a fellow disciple in jeopardy, and (2) that his liberty be exercised with self-control. In regard to circumcision, the verdict forbids us to bind our scruples on others so as to limit their Christian liberty. These verdicts can be applied to everything which is of like principle today. (Read 1 Cor. 6, 8, 10; Rom. 14; all of Galatians; Acts 15).

III Our Liberty Is Limited by Self-Control

Man must never be brought under the control of amoral things. “*All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything. Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food and God will destroy both one and the other*” (1 Cor. 6:12-13). Paul is saying, “God has created the body with its

appetites, cravings, and desires, and at the same time God created good things to satisfy the desires; let the desires be fulfilled in moderation and self-control, not slavishly being ruled by the desires.” Both the appetite and the meat to satisfy are amoral. They have no special significance before God. “*But food will not commend us to God; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse; nor, if we eat, are we the better*” (1 Cor. 8:8). Applying this principle to all instincts, desires, drives, or cravings given by God, we see that none are evil within themselves. Consider these.

1. The instinct of self-preservation. It is right to preserve ourselves, to seek for our own well-being, unless we let the desire control causing us to become fraudulent, deceptive, greedy, injurious to others, or disrespectful of the rights of others.
2. Desire for food. This is a pure thing unless we lose control of the desire and become gluttonous or steal food to eat. Because it is abused by some does not make it sinful to desire, obtain, and eat food.
3. Desire for approval. It is natural and right for us to want others to think well of us. This makes us good neighbors. If this desire controls us, we may become hypocritical, deceitful, or extravagant in order to gain approval.
4. Desire to possess. This is the instinct God gave us to cause us to provide for our needs. If one is “brought under the power of” the desire, he may become a thief, covetous, stingy, or an extortioner, or he may destroy his health in order to possess. The flagrant abuse by some does not make the proper exercise of the instinct unholy in others. The pure heart will permit only the proper exercise of the desire.
5. Mating instinct. The desire for sexual fulfillment is given by God for the establishment of the home and the propagation of the race through marriage. If, through lack of self-control, one is brought under the power of his instinct so as to become promiscuous, he has abused God’s arrangement.
6. Reaching out for God. It is a natural desire in man to worship a higher power. Misdirected and out of control, this natural drive has led most of mankind away from the true God. The desire in man is not condemned because it is abused by the majority.

In all these things man has free exercise of liberty so long as his heart is kept pure and self-control is maintained. For this cause Paul emphasized the necessity of the mind’s mastery over the flesh. This brings the war in our members: “*But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would*” (Gal. 5:16-17). (It is my belief that the contrast is between “flesh and spirit” rather than “flesh and Spirit.) So he says, “*For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh*” (Gal. 5:13).

Is everything that could lead to sin evil? We will deal with that question in our next lesson. So, please stay with us. Some answers may be surprising. []

(Cecil Hook: February 2007)