

Grace and Christian Liberty, No. 2

We concluded the previous installment of this lesson by asking: Is everything that could lead to sin evil? In approaching this subject, let us look back to the list of instincts, desires, drives, and cravings put in each normal human being by our Creator. You psychologists may have different listings and definitions for these motivators than my elementary list, but I have called them the instinct of self-preservation, the desire for food, the desire for approval, the desire to possess, the desire for sexual fulfillment, and the reaching out for God.

These are strong motivating forces in our lives. Without them we might not want to get out of bed each morning. At my age, the comfort of bed is often more appealing! Are any of those motivators sinful? Does a strong desire to fulfill any of them become a sin? Is it proper to entertain strong desires for food or possessions but sinful to think about sexual fulfillment? Motivators work through our thinking. They only become temptations when we think about them. Thinking about them and desiring fulfillment is not sin. Temptation is not sin.

We cannot avoid thinking about and desiring satisfaction of these things God put in us. When you see food, you have an automatic reaction to it. It may rate from zero to ten positively or negatively. When a normal man sees female, he also has an automatic reaction with a similar positive or negative reaction. Because the positive rating for the food or the woman may be a ten does not mean he is ready to steal food or entice the woman. The desire may be strong but it is only when he gives consent of his mind to steal the food or entice the woman that it becomes sin, whether either act is accomplished or not.

So let us not constantly load ourselves with feelings of guilt because God's motivators are alive in us.

Is everything that could lead to sin evil? The affirmative answer to this has led many people to censor many amoral activities while inconsistently sanctioning other practices of the same nature. **Any amoral activity could lead to sin.**

1. The preparation and enjoyment of wholesome meals could, and often does, lead to over-eating or the eating of foods detrimental to health. Must one refuse to eat? To prepare a fine meal for guests may lead them to over-eat. Should one ration the meal of his guests?
2. Working at a job and earning a good salary might lead a person to love money.
3. Even though some have had wine prescribed for them by a doctor, they refused it on the ground that it could lead to sin. The contention is true, but does that justify the universal surrender of the liberty for any use of wine?
4. All kinds of competitive games are used as instruments for gambling. Any game could lead to addictive gambling. Who can say which game would tempt a person to compulsive gambling more than others? Must one refrain from all games and sporting events?

5. Many have fallen into immorality and adultery while selecting a companion. Dating can, and often does, lead to sin. Should the young person let his parents choose his companion for him so as to avoid this possibility?
6. In times past the Roman Catholic Church declared that the individual study of the Bible leads to sin by misunderstanding it through private interpretation. The pitfall is there. More people who read it misunderstand it than understand it. But does that make reading the Bible sinful?

We cannot destroy the desires, drives, and instincts discussed earlier. In exercising them, we should “*watch and pray that you enter not into temptation.*” We must strengthen ourselves to live as Christians worthy of the honor Christ bestowed on us as free sons, not as servants under a yoke of bondage. Here we see the necessity of purity of mind and purpose, of mental discipline and self-control. “*For God gave us not a spirit of fearfulness; but of power and love and discipline*” (2 Tim. 1:7). Disciples must be taught to respect the high calling and liberty that God has extended to them. Purity of heart will maintain an enlivened conscience toward all things. Pinocchio let Jiminy Cricket be his conscience. A disciple should not let the preacher, or anyone else, be his conscience. He must have one of his own. Until this is developed in persons or congregations, it is futile to try to herd them by the preacher’s conscience.

IV. Liberty Is Limited by Charitable Regard for Others

Love would constrain a disciple to surrender his liberty in amoral things if it proves to be destructive to a brother. “*All things are lawful for me; but not all things are helpful*” (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23). “*Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for any one to make others fall by what he eats; it is right not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother stumble*” (Rom. 14:20-21). Urging that we be above blame in exercising our liberties, Paul exhorts, “*So do not let what is good to you be spoken of as evil*” (Rom. 14:16). “*Happy is he who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves*” (Rom. 14:22). Freedom must not destroy others.

The test case to illustrate this is the eating of meats which had been sacrificed to idols. Realizing that meat could not contaminate him spiritually, the disciple could eat such meat with no regard to the idol. But a weak brother, who has just escaped from idolatry, seeing his brother eat the meat, thinks that he is eating with regard to the idol. Being thus misinformed, he may be led to eat with respect to the idol. Thus he has been encouraged to sin by his unsuspecting brother. If the man is aware of the weak brother’s conviction, he should not eat. This does not forever ban the man from eating meat, however. After he instructs the weak brother properly, he can continue to exercise that liberty. The “weak brother” is not the preacher, elder, or teacher who is contentious on some point.

“*Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother’s falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall*” (1 Cor. 8:13). Did Paul become a vegetarian? Or did he not use discretion in his eating and continue to teach the truth about Christian liberty? Continuing his discussion into Chapter 9, he declared his right to eat and drink.

Out of regard for our brother, practices which put undue strain on his weakness must be avoided. Even our laws hold us liable for creating attractive hazards such as leaving a ladder up where a child might climb and fall. Although teasing a person is an amoral thing, it would be wrong to tease a temperamental person until he becomes angry and loses his temper. This class of activity is practiced without evil motive, but it shows lack of regard for others and is not expedient because it may cause the death of a brother.

V. Liberty of Others Must Be Respected.

We have not the right to limit the liberty of others by binding our scruples on them. The Jewish disciples had a doctrinal conviction that circumcision should be bound (Acts 15:1). Others realized that “*in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail*” (Gal. 5:6). Circumcision in itself is amoral, neither helping nor hindering. But the binding of this scruple was about to split the whole church. These Judaizers “*slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage...*” (Gal. 2:4-9). Did Paul say, “Oh, well, since circumcision really does not make any difference, we had better surrender our liberty and accept this yoke lest the church be split through the offense of these brethren”? He did not! “*...To them we did not yield submission even for a moment,*” Paul declared.

Almost alone the great Paul waged this battle for our freedom in Christ. Even Peter had about surrendered (Gal. 2:11-13). Because he so protested this yoke of bondage, Paul’s apostleship was being questioned by some. This Judaism had invaded Antioch. From there it would envelop all of Paul’s work among the Gentiles. What should he do? A battle had to be fought to keep us free. God sent him to the fight (Gal. 2:2; Acts 15). He won a victory for us today.

If they could bind circumcision, others can bring us into bondage to their scruples in demanding that our liberties be limited in studying in classes, using individual cups for communion, helping the fatherless, cooperating in evangelism, building up a large congregation, having food in fellowship in the building, and what else might be your local scruple. Although the abuse of any amoral exercise — and these are all amoral — can lead to sin, we are not condemned by a sensible exercise of it.

Now that the battle is won, what attitude will Paul demonstrate? Rather than further driving the wedge to split the church, he made concessions to promote healing by love. After proving that circumcision could not be bound on Titus, he took Timothy “*and circumcised him because of the Jews*” (Acts 16:3).

Then later, Paul took a collection from these Gentiles and took it back to the very ones who were excluding them from the kingdom of God. He must have had more motive in this than charity toward the poor. On bearing this gift to Jerusalem, he agreed to purify himself in the temple as a concession to make peace (Acts 21:26). All of this was done after he had won his case. Charitable concessions can be made without the surrender of liberty. These are necessary in preserving harmony among believers.

Principles cannot be applied with legalism. They are applied through personal judgment. “Circumstances alter cases.” So Paul exhorts, “*... be united in the same mind and in the same*

judgment.” (1 Cor. 1:10). “*The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God...*” (Rom. 14:22). Also, “*As for the man that is weak in the faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions*” (Rom 14:1).

If we were to be bound by the scruples of everyone, we could not use a modern translation of the Bible, allow a quartet to sing in the assembly, eat in a church building, let the Boy Scouts meet in our building, drink a serving of wine, put a cross on the building, lift up hands in prayer, clap hands in praise, use modern hairstyles, give money to the Red Cross, and so on without end. But few of these restrictions would be due to the scruples of the weak brother. They would come from preachers, elders, and other staunch individuals who would limit our liberty by binding their convictions on us.

VI. Evil Displayed with the Good

Must a thing be shunned because evil is displayed with the good? Again, purity of purpose determines the case. Only the good will be sought by the pure in heart. But evil is everywhere. In one form or another it is presented in the newspaper, on the radio, on television, in movies, in fiction, in history, in the Bible, in the school, in places of business, on the job, at the game, in the church, and in the home.

In all of these things our purpose is to accept the good while holding misgivings toward the evils incidental to the good. The desirable rose has thorns incidental to it. Although the thorns are detested, we do not let them prohibit enjoyment of the rose. In enjoying the rose, we learn to avoid the prick of the thorn. So the presence of that which is undesirable does not eliminate our liberty to enjoy that which is good.

VII. Conclusion

“For freedom did Christ set us free: stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” In exercising our liberty in Christ, we must not come into bondage to:

1. Impure motives.
2. Amoral things.
3. A selfish desire to be free to act without regard for others.
4. Those who would bind their scruples on us.

(Cecil Hook; March 2007. First published in *Firm Foundation*, Feb. 7, 1961)