

## Checkpoints for Making Decisions

### *How To Make Decisions That Honor God*

by Marvin Hawbaker

How should Christians make decisions when an activity or situation in question is not specifically addressed in Scripture? Some Christians try to live their lives based on rules set down by their church, pastor or other Christians. This approach often results in living by rules that are based on someone else's preferences rather than clear Scriptural principles. Even if the rules are based on principles of Scripture, it is frustrating to keep a rule without understanding the underlying principle. In order to avoid these pitfalls, we must make decisions based on the principles of the Word of God. In his letters to the Corinthians and Romans, Paul gives five general principles that can be phrased as questions to use as checkpoints in making decisions that will please God.

#### Ü *IS IT HELPFUL?*

*All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. . . (1 Corinthians 6:12a)*

In other words, even if all things were permissible to the Christian, not everything would be beneficial. The phrase "all things are lawful for me" may have been a common phrase among the believers in Corinth. Paul indicates in his letter to the Corinthians that they were flaunting their liberty in Christ to the point of participating in unquestionably sinful practices. Paul could be repeating what they had come to use as justification to do anything they wanted to do – "all things are lawful for me", or, as the NIV translates the phrase, "everything is permissible for me." Paul's response to this statement was, "but all things are not helpful," or, "not everything is beneficial." Paul is countering the erroneous idea that everything is permissible by saying that even if it were, not everything is beneficial or helpful. One checkpoint that Paul would use is whether the activity or situation is helpful.

In practical application of this principle, we need to ask ourselves whether the decision we are considering will help us or harm us *physically*. Remember that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Will it help us or harm us *mentally*? Does it captivate our mind and draw us into sin? "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things *are* noble, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy; meditate on these things." (Philippians 4:8). And finally, will it enhance or hinder our *spiritual life*? How will it affect our spiritual growth and our desire and ability to serve the Lord faithfully in our daily relationships with others, on our jobs and through the church?

#### Ü *DOES IT GET ME IN ITS POWER?*

*. . . All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. (1 Corinthians 6:12b)*

Will the decision we are considering bring us under the power of something? Will it enslave us in the sense that it controls our feelings, our attitudes or our life's activities? Does it become an unbreakable habit? The only legitimate controlling force

for the Christian is the Holy Spirit. We are to be “filled”, that is, controlled and dominated by, the Holy Spirit. Anything else that controls us is illegitimate. Realizing this, Paul said “I will not be brought under the power of any.” The word he used actually means to be enslaved. He is saying “I will not allow myself to be enslaved by anything.”

### Ü **WILL IT CAUSE ANOTHER CHRISTIAN TO STUMBLE?**

*Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (1 Corinthians 8:13)*

Every decision must be made in consideration of the effect of the outcome of the decision on others, especially other brothers and sisters in Christ. The discussion in this passage deals with an issue that seems at first to be irrelevant to our day – the eating of meat that had been offered to idols. In New Testament times, those who worshipped idols would take the very best animal they had, such as a lamb, and take it to the idol's temple where the pagan priests would sacrifice it as an offering to the idol. The animal was killed and part of it would be burned on the altar. The remainder was roasted and sold to the public. The idol's temple became what we might think of as a restaurant today. Anyone could go there and purchase a meal that included this prime meat. Christians of Paul's day wanted to know whether they could eat this meat. Could they go to the idol's temple and eat a meal? Although we do not face this exact issue here and now, Paul's answer forms a universal principle that can be applied to any decision.

Let's follow Paul's reasoning. First of all, we know that an idol is nothing. It is just stone or wood. We also know there is only one true God. Therefore since this meat was offered to nothing and the idol's temple is a temple to nothing and we know who the true God is, we might reason, like some of the Corinthians, that there would be nothing wrong with going down to the idol's temple to eat a meal. And Paul says that if that were the only consideration, that is correct. But there's more to it than that. We must consider how our decisions will affect those who are less mature, or “weak” in the faith, to use Paul's terminology. He is warning against allowing our liberty to cause a weaker brother or sister to sin against their conscience. It's the principle that Paul stated elsewhere, “For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself” (Romans 14:7).

While we don't deal with that exact situation today, we do face the same principle quite often. Our decisions and activities can possibly influence and affect other Christians. If we cause another believer to sin, we have sinned ourselves. “But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.” (1 Corinthians 8:12). “Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in *our* brother's way.” (Romans 14:13). Paul's conclusion to the matter is found in 1 Corinthians 8:13. He would give up his liberty to eat at the idol's temple if his doing so would cause believers who are not convinced they have that liberty to follow his example and sin against their conscience.

### Ü **IS IT GLORIFYING TO GOD?**

*Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)*

The primary responsibility of man in this life is to bring glory to God. We are to live in such a way that God's reputation is made to look good in the eyes of others. The places we go, the activities in which we participate and the things that we say all reflect upon God. Will God be pleased with our decision? "For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." (1 Corinthians 6:20). Will His reputation be protected? "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16).

## Ü IS IT DOUBTFUL?

*But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin. (Romans 14:23)*

Romans 14 addresses the same problem of eating meat offered to idols. But in this discussion, Paul adds one more consideration. If we have reservations or doubts about a decision, it is best to wait until we have complete confidence and peace before proceeding. "If in doubt, don't!" is a good motto to follow. That's what Paul means when he says "whatever is not from faith is sin." To go ahead without being fully convinced is what he means by defiling a weak conscience. (1 Corinthians 8:7)

## Ü SUMMARY

Honestly evaluating and answering these five questions will guide us in making decisions that honor God. Is it helpful? Does it get me in its power? Will it cause another Christian to stumble? Is it glorifying to God? Is it doubtful?

Of course, we must work through this process with much prayer and study of the Scriptures for the leadership of the Holy Spirit and with a desire in our heart to please God. However, when we approach decisions in this way, we can be confident that God will give us clear direction along with the peace that comes from striving to please Him.

All Scripture references are from the NKJV except where otherwise noted.

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