

QUESTIONS TO ASK REGARDING WHAT I CAN DO

1 Cor 8:1-3, 9-13; 9:19-23; 10:23-24, 31-11:1

Are you influenced by what other people do? Maybe a more important question is "Are others influenced by what you do?" In most cases, the answer to both those questions is "YES." This influence reaches into such areas as the way we comb our hair, the clothes we wear, the kind of car we drive, where we live, if we drink alcoholic beverages, do drugs, cheat on our spouses, or if and where we go to church. In fact, we might even avoid certain behaviors because the wrong group participates in the action. We are influenced as well as being influential people.

Some might ask if it really matters that we influence others or that others influence us. That's a good question. We will find that there is not an easy straight forward and clear-cut answer that fits all situations. Most of the time, it really does not matter; however, there are exceptions that can have significant consequences in the lives of others. The most important issues of life are those that have eternal significance. Whether I wear a button-down shirt with a paisley tie or go with an open collar really doesn't have a lot of cosmic significance, although even something that simple has been known to influence the careers of people. You might stretch the point and argue that there are no insignificant issues. Maybe that is why we are told that in the Judgment that we will be held accountable for every idle word.

The level of the importance and whether or not we are greatly influenced or have great influence can be debated for any number of issues you might name. We aren't interested in doing that, but do want to raise our level of consciousness to the fact that such influence is there and that we have responsibilities to others even though we may be free to decide for ourselves what is important or unimportant to us. Paul addressed such concerns in his letter to the church at Corinth and we can look at four questions that will help us answer the question of "What Can I Do?"

Is It Based On Love? 8:1-3

¹ Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. ² If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; ³ but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him. 1 Corinthians 8:1-3 (NASB95)

An issue within the church at Corinth was that of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols in the various temples in the city. Was it OK or not? Part of the membership said "No" and part said "Yes" and I would bet that the majority were just confused and didn't know what to say. Both sides were probably quoting scripture (or teachings they had heard from Paul) to each other to "prove" their point of view. This sounds familiar to what happens today in churches.

It is helpful in reading Paul's letter to the Corinthian church to know that he is writing this letter to address a number of questions and situations they had sent to him in a letter. When you see a statement such as "now concerning this or that" it is likely that "this or that" was in the letter they sent to him. Some commentators think that Paul would then include a statement they had made in the letter to him. A good example of this is the second part of verse one: "We know that we all have knowledge." This statement is thought to be a quote from the letter sent to Paul. The letter writer to Paul was affirming that they knew what he had taught about this subject which Paul summarized in verses four through six of this chapter. However, simply knowing facts is certainly a long way from knowing what to do with the facts and how we apply the knowledge we have in everyday living.

We tend to latch onto a certain truth and then use that to build up our own egos to the detriment of other which is characteristic of those who are arrogant. Paul cautioned them to be motivated in everything by the love of God. Knowledge may inflate our self esteem but Godly love builds up the Body of Christ.

Paul makes an interesting observation in verse two: People who know a little about a subject will tend to sound as if they were expert. On the other hand, those who have really gone into depth in a particular area realize how vast the "unknown" is about any subject. There is an adage that describes this well: "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing." True knowledge is humbling and causes us to realize our desperate dependence on God who is the Source of all knowledge, wisdom and understanding.

In verse three, Paul put things in perspective as to what we need to be achieving in our lives. While learning fact and gaining knowledge is good, it is more important that God knows us (as in the reference to those who work iniquity and will hear "depart from Me for I never knew you). The way God will "know us" is that we love Him. If we love Him, then we will keep His commandments.

Will It Harm Others? 8:9-13; 10:23-24

⁹ But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. ¹² And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble. 1 Corinthians 8:9-13 (NASB95)

²³ All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. ²⁴ Let no one seek his own *good*, but that of his neighbor. 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 (NASB95)

When the problem was presented to Paul, he saw that the real issue was not whether to eat meat or not but was actually the trouble that such concerns were stirring up in the church. The attitude of the group that argued "since we are free that we should eat whatever we wish" was not an attitude of concern and love for others. (Notice what seems to be a bit of sarcasm in Paul's use of the word "knowledge.") They were willing to ignore what influence and harm they were doing to others in an effort to preserve their "rights." This group would have fit in well with the "me-first" generation that is causing so much difficulty in our society today.

Paul did not deny the truth that idols have no power. He also recognized the truth that whether we eat meat or practice being a vegetarian does **not** impress God. This is not what God is looking for in His children. The same thing could be said about long hair versus short hair for men. Do you think that God cares one way or the other? Man looks on the outward things, while God looks on our hearts.

One question I think God would be interested in would be "Why are we doing what we do?" For example, are you being a vegetarian to draw attention to yourself as a unique person? Do we eat meat because we think it makes us more aggressive and, therefore, we are more able to have our own way in dealing with others? Do we wear long hair as a statement of rebellion against authority? Perhaps we wear short hair simply as a means to impress others with how "clean cut" we appear to be. In other words, what is the "intent of the heart?"

Another question is also important and that has to do with how our actions impact others. If we limit our freedom because of love for others, then we are really and truly free. Some may question how that shows freedom. The freedom comes in our being able to deny the influence of our old sinful nature that demands to also have its way. If we are driven to have our own way and get the most for ourselves, then we are going to miss the point of being free in Christ. Paul

knew the freedom that came from giving consideration to others above yourself and he was not hesitant to use himself as an example to follow. Each of us should live our lives in such a way that we would not be reluctant to say to someone else, "Follow my example." You know, even though we don't really say it with our mouth, we really do, through the influence that we have, encourage someone to follow our example. Knowing that is true, then please be certain that others have a good example to follow.

In Chapter ten and verse 23, we see a repeat of what Paul had written in Chapter six regarding whether an action being lawful is the only criterion in deciding whether or not to participate in a particular behavior. It would be lawful for me to go skydiving. However, such behavior has the potential to kill or maim (which is not particularly edifying). While I would parachute out of a burning airplane without much thought, I would not willingly expose myself to such high risk behavior as doing this voluntarily. When it comes to a matter that some consider sinful but is really more a matter of what is (or is not) sanctioned in the local church (such as eating meat sacrificed to idols), then we need to exercise our freedom to deny self and put others first.

Is It Evangelistic? 9:19-23

¹⁹For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. ²⁰To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; ²¹to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. ²²To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. ²³I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (NASB95)

The theme of what real freedom is all about is summed up in verse 19: "For though I am free from all men, yet have I made myself a slave unto all." For some, freedom becomes a compulsion and they are driven by their freedom. We become truly free when we can choose to limit the exercise of our rights. Have you ever been to a restaurant that allowed you to eat all you wish for the same price? There is a tendency for people to overeat at such occasions. Why? Because we let our right to have all we can eat drive us to consume more than is healthy for our bodies. We, in effect, come under the control of that which sets us free. We are truly free when we choose to limit our freedom for the sake of what is most beneficial. The ultimate expression of freedom is when the king willingly allows himself to become a slave. This is exactly what Jesus did when He came to die for us.

We have the right to freedom of speech and some find themselves compelled to use four-letter words in their conversation because they are "exercising their freedom." You might hear them say, "I'm an American, I can say what I want to."

The tendency to exercise freedom for freedom's sake is really an expression of the tendency of mankind to rebel against authority. The young person who has been made to go to church all his life might feel compelled to abandon church when he moves away from home.

Paul considered himself to be so free that he could choose to behave in whatever way accomplished the most for the Kingdom of God (what is YOUR number one priority?). If it meant eating only kosher food when he was with Jews, then he was free to do that. If it meant eating pork when he was in the home of Gentiles, then he had the freedom to do that, also. If the practice did not violate morality as defined in the word of God, then Paul could choose what to do "whatever" in light of what was best for winning souls to the Kingdom of God.

Will It Glorify God? 10:31-11:1

³¹ Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³² Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; ³³ just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the *profit* of the many, so that they may be saved. ¹ Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. 1 Cor 10:31-11:1 (NASB95)

The whole discussion is concluded in 10:31–11:1 giving the broad parameters within which Christians should operate in society. First, whatever a Christian does, whether it is eating, drinking or any other action, it must be done to God's glory. Secondly, neither *Jews* nor *Greeks*, *i.e.*, those inside or outside the church, must be caused to stumble by the actions of any Christian. Again Paul can draw attention to his own actions in support of this, for he sought to please all, never looking for his own advancement, *but the good of many, so that they may be saved*. He concluded with the command that the Corinthians must follow his example outlined in the discussion, which is an example drawn from Christ. The priority of others in terms of their need of the gospel and the concerns of the weaker brother must determine the actions of a Christian.