

7

QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK TO HELP YOU DISCERN BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL¹

Introduction

1. Every *sincere* Christian desires to please God (2 Corinthians 5:9) and abstain from every form of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:22). In order to overcome sin it is essential to (i) understand the development of sin, (ii) utilize the help of God to change our desires, limit our opportunities to sin, exercise self-control, and seek forgiveness.
2. Assumed in all of this is that we know or can discern the difference between what is good and evil. Knowing the difference between good and evil does not come automatically upon conversion, it is an ability that comes with time and “exercise” (cp. Hebrews 5:12-14).
3. This lesson is designed to help us develop the ability to discern between good and evil. In discerning between good and evil, we can ask ourselves a few questions about the matter at hand.

7 QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK TO HELP YOU DISCERN BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

1. Is it clearly condemned in the Bible?
2. Is it similar to the things condemned in the Bible?
3. Does it hurt my conscience?
4. What do mature Christians say about it?
5. Does it hinder my influence?
6. Is it poor stewardship?
7. Would Jesus do it?

7 QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK TO HELP YOU DISCERN BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

1. IS IT CLEARLY CONDEMNED IN THE BIBLE?

- a. Many things are specifically mentioned as being wrong:

- 1) A list of sins can be found in Galatians and Ephesians:

“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21).

“But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them” (Ephesians 5:3-7).

- 2) These things are specifically named and that settles the matter; there is no room for debate when the Scriptures clearly condemn specific practices.

- b. However, not all sins are specified by name, so another question needs to be asked, which is discussed in the next point.

¹ This lesson is based on a lesson by Mark Copeland titled “Discerning Between Good And Evil”, which is included in a series of lessons titled “A Closer Walk With God”.

2. IS IT SIMILAR TO THINGS CONDEMNED IN THE BIBLE?

- a. Paul lists seventeen works of the flesh and ends with the phrase “and the like” (**Galatians 5:21**).
 - 1) Paul has listed a class of evils but has not specified all of them. So, when we are uncertain about some matter, we should ask whether it is *like* any of the sins he has specified. For example, there are many drugs that are not specifically condemned by name in the scriptures: marijuana, ecstasy, cocaine, etc. What are these drugs like? I believe we can compare them to alcohol because they produce similar effects.
 - 2) We can even compare a particular practice with the good things Paul lists as the fruit of the Spirit (**Galatians 5:22-23**). We can ask, “Is the matter in question more like the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ (that which is good) or the ‘works of the flesh’ (that which is evil)?”
- b. Comparing a particular practice against the good and the evil to determine our action is useful, but if we are still uncertain, then we ought to consider another question.

3. DOES IT HURT MY CONSCIENCE?

- a. The importance of a good conscience:
 - 1) One thing that Paul stresses to Timothy is that of holding to a clear conscience (**1 Timothy 1:5, 18-19; 3:9**). If we are about to say or do something and our conscience “speaks” to us, then we ought to listen.
 - 2) A word of caution, however: the conscience ought not to be considered as **the** guide in our lives; the conscience is not a 100% reliable guide. For example, one man’s conscience is pricked when he steals food for his hungry children, but another man feels perfectly justified in doing so, and his conscience doesn’t bother him at all! Why the difference?
 - a) The first man has been a Christian for several years and has been studying the scriptures for just as long, and he has learnt that stealing under any circumstances is a sin. Thus his conscience pricks him; certain scriptures come to his mind (**Ephesians 4:28**) and he feels guilty. This man’s conscience has been properly trained. In this case, the Spirit speaks to him through the scriptures and condemns him.
 - b) The second man is not a Christian and lives his life according to worldly principles, and it is such that have taught him that he is perfectly justified in stealing food for his hungry children under such circumstances. His conscience does not prick him. In fact, his conscience condones his actions.
 - 3) Another word of caution: if we continually ignore our conscience, then it will harden to the point where it doesn’t work; it doesn’t prick us. Violating our conscience to the degree it no longer bothers us is a sure sign of apostasy (**1 Timothy 4:1-2**).
- b. Understanding how the conscience works may help us to better appreciate what Paul says: “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**).
 - 1) In this context, Paul is speaking to Jews and Gentiles who had become Christians and understood that the Law of Moses had been abolished; including laws regarding clean and unclean meats.
 - a) The Gentile Christians, never having followed the Law and never having made such distinctions between clean and unclean foods, had no problems eating whatever was put before them.
 - b) The Jewish Christians, though, had been following the law regarding clean and unclean meats all their lives. To make such distinctions was ingrained in their minds; their consciences had been trained in such distinctions. So, even though they understood that the Law had been abolished and that God had declared all meats clean, they found they could not eat unclean meats without their consciences pricking them; condemning their action.

- 2) This being the case, Paul instructs these conscientious Jews not to eat those meats that were once considered unclean. Doing something when you doubt its rightfulness is to violate your conscience, which is a sin. So an act may be approved of God, but if your conscience bothers you, then don't do it!
- c. Solomon said, "Where no wise guidance is, the people fall, but in the multitude of counselors there is safety" (**Proverbs 11:14**). This will be discussed in the next point.

4. WHAT DO MATURE CHRISTIANS SAY ABOUT IT?

- a. There is safety in a multitude of counselors (**Proverbs 11:14**), and so if we are unsure about something, we can consult other, mature Christians "who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (**Hebrews 5:14**).
 - 1) We ought to take advantage of those with knowledge and understanding:
 - a) The Lord Himself gave gifts to the church - apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (**Ephesians 4:11-12**).
 - b) Paul told Timothy to instruct the brethren in the things he had taught him (**1 Timothy 4:6**).
 - c) The older, mature women are told to instruct the younger, immature women (**Titus 2:3-5**).
 - 2) This doesn't mean their word is infallible and the determining factor because such can be wrong and give bad advice. But, nevertheless, this is no excuse to ignore their advice because they are mature, knowledgeable, and better able to discern good and evil (**Hebrews 5:14**).
 - a) Let us again remind ourselves that there is safety in a multitude of counselors (**Proverbs 11:14**).
 - b) The example of Rehoboam's failure to listen to the advice of older, mature men should teach us something (**1 Kings 12:6-20**).
- b. Another interesting question that is often overlooked regarding our influence is considered in the next point.

5. DOES IT HINDER MY INFLUENCE?

- a. The influence we have on others ought to be of great concern to us:
 - 1) Jesus says that we are the "salt" of the earth and the "light" of the world – this is speaking of our influence in the world (**Matthew 5:13-16**).
 - 2) It is because we can influence others for good that we must be careful how we conduct ourselves:
 - a) The conduct of a wife could influence her unbelieving husband to obey the gospel (**1 Peter 3:1-2**).
 - b) The conduct of a proud unloving person could cause his brother to stumble (**1 Corinthians 8:7-12**).
 - c) Paul strove to become all things to all men for the sake of the gospel (**1 Corinthians 9:19-23**), and he urges us to imitate him in this attitude (**1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1**).
- b. So, as we consider whether we should or shouldn't do something, we ought to ask ourselves whether our actions help or hinder our influence for the Lord.

6. IS IT POOR STEWARDSHIP?

- a. That we are "stewards" of our time, money, and bodies, is evident from:
 - 1) The Lord's Parable Of The Talents (**Matthew 25:14-30**).
 - 2) Paul's instruction concerning our bodies:

"Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (**1 Corinthians 6:19-20**).

3) Paul's directions for those rich in this world:

“Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

b. It is essential, then, to manage our time in all areas of our life. If we take this seriously, then before we engage in something, we will ask, “Is this the best use of my time? Will engaging in this activity demonstrate to others that I am a good steward of my time?”

1) Some activities may be lawful and harmless but may take up so much of our time that we have no time to do the Lord's will or engage in spiritual exercises. This can be true of vacations, hobbies, etc.

2) We should bear in mind that time is limited and therefore priorities must be set and kept:

“Redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:16).

“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

c. One final question we can ask depends on our knowledge of the life of Jesus, which we will discuss next.

7. WOULD JESUS DO IT?

a. Every *genuine* believer is a disciple of Christ. What is a disciple?

1) A disciple is “a learner” and is in contrast to a teacher. “Hence it denotes ‘one who follows one's teaching’” (Vine).

2) But a disciple is more than just a learner or pupil “but an adherent” (Vine). This is why disciples are spoken of as imitators of their teacher (John 8:31; 15:8).

3) The goal of every genuine disciple of Christ is, not only to learn from Him, but to become like Him. Jesus said:

“A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40).

b. So, when we are in a situation and we're not sure what to do, it would be appropriate to ask, “Would Jesus do it?” If you believe He wouldn't, then it is best not to do it.

1) This makes the study of Jesus of prime importance in our lives; studying His life, His examples, and His words, so that we can have the “mind of Christ” (Philippians 2:5).

2) An important point needs to be made and emphasized:

a) Think of someone you know extremely well. It may be a spouse, a child, a friend, etc. Now imagine you were contemplating climbing Mount Everest, but you were wondering whether it was a good idea. So to help you decide, you ask, “Would my uncle Tom do this?” You would have to know your uncle Tom very well to know whether he would climb Mount Everest, wouldn't you?

b) Likewise, before we can ask, “Would Jesus do this?” we have to make sure we know Him well enough. We cannot ask, “Would Jesus do this?” without having a knowledge of Jesus' life and teachings.

Conclusion

1. Every *sincere* Christian desires to please God (2 **Corinthians 5:9**) and abstain from every form of evil (1 **Thessalonians 5:22**).
2. There are some sins that are obvious, and such can be found listed in Galatians 5:19-21 and Ephesians 5:3-7. But there are some things that we find difficult to classify as good or evil.
3. In this lesson we have suggested seven questions we can ask to help us determine whether something is good or evil: (i) Is it clearly condemned in the Bible? (ii) Is it similar to the things condemned in the Bible? (iii) Does it hurt my conscience? (iv) What do mature Christians say about it? (v) Does it hinder my influence? (vi) Is it poor stewardship? (vii) Would Jesus do it?
4. The importance of properly discerning between good and evil is seen in such passages like 2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1 where we are reminded of how blessed we are to be the people of God, and the responsibility to act accordingly, if we wish to have a closer walk with God!

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