

GRAY MATTERS

Part 1

Psalm 119:104-105; 1 Corinthians 10:23-33

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- Is it beneficial or constructive?

- 1 Corinthians 10:23

- Will it control you?

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- Is it motivated by love for others?

- 1 Corinthians 10:24; Philippians 2:3-4;
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- Will it produce a clear conscience?

- 1 Corinthians 10:24-30; Romans 2:14-15

- Will it bring glory to God?

- 1 Corinthians 10:31; Romans 12:1-2;
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- 1 Corinthians 10:32-33; Romans 14:13-21;
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- Is it a good example for others?

- 1 Corinthians 10:33; 9:19-23

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Gray Matters, Part One

We are faced every day with a myriad of decisions—some seem small and inconsequential. Others loom large. What do we choose? There are many decisions which the Bible seems to say nothing about; so how do we make decisions when that's the case?

Rarely does anyone ask if it's wrong to lie, to steal, commit murder or adultery. Most Christians don't need to ask whether or not to pray, read the Bible, and introduce people to Jesus; the Bible is clear about these things and many more. There are other things, though, that the Bible is not clear about – things that fall into "gray areas." Our choices in the "gray" areas matter; in fact they make all the difference. So in this sermon series, we'll explore some ways to make decisions when the Bible is silent, and we'll look at a few contemporary issues. The gray areas of our lives are really important. Gray Matters. It matters a lot.

If God really loves us as much as he says (and he does), and if his Son Jesus Christ died on the cross for us so that we could have this relationship with God as our Father (and he did), and if God really did send His Holy Spirit to empower us and guide us (and he did), then surely He must mean it when He says He wants to direct our steps and guide our path through life (and he does). Psalm 119 says:

"With your instruction, I understand life; that's why I hate false propaganda. By your words I can see where I'm going; they throw a beam of light on my dark path." (Psalm 119:104-105, tmt)

That's a great promise! But what do we do when we are faced with a decision and the Bible doesn't say anything about it?

It's not easy. We are faced with decisions every day, now more than ever before—even in the simplest of places. Did you know that 30 years ago a trip to the supermarket meant that you would be faced with an average of about 9,000 choices of products? Compare that to today, when you go to the store you will be faced with having to choose from over 35,000 products. That's the average *grocery* store; that's not even counting stores like Fred Meyer or Walmart! Even a trip to the store nowadays can be filled with stressful decisions!

Fortunately, while many times the Bible doesn't tell us *directly* what decisions we should make, it does give us clear guidelines for *how* to make decisions. Today I want to point you to some questions you can ask yourself that, if you prayerfully ask them whenever you are trying to make decisions, I guarantee that you will choose correctly. You heard me: I guarantee you will make wise choices if you prayerfully ask these questions when you are making decisions of significance. If these don't

work for you, you can have the money back that you put in the offering today. (so, for some of you this is free advice. . .)

These guiding questions are given to us in 1 Corinthians. We're going to look at each question today, so take out your notes and follow along; when we are done I encourage you to keep these in your Bible or put them someplace where you can refer back to them when you make decisions about what you are doing or will do. Would you stand with me as I read a section?

This is what it says in 1st Corinthians 10:

"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others. Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it."

If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience. I am referring to the other person's conscience, not yours. For why is my freedom being judged by another's conscience? If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God— even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.

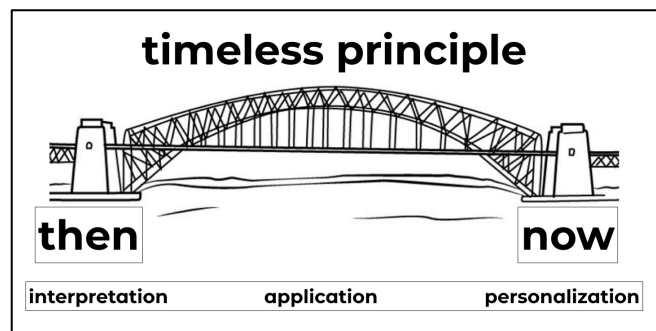
(1Corinthians 10:23- 33, niv)

Thank you – you can be seated.

I want us to start by putting into practice something that we teach in our Core 102 class, and that means we need to...

1. Find the *timeless principle*

Those of you who have been through the class have heard this before. But the way we find the timeless principle is by using something called "The Application Bridge." It's what we use when we come across a portion of Scripture that doesn't always make sense today but we want to figure it out. Here's how it works: you take the original story from the Bible, which is the "Then" side of the bridge, and you want to apply it to "Now" which is the other side of the bridge. To do that, we need to find



the timeless principal that applies no matter when it was written—that’s the bridge that spans from biblical times to today, and will continue to apply no matter what era you live in. That means we have to interpret it in order to apply it and then personalize it. To do that, we have to put it in the context that it was originally given. That’s what we’re going to learn to do today. The issue that was being addressed in 1 Corinthians was the problem of eating meat that had been offered to idols. It seems a little weird to us, but it is referring to meat that had been sacrificed and given to wooden or stone idols (false gods). So we need to figure out how to apply that to our lives today. Let me ask you: when was the last time you ate meat that had been sacrificed to an idol? I’m pretty sure you never have. So how do we apply this to my life and yours? If there is something for us to learn (*and there is because it’s in the Bible*), then what would it be? To apply this, we’ve got to find the timeless principle in it. That’s what we are going to do. Here we go—let’s start with the “then” side: In those days people would sacrifice an animal and take the meat and offer it in a temple to idols—false gods. Now obviously a piece of stone or wood doesn’t eat. So after the meat was left there on the idol-altar for two or three days in the middle-eastern heat and dust, the priests of these false gods would take the meat out the back door of the temple and go over to the street market and sell it. So they’d make money off of it. It was a common practice. Much of the meat in the market started out this way. But for a Jew to eat that kind of meat was a violation of their religion.

Here’s why: they felt that when you bought and ate that meat you were supporting that false god because your money would go to the temple of that idol. Added to that, the meat itself was now considered unclean because it had been dedicated to a false god. But then in this letter to the Corinthians, here comes the Apostle Paul who essentially says, “You know as well as I do that idol meat is no different than meat in your burger at McDonald’s” (except he wouldn’t really have said that, because there’s no meat in a burger at McDonalds). But Paul was saying, “The idols are not real so there’s really nothing wrong with that meat. But,” he says, “it offends some people (specifically, those who were Jews and had become Christians).” So Paul gives them godly advice about Christian freedoms, and Paul’s advice to them is our timeless principal. That timeless principle is what we are going to learn to apply to our lives today, so that we know how to make wise choices when the Bible doesn’t give us clear direction. So the timeless principle is the...

2. Questions to ask:

The first question we need to ask ourselves when we are making gray matter decisions comes from verse 23:

““I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but not everything is constructive.” (1 Corinthians 10:23, niv)

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in Corinth, and when he made this statement, he was quoting what others in the church were saying. Apparently, there

were some in the church who were bragging about how much freedom they had as Christians, and that they could do whatever they wanted to do. So Paul quoted them to say, “You brag about having freedom to do anything you want, but is what you are doing the most beneficial and constructive thing you can do?”

So when we are faced with a decision, the first question we want to ask ourselves about whatever choice we are facing is this:

- Is it *beneficial* and *constructive*?

If I do whatever it is I am considering, will it be beneficial and constructive for myself and for others? Paul is saying, “Sure, I can do whatever I want, but will it really do the most good— will it help the most people?” People in the church in Corinth were bragging about their own freedom, and Paul was saying that there’s something more important than our own freedom that we need to consider.

Let’s say you went skydiving, and at 10,000 feet, before you jump out of the plane, you announce that you want to exercise your freedom, so you are not going to use a parachute. You jump out and guess what? You *do* have that freedom to do what you wanted. But you are also constrained by something else called gravity, and it’s going to kick in.

As Christians, we maybe could choose to do whatever we want, but we’re constrained by a greater set of rules bound by love, and this is one of those: we must seek to do what is beneficial and constructive. We can justify just about anything, but Paul is saying your Christian life is not just about *you*—it’s about what will be most helpful for others. Will your decision be beneficial and constructive?

The next question then comes from this same teaching, but from an earlier chapter, chapter six. You get the idea that the church in Corinth was feeling pretty smug about doing whatever they wanted to do as Christians. So Paul said this:

““I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but I will not be mastered by anything.” (1 Corinthians 6:12, niv)

Do you see that last phrase – “I will not be mastered by anything”? Paul is setting the example for us, so we need to ask ourselves the question:

- Will it *control you*?

There are so many things in this world that are addictive and before long can control us. It’s that old joke about the person who wants to quit smoking, and says, “I can quit smoking anytime I want to. I just don’t want to right now.” Well, then the odds are you don’t control it – it controls you. The Bible is very, very clear my friends: *we have only one master, and that is Jesus Christ*. We are not to let anything or anyone else master us. So whenever you are faced with a decision, you need to project out ahead of yourself and ask – is this going to end up controlling me? And maybe you don’t think it will, so ask, “has this thing controlled other people before? Is this an addictive behavior that others have struggled with?” If so, then I’d strongly suggest you steer clear of it.

The third question is:

- Is it *motivated* by *love* for others?

In verse 24 Paul says:

“Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.” This is a key question to ask ourselves if we are to genuinely follow God as believers in Jesus: “What is my motive? Why am I wanting to make this decision?” If your attitude about the decision is that you intend to do it regardless of anyone else or how it affects others, then you had better turn around—it’s a bad decision. Ask yourself, “Is this something I want to do, and who cares about anyone else? Or is it coming from a heart of love and a desire to do good for others?” If your decision is coming from a heart of selfishness, then the decision is wrong, so examine your motives carefully. Having said that, this doesn’t mean that your decision shouldn’t benefit you; it’s just that you are not the only person to consider. The Bible’s wise advice is, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:3-4, niv)

Be sure to check your motives in any decision, especially the major ones. Make sure you are motivated by *love* for others. The fourth question we need to ask ourselves when the Bible seems to be silent is:

- Is it *producing* a *clear conscience*?

Remember that Paul was addressing the question of whether or not they should eat meat that had been previously offered to idols. To the Jewish Christians it was an offense, but to the Gentile Christians who didn’t have the Jewish laws and legalism, it was just meat—it didn’t really matter where it came from.

So the timeless principle is shown in Paul’s further response (I want to read this to you out of the Message translation of the Bible because it really unpacks this question of conscience. Other translations are more literal, but this one helps us understand it better):

We want to live well, but our foremost efforts should be to help others live well. With that as a base to work from, common sense can take you the rest of the way. Eat anything sold at the butcher shop, for instance; you don't have to run an "idolatry test" on every item. "The earth," after all, "is God's, and everything in it." That "everything" certainly includes the leg of lamb in the butcher shop. If a nonbeliever invites you to dinner and you feel like going, go ahead and enjoy yourself; eat everything placed before you. It would be both bad manners and bad spirituality to cross-examine your host on the ethical purity of each course as it is served. On the other hand, if he goes out of his way to tell you that this or that was sacrificed to god or goddess so-and-so, you should pass. Even though you may be indifferent as to where it came from, he isn't, and you don't want to send mixed messages to him about who you are worshipping. But, except for these special cases, I'm not going to walk

around on eggshells worrying about what small-minded people might say; I'm going to stride free and easy, knowing what our large-minded Master has already said. If I eat what is served to me, grateful to God for what is on the table, how can I worry about what someone will say? I thanked God for it and he blessed it! (1Corinthians 10:24-30, tmt)

Let's break down this timeless principal a little more: go ahead with your decision if it's not in violation of first, **your conscience**. Your conscience is that built-in alarm that tells you right from wrong. The Bible says in Romans 2 (14-15) that God has placed this conscience in all of us, so we all know right from wrong. If your conscience tells you "don't do it," then don't do it. But it's not just *your* conscience—you should also consider **others' conscience** as well.

Paul is saying that you should watch out for other peoples' conscience, too. In other words, *you* might feel it's okay to do something, that you have the freedom to do it and it doesn't bother your conscience, but if there is *someone else* whose conscience would be bothered by you doing it, then you might want to reconsider. Why selfishly pursue your freedom at the expense of your friend's conscience and growth? It's not worth it!

Let's review so far—say them with me:

- Is it beneficial and constructive?
- Will it control you?
 - Is it motivated by love for others?
- Is it producing a clear conscience?

Now you might be thinking "It's only one simple decision; is it really that important?" Well, you're not going to use these questions to make the decision of what color socks you should wear today. You don't have to run through these steps when you are making a sandwich; don't do this in every single decision you make in a day. Usually common sense and experience is enough for those. But decisions that will have significant impact on you or others and it is a gray matter—the Bible isn't clear, then those decisions should be run through these criteria.

The next question comes from verse 31, and it says:

"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (1 Corinthians 10:33, niv)

So the fifth question, and one of the most important, is:

- Will it *bring glory* to God?

This is a critical question. Do you remember several years ago when everyone was wearing those bracelets that had the letters "WWJD" on them—for "What Would Jesus Do"? I think an even better one would be BGTG for "Bring Glory to God" to remind us that this should always be our goal. In *all* that we do, we should ask this question! Who will get the most glory from my decision? God? Me? Or someone or

something else? Living our lives for the Glory of God alone should be our primary ambition. That's what the Bible means in Romans 12:1-2:

“So then, my friends, because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer. Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God--what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect.” (Romans 12:1-2, gnb)

That means that we want our lives—*all we do with our lives*—to be a form of worship to God. And worship means that we give to God the glory that is due him; that he deserves. Notice, too, that verse says that's how we'll know what God's will for us is! So in every decision we face we want to ask this question. Ultimately, will God get glorified for this? Or will I? That's why Jesus himself said:

“Let your light shine before men (that means let others observe your actions), that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16, niv)

In other words, your decisions and your actions should glorify God. Don't ever skip this question!

The sixth question we want to ask ourselves whenever facing a decision is in the next verse—verse 32:

“Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks, or the church of God. . .” (1 Corinthians 10:32, niv)

Remember that some people in Corinth were bragging about their freedom to eat whatever they wanted. So Paul warned them not to brazenly act on that freedom without thinking about how it would affect someone else. While some action might not be a sin for *you*, it could lead to sin for *someone else*. Paul told them, before they acted on their decisions, to ask themselves:

- Will it cause a *weak Christian* to struggle?

Whatever decision you are facing, maybe you could justify it and your conscience won't bother you. But if you do it, will it lead someone else to sin – another Christian who perhaps is not as strong as you? Do you think that, because of your action, they'll do what is sin for *them*? *You* might be able to handle it, but will *someone else*?

But how do I know if my decision will or won't cause someone to sin? You don't always know. So here's a good rule:

When in doubt, do without.

If you suspect that your decision might result in someone stumbling into sin, then don't do it. It's not worth it!

In fact, Paul said this himself in Romans 14:21 –

“It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.” (Romans 14:21, niv)

Do you see that? That’s important, because Paul was only repeating what Jesus said:

“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.” (Mark 9:42, niv)

We are here to help each other, not hurt each other.

- Is it beneficial and constructive?
- Will it control you?
- Is it motivated by love for others?
- Will it produce a clear conscience?
- Will it bring glory to God?
- Will it cause a weak Christian to struggle?

We don’t want to cause our fellow Christians—our brothers and sisters in Christ—to sin. But it’s not just Christians we’re to think about; it’s the impact our decision will have on non-Christians, too. And that’s why, finally, when it comes to making decisions, we need to ask ourselves:

- Is it a *good example* for others?

If you are a believer in Jesus, your purpose is to introduce the people around you to Jesus Christ. There are those who don’t know him yet, and you have been commissioned by Jesus to introduce him to others. The last thing you want is to have your decisions discourage people from accepting Christ. You want to set a good example for them. Paul concludes this passage on making good decisions by saying this:

“For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.” (1 Corinthians 19:33, niv)

So that they may be saved! (*repeat*) Does *that* drive your decision? *That should always drive our decisions.* This is especially why the gray matters.

Earlier in this same letter Paul talked about this priority when he said this (I want you to just listen to it; I’m not going to put it on the screen):

“Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized--whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ--but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God- saved

life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it!" (1 Corinthians 9:19-23, The Message)

We, too, should do everything possible to share the Good News of God's love with others. For I am not seeking my own good, but the good of my family member who isn't a Christian. For I am not seeking my own good, but the good of that person I work with or go to school with. Imagine how your decision will impact them. Will it move them closer to a faith in Christ, or further away? If it's further, then don't do it.

Seven simple questions, but their answers could lead you to a decision that will have a profound impact on the world. Likewise, if you don't ask yourself these questions, it could lead you to decisions that will have negative results. No decision affects only you; we are all in this together.

If the Bible doesn't give us clear-cut directions, then those decisions must be made of quality wisdom by asking these questions. If we ignore or disregard this advice, then those decisions and the results could hold eternal impact in our lives and the lives of lost people around us. I think you can see that the gray really does matter. A right decision will make an enormous positive impact in the Kingdom of God. Gray matters.

Follow these questions to make the best decisions.

Prayer