



The Beneficial Test

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1st Corinthians 10:23-11:1

We often want definitions of sin and God's will to follow arbitrary rules and regulations. We want all of life to fall into nice, neat, clean categories, where everything is black and white. Indeed, there are some categories like that which we can identify. Jesus taught a broader understanding of God's will, principles on which Paul built in his discussion with the church at Corinth. While there are some black and white issues, there are areas of gray; Jesus would take us deeper into the underlying issues.

Understanding what is right and just can be a challenge for us. On the other hand, the greater challenge is living up to the definitions of just and right that we can understand. As Samuel Clemmons stated, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."¹ Knowing what is right, just, and ethical is but the first step in a life of faith. Knowing, accepting, and doing are related, yet wholly different categories.

Throughout 1st Corinthians, Paul writes in response to messages from Corinth. "Everything is lawful" seems to be a Corinthian phrase he quotes back to them. He quotes their statement to offer a correction. "Everything is lawful... but," he says. He then sets forth two tests, "Is it beneficial?" and "Does it edify?" Paul then goes on to set forth another principle, "Don't seek your own individual interests, but what is best for others."

Reading along in 1st Corinthians, we notice these principles appear in other passages. Paul applies them to food sacrificed to idols, as well as to the use of spiritual gifts. They offer resolution for divisions in the church body. If words, decisions, and actions flowed from these principles, there would have been no conflict for Paul to have addressed in the first place. There was conflict, however, for the church had not yet decided to place their issues in submission with the greater will and purposes of God.

They struggled to exert their freedoms in Christ Jesus. They failed to account for the interplay between freedom in Christ and responsibility for our actions. We enjoy our freedom from a legalistic understanding of God's will, and yet there is a greater degree of responsibility in the gospel which far outstrips any parameters legalism can establish. The law might categorize foods into acceptable and unacceptable groups, but it cannot easily deal with how eating or not eating affects our relationships in differing contexts. There are many things which might be allowable, but we must address the implications of our actions and decisions. We are responsible to view our freedoms under the lens of how they impact others.

For Paul, questions of conscience have as much to do with not being offensive or legalistic toward outsiders as with following the revealed will of God. Conscience should lead us to offer healing to the larger community. It should encourage us to build relationship with those beyond the gathering of the church. Conscience is related to the mission and purpose of God, for it should call us to live according to the will of God to an ever expanding degree. Do my actions take others into account?

In *A Cafecito Story*, Julia Álvarez² leads her readers through a tale of coffee growers in the Dominican Republic. She shares the economic impact that our purchases at the grocery store can have

¹ Clemmons, Samuel ("Mark Twain") <http://www.quoteworld.org/quotes/10291>.

² Álvarez, Julia. *A Cafecito Story: El Cuento del Cafecito*. Chelsea Green: Vermont, 2002.
<http://www.fbc-h.org/>

on the lives of communities half a world away. We want to consider the simple acts of buying coffee, tea, or chocolate as simple activities that are neither good nor evil. When my purchase sustains or expands the oppression of others, however, the situation is changed. My actions take on a deeper meaning as I contribute to the welfare, oppression, or well-being of others. In a similar way, Paul says that those things I might otherwise be free to do are transformed into ethical and moral decisions as they begin to impact others in relation to the gospel. I can “Drink Coffee and Do Good,” or I can drink coffee that implicates me in the economic oppression of entire communities. I can freely eat meat sacrificed to idols, or I can place a higher value on how my action impacts another along their journey toward the gospel.

While many would lambast the idea of situational ethics, there is a sense in which Paul seems to apply the ethics of the gospel in a way that depends upon the context at hand. It is not so much that the underlying ethics change, but the principles of ethics must be applied to shifting circumstances in accord with the priorities of Christ Jesus.

Coffee is good, but not as an instrument of oppression. Cocoa is good, but my purchase should not promote the enslavement of children. The exercise of my rights and freedoms impact others. I am made free from legalism in Christ Jesus. In grace I am freed to approach the throne of God, not by any system of works or some means to become worthy. Yet as I approach God in grace I am called to give account of my actions, not in the exercise of unrestrained freedom. Rather, I am enjoined to live the remainder of my life according to a new slate of priorities. I am called to use my freedom according to the principles of the gospel of God’s love and grace.

If the issue revolves around meat sacrificed to idols, of greater interest is the impact which eating or abstaining has on others. Freedom in Christ is not to be abused. It is to be used in grace, mercy, and to the benefit of others. In different contexts it looks different. It is not about dotting I’s and crossing T’s; that is legalism. On the other hand, it is not concerned with abolishing any definition of right and wrong. It is something more than either one of those extremes. It is about love.

We are freed in Christ from legalism that we might follow the path of love, as Jesus modeled for us. The demands of love may be greater than the demands of legalism. They require a greater investment and involvement of our lives. Love and freedom require accepting responsibility for our decisions and actions, even as they grant greater room for expression. They require thought, compassion, and the submission of selfish preferences in seeking the benefit of others.

In a related vein, Stephen Colbert has stated, “If this is going to be a Christian nation that does not help the poor, either we’ve got to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we’ve got to acknowledge that he commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit that we just don’t want to do it.”³

Doesn’t that cut to the heart of the issue? We have the choice to become the people of God. We as the church lay claim to the title. The real question is how we will respond to the call of the gospel upon our lives. Will we live in a way that makes a positive difference and impact on the lives of others, or will we allow ourselves to be wrapped up in our own issues? God would call us beyond ourselves. God would call us into a life more focused on bringing grace, hope, and love to others. While we determine how we will respond, the gospel hangs in the balance. Will we pass the test?

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³ Colbert, Stephen. <http://cafephilos.wordpress.com/2010/12/22/stephen-colbert-on-jesus-and-our-christian-nation/>
<http://www.fbc-h.org/>