

Doing What Is Honorable

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Introduction.

- A. As you've probably noticed by now, when I teach Bible classes, I do so using a question-and-answer-based discussion format. This is true for a couple of reasons. In the first place, I believe that people learn more in discussion classes. In the second place, whether I'm a teacher or a student, I find lecture-based Bible classes to be horribly boring, and I don't want to inflict that either on myself or on you.
- B. Of course, just as there are benefits associated with discussion, there are some risks as well. One of the big risks is the possibility of being dragged irrevocably off-topic by comments that, although quite good, do not directly address the text at hand. Over the length of an entire quarter, these delays can really add up. I am convinced, for instance, that there are Christians who have never studied Romans 16 because all the Romans classes they've ever been in have ended before they reached the end of the book.
- C. This means that much of the time in Bible class I'm forced to pass over questions and comments rather than address them fully in the manner they deserve. In class a couple weeks ago, there were two such comments. One of them was about blood drinking, which will be coming soon to a sermon near you, and the other, which was actually raised by two different people, was about the times when we as Christians are compelled to guide our behavior by someone else's perspective or beliefs. It's a subject closely related to matters of conscience, but it is actually best answered from a completely different text, and it was a place I didn't want to go without preparing for it fully. This sermon, then, is a response to those questions. It's about doing what is honorable.

I. Where It Isn't.

- A. This idea, of avoiding what someone else believes is wrong, certainly appears in Scripture, but the Scripture that many people turn to to make this point does not discuss the subject at all. We need to begin this evening, then, by looking at where this idea isn't found. The confusion comes from the way that the King James Version translates 1 Thessalonians 5:22. To brethren back in the nineteenth century, this looked like a slam-dunk case. They took "appearance" to mean something that looked like and actually wasn't, and made the application that Christians shouldn't do things that looked sketchy, even if they weren't really sinning.
- B. It's important to note, though, that more modern translations don't follow the KJV in this passage. For instance, in the New King James Version, 1 Thessalonians 5:22 urges us to abstain from every "form" of evil. That's a very different idea. Instead of saying, "Don't do things that look bad," the NKJV is saying, "Don't do anything that IS bad," and it's actually this second rendering that's the correct one. Basically, back in 1611, when the KJV was being translated, the translators missed the boat on the Greek word *eidos*. *Vine's Expository Dictionary* describes the KJV rendering as "inadequate" and says that a better translation of *eidos* would be "form" or "kind," which is what we see in the NKJV, New American Standard, and so on.
- C. This translation problem, and problems like this, are why it's probably not the best idea for Christians today to use the King James. Don't get me wrong; back in the early seventeenth century, it was a wonderful translation, and it is certainly quite possible to be saved and go to heaven relying upon no other guide than the KJV. However, it's not the best translation, and both the NKJV and NAS do a better job of conveying all the nuances that will bring us closer to Christ. Let's choose our Bibles on the basis of usefulness, not tradition.

II. Where It Is.

- A. Now that we've finished stomping all over a cherished teaching that many of you probably learned in young people's Bible classes just as I did, let's look at where this idea of following the dictates of another's conscience actually is in Scripture. It's found in a context we don't look at a whole lot, in 2 Corinthians 8. This entire chapter, and indeed the chapter that follows it, concern themselves with a big deal in the first century that we don't care too much about today: the collection for the needy saints in Jerusalem. Back then, the church had two big problems. In the first place, as often happened, the brethren in the area of Judea and Jerusalem were oppressed by a big famine and needed help. In the second place, there was a continuing conflict between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Many of the Jews regarded the Gentiles as second-class citizens in God's kingdom, even going so far as to reject them entirely unless they also began to obey the Law of Moses.
- B. Paul, whether on his own or with the help of the Holy Spirit, came up with an idea to kill two birds with one stone. He decided that he would encourage all the Gentile Christians in the churches he'd founded to make a contribution for famine relief in Jerusalem. Here was Paul's goal: when he showed up in Jerusalem with all this money from Gentiles, it would show the Jews that these Gentiles were genuine Christians who cared about them. Then, when the Jews accepted the money and used it for their needs, it would be the same thing as accepting into fellowship the brethren who had contributed to help them. This is the reason why Paul went to Jerusalem even though he knew he would be imprisoned. To him, this collection was that important.

- C. That's the historical context in which 2 Corinthians 8 was written. That's what Paul is talking about when he describes his conversation with Titus in 2 Corinthians 8:6. Titus has already been to Corinth to collect the contribution once; now Paul is urging him to go back and finish the job. In this passage, it's important to notice that Paul says not "I" but "we" in telling the Corinthians what has happened. That's because Paul is not a lone ranger in all of this. As 2 Corinthians 1 makes clear, Paul is writing on behalf of not just himself, but also of Timothy and Silas. With this in mind, let's see what Titus actually does in 2 Corinthians 8:16-17. As we see throughout Paul's writings, Titus is a pretty good guy, and he's eager to go collect this money from the church in Corinth because he believes it's a good work that's going to have even better consequences.
- D. However, Paul's arrangements for dealing with this collection don't even begin to end with Titus. We see further arrangements that Paul makes in 2 Corinthians 8:18-19. The point is that Paul has sent another companion with Titus, who also happens to be the same guy that the churches of Macedonia selected to travel with the contribution all the way to Jerusalem. It's always struck me as kind of funny that Paul describes this companion as someone who is praised in all the churches, yet we have no idea who he is. We can speculate, but there's absolutely no way to tell. Let's just call this fellow traveler Brother A.
- E. Even Brother A, though, isn't the end of the arrangements that Paul has made. Look at Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 8:22. Paul is sending with Titus and Brother A another brother who is known to be reliable. Once again, as far as I'm aware, this brother isn't identified anywhere in Scripture either. Let's call him Brother B.
- F. Obviously, this is quite a host of Christians who are involved with the collection from Corinth. We have Paul, Timothy, and Silas, who are the main men in bringing this collection to Jerusalem. Titus is likewise involved in the collection, and probably also in the journey back to Judea. Brother A, who isn't part of Paul's companions at all, has come with the money from Macedonia, and he's going to go to Corinth and all the way to Palestine as well. Finally, we have Brother B, another outsider, who is supposed to go to Corinth as well.
- G. What in the world is going on with all this? For whatever reason, we've got a lot of accountants in this congregation, and here's what this looks like to me in accounting terms. We've got Paul and his companions, who are presumably all watching each other to make sure everyone's honest, then we've got Brother A auditing them, then we've got Brother B auditing the auditor. That's a lot of precaution to take even with people of questionable honesty, but here, we're dealing with Paul, an apostle, with his closest and most trusted associates, and with two outside brethren who are known as men of integrity. Presumably, the churches of Macedonia and Achaia could have handed any one of these men a bag of money and said, "Take it to Jerusalem," and the money would have arrived there safely. What's with all the commotion?
- H. We see why Paul goes to all this trouble in 2 Corinthians 8:20-21. Paul's not concerned about the money actually being embezzled; he's familiar with the character of all these men. He's set up all these precautions not to avoid the possibility of dishonesty, but to avoid the possibility that anyone might even THINK they're being dishonest. No one can accuse him of embezzling, because everything he's doing is plainly aboveboard.
- I. It's because of this that Paul is able to make the appeal that he makes in 2 Corinthians 8:24. He tells the Corinthians, "Guys, it's time to get out the checkbook," because now they can be certain that the money they contribute is going to go to the right place. Even if Titus wanted to run off with what they gave, he can't, because he's got two other brothers watching his every move, and when they all get back to Paul, there are going to be three more brothers taking care of the contribution. There's nothing to interfere with Paul's plan, so the Corinthians can now give to the Lord's work without concern that their money will be misused.

III. Our Response.

- A. This example itself is fairly specialized, but there are three ways that we need to respond to the principles it sets forth. To begin with, this teaches us that we need to **BE CAREFUL WITH THE CHURCH TREASURY**. Money poses just as big a temptation today as it did in the first century, and it's important not just that our dealings with the Lord's money are honorable, but that they are seen to be honorable. We need to have a system, and we do have one, in which lots of eyes watch over that money to remove even the possibility of embezzlement. That way, just like the Corinthians, each one of us can give with confidence.
- B. Second, we need to **CONSIDER WHAT PEOPLE MAY THINK**. We don't have to cater to the prejudices of one lone crank, but we do have to think about what the common perception of our actions will be. For instance, unless she's old enough to be his grandmother or something, it's a bad idea for a man to go to a woman's house alone to study the Bible. Sure, both parties might be pure as the driven snow. Sure, they might do nothing but talk about God's plan of salvation. But folks, when the man pulls up in his car, goes in, and then leaves an hour later, the neighbors aren't going to think he was talking about the Bible.
- C. Third, we need to **PLAN TO AVOID BLAME**. There are some in the church who would get outraged about what I just finished saying. They'd say, "So that man can't study the Bible with that woman at all?" That's not the point. The point is that he can't study the Bible ALONE with her at all, and he needs to plan to remove that obstacle. For instance, I know that if I'm ever in that position, there are half a dozen women here who would be happy to go study with me, and there are similar solutions to every problem of appearances.

Conclusion. On the other hand, the problem of sin has only one solution, and that is the blood of Jesus Christ.