



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 12.6 – The Doctrine of Sanctification

#### Actions Neither Commanded nor Forbidden: Adiaphora

There are many activities and behaviors that are neither good nor bad in themselves. For example, a Christian is free to drink a glass of beer or wine or some other alcoholic beverage. God has not commanded us to do this. God has not forbidden us to do this. It is the Christian's individual choice whether he wants to drink this glass of beer or not. Activities like this that God has neither commanded nor forbidden are called *adiaphora*: "indifferent things", "things in the middle", or "in-between things". Under certain circumstances these "in-between things" may be wrong, and under other circumstances these "in-between things" may be necessary, but in themselves they are neither right nor wrong.

Sometimes one may need to make difficult decisions regarding adiaphora. One problem is knowing which things are adiaphora and which are not. Some people tend to extend the list of adiaphora to include things that God has definitely forbidden. For example, there are some professing Christians today who say that homosexual behavior is an adiaphoron (the singular form of adiaphora) that Christians are free to do or not do, even though God has definitely forbidden it. Others go to the opposite extreme and narrow the list of adiaphora so that there are very few activities that God has not forbidden. Some of the pietists, for example, made the playing of games a sin. Thus, it is easy for Christians to go too far in either direction. Only a careful study of Scripture can give us a good understanding of the things God has truly commanded and the things that God has truly forbidden.

Another problem that arises is that Christians come from different backgrounds and are brought up from their youth in different ways. If a person has been taught from his youth that drinking beer or any alcoholic beverage is a sin, that person's conscience has been trained in that way. For that person it is a sin for him to drink beer as long as his conscience tells him that it is wrong, for it is always wrong to sin against one's conscience, that is, to do something that one believes is wrong to do, even if it is not really wrong according to God's Word. In a situation like this it is necessary for the Christian to become convinced in their mind that drinking beer is not wrong according to God's Word before they drink beer.

In many cultures and in various religious backgrounds there are taboos, that is, things and activities that are considered off limits by most of the population. There may be taboos about certain foods, kinds of clothing, or the way men and women behave toward each other. When people of different backgrounds and cultures get together, it may take a certain amount of time and Christian training before they feel comfortable with each other.

Among the early Christians there was a big difference between the way Jews were brought up and the way non-Jews (Gentiles) were brought up. The Jews circumcised their male children; the non-Jews did not. The Jews did not eat what they considered to be unclean food, such as pork. The Gentiles did not follow such practices. The apostle Paul had to deal with this question in many congregations that were made up of both Jews and Gentiles. In chapters 14-15 of his letter to the Romans he deals with this question, as well as in chapters 8-10 of 1 Corinthians.

As we examine what the apostle says in these chapters, we can propose some principles as general guidelines for our Christian life of sanctification. The first principle is that regarding genuine adiaphora Christians are free either to do it or not do it, as they themselves determine in their own mind. That

is, a person can drink beer or not drink beer; we are free to do as we choose in this matter. For Paul says regarding food and drink: **“I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself”** (Romans 14:14). Paul condemns those who make rules regarding food and drink and other things that go beyond what God Himself requires. He wrote to Timothy: **“Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer”** (1 Timothy 4:1-5).

The second principle is that when we are in the company of others who believe that certain activities are sinful, we will not practice what we are free to do otherwise, out of respect for those who in their consciences believe these things are wrong. The Bible term that is used for this is offense. We will try not to offend them. That is, we will not do things in their presence that these others consider wrong. We do not want them to follow our example and sin against their own conscience. The proper conduct in this case is to help someone understand what God says so that in time their conscience will understand that what we are doing is not wrong. Perhaps they will even feel free to join us in what we are doing after they are convinced from Scripture that it is not wrong. Such Christians who believe certain things are wrong when they are not wrong are called weak Christians.

This what the apostle has to say about such circumstances. **“For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat”** (Romans 14:2-3). Again Paul says: **“I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died”** (Romans 14:14-15). **“Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense. It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is made weak”** (Romans 14:20-21).

In the same way Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, just I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved”** (1 Corinthians 10:32-33). Paul was willing to give up his freedom to do certain things that were not wrong out of love for those who were still weak in their understanding of what was right or wrong according to Scriptures. His principle was this: **“Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant of all, that I might win the more. ... I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some”** (1 Corinthians 9:19-22).

The third principle is that when we are in the company of teachers who insist that eating certain foods or practicing certain activities is sinful for us, we will defend our freedom to do those very things that others insist we must not do. Such persons who insist that others follow their rules are no longer weak Christians but false teachers whom we must oppose. Paul warns such false teachers: **“Let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has received him. Who are you to judge another’s servant?”** (Romans 14:3-4). To the Galatians Paul wrote: **“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage”** (Galatians 5:1). In a similar way he wrote to the Colossians: **“Let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths”** (Colossians 2:16).

Paul followed these principles in the case of his assistants Timothy and Titus. Timothy had a Jewish mother and a Greek father. His father did not circumcise him in his youth, even though he had a Jewish mother. For the sake of his mission work among the Jews, Paul thought it best that Timothy should be circumcised. No one was insisting that he must be circumcised to be saved. In their freedom to circumcise or not to circumcise as they saw fit, they decided have Timothy circumcised.

But when some false teachers insisted that his Gentile helper Titus must be circumcised, Paul refused to have Titus circumcised. He wrote to the Galatians: **“Not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you”** (Galatians 2:3-5). If Paul had agreed to have Titus circumcised under such pressure, he would have denied the Gospel principle that we are saved alone by faith in Jesus Christ, for these false teachers were insisting that circumcision was necessary for salvation.

In teaching the Gospel of Christ to people of a different culture, it is important to learn what activities are taboo in that culture, so that the Christian can avoid doing those things that may lead weak Christians to sin against their own conscience, or may lead persons of another religion to react in a negative way to Christianity before even knowing what Christianity really is. The attitude that Christians need to have in such circumstances is love, love for others that will lead them to do whatever may help them bring the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who need to hear it. Christians should gladly refrain from practicing their Christian freedom to do certain things, if it will help bring the Gospel of Christ to others. We need to follow Paul’s principle, stated above: **“Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant of all, that I might win the more. ... I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some”** (1 Corinthians 9:19-22).

### Questions

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1. What is the term used for things God has neither commanded nor forbidden?
2. What are the two extremes that people tend to take in these matters?
3. If you can, name some groups in your locale that go to one or the other of these extremes.
4. What are the taboos in the culture of your locale?
5. Do these taboos agree with Scripture, or not? Give some examples.
6. What problems developed between Jews and Greeks in the early churches?
7. What three principles should guide us in dealing with adiaphora?
8. Explain the Biblical basis for each of these three principles.
9. Why did Paul circumcise Timothy but not Titus?
10. What should we always keep in mind when teaching the Gospel to people of another culture?