

Can but Won't

Michael J. Nielsen

Epiphany / Conscience; Temptation; Forgiveness / Deuteronomy 18:15–20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1–13; Mark 1:21–28

- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sometimes, even though we *can* do something, we *don't* do it so that someone else doesn't get hurt. I'd sum it up this way: "Yes, I can, but, no, I won't."

I remember just seven days ago, I was watching the Green Bay Packers vs Tampa Bay Buccaneers play in the NFC title game. I was getting upset during the game as the calls were not falling the way of the Green Bay Packers. As the flag came with 1:39 to go in the game, a flag that hasn't been called all day long, I lost my nerve. It was an epic meltdown on my part. I was angry. I got caught up in the emotions of the game. But now as I have had some time to cool down and think back, was that the right thing to do. No way. I can only imagine what I would have done if I was on the sideline. Could I do them? Yes (that is a fan's right), but no, I shouldn't have done that.

For a different sport and a different level, Mike Matheny, former catcher for the Milwaukee Brewers and former manager of the St. Louis Cardinals wrote a book for players, coaches and parents called *The Matheny Manifesto*. It came out of his coaching Little League baseball and a letter he wrote to parents. Essentially it calls for showing integrity while playing hard. You play smart, but you respect yourself, your teammates, your opponents, your officials, and your craft. It also details how parents are to act at their kids' games, with the key word being *respect*.

I wish I would have seen this book or heard about it before I became such an avid fan. I am also glad I know about this book before my kids get involved in playing sports. This book teaches that even though you can yell, blame, complain, and be obnoxious, you don't do these things. Instead, by *not* doing them, you teach your kids good sportsmanship. I failed to do that last Sunday.

YES, I can, but, NO, I won't.

The Apostle Paul is setting forth that principle in this Bible passage today:

English Standard Version Chapter 8

Now concerning food offered to idols

I know this text sounds so strange. Food sacrificed to idols. Not eating meat. What's this all about?

Back in Corinth, you would find all sorts of temples and shrines to various idols and false gods. What would happen is that sacrifices of animals would be made and the meat of those animals would be split three ways. First, some would be left at the altar for the false god. Second, some would be eaten by people who worshiped there, often in special meals or celebrations, like a birthday, anniversary, or family event. Third, the rest would be taken to the marketplace and sold. In fact, most people, if they were going to eat any meat, would most likely have eaten meat that had been sacrificed to an idol before it reached the marketplace.

What complicates matters is that these temples or shrines were the meeting places for that society. That birthday party, anniversary dinner, gathering you were planning, well, it was going to happen at places where idols were worshiped. The meat for the meal came from the altar where it had been sacrificed to a false god.

Now, some of the members of that Corinthian congregation were a bit too puffed up in their own knowledge. They said, "we know those are false gods. We know the idols are just wood or gold or stone. We know there's just one true God. We know this food isn't going to get us any closer to Jesus or push us further away. It's just plain food because those idols don't really exist anyway. We can go ahead and eat these temple meals."

In the church, however, were some people who had been involved in those kind of sacrifices. They couldn't separate the eating they were doing now from the eating they were doing when they were worshiping the false gods and idols before. So their conscience was hurt. Their conscience was weak because to eat this meat would lead them back to the idols and away from Jesus.

Paul steps into the situation. He isn't talking about things that are definitely wrong here. He isn't dealing with actual worship of idols. Of course that's wrong. And he isn't dealing with adultery, stealing, abusive anger, using profanity, getting drunk, or other things that are forbidden. No, he's talking about this gray area of whether we can eat this meat or not. Can we eat it in the privacy of our homes? Can we eat it when other people see us?

Paul says, "Yes, you can eat this meat, at least in the privacy of your own home, since you know the idol is a fake, you don't at all mean to worship it." Later on in chapter 10 he comes back and says, "No, you can't be a part of those temple meals, even if it is mostly a social gathering. That meal is participating with the demons that may be present there. That meal gives the wrong public witness to those who are struggling to stay faithful to Jesus."

But what about when you're with other people at your home or eating at church as a congregation? Can you eat the meat that had been sacrificed to an idol then? Well, here the

principle we started with comes into play: “Yes, I can, but, no, I won’t because it might someone I’m with.” See, they might think eating the meat that was sacrificed to idols means it’s okay to worship the idol too. Out of love for the brother or sister who could stumble, even though you could, you don’t.

Paul ends up with, “Yes, I can because it’s not forbidden or commanded one way or the other. I have this freedom in Christ to do it. The food isn’t going to make a difference one way or the other in my relationship with Jesus. But sometimes I won’t eat the meat for the sake of my brother or sister in Christ.”

Now, how could you apply this Corinthian principle since we don’t have same problem of meat sacrificed to idols today? I looked at a couple of sermons and even some of my commentaries and the same example was mentioned quite frequently. I brought with me, my wine glass today. Is it okay to have a glass of wine? Yes...absolutely...as long as you are 21. Now, I’m not about getting drunk. The bible forbids drunkenness, that’s a sin. But we can have something to drink.

Let’s take it where the Apostle Paul comes into play. Did you know that in the United States today, one out of six (at least as of 2018) Americans are problem drinkers or alcoholics? Of course, this drinking problem extends into families and relationships with friends and coworkers. I’m sure that we all know of someone or we ourselves have been touched personally by this alcohol abuse. It can be difficult when it plagues oneself or family.

How does this play out for those of us in the church? Can you have a drink of wine or a beer or a mixed drink? Yes. but if you know somebody is there who has troubles with it, it’s time to say: “No, I’m not going to right now. I’ll have water, soda or a juice instead.” You say no because you don’t want to hurt someone by somehow encouraging that person to take a drink, which would lead to a falls back.

That’s How it works. I know I can, but for the sake of someone else, the love I have for my neighbor, my brother or sister in Christ, this time I won’t do it.

For others, it’s not alcohol, it’s spending money. (Hold up credit card) They can’t keep their credit cards in line, and they are in debit. If you have an opportunity to go out with that person and know the difficult they have with finances, then the invitation is not to go shopping but to do something else? Could you take them shopping? Yes, but for the sake of your friend who could stumble into sin, you don’t.

For others it may not be money or alcohol, but they struggle with sexuality. For some, what someone else wears can cause a person to fall into sin. For instance, you are on a church trip, and you know there is a pool or a lake or ocean where you will need a swimsuit, do you wear your bikini where little imagination is needed or do you wear a swim suit that covers more

skin. For the sake of your neighbor who may struggle with lust or pornography, cover up. Yes, you can wear it, but for the sake of your brother or sister in Christ, don't.

Now our text talks about food sacrificed to idols. There's another issues that is forbidden in scripture and that is gluttony. Many struggle with overeating. Many are trying to get on the right track with their eating and health and weight. I've walked into conferences, restaurants, malls, and even into the church and there's food everywhere....especially the sweets. For someone that struggles with overeating, this can be very scary and can result in gluttony, so if I know of a person that struggle with this, will I invite them out for dinner or over for appetizers or cake and ice cream. Absolutely not. Yes, I can, but for the sake of my brother or sister in Christ. I won't.

As I mentioned at the beginning, last week I lost my nerve at the end of the NFC Championship game, I have in the past as well.

Do you think you've ever exercised your freedom to do something but hurt a brother or sister in the process? Of course we have. We are sinners it happens frequently. Sometimes we've even done it without knowing it. I'm sure we've hurt someone because we weren't even thinking about what we were doing. I imagine we've had too many times when we weren't even taking into account someone who is weak in a certain area of life. Maybe we didn't even care if someone was struggle. "I can do it, so I'm going to do it" was the attitude.

Even for those times, though, Paul has some good news for you in this passage. Remember his words: Jesus died for your brother or sister in Christ. He has died for you and me as well. Now Jesus could have opted out. HE could have used his freedom to say, "I'll just stay in heaven and not worry about the people in need of forgiveness." He could have done that. But he didn't. He did what we needed so we would become his brothers and sisters in His Church.

He goes through the agony, the beatings, the bloodshed for you to become the once and for all, onetime sacrifice for all. No sacrifices needed at any shrine. We are not to assert our rights, but in love do what we can to keep our brother or sister in Christ from stumbling into some sin. As Jesus has sacrificed himself for us, he wants us to sacrifice our rights for others. And yes, it might even be our rights as Americans if it keeps a weaker brother or sister from sinning."

Or here is another way of saying it: Because of Jesus, I can do this; but because of Jesus and my love for my brother or sister in Christ, this time I won't.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

- › Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.