

## The Question of Silence

*I thought we'd start by talking a little about parenting, and then we'd move on to another topic that may relate to it.*

*Most of you are parents. All of you have parents. I assume that you all agree that it's important that parent pass moral lessons down to their children. Give me some examples of do's and don't's you've tried to pass to your children—or that your parents passed to you—even the stuff you were taught when you were very small..*

Several class members respond quickly.

“Do unto others ... .”

“Pull for the Tide ... Hate Auburn!”

“Share.”

“Don't fight with your sister.”

“Don't stick your tongue in the light socket! I only had to be told that one once!”

“Work hard. Give real value to your customer. Stand behind your work.”

*Hmm. It's seems we've got very particular commands—like “don't stick your tongue in the light socket” and some more general commands, like “do unto others” or “share.”*

*Now, so long as your kids are at home, if they run into a moral decision they don't know the answer to, I suppose you'd hope they'd ask for your input, right?*

The class nods vigorously. “I hope they'd ask, or at least want to talk through it,” one student says.

*So, how do you want your kids to handle problems when they can't call you? Or after you've gone on to your reward. What if mom or dad isn't around?*

The class has to ponder this one for a while. One student, Charles, finally volunteers, “I suppose I'd hope they'd reason based on the principles my wife and I had taught them while we had them at home. I mean, you can't anticipate everything. You just have to leave them with some broad principles and some specific examples and hope they can see how it all fits together.”

The rest of the class is nodding. This answer strikes them as wise.

*Really? I wouldn't expect them to think this way at all. Not even close ... Here's what I want my kids to do.* The class is getting just a bit defensive now. This seems unduly harsh.

*I mean, they should first ask themselves whether their mom and I have given them specific guidance on this point.*

*If we've been silent, then they should ask themselves—is every silence permissive or is every silence a prohibition? I certainly don't intend that my silences are all permissive. Therefore—obviously—when I'm silent, I intend a prohibition. It's just that simple.*

“That's just ridiculous,” one student says—a long-time friend of the teacher.

*I'm hurt. He feigns wounded feelings in obvious sarcasm. This is brilliant hermeneutics! This is the reasoning that the Bible faculties at many of our universities subscribe to! Guys with doctorates agree with this! There are books published that say just this—LOTS of books! How can you call that “ridiculous”? I mean, really!!*

“Hey!! You're not talking about parenting at all, are you? You're talking about instrumental music!” His friend decides to spell it out for the rest of the class.

*All right. You caught me. The “ridiculous” argument is the centerpiece of the argument made by many against the use of instruments. Now, there are other arguments, but this one is particularly dangerous, because once you brand all silences as prohibitions, then you wind up prohibiting all kinds of crazy things.*

*We've had people ban kitchens in the church building, fellowship halls, using literature other than the Bible, hired preachers, Christian colleges, cooperation to send out missionaries, cooperation to support orphan's homes, Sunday Schools, and on and on and on—all because of this line of reasoning that we'd never use in our own households but which we gladly impose on the household of God.*

*The technical term is a “false dichotomy,” which is a logical fallacy where you assume that something is either all one way or the all the other way—and you ignore the possibility that it might some one way and some the other way.*

*For example, the answer to the scriptures' silence on instruments might just depend on principles other than permission or prohibition. Perhaps it depends on entirely different considerations. Just as Charles suggested at the beginning, the obvious choice is to consider the impact of larger principles.*

*God gave us our brains for a reason—to think! And he gave us essential principles to think from, like love, the need to seek and save the lost, grace, and the importance of worshipping from the heart. But the way these principles get applied in a given case may well be discretionary. But it's certainly not determined by declaring all silences prohibitions!*

*There's not always even a right or a wrong answer. Sometimes, it's just a question of human wisdom. Sometimes, it's applying a general principle to a particular situation.*

*Or maybe there is a right answer—based on other scriptural principles—principles that actually exist. But the idea that anything I can characterize as a silence must be a prohibition is, well, rather silly. It's just not true, and it's led to a lot of hardship, a lot of hurt feelings, and a lot of division. It's run a lot of people out of the church. It's likely cost some people their souls. I know it's made some people very hard hearted.*

*Now, again, I'm not saying that therefore we need to go out and buy a pipe organ or start a band. Don't misunderstand me and don't misquote me. I'm just saying that any argument that starts with "silence is either always permissive or a prohibition" is just dead wrong. But maybe the same conclusion can be reached by a valid argument.*

*"This changes everything!" one student exclaims.*

*No, it just tosses one badly flawed argument in the trash. Sometimes silence really is a prohibition—but only when God wasn't really silent. For example, God is silent on the use of chainsaws. The Bible is 100% silent on the topic. I checked my concordance just last night. But it's okay for me to trim my trees with a chainsaw but altogether wrong to kill someone with it.*

*God speaks quite plainly to murder, and so it's wrong. But God says nothing about trimming trees, and so it's okay. Except if I trim my neighbor's trees without his permission, or if I run my chainsaw at 3 in the morning and wake my neighbor, or if I use my chainsaw labors as an excuse to avoid my responsibilities as a husband or member of my congregation or as a parent.*

*You see, silence on the chainsaw issue is neither permission nor prohibition. Rather, all the supposed silences are really filled with the big principles—love your neighbor, do not kill, submit to one another, etc. There are no deep theological problems here—even though the Bible's silence on the chainsaw issue is undeniable. We've just been looking at this issue in entirely the wrong way. Rather than looking for silences, we need to look for what the Bible does say, and we'll surely have guidance enough.*