

# When God is Silent...

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In the last lesson, we looked at the need for us to “speak as the oracles of God” (1 Peter 4:11). That premise is at the heart of “finding out what is acceptable to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:10). The question is often raised, however: “What if God has not spoken?” In other words, what if God is silent on a particular issue?

There are many who choose to rely upon God’s silence as permission to do the things that they desire. They often approach their actions from the premise: “God didn’t say not to!” It quickly becomes evident that such a one believe that they can do anything that the Lord has not specifically forbidden. With this lesson, we want to examine this idea, and determine if the silence of God is either permissive or restrictive.

## ***Is God Silent?***

The first question that needs to be asked when one claims that silence grants permission for action is to see if God is really silent on the subject. In reality, there are very few things that one might find that God has truly been silent on. To think that God has been silent on a particular topic would mean that God has not spoken on that topic in any way. Consider, for example, the argument made by the Hebrew writer:

*Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron? For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law. For He of whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no man has officiated at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood. And it is yet far more evident if, in the likeness of Melchizedek, there arises another priest who has come, not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an endless life. For He testifies: “You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 7:11–17).*

Here, the inspired writer makes two significant points. First, he wrote of the fact that God had not spoken (was silent) about members of the tribe of Judah serving as priests. From his instruction, it is clear that one who was from this tribe could not serve as the priest under the Old Testament law, because God had not given permission for him to do so. A change in the priesthood that was established would have to take place before he could serve! Second, this writer made it clear that God had not been silent on the issue of the priesthood. He had given specific instructions that the priesthood was to descend through the tribe of Levi, in the family of Aaron. So, when God spoke concerning what He wanted, all other options were extinguished. Though God did not speak directly to the possibility of one from Judah serving as a priest, He did speak to that idea by specifying that the priests had to come from the tribe of Levi.

Sometimes, when it comes to sinful practices, people will declare that the Lord is silent, and therefore we are permitted to do as we please. This attitude is based on the premise that God must identify every single thing that a person could do, and name it as prohibited by name. Clearly such an approach would be impossible. With changing times, cultures and technologies, it would not take long to come up with some thing that God had not specified, or else we would have lists of sinful

practices found in the scriptures coming before the invention of the practice itself! Quite often, those things that people declare that God has not spoken about have been generally (rather than specifically) addressed by God. Consider the instructions of the apostle Paul:

*I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:16–21).*

After a lengthy list of sins, Paul adds the phrase, “and the like”. He was acknowledging that this was not a comprehensive list. We should be able to see practices that are similar in their nature to the sins listed, and know that God does not approve of them. To say that some practice that is not specifically condemned is permitted stands contrary to Paul’s teaching in this passage.

In some instances, God has spoken very clearly on a topic, and men twist the scriptures to make it look as if God has not spoken on a topic. The practice of homosexuality comes to mind as an example. God has clearly spoken on the topic, condemning it in no uncertain terms (Romans 1:26-32). However, proponents of this sinful practice declare that passages such as Romans 1 are really only addressing some “uncommitted, or corrupted, or pagan form of homosexual love.” In other words, God perhaps condemned the homosexual practices of the idol’s temple prostitutes, but He did not say anything about committed same-sex relationships! Of course, to argue such a premise is ludicrous, and completely ignores all that God has written on the subject. He has not, in fact, been silent. Trying to find a way to dismiss a passage in our own minds because it says something that is contrary to what we want to practice does not change God’s instructions on the matter.

*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).*

Some of the same principles are true when it comes to practices within the church. Many of the additions and innovations to the worship of the church are founded in the idea, “God didn’t say not to!” Again, just because God did not specifically condemn something does not mean that He has been silent on the subject. Consider the practice of instrumental music in worship. Many churches have adopted this practice, and think it strange that anyone would reject it. They say that God has not condemned the practice, so it is fine for us to participate in! But, God has not been silent on the topic of music in worship to Him:

*Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God (Ephesians 5:17–21).*

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. (Colossians 3:16)*

God has specified what is pleasing and acceptable to Him. Much like our earlier reference to the priests coming from the tribe of Levi, we see here that God does not have to specify everything

that has been excluded. God didn't have to say at the time He appointed the Levites to serve in the capacity of priests that every other tribe by name was excluded. Likewise, when God has specified that "singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" is the accepted manner of music in worship, He did not have to specify every thing excluded by name! "God didn't say not to!" is not an acceptable way to approve a practice because it ignores what God did say!

In reality, God has not been silent on much. He has spoken to almost everything we can conceive in our minds, either in a direct way or in a more general way. We will plan to consider these ideas in more detail later in this lesson.

### ***When God is Silent...***

Maybe we have determined that God is really silent on a particular topic. Perhaps then we can question whether that silence is permissive or prohibitive. Does God's silence on a topic give us permission to act, or is it intended to keep us from acting?

In previous lessons we saw that we are to "speak as the oracles of God", which means that we speak in the way that God has spoken. We relate what He has given. We can know that God approves of something by the fact that He has spoken to it. When we decide to act on the silence of God, we act presumptuously. We choose to act in a way in which God has not authorized because we have decided that it is good (and therefore must be accepted by Him).

We should realize that God has revealed all that He intended to reveal. He has not been "accidentally silent" on any topic! Consider what Doy Moyer has to say in his book, *Mind Your King*.

*If God truly is silent about a matter, there would only be a couple of reasons why this would be so: 1) He intends to be silent. In this case, we do not have the mind of God on the matter, and we can either presume upon His mind, or refrain from such presumption. Given the principles of honoring God in Scripture, which is more appropriate? We know the answer. 2) He intended to say something about the issue, but failed or forgot. This is not an option because it would make God incompetent. If God truly is silent, then He intended to be silent and we ought to respect that.<sup>1</sup>*

In essence, we should treat God's silence as just that: silence. The mere fact that God has been silent should not be looked upon as either permissive or restrictive. It is, in fact, simply the absence of information, and should not be appealed to for either approval or restriction. In the absence of other information, we cannot possibly know what God would want in areas He has not spoken.

The Bible is full of warnings to only listen to what God has said, and to be careful not to add to or take away from His revelation. Consider this list, as compiled by Moyer:<sup>2</sup>

*"Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it (Deuteronomy 12:32).*

*"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).*

*Do not add to His words, Lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar (Proverbs 30:6).*

*Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go (Joshua 1:6-7).*

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<sup>1</sup> Moyer, Doy. *Mind Your King, Lessons and Essays on Biblical Authority*. (Birmingham, Moyer Press 2016) 53

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 54-55

*And when they say to you, "Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter," should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them (Isaiah 8:19–20).*

*But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does (James 1:25).*

*Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31–32).*

*Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other (1 Corinthians 4:6).*

*Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son (2 John 9).*

*For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book (Revelation 22:18–19).*

*Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law"—to whom we gave no such commandment— (Acts 15:24)*

*If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions... (1 Timothy 6:3–4)*

*O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge—by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith. Grace be with you. Amen (1 Timothy 6:20–21).*

Notice the theme throughout these passages is that those who are followers of God should keep themselves within the confines of what He has revealed to us. The presumption that God would approve of activities that are not revealed by Him in His word is without foundation in His word! In fact, just the opposite is evident. He knows what He has revealed and why He has revealed it. For us to act in some way beyond what He has told us He approves is condemned!

### **Must God be Specific?**

Sometimes we misconstrue the way in which God reveals His mind as being "silence." If we cannot find something that specifically addresses the issue that is on our mind, we think that God has been silent. As we saw earlier in the lesson, there are very few things on which God is truly silent. He has spoken to most things in one way or another. Sometimes, instead of speaking to something directly (specifically) He speaks more generally. In this way, God authorizes things. He reveals what is approved by Him in either a very specific way or in a more general way. Both convey His mind in the matter!

Earlier in this study, we saw how this idea might be applied to sinful practices. However, the same ideas are true when it comes to all of our practices in the religious realm. God has the ability to

reveal what He wants from His children in either specific ways, or more generally. Keep in mind that as we look at the manner that God gives instruction, it is no different than the way that we communicate with one another. It is not that we are here making up “rules” for establishing Bible authority (or Divine authority) so much as we are taking note of the way that we communicate and see that these logical principles apply to what God has said as well.

Sometimes instruction is given very specifically, while other times it is given more generally. How information is given impacts how much freedom we have to make choices in the manner that we implement the instructions. First, consider a secular example. If your neighbor gives you \$20 and asks you to go to the store and buy her a case of diet Dr. Pepper, she has been very specific. If you were to buy her coffee instead of diet Dr. Pepper, it would be clear that you have not followed her instructions. If you bought Dr. Pepper and a loaf of bread, you have not followed the instructions that were given. To change the item, or to add to it are presumptuous acts, beyond what had been provided in the instructions. However, if that same neighbor gave you the money and asked for you to go to the store and get her something to drink, your choices would be much broader. That coffee would now be a viable option, as would any number of other beverages: juice, sodas, milk, etc. When a task is given, but the specifics are not, one has much more freedom to act. Parents learn this principle pretty quickly when giving instructions to children. If they want a job done a particular way, they learn to give very explicit instructions. A child given a specific list of how to do something has much less freedom to choose how to accomplish the task than one who is simply told to do something generally. For example, suppose a child was given the instructions that she was to “fix breakfast.” If left at that, this child would have a lot of freedom to choose what to fix. However, if she were told to “fix cereal, toast, milk and juice for breakfast,” the amount of individual choices that she has dwindles considerably.

The same principles are true in the way that God communicates. When He provides specific instructions, there is little room for personal choices in the manner in which one obeys. Consider a couple of examples:

*Noah and the Ark.* Noah was told to build the ark from Gopher wood (Genesis 6:14). God was very specific. In fact, the word that is translated as ‘gopher’ is found only this one time in God’s instructions to Noah. While we may not know exactly what type of wood Noah was to use, we can be certain that Noah knew! The instructions given to him were clear, and specific. He was not to use any other kind of wood, because God told him specifically what kind to use. Noah was also given specific dimensions to which the ark was to be built (Genesis 6:15). It was to be 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide and 30 cubits tall. Noah could not change these elements and continue to be pleasing to God. The rest of the world was being destroyed because of the wickedness of mankind. If Noah disobeyed, he would be as guilty as they, and suffer their fate. He could not choose to change the wood with which he built, nor could he decide that different dimensions would be better!

There were, however, still some elements of building the ark that would be left up to Noah. Though God specified some things, there were other things that He did not specify. God did not specify (as far as has been revealed to us) where Noah was to get the gopher wood he used to build the ark. He had the freedom to make a choice about where he could get the supplies. God did not specify how that wood was to be harvested for the job. Could Noah use a saw to cut the trees? Of course. Could he use a cart to carry the boards to the construction site? Could he drag them with mules or horses? These choices were left to Noah because God did not specify them! As soon as an instruction was specified, Noah’s ability to choose what to do was limited. The more specific God is, the less freedom man has to make decisions about how to accomplish what God has instructed. This is a principle we have no problem understanding when it comes to our own communication, and yet many are confused by it when it comes to God’s communication!

David Moving the Tabernacle. In Exodus 25, in the midst of God's instructions for the tabernacle and its furnishings, we find instructions for the construction of the ark of the covenant. There, God told Moses that the ark was to have rings mounted to it, so that poles could be inserted by which the Levites (namely the Kohathites) would carry the ark on their shoulders. In Numbers 7, Moses recorded the distribution of carts for the moving of the tabernacle, and he specifically noted that none of the carts were given to the sons of Kohath because they were to carry the ark (and other furniture from the tabernacle) by the poles, and on their shoulders (Numbers 7:9).

Move forward in time from those instructions to 2 Samuel 6, where king David was intent on moving the ark of the covenant, to bring it back to Jerusalem. They built a new cart for it, and had the sons Abinadab (whose house the ark had been kept at for some time, see 1 Samuel 7) to escort the ark. One son, Ahio, went before the cart, leading the oxen that pulled it. Uzzah, a second son of Abinadab either sat on the cart with the ark, or walked along beside it. When they reached Nachon's threshing floor, the oxen pulling the cart stumbled, and Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark, presumably so that it would not fall off. It is recorded for us that his actions angered the Lord:

*Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against Uzzah, and God struck him there for his error; and he died there by the ark of God (2 Samuel 6:7).*

The term for 'error' in this verse can also be 'irreverence'. This is an interesting depiction, as it seems that David, Abinadab, and his sons were working diligently to show great honor to the ark of the Lord. However, because they were not obedient to how God instructed their action was 'error' or 'irreverence'.

David figured out how to move the ark before trying again. 2 Samuel 6:13 tells us that when he went back to retrieve the ark after 3 months, he had "those bearing the ark" who had "gone six paces," which indicates that he had men who were carrying the ark, and walking, just as the Lord had instructed. He was, therefore, able to bring the ark to Jerusalem.

In each of these examples, we see the need to do just what God said to do when He has specified his instructions. We cannot choose to do something different, just because we think that it might be better. David learned that lesson the hard way! When God has been specific, He intends for the revealed specific to be adhered to.

We can see the same principle at work in the instructions that God has given to the church. We used the example of instrumental music earlier in our study. In Ephesians 5:17-21, and Colossians 3:16, God specified that what is pleasing to Him when it comes to music in worship to Him is singing. Because He has been specific, all other options are ruled out. Just like when God told the Israelites to carry the ark of the covenant, it ruled out putting it on a cart. It does not matter how much better we think we are able to do something, when we go beyond what has been revealed, we are violating God's instructions!

Sometimes, however, God is not specific in what He has instructed. Sometimes, He only gives general instructions, and expects that his people are able to work out the manner in which those instructions are implemented.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 14, as Paul was giving instructions concerning how the disciples in Corinth were to conduct themselves in the assemblies of the church, particularly in regards to the use of spiritual gifts, he told them:

*Let all things be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40).*

While Paul had given some specific instructions concerning the use of those spiritual gifts (such as

how one who could speak in tongues was to remain quiet if there was no interpreter), he did not go into great detail about how to make sure “all things” were done in a decent and orderly manner. He did not, for example, insist that there is an official “church of Christ worship service” with every detail itemized to ensure the instruction was not violated. Rather, he intended for the local church to work out how to compose the assembly in a way that did not violate the general principle.

A similar point could be made from Jesus’ instructions to His disciples as He prepared to ascend to Heaven:

*And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:15–16).*

As Jesus gave these parting instructions, He did so without specificity. He told them to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel...” He did not give any specific instruction on either where to go, or how to get there. They could choose to go by boat, by foot, by donkey, by cart, or by camel. They could choose to go to Egypt, to Asia, to Europe, or to stay in Palestine. Because Jesus did not specify where they were to go, or how they were to get there, they had a lot of freedom to make decisions for themselves. He did, however, specify what they were to preach: the gospel. They were not sent forth to build hospitals, houses, or church buildings. They were not sent out to feed all the hungry. They were sent forth to preach the gospel message. And that is exactly what we see throughout the New Testament: men going into all the world to preach the gospel message. In fact, they were so successful at this task that Paul could write, some 30 years later, that they had done just what Jesus had instructed them to do:

*...if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister. (Colossians 1:23)*

The logical conclusion we can reach from looking at these examples is that God does not have to be specific when He reveals His mind. Revealing His will in a more general way does not mean that He has not spoke (i.e., has been silent). He has merely spoken in a general manner.

### ***Practical Applications...***

As mentioned earlier, the more specific an instruction is, the less choice is left to the hearer to be obedient. As we evaluate God’s instructions on any given topic (and we must compile all that God has revealed, to ensure we have the fullness of His instruction) we can gauge how much freedom we have to fulfill the instruction by how specific His instructions are. For example, when giving instructions for how money was to be taken up for the work given to the church, the apostle Paul wrote:

*Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come (1 Corinthians 16:1–2).*

While other instruction was given concerning the manner of the contribution, as well as the distribution or use of the monies collected, this is the only passage that provides instruction for *when* the collection is to be taken up. It also provides instructions concerning the *way* that the contribution is to be taken up. Two things are specified by Paul:

- This was to be an offering made by individuals to a common treasury, so that it was available when needed. This was a free will type offering, and no definite amount was established.
- This was to be done on the first day of the week.

Having these elements specified means that God has not left much in those areas up to the judgment of men. We cannot simply decide that a car wash is a better way to raise money for the church. Nor can we decide that we can take up a collection on other days than that which was specified in the instruction. By doing so, we would go beyond that which was revealed, and act in a presumptuous manner. We have already seen that such would be foolhardy on our part!

There are, however, some areas in the instructions concerning the collection that are not specified, and thus left to the discretion of those participating. A group can decide the logistics of having the collection taken up, such as whether to pass a basket around, or putting a collection basket where members can fulfill their instructions. Each individual is given the freedom to contribute in a manner that is a reflection of what God has prospered him.

What we find when we delve into a study of just about any instruction that God has given is that there are elements that are specific, and others that are general. As we discover God's will on a matter, we must recognize when He is specific, and stay within the confines of His specific instructions. When He asks for service in a very specific manner, we have no right to expand His instructions, or change it to something we think we would like better! When He speaks in a more general way, we have more freedom to choose how to obey His instructions. To fall back to our previous example (Mark 16:15-16), we can "go into all the world" by any means that is convenient to us, but when we go we must do what He specifically instructed: preach the gospel. We can't change the message, as that work has been directly specified for us!



## **Questions...**

1. When challenged by the prospect of the “silence of the scriptures,” what should be our first question?
2. When God is silent on a topic, what are the only two reasons He might be so?
3. What do the scriptures say concerning the responsibility of believers to stay within the confines of God’s revealed word?
4. Is it true that God is silent if He is not specific in His instructions? Why or why not?
5. What aspects of the instructions for building the ark were specific? What aspects were more general?
6. What did David do wrong when moving the Ark of the Covenant? What had God specified?
7. When instructions are specific, how much freedom is given to us to choose how we are going to fulfill the instructions?
8. Give an example of how specific instructions are used in typical communication, and explain how the specificity of those instructions impacts personal judgment in fulfilling them.

