

“How Long Is A Rope?” – Discretionary Judgment

By Ted Gatza

Years ago, when I was working as a machinist, I quickly learned that speed and accuracy resulted in profit for the company, and satisfied customers. A skilled machinist was always recognized and rewarded by the owner of the company.

One day, the shop Foreman gave me a blueprint for a part that a customer wanted to have made. While we were looking at it, I asked him, “How much time do I have to make it?” He replied, “How long is a rope?” I gave him a puzzled look, and he said, “Take as much time as you need to do it right, and we make a profit. But not too long that we lose money and lose the customer.” This was how he defined “How long is a rope.”

He knew what it would take to do the job, but he kept it to himself. He had left it up to me to see if I would do what was needed to achieve the given time and profit objective. It was his way of determining who his valued machinists were. Over the years I have come to think that God does the same thing with his children.

As children of God, we are taught how to live. Moral commands have been given to us by God, and when we obey them, we become holy in His eyes. Paul, for example, explained to the Christians in Galatia that the flesh and the Spirit are opposed to each other, and those who are spiritual will not indulge in the fleshly desires of this life. He was very specific in telling the Galatians what they must not do, *“adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like.”* (Gal 5:19) He concludes by saying, *“Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”* God is very specific in what we are not to do, and very specific of the consequences! But what is interesting is that Paul ends the list with the phrase *“and the like.”*

It becomes apparent that God desires to see how we add to the list of things to avoid by using our judgment of right and wrong. To see how far we will go to stay away from sin or how close we try to get to sinful activities while trying to retain God’s favor. So we might ask, “What is God expecting from us?” — How long is a rope?

Let us consider some things that require our judgment.

Paul says in 1 Tim. 2:9, *“In like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing.”* I will add that what applies to the woman also applies to the man.

The clothes that we choose to wear must be “moderate, morally acceptable, that is reasonable and not extreme.” When Paul said this, he did not provide specific measurements or styles. Instead, he left it up to us to determine what meets the given criteria. However, we can use common sense in how we dress and not allow today’s society, and its standards to dictate what is acceptable. Do we wear our clothes as a covering or in a provocative way to accentuate and display our bodies? To help answer this question, we might ask, “What would the mother and father of Jesus wear in public places?”

Then Paul says in 1 Cor. 11:14-15 *“Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering.”* He also said in 1 Cor. 11:17 that is shameful if she is *“shaved or shorn”* (i.e. to cut close). Again, Paul does not provide specific measurements of what is too long for men or what is too short for women. What he does teach is that proper hair length is not only a natural distinction between men and women, but it was established by God himself. When the length makes man and woman indistinguishable, it becomes a shame for the man and a dishonor for the woman. So, what is the man’s shameful length, and how short is it when the woman’s glory is lost?

We are not given specifics about our clothing or the length of our hair; we are given guidelines. It is these guidelines that God looks at to see how well we understand His precepts and use our judgment to separate ourselves from the world. Sadly, some will use their discretion in an attempt to be like the world while trying to gain God's acceptance. This is a dangerous practice to embrace. James 4:4 says, *"Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."*

Finally, we should consider our attitude with discretionary judgment and the impact it may have on our brother. The desire to portray the world in our lives could cause him to lose faith in Christ and stumble in his convictions. If this happens, it could be detrimental to the one who caused it. Jesus said, *"But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea."* (Mk. 9:42).

When we understand how serious our discretions are, then it would be wise to follow Paul's example. He said that if his liberties caused a brother to sin, he would no longer do them (1 Cor. 8:13). When it comes to matters of discretion, we should be careful, conservative in our thinking and in the actions of our judgment. It may even be prudent to do as Paul says, and *"Judge among yourselves"* (1 Cor. 11:13). Honest and loving discussions of our discretions could prevent shamefulness and increase our faith and commitment to God, with love and respect for each other.

So, "How long is a rope?" The rope should be long enough for us to be found holy before God, but not so long that it causes God to reject us.