

FREEDOM FROM LAWS AND LEGALISM

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INTRODUCTION

“If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:26).

“For freedom Christ has set you free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1).

“You were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but, through love, be servants of one another” (Gal 5:13).

What are the laws of your church? Why are the laws of one church different from the laws of another? What is the relationship of a Christian to Old Testament laws? These are questions, which we often hear from Christians of Papua New Guinea, as they face the wide range of churches, with their varying statements of theology, and standards required of members. Where do we turn for an answer? How does a Christian know whether or not he is bound by Old Testament law?

The only safe authority, and reliable answer, is in the Word of God, itself, and, particularly, in the New Testament. Our Lord’s teaching in Matt 5-7; 12:1-8, and in various passages in John’s gospel, coupled with a wide range of teaching from Paul, give us a true understanding of what the Bible teaches on this subject. We should remember that the God of the New Testament is not different from the God of the Old Testament; His holiness, His love, His judgment on sin, His righteous demands, do not change. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

We begin our discussion by considering God Himself, His perfect creation, and His laws, how those laws are broken, and how He has made provision for sinful man to be counted righteous. We will consider, then, whether we are still controlled by those laws, and adjust our lifestyle by those laws, or whether there is some greater power that controls our lives, by which we live.

THE PERFECT CREATION

In discussing this subject, we begin with the nature and character of God. We are discussing the relationship of the “sons of God” to laws and legalism. It will help us, therefore, first to see the relationship of God to laws and legalism.

GOD IS A GOD OF ORDER, NOT OF CONFUSION (1 COR 14:33)

God, in His nature, is perfect in every way. It is not because He has surrounded Himself by laws that He is perfect. He IS perfect, and, therefore, all He does is perfect. His laws come from His nature, not His nature from His laws. When He created the universe, because of the perfect harmony of His nature, His creation was also in perfect harmony, and operating on laws that He Himself established. The universe of the stars operates within these laws, in a harmony of coordinated movement. The rhythm of seasons, the growth and propagation of plants, the life cycle of all living things – He created all these in perfection, each operating within the laws, which God Himself established “for each, after its kind”.

MAN MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD LIVED FREELY AND FULLY WITHIN GOD’S LAWS

The first Adam, before the fall, was perfect before God. He lived within God’s laws, not because he had to, but because he had God’s nature. He was like God, and, therefore, kept God’s laws by nature. We need to keep this fact in mind, as we discuss the Christian, and his relationship to law.

MAN SEPARATED FROM GOD

When Satan came to Eve, with his temptation, for the first time man looked at the laws, within which he lived, as a restriction, as a fence.

When he was rightly related to God, living in perfect harmony with God, he was not aware of any restriction. He then broke the law, which God had given, and within which he should live. In breaking that law, he separated himself from God, and was no longer in harmony with God. From that time, all the descendants of that first man have been born out of fellowship with God. They are separated from God, because they are descendants of Adam, sinners by nature, and because, as sinners, they live outside God's perfect law. So, Paul describes all men as "dead in sin" (Eph 2:1), "enemies of God" (Rom 5:10), and "sinners" (Rom 5:8). They are "slaves of sin" (Rom 6:6; John 8:34).

LAWS NOW GOVERN

Because of man's sinful nature, and his perverted desire, laws are needed, both to instruct and to curb. God's laws became explicit, and human societies created laws.

GOD'S LAWS GIVEN

The nature of God's laws did not change when man sinned. The Ten Commandments were not necessary before man sinned. Before the fall, there was no need to tell Adam not to make idols, not to kill, or not to commit adultery. Being in right relationship with God, he, by nature, did not do those things, and did not need to be given laws.

Now that man had sinned, his knowledge was clouded, and his desires skewed, so God's laws were given to him. They were made explicit. They showed man the standard God required. If man was to live in harmony with God, he had to live within the laws, which God had given. Those laws were good (Rom 7:12). They came from a holy God, and gave the standard of holiness God requires of those, who would come near to God. They covered man's relationship with God, and his relationship with other people.

EVERY HUMAN SOCIETY HAS SOME KIND OF LAWS

The each of the tribes of Papua New Guinea has their laws. All the people of a tribe are expected to live by the laws of that tribe. There are laws about land ownership, marriage, birth, death, divorce, gardening, hunting, and sickness. When the people of a tribe put aside their laws,

and please themselves, law and order in that society breaks down. The record of the people of Israel, in the book of Judges, where “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25) shows how a tribe “falls to pieces” if it puts aside its laws, and lives without law. From these tribal laws, we learn three things:

1. Law and order in society come from good laws. Good laws are a pale reflection of God’s perfect law. Man, separated from God by sin, is only a pale reflection of the perfect man, made in the image of God, but he is still man, whom God made. Therefore, the laws, which men make for their society, are, to some extent, a reflection of God’s laws.
2. No set of tribal laws, or laws made by men, are as good as God’s perfect law. Some laws are good, but no human laws, or laws of human society, are perfect.
3. Men, who have been used to living by tribal laws, very easily think of the Christian life as being governed by a set of “Christian” laws, and that all they have to do is to move from one set of laws to another set of laws.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD’S LAW AND PEOPLE

Now that the Law is given to people, how do people relate to it? What is its purpose?

PEOPLE ARE UNABLE TO KEEP ALL OF GOD’S LAW

When laws are given, whether God’s laws, or the laws of society, they are given for a purpose. That purpose is for people to obey them. And, if people obey good laws, we anticipate that good things will come as a result.

God gave His laws to the people of Israel, and said, “If you keep these laws you will live.” But no one has ever been able to keep all God’s laws. Paul said, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). No matter how a man tries, he does not measure up to God’s perfect standard. Therefore, “no human being will be justified in God’s sight by the works of the law” (Gal 2:16; 3:11; Rom 3:20).

The first thing we notice, however, is that, although we fully expect that the response to laws is that they be obeyed, people are unable to. They might be able to keep some of the law, but not all of it. In fact, some people believe that they do keep the law, but they do not, really. The Jewish religious leaders, in the time of Jesus, especially the Pharisees, were like that. They were proud of the fact that they had kept the law. Before his conversion Paul, who was a Pharisee, was like that. He says that he was “faultless” in keeping the legal requirements of the law (Phil 3:6). The rich young ruler, who came to Jesus, looking for eternal life, told Jesus that he had kept all the commandments from the time he was a boy (Mark 10:17-22). But Jesus pointed out to him that he had not kept all the law. He lacked in one thing, and it was a major thing. He was selfish, and lacked love; he did not use his wealth for the benefit of the poor. His love of wealth stood between him and eternal life. Jesus also pointed out to the Pharisees that they had only kept minor points of the law, not the really major issues – justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt 23:23), and, of course, the sin of pride prevented them from receiving true spiritual life.

James says that whoever keeps the whole law of God, yet breaks it at only one point, is guilty of breaking the whole of God’s law (James 2:10).

So, if people cannot keep the law, what is the use of it? Let us look at what the law can do, and remind ourselves of what the law cannot do.

WHAT THE LAW CAN DO: IT SHOWS UP SIN

One thing we can be certain of: the law shows up sin. By God’s law, people see themselves as sinners. James tells us that God’s law, His word, is like a mirror (James 1:23). The person who measures himself against the law, sees himself as a lawbreaker. Sin is lawlessness. Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness (1 John 3:4). The law condemns us as guilty. The righteous judge (God) judges the sinner by His perfect law, and pronounces all guilty, and condemned to death.

WHAT THE LAW CANNOT DO: IT CANNOT MAKE PEOPLE RIGHTEOUS

While the law shows man his sin, it has no power to make him righteous. It cannot give him life or power. It cannot help him to keep the law. All it can do is show him God's perfect standard, and condemn the man who does not keep it. The written code (the law) kills, it condemns to death; it cannot make alive (2 Cor 3:6).

GOD SENT HIS SON TO REDEEM THOSE WHO ARE UNDER THE LAW

“All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law, who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law, who will be justified” (Rom 2:12-13). However, no one has been able to do the law, and, therefore, all are found guilty, and are condemned. But God sent His Son, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law (Gal 4:4-5). The law was our custodian (guardian), until Christ came (Gal 3:24). It did not give us life and salvation. It did not make us free. However, Christ came to set the slaves free. He took the death penalty Himself when He “bore our sins in His body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24). He not only came to redeem, and to set free; He came to make slaves into sons. Those who had been guilty sinners, slaves of sin, separated from God by their sin, can now call God their own dear Father. They have been made sons in Jesus Christ (Gal 4:6-7).

HOW DO WE COME INTO THIS NEW RELATIONSHIP?

Sons, instead of slaves of sin! We have been slaves of sin, condemned by the law. How may we come into this relationship of sons, instead of slaves? Paul teaches very clearly in his letters that it is by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. “No human being will be justified in God's sight by the works of the law, since, through the law, comes knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20). The gospel concerning God's Son, Jesus Christ, born of a woman, who died and rose again, is the “power of God unto salvation; to every one who has faith. In it, the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith” (Rom 1:16-17). The righteousness of God has been manifested, apart from law, the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, for all who believe (Rom 3:21-22). Since we are

justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 5:1).

Paul's main message, in his letter to the Galatians, is that salvation and life come through faith in Christ, not through keeping the law. God, in His kindness and love, has made a way for sinners to have forgiveness of sin. He "cancelled the bond, which stood against us, with its legal demands" (Col 2:14). We cannot be accepted as righteous through keeping the law, because, no matter how hard we try, we cannot measure up to the righteous requirements of the law. But God has set this aside, and counts as righteous, those who believe in Jesus Christ. They see that He has taken their place. In believing and accepting Jesus Christ, they have received the Holy Spirit. Paul says clearly that we did not receive the Holy Spirit by keeping the law, but by faith (Gal 3:2). There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. The just requirement of the law may be fulfilled in us, who walk according to the Spirit (Rom 8:1-8).

WHAT PLACE DOES THE LAW HAVE FOR THE CHRISTIAN?

In Christ, I am no longer under the law. I fulfil the requirements of the law, not through trying to keep the law, but because Christ is in me, and I in Him. So, we come to the point, with which we commenced. God, by His nature, cannot sin, and is in perfect harmony with His law. God's Son, Jesus Christ, "reflects the glory of God, and bears the very stamp of His nature" (Heb 1:3). He is perfect in every way, just as His Father is perfect. He always did what was pleasing to God (John 8:29). As a believer in Christ, I am in Him. My life is hid with Christ in God (Col 3:3). I am made a "partaker of His divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). As His Son, I share His life, and His Holy Spirit is in me (Rom 8:1-9). The law has already judged me as a sinner, a lawbreaker and guilty. But, Jesus, Who has given His Spirit to me, when I believed, has taken all my sin. Now I can say with Paul, "I, through the law, died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Gal 2:19-20). All the righteous demands of the law have been fulfilled in Christ; His righteousness has been given to me, through faith, not through my keeping the law, but through my union

with Christ. The Christian life is not determined by whether I keep the law or not. The Christian life is “Christ in me”. Our Lord said, “Abide in Me, and I in you” (John 15:4). In Christ, we have redemption of sins. In Christ, we have been chosen, and made sons. In Christ, we have been appointed to live to the praise of His glory. In Christ, we were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. We have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Eph 1:3-14).

WHAT IS THE LIBERTY OF WHICH JESUS AND PAUL SPEAK? (JOHN 8:36; GAL 5:1)

Firstly, it is not liberty to sin. Paul says, most emphatically, that we, who have died to sin, can no longer live in it (Rom 6:1). Jesus said that “everyone who commits sin, is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). The liberty, which Christ gives us, does not give us an excuse to sin. Life in Christ will be marked by hatred of sin, and holiness of living. John points out, in his letters, that the person, who says he loves God, but who continues in sin, is a liar. The Spirit of Christ in us cannot sin, it is against His nature. In so far as we walk in the Spirit, led by the Spirit, we will not commit sin. We will experience the problem, of which Paul speaks in Rom 7, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want, is what I do” (Rom 7:19). We hate the sin we still do, and long to be more like our Father in holiness and godly living.

Secondly, it is liberty from the curse of sin. We have been condemned. Our own consciences condemn us, because we know we are sinners. The law of God condemns us, because we have broken the law. But, in Christ, we are free from this condemnation. Even though we still come short of God’s holiness, and, in thought, word, or deed, sin against God every day, we know that we are not condemned. We stand free from this condemnation, because, as we confess our sin, He forgives us our sin, and the saving death (the blood) of Christ, God’s Son, cleanses us from all sin.

Thirdly, it is the liberty of the Spirit-led, and Spirit-controlled, life. We no longer live like servants or slaves, who are continually hemmed in by law. We live like sons, who have liberty to move anywhere, and do anything, within the limits of their Father’s will.

Our Lord's words in Matt 11:28-30 are relevant. To those who labour and are heavy laden, weary of trying to keep the law, loaded down with all the burdens and regulations imposed by the law, He says, "Come unto Me and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me; for I am gentle, and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light." We exchange the weariness and bondage of trying to keep the law for the liberty of being servants of Jesus Christ.

Fourthly, it is the liberty of a love relationship. We are not bound by law, but by love for God and men. When a man and his wife really love each other, they find, in this relationship, liberty, not bondage. So it is, in our relationship to Jesus Christ. He loved us, and gave Himself for us, that we might belong to Him. When a woman loves her husband, it is not because of law that she does not go to another man. Because she loves her husband, she does not think about other men. So it is with those who love God. They live in the liberty of this relationship, their lives controlled by love for Christ.

When the scribe asked Jesus which commandment was the first of all (Mark 12:28-34), Jesus replied, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord, is One; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength'. The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'." Jesus, did not give commandments as to the things which people should not do; rather He gave two commandments, which, if people do, they will be living inside the law. Paul also gave this same principle (Rom 12:8-10) when he said, "Love is the fulfilling of the law".

WE ARE NOT UNDER LAW BUT UNDER GRACE

We have not become Christians by moving from one set of laws to another set of laws. We are not saved by trying to live inside the fence of the Ten Commandments, or the laws of our church. We are saved by the grace of God, through faith in what our Lord Jesus Christ has done for us. We become Christians by becoming united to Jesus Christ. We continue as Christians as we live in union with Him. It is not by living inside the fence of laws that we continue as Christians. It is by living in

union with Christ that we continue in Christ (John 15:1-6). We have not moved from a tribal fence of laws into a Christian fence of laws. We have moved from the slavery of sin to the freedom of the sons of God.

WHAT IS THE APPLICATION OF THIS PRINCIPLE?

In our Melanesian context, there are two ways we can apply this principle: in how we judge people to be Christians, and in the need to guard against adding to faith “keeping the law”, in order to be Christian.

JUDGING OTHERS TO BE CHRISTIAN OR NOT

As Christians, we have tended to surround ourselves with laws, and to say that, if a person does not do these things, he is not a Christian. I have heard a pastor say, “That man is not a Christian; he smokes”. When I was a young man, some Evangelical Christians used to say, “That person goes to dances; he is not a Christian”. We often judge whether a person is a Christian by whether he keeps certain laws, not by whether he has spiritual life. In this, we are wrong.

It is true, as John says, that, if we say that we have fellowship with God, while we walk in darkness, we lie (1 John 1:6). The way a person lives, shows whether or not he is a Christian. The person who loves sin, who habitually sins, is not a Christian. The way he lives shows up his nature.

What marks a person as a Christian is not whether or not he keeps certain laws, such as, “Do not smoke”. It is his union with Christ that marks him as a Christian, the fact that he walks in the light. If we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, if we love our neighbour as ourselves, our lives will show it.

The Pharisees of our Lord’s day put many laws on their people. In many small ways, they were surrounded by laws, but they overlooked the important issues of justice, mercy, and faith (Matt 23:23-24). We so easily become like the Pharisees. We make laws about things like smoking, and we overlook things like criticism, gossip, pride, and covetousness. I am not saying that I agree with smoking, and some of

these things. What I am trying to point out is that it is not living inside a fence that makes us Christians. It is our union with Christ.

A church may have its rules for its members. It is not the keeping those rules, which make a person a Christian. It is being united to Christ, by faith, that makes him a Christian.

ADDING WORKS TO FAITH

Because of the laws we make, we can easily be guilty of the sin of the Galatian Christians. They were adding law-keeping to faith in Christ. They were saying, “We must believe in Jesus Christ, AND keep certain laws, if we are going to be Christians.” Paul said to them, very strongly, “If you add anything to faith in Christ, you are believing and preaching another gospel.” For our salvation, nothing can be added to the saving work of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are not counted righteous, because of what we do, and the laws we keep. We are counted as righteous, because, by faith, we accept what God has done in Christ. “In Him, we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our sins, according to the riches of His grace” (Eph 1:7). We have come to fullness of life in Him (Col 2:10), not by putting on laws, but by union with Christ. We are called to abide in Him, to live in Him, to walk in Him. Martin Luther’s text, “The just shall live by faith”, refers not only to our salvation, but to the whole of our Christian lives. Whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

WHAT ABOUT CHURCH LAWS AND REGULATIONS?

Churches have the right to have certain laws, and require certain standards of their members. I am not suggesting that churches should have no standards or laws. But we need to hold these laws in the light of Rom 14. There, we see one man (or church), who has certain laws about what he may eat, or what days he must keep as holy days. Another man (or church) has no taboos about food or drink, and regards all days as the same. Paul’s emphasis here is, once again, on the principle of loving our neighbour as ourselves. We will neither judge those, whose laws are different from ours, or give offence to them. A very important verse is Rom 14:17, 19. “The kingdom of God does not mean food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy

Spirit. He who serves Christ is acceptable to God.” Neither having taboos, or having no taboos, count for anything; it is serving Christ that counts. The guiding principle is our relationship to Christ.

Let us not put fences of laws and taboos around ourselves, which destroy the liberty we have in Christ. Each denomination tends to build its own fence, and to judge those who have different fences. We belong to Christ; we are sons of God. Paul said to the Colossian Christians, “Don’t let anyone pass judgment on you on questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival, or a new moon, or a sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col 2:1, 17). To quote John Stott:

Your religion has developed into an external formalism. It is no longer the free and joyful communion of children with their Father. It has become a dreary routine of rules and regulations. . . . Instead of growing in the liberty, with which Christ has set them free, they have slipped back into old bondage.¹

John Stott further says, concerning the prodigal son, “How foolish he would have been to say, ‘You have made me a son, but I would rather be a slave’.” That was the foolishness of the Galatians. We sometimes are guilty of the same foolishness.

God has not rejected His own laws. But all the requirements of His law are met in Christ. As we live in Him, so we are acceptable to God. Our Lord said, “Not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law till all is accomplished” (Matt 5:18). Then He went on to teach that His demands were higher than those of the law. If we are unable to keep the demands of the law, how can we ever measure up to the high demands of Christ? The answer is in Him. He is our righteousness, and He qualifies us before God. The more closely we are united to Christ, the less important our church laws and regulations become. He becomes the centre, and the whole, of our life.

¹ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, Chicago IL: IVP, 1986, p. 108.

CONCLUSION

In closing, let me set out how to live the Christian life. Paul's message was, "Once you were slaves, now you are sons. How can you go back to slavery?" The Galatians had gone back to slavery, and so do we, if we put ourselves under laws, and do not live in the liberty of union with Christ. To go back to a life, controlled by laws, is to deny what God has done for us in Christ.

We must keep on reminding ourselves what we have, and what we are, in Christ. We need to say to ourselves, "Once I was a slave, but God has made me His son, and put the Spirit of His Son in my heart. How can I go back to the old slavery? Once I did not know God, but now I know Him, and He knows me." Our life comes from Him, and, because we belong to Him, we continually seek to live as He wants us to live, and to do the things that He wants us to do. Those, who live according to the Spirit, set their minds on the things of the Spirit. Those, who walk in the Spirit, do not fulfil the desires of the flesh. We live by the Spirit, not by laws. We live within the law, because we live by the Spirit.

We are free from the bondage of sin. The Son has made us free. We are free, indeed. Therefore, we should not allow ourselves to become entangled again in slavery of any kind. We are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve, not under the old written code (the law), but in the new life of the Spirit (Rom 7:6). You were called to freedom. Stand fast in it.

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