

Freedom Series

10. Freedom from Legalism Luke 11:37-44, 18:8-14

A few years ago there was a programme on TV called *That's Life*. It used to run on a Sunday night and they used to focus on some of the more bizarre things in life. One of their best examples was the Jobsworth award for the official who enforced what he saw as his duty irrespective of however ridiculous that may have been. It's actually a pastime of poor quality officials the world round. Let me give you a collection:

Police in Sweden have announced that they are prosecuting a man who crashed a shopping trolley for careless driving. The twenty year old was travelling downhill in the trolley when it struck a car at a speed estimated at 30 mph. "He was certainly careless but it is debatable whether he was driving" said a Police Inspector. He was rather drunk and the trolley wasn't showing the correct lights.

What about the council in Warrington, which gave planning permission for a church in Warrington, provided it didn't open on a Sunday.

Or what about the bus drivers in Walthamstow that were told to pass stops with passengers waiting even if they had space so that they would keep to the timetable. In fact they complained that buses were late because they had to stop and pick up passengers.

Debbie Collins aged 22 was stunned when anti-noise inspectors called at her house after complaints about a noisy party there. The party was a birthday party in the back garden with 20 five year olds who were playing party games and enjoying themselves on a bouncy castle.
The Guardian

Ridiculous you may think. But Christians do it with style. Today we are going to do the last in the Freedom Series and we are going to go full circle. In our first item in the series we looked at Freedom from Condemnation and we discovered that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and we understood that Christ accepts us despite our failures - in fact, because we are failures in our own strength. Our faith is based on God's grace through faith.

The trouble is the fundamental principle of all religions, except true Christianity, is that favour with the gods is based on human achievement and merit. It's what I call primal religion. It's based on doing things which we think will save our skins.

It's like thinking we will be saved from death in an airliner plunging out of control to the ground by fastening our seat belt. Nothing can save that plane except a miracle. Primal religion says we do good works and live to codes of practice in order that we may live prosperous lives and somehow hope to merit eternal life. If something bad happens in your life, you do religious things in the hope of appeasing the gods.

Unfortunately it doesn't work. It never has done and it never will. Like the crashing plane, our salvation is based on a miracle - the intervention of God alone. Our faith is based on eternal life being achieved by grace through faith. Our growth into maturity as God's people is wrought by the power of the Holy Spirit and our desire to live lives

in obedience to God out of devotion to Him because of His love and grace to us through Christ.

The problem is that legalism - a strict adherence to law in order to gain God's favour is still rife in churches. Worse, the essence of all "Christian" legalism is it is usually a perversion of the law of God. Christians take the word of God and interpret it - adding something to it or changing it. The rather than uphold the scriptures, what they uphold is their interpretation of it. And people who do this are usually people who stick to the letter of the law.

I gave you the example of the Pharisees because these are the role model of how not to do law. They took the law of God, reinterpreted it into a mass of laws. They had their rules and regulations about religious purity about what went into their stomachs but they were unconcerned about the important things. Jesus said:

"Woe to you Pharisees , because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God.

They obeyed the letter of their own law but didn't keep the spirit of it. Worse still is the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee glowed in his religiousness but God was tuned into the person who realised his sin and called out for God's mercy. They didn't think about God, they thought about themselves. But the Pharisees were a very dominant force in Judaism in the first century and their legalism.

Right from the start of the Church, the apostles battled with what are often called Judaisers. They said it was insufficient for someone to have salvation through faith - they had to become Jews and take on the requirements of the law to be saved. Poppycock is the reply of Scripture. We are saved by grace through faith, not by works so that no-one can boast!

The worse thing about the Pharisees and the Judaisers in the early Church was that they had perverted the intentions of God even to the Jews. Why were the Israelites God's earthly people? Was it because they did faithful things? Was it because they were superior in any way to gentiles? Was it because they kept the law faithfully. No on every count they failed.

When I was young it was suggested to me that the Jews were believers in justification by law alone. In the first century that wasn't true of all Jews. There were many that had the same view as Romans 4. You'll find there that the basic law of God regarding what makes people righteous before God is faith and right from Abraham to now that has remained the case. Christianity made sense to first century Jews that were not of the more ultra-orthodox stock like the Pharisees, which is why Paul always got a mixed reception in synagogues.

I was at a meeting two weeks ago led by a Hebrew Christian on the 10 commandments was amazing because I'd never read them in the way presented. You see people use the commandments as a way by which they justify themselves. Keep the commands, please God. No

Actually the Jews call them the 10 words. They don't use the word commandments although we have to accept that this is a code of behaviour. The reason why they call them the 10 words is that Christians traditionally have ignored the first word that the Jews recognise because it isn't a command which really spoils the title The 10 Commandments.

Turn to Exodus 20 and you'll find that all the Jewish 10 words are there and you'll see how we've changed these words. You see, it starts with the first word as a statement not a command:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

The other words or commands follow. The first word is a word of grace. I am the Lord your God, and I've saved you. Therefore live like this. For all their sin and all the calamity the people of Israel have brought on themselves over the years, they are the same earthly people towards which God has poured out his grace. The commands were there so that people could show their love for the God that had saved them and the law was there to provide social order. Disobedience was literally bad for them. As we know, the law was also there to define the standards of a holy God.

However for those of us who are God's heavenly people, his children, his church, then before we believed the law helped define what we were - sinners. Let's read a few words from Romans 7:

4 So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. 5 For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. 6 But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

What the law does is demonstrate that all have sinned and come short of God's glory. The law is our schoolmaster - it is there to show that without Christ, our standards are well below God's and we can't make up the difference. The law bound us. We were captives - struggling as the Pharisees did to somehow appease or please God and falling way short of the mark. That's what many people who aren't Christians do to appease God. They try to be moral and upright and hope that God will somehow show favour to them when they die. What an awful view of God!

But that first word is important - because the law is our schoolmaster instructing us that God acts through grace to save people! It's the same for us. He is our God, we are His children - not His earthly nation - but His eternal one. He's brought us out of captivity to the flesh, the world and the devil and He's made us His people. Now He expects us to act like it.

As Paul says here, we are people of the Spirit we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code. Because it is the Spirit who changes and transforms us. It's the Spirit that enables us to both desire to live holy lives and to live them. Holy living starts as an act of faith and ends as a work of the Spirit.

Unfortunately we still try as Christians and fail. And we feel guilty and condemned. That's law. We need to come before Him afresh this morning and realise there's forgiveness and no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.

The trouble is that the Church has fallen into the sin of the Pharisees and does the same things. By that I'm not just meaning those who have created law and things not in scripture, like the Catholics but good Bible-believing Baptists like ourselves. We indulge in legalism extensively. We take the truth of God and adapt and use it to serve our personal desires, just like the Pharisees did. And we make it law and try to justify it from scripture.

Why? For many Christians they assume their salvation is by grace through faith but they then believe that their sanctification - that is a holy walk before God - comes by works. Rubbish, look at that passage in Romans again *But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.* Yet we make our rules and regulations.

🌈 we say must please God by having a certain dress code. If we fail in that we sin and dishonour God. How many stories of people have you come across where they have been turned away from church because they are not properly dressed. Not wearing a tie? Now what part of the Bible is that in?

🌈 we must worship in a certain way and the way other people worship in a different way to use dishonour God and are sinful. We take offence at people who get a bit emotional, or are a bit noisy - tut, tut - they shouldn't do that. Because the Bible says we should be all quiet, reserved and respectful in worship. Perhaps the psalmist must have been mistaken when he penned the words "Shout to the Lord"?

🌈 if people don't have the same doctrine as us regarding behaviour, dress, worship style, use a modern version of scripture, or use spiritual gifts that we don't think exist must be sinful, evil or even satanic and must be avoided. Now in which part of the Bible are we instructed which English version we should use. Oh dear, when it was written, English hadn't been invented.

🌈 we make generalised judgements about people or denominations which suit our prejudices but are not true when we deal with groups or individuals - all Methodists are liberal, all Anglicans tolerate homosexual acts, all charismatics are crazy, Alpha is bad because it's been misused by one person or another.

🌈 certain activities are evil and must be avoided at all cost as they pollute our minds and are therefore sinful - going to the cinema, walking into a pub, drinking alcohol, mixing with certain kinds of people, listening to popular music particularly if it is loud, dancing of any sort, particularly in a disco or night-club. Were are any of these prohibited in Scripture? Nowhere, because most hadn't been invented.

The most awful thing about all this is that we use the same judgements to separate ourselves from other believers or even throw people out of our churches or make them feel inadequate. And can we justify any one of them as being *God's law*? Of course not - it's all legalism. In fact legalism has more to do with our culture and prejudices than the Word of God.

What am I trying to get at here? Is our faith based on the Word of God, or is it based on our perversion of it. As we move forward in faith as a church it's a question we need to ask ourselves.

The first lesson they teach you in College is that they teach you exegesis. It's an ugly word for a frustrating piece of study but which has rich rewards. Rather than study using our prejudices to suggest what something means, the most critical thing is to look at what the text is actually saying - and asking "What did the people who read this actually understand by it?" Because it's the Word of God and the meaning has not changed in however many years have intervened since.

As I moved away from my Brethren background into the evangelical mainstream, I found myself starting to question what I had been taught. It's a hard lesson to learn and it takes decades to get a Brethren background into scriptural perspective because they are such arch legalists. But even now I still find myself being challenged by God's Word.

Are you being challenged? Are you finding change difficult? Are you finding some of the things that we've been doing in the past year just a little difficult to square?

Then we need to start asking questions? You can ask me. But most of all go back to your Bible. Not the interpretation of it you were taught years ago, but look at the words. Let God open your mind to what He is saying. If we are people of the word then we must be people who are free of the legalism of ours and other people's interpretations of it.



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