

FREEDOM IN CHRIST Part 2

INTRODUCTION

In Lesson Nine we considered several Biblical guidelines to help us learn how to live as believers who are “free in Christ” and are no longer “under the law.” This Lesson is a continuation of Lesson Nine.

One significant issue that the Apostle Paul had to deal with was how Christians should live alongside each other when they differed strongly on specific matters related to “Christian liberty.” Many new believers had recently come out of situations where they lived self-centered and sinful lives while totally ignoring the teachings of the Bible and the ways of God. When they became believers they were eager to live for Christ and wished to get rid of all their old habits and ways of life which clearly did not please the Lord. They also wanted to be free from anything which might tempt them to go back into their old sinful and disobedient ways. They were therefore sometimes more “strict” in the things they chose to do or not to do than those who had been believers for a long time. Others who cherished their freedom from the law were very reluctant to submit to any new laws or restrictions which went beyond the clear teachings of the Bible. All this caused confusion, misunderstanding, and sometimes even a lack of love and trust among fellow believers.

It's obviously very important not to take away a believer's freedom in Christ. No true believer wants to go back to the bondage of living under the law. However, it's also important that Christians do not present a stumbling block in the life of fellow believers—especially in the life of someone who is seeking to live for the first time in a way that is pleasing to the Lord.

In this Lesson we will study what the New Testament teaches about the exercise of our Christian Liberty in situations where believers differ on various practical matters. Though some questions may possibly remain in your mind after studying this Lesson, it's important that you at least know what the Bible teaches regarding these things. And after you learn what the Scriptures teach, you should pray that the Lord will enable you to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in such a way that Christ is truly honored and others are truly blessed through your life.

ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES FOR LIVING IN FREEDOM THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT

(8) We should recognize that there are some things which may be sinful for one person but not for another.

This statement may seem very strange at first and completely out of harmony with what the teachings of the Bible. But it isn't! There are, of course, many things which are either clearly “right” or clearly “wrong” for everyone. But Christian liberty has nothing to do with those things. Christian liberty deals primarily with matters which the Bible does not clearly condemn or which it does not clearly command—either directly or by implication.

In Romans 14 Paul discusses some of these things, focusing particularly on eating and drinking and the observance of special days. He wrote:

“One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. . . One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. . . As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. . . . The man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.” Romans 14:2, 5, 14, 23

In this same passage, Paul reminds his readers that “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.” (Romans 14:17-18). In other words, living as a Christian is not a matter of laws and rules and regulations, but a matter of living joyfully and faithfully under the guidance and leading of the Holy Spirit.

However, even though all sincere believers may claim to be led by the Holy Spirit, not everyone agrees on what is right or wrong for believers in every situation. For example, some people in Paul's day believed that eating certain foods and drinking certain beverages or doing certain things on certain days was wrong (sinful). Others strongly disagreed. In verse 23 of Romans 14 Paul made a very strong statement about this. He wrote that anything is sinful and wrong for those who sincerely believe that it is wrong. It is sinful not because God declares it to be wrong, but because a person does something which he sincerely believes is contrary to God's will. Whenever someone deliberately chooses to do something which he believes is displeasing to the Lord, he is sinning against him.

Obviously, this statement by itself does not completely resolve every issue. However, as a first step we should recognize that each one of us should definitely stay away from anything and everything which we believe is displeasing to the Lord. If we don't, we are sinning. At the same time, we should also recognize that someone else is not necessarily sinning even though he does something which we believe is wrong.

This does not mean of course, that something is right and pleasing to God simply because we believe it is. Our judgment may well be wrong. We are easily deceived. Many times we seek to justify something which we like to do even though other Christians believe that it is wrong! Not everything is right and acceptable to God even if the Bible does not specifically condemn it or forbid it.

Every culture has its own moral challenges which may not be specifically addressed in the Bible. As believers we should not try to find “loopholes” to justify our pursuit of questionable things, but rather we should pursue a way of life that clearly and obviously pleases the Lord, blesses others, and enables us to live lives of “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

(9) We should be very careful not to cause a “weaker” brother or sister to fall into sin through the things we do or the choices we make.

Believers, especially leaders, are constantly being watched by others, both non-believers and “new believers”-- whether they realize it or not. Many younger believers may take their “cue” as to what is right and good and acceptable by watching an older or mature Christian. And that becomes a

matter of great responsibility for the person being watched. The mature Christian may well be able

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to do certain things (such as watching certain movies, reading certain books, going certain places, drinking certain beverages, wearing certain clothes) without sinning. These things are in no way a problem for his own personal or spiritual well-being. However, a weaker brother or sister who is watching him may not be able to do the same things without sinning. The mature Christian, therefore, should never forget the potential influence he has on a younger or weaker believer and should live accordingly.

In most instances a mature believer will be very careful not to lead another person into sin by what he does. However, there may be times and situations where mature believers are not even aware that their actions are having a very significant effect on someone else. Every mature believer should therefore be very careful not to lead someone astray and every “younger” or “weaker” believer should be careful to follow the example of those who most consistently exhibit the fruit of the Spirit in their lives.

“Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. . . . If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.” Romans 14:13-15

“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything cause causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.” Romans 14:19-21

“Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.” 1 Corinthians 8:9-13

(10) We should be ready and willing to give up some of our “rights” as Christians if that would promote the Kingdom of our Lord and enable us to be a greater blessing to others.

A believer's primary interest should always be to promote the kingdom of God through what he does and not to please himself. There may be many things which are “permissible” for us (See 1 Corinthians 6:12), but they would not be the “best” things for us to do. There are many times when we have to make decisions on the basis of how we can best honor the Lord and promote His kingdom rather than simply on the basis of whether we personally think something is “right” or “wrong.” God has richly blessed us with His grace so that we may serve Him with joy and gratitude rather than focusing on our own interests or satisfying our own desires.

“Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. . . .

One man considers one day more sacred than another, another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to

God. For none of us lives to himself alone” Romans 14:1, 5-7

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“We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself “ Romans 15:1-3

“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”
Romans 15:7

Paul rejoiced in the fact that he was “free in Christ,” but he also knew that he was “saved to serve.” He was willing to give up the right he had to receive “payment” for his service as an apostle--if this would promote the cause of Christ. He willingly became “all things to all men” in order to win them to Christ. Though he was not “under the law,” he would on occasion “observe” the law for the sake of creating an opportunity to bless others. He was free to eat and drink whatever he pleased, but he willingly gave up both meat and wine if that would help others in their Christian life. He was free to be married, but he chose not to marry in order that he might better carry out his work as an apostle. He was grateful for his freedom in Christ, but he would not use that freedom simply to make life more comfortable or more “pleasant” for himself. He readily gave up all the “credits” which he once prized as a strict, law-abiding Pharisee in order that he might focus on living for Christ (Philippians 3:4-9). Paul was not only saved by grace but he also lived by grace, free from the condemnation and burden of the law, and free to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in every area of his life.

“Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? . . . Don't we have the right to food and drink? Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us as do the other apostles . . . ? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.”
1 Corinthians 9:1,4,5, 12

“Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. . . . To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

“Everything is permissible’—but not everything is beneficial. ‘Everything is permissible’--but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.”
1 Corinthians 10:23-24

(When Paul wrote that “everything is permissible,” he obviously did not intend to include the many things which he himself condemned and which Jesus and other writers also condemned. He may have been referring simply to matters of eating and drinking. He may also have been referring to a common phrase used by some people in Corinth who emphasized “total freedom” from the law. In either case, Paul is definitely not making a general statement that everything is permissible in the sight of God.)

THE DANGER OF EMPHASIZING MAN-MADE RULES

Because of the continual danger of being conformed to “the world,” sincere believers often seek to protect themselves and their children by drawing up a set of rules to guide them as they live out their Christian faith. Some of these rules are reasonable, helpful, and important and may be even be necessary in some situations.

However, an over-dependence on man-made rules can also be dangerous and even counter-productive. Instead of leading us to increasingly trust in the leading of the Holy Spirit to guide us, we replace our freedom in Christ with rules and laws which bind our conscience. And the long term result of that is negative rather than positive.

By focusing too much on a set of man-made rules, we open ourselves up to a number of potential problems which stifle our Christian growth and diminish the joyful freedom we have when we live in constant fellowship with Christ.

Among the potential problems we create are the following.

- (1) By seeking to perfectly obey a set of man-made rules we are often led to worry whether we are “good enough,” “doing enough,” or “holy enough.” We measure ourselves and our “holiness” by what we do rather than by what Christ has done for us. We become excessively concerned about our failures and unduly proud of our “successes.” We may also become extremely stressed out and on edge because we fear that we might “fail” to do everything expected of us.
- (2) We tend to forget that salvation is by grace alone (even though we believe it) and put too much stress on our own obedience. And when we do that, instead of honoring God, we dishonor Him, and instead of pleasing Him, we displease Him.
- (3) We tend to judge others who do not conform to our rules. If they don't do what we think is right and good and proper, we are inclined to look down upon them, criticize them, and take away their own joy in walking with the Lord.
- (4) We may feel very guilty if we don't observe all the rules all the time. A sense of guilt can be good if it drives us to prayer and repentance and leads us to a sincere desire to walk more consistently and joyfully in fellowship with the Lord. But guilt is bad if it causes us to doubt our salvation or to question the promises God gives to those who earnestly turn to Him in repentance and faith. Further, a sense of guilt can be good if it leads us to seek the peace that Jesus promised to us by His grace (Matthew 11:18-30). But guilt is bad if it causes us to feel depressed, inferior, and hopeless. And finally, a sense of guilt can be good if it enables us to understand what went wrong in the past, leads us to overcome temptation in the present, and helps us to avoid sin in the future. But guilt is bad if it causes us to feel that we will have to “work” much harder in the future in order to gain the assurance and joy of our salvation.

Since Christ has perfectly fulfilled the law in our behalf, we do not honor Him by feeling that we have to fulfill it perfectly, too! We obviously should never minimize the importance of humble and joyful obedience, but neither should we feel that our salvation is in danger unless

we meet a certain standard of “holiness.” Those who continually wrestle with significant guilt feelings should re-focus their minds on what God has already done by His grace rather than on their own efforts to “obey” a set of commandments—whether God's or man's!

- (5) Since it is impossible for us to make a rule or law to cover every possible situation that may arise, we will always have to wonder whether we have made enough rules or whether the rules we have already made are strict enough, broad enough, or comprehensive enough. We will be driven and controlled by an approach to life which can never give us the assurance that we have ever “done enough” to please God.
- (6) If we depend on rules to help us live a life that is pleasing to God, we may no longer daily and humbly seek for the guidance of the Holy Spirit since we have already determined in advance what we should do and how we should live. But the only way to make sure that all our choices and actions will be pleasing to the Lord is to earnestly follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. Only then will all our choices and actions increasingly conform to the will of God. In the words of Paul, “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25).
- (7) By emphasizing laws and rules, we may give non-believers the impression that Christians are primarily defined by their adherence to a set of man-made rules. As far as many non-Christians are concerned, Christianity is a religion of doing certain “good things” and refraining from certain questionable things such as smoking, drinking, dancing, gambling and the like. When we place a heavy emphasis on a list of man-made negatives, we simply confirm the false impressions which many non-Christians already have. By doing so, we not only give them a false understanding of the Gospel of grace, but we may also create an unnecessary obstacle for those who are sincerely interested in surrendering their lives to Jesus. And if that happens, our emphasis on living in a certain prescribed way, no matter how sincere we are, may hinder rather than promote the Kingdom of God.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Christians are free from the bondage and condemnation of the law and live their new lives in Christ with a measure of freedom that Old Testament believers did not have. However, they do not have the freedom to live as they please. God has given us many teachings, guidelines and commands in the Bible to help us live in a way that is pleasing to Him. He has also given us His Holy Spirit to live within us and to help us do the things that please Him and to stay away from the things that don't.

However, God has not given us a set of rules or laws to cover every possible situation which may arise in our lives. As a result, Christians sometimes differ on how they should deal with certain moral concerns which are not specifically addressed in the Bible. Some believers contend that it doesn't really matter very much how we live in these situations since our salvation is totally by grace and not by keeping or observing laws. Others, however, respond by drawing up a set of man-made laws and insist that sincere believers obey them. Some of these laws may be helpful for some people in some situations. However, there are also some significant dangers in making up rules and laws which go beyond the specific teachings of the Bible.

When we draw up laws of our own which become burdensome to us or which destroy our joy and freedom in the Lord, God is not pleased. Such laws not only diminish our joyful celebration and loving obedience but they do little or nothing to help us become the kind of people God wants us to be.

Though we do have wonderful freedom from the law when we are in Christ, that does not mean that we can ignore the influence our moral choices may have on others. When we put our own interests or desires first without considering how they may affect others, we do not glorify God. When we lead others into temptation, whether deliberately or unintentionally, we do not please Him. When we choose to walk as close to “the world” as we can without stepping over the line, we do not honor Him.

By His grace, God has completely forgiven all of our sins. And by that same grace He has granted us the gift of His Holy Spirit to help us increasingly become the kind of people He wants us to be. What a tremendous privilege and wonderful blessing it is for us to know and experience that! And when our earthly pilgrimage is over, we shall live forever in glory with our gracious Lord to praise Him without ceasing for His indescribable mercy and grace.

“Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” Ephesians 2:4-9

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON TEN

1. Indicate whether the following statements are true or false.
 - A. The early Christians usually agreed on all moral issues.
 - B. Christians are “free from the law” and therefore no longer have to be concerned about doing what God has revealed in the Bible as “right” or “wrong.”
 - C. Sincere Christians today will always agree on what is right or wrong in any given situation if they prayerfully study the Bible together.
2. Fill in the blanks in this statement from Romans 14:23. “The man who has _____ is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from _____; and everything that does not come from faith is _____.”
3. Choose A or B or C.
 - A. Something is morally wrong for us if we truly believe it is wrong in God's sight and it's morally right if we truly believe it's right.
 - B. Something is morally right or wrong for us no matter what we believe about it.
 - C. Something is morally wrong for us if we truly believe it is wrong in God's sight, but it's not necessary right simply because we believe it's right.
4. Complete this sentence from Romans 14:17: “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but _____.”
5. If the Bible does not clearly forbid or condemn something, does that mean it is OK for us to do it? Please explain your answer.
6. Complete the following sentences:
 - A. Romans 14:13 “Make up your mind not to _____.”
 - B. Romans 14:20. “It is wrong for a man to eat anything that _____.”
 - C. 1 Corinthians 8:9. “Be careful that the exercise of your freedom does not _____.”
7. Do you think Paul was really serious when he said, “If what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall” (1 Corinthians 8:13) ? Please explain your answer.

8. A. Briefly explain in your own words, what Paul teaches in Romans 15:1-2.
- B. Give a practical illustration of what this means.
9. Give three specific examples of how Paul gave up his personal “rights” in order to better serve the cause of Christ.
- A.
- B.
- C.
10. In Corinthians 9:19-23 Paul wrote that he became “all things to all men” Why did he do this? (See verses 22 and 23.)
11. In 1 Corinthians 6:12 and again in 1 Corinthians 10:23 Paul wrote that “everything is permissible.” Does that mean that we can do anything we want? Please explain your answer.
12. Since believers are “free in Christ, why should mature Christians have to be very careful about how they live?
13. In Romans 14:13, Paul writes, “Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another.”
- A. Does this mean that we should never judge or condemn people no matter what they do?
- B. Give the reason for your answer.

Questions 14-20 are based directly on the Lesson notes.

14. If we seek to perfectly obey a set of man-made rules, we may begin to measure our “holiness” by _____ rather than by _____.
15. If we stress the observance of man-made rules we may put too much stress on our own obedience and forget that salvation is _____,
16. If we stress man-made rules too much, we may _____ on others who don't obey them, _____ them, and take away their own _____ in walking with the Lord.

17. A sense of guilt can be good if it drives us to _____ and _____ and leads to a sincere desire to _____.
18. A sense of guilt is bad if it causes us to doubt _____ and to question the promises God gives to those who earnestly turn to Him in _____ and _____.
19. “Those who continually wrestle with significant guilt feelings should focus their minds on _____ rather than on _____.”
20. “By emphasizing laws and rules, we may give non-believers the impression that _____”

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Carefully evaluate each of the following statements. Indicate why you agree or disagree with each statement and, if possible, include some Scripture references to support your position.

1. Just as young children need more rules than mature people do, so young or new Christians need more rules than mature Christians do. Therefore, we should help new believers by providing them with specific laws or rules to cover as many situations as possible.
2. The more rules and laws we have, the less we will depend on the leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Therefore, we should not add any rules whatsoever to those found in the New Testament.
3. Some people are so easily led astray by the example of others that we really do not have to be concerned about their reactions to what we do. Our only responsibility before God is to do what we personally believe is right in His sight.
4. The Bible gives us clear teachings as to what is sinful in God's sight and what is not. Therefore, what is wrong for one person is also wrong for everyone else and what is right for one person is right for everyone else.
5. It's wonderful to be saved by God's grace, but most of us would have far more assurance of our salvation if we were judged on the basis of our works.

GRACE ANSWERS TEN

1. A. False
B. False
C. False
2. doubts faith sin
3. C
4. righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit
5. No. There are many things which the Bible does not explicitly refer to—particularly things which are common today but were unknown in earlier days. For example, today there are computers, television, radios, movies, readily available pornography, cars, etc., all of which can present temptations of one kind or another. Also, there are many situations in our lives which the Bible does not address directly. We continually need to seek the leading of the Holy Spirit without always depending on a specific Bible verse which addresses our concerns.
6. A. put a stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.
B. causes someone else to stumble
C. become a stumbling block to the weak
7. Yes! Paul was very sincere about what he wrote about putting a stumbling block in the way of someone else. Pleasing God and helping others were more important to Paul than pleasing himself. He not only wrote that in his letters, but he also demonstrated it in the way he lived his life.
8. A. We should not always make our choices in life on the basis of what pleases or benefits us, but we should always first consider what effect our choices may have on others. Our calling from God is to build up others. And, as we seek to do that, we should mercifully deal with the weaknesses of others—even as God deals mercifully with us.

B. Many appropriate examples could be given here.
9. Various examples might be given here. Among them are the following.
A. Paul chose not to marry.
B. Paul chose to support himself rather than receiving payment for his ministry.
C. Paul occasionally observed an O.T. law when he didn't have to—simply in order to be
able to win some Jews to Christ.
10. Paul did this so that he might win some people to Christ and also that he himself might share in all the blessings of the Gospel.

Grace Lesson Ten Answers continued

11. No. Paul may have been referring to a quotation (“All things are permissible”) used by some of the people in his day. Or, he might have been referring to freedom from all the civil and ceremonial laws. In his own letters to the churches, he wrote about many things that clearly displeased God and were wrong under all circumstances. Besides, in the passages referred to (especially in 1 Corinthians 10) Paul was emphasizing his freedom from the laws and rules made by men which were not necessarily based on God's own commands.
12. Being “free in Christ” does not mean that we can do anything we please. It's obvious from the New Testament that there are many things which do please God while many others do not. Besides, we have to do whatever we can not to lead others into sin through our example. We may be “free” to do certain things which are not sinful for us, but, as Paul wrote, we should not do them if they will become a stumbling block to others.
13. A. No
B. We should remember the words of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount regarding judging others (Matthew 7:1-5). However, we are also taught that we should learn to distinguish right from wrong and should help others to see when they are doing what is wrong. Our judging should be done “in love” and with the sincere intention of helping and blessing others, but we do not show genuine love for God or for men if we fail to confront others when they are doing wrong. Among the many passages which could be cited in this connection are Matthew 18:15-18, Acts 5:1-10, and 1 Corinthians 5:3.
14. what we do what Christ has done for us
15. by grace alone
16. criticize look down joy
17. prayer repentance walk more consistently and joyfully in fellowship with the Lord.
18. our salvation repentance and faith
19. what God has already done by His grace their own efforts to obey a set of commandments.
20. Christians are primarily defined by their adherence to a set of man-made rules.