

Christians Are the Freest People in the World

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During the season of Lent, we begin our Sunday service with a reading of the Ten Commandments. As part of their preparation for Confirmation, our Confirmands will be required to memorize the Ten Commandments. Repeatedly, in the Old Testament, you will hear references to the, “Commandments, the statutes and the ordinances.” Some people think that the principle purpose of religion is this: to provide commandments, statutes and ordinances. We want to know what to do, when to do it and how to do it. And not just some relative notion of value, we want the absolute Rule of Life, one with eternal importance, significance and certainty. This we seek from our religion: an absolute, eternally binding, true and clear set of commandments, statutes and ordinances. The question is “Does Christianity give us what we seek?” The answer is, “yes and no”.

Let me use a parable of my own design to illustrate: There once was a father who had two sons whom he loved dearly. As all good fathers will, he raised his sons to be responsible young adults. When the boys were young, the father gave them a clear set of rules that they were to follow. When the boys obeyed the rules they were amply rewarded by the father. When the boys disobeyed the rules, they were quickly and fairly punished. The boys grew up loving their father. However, one son grew up with a strong sense of responsibility and one son grew up never quite able to control himself. Now one Saturday night the strong son asked his father for the keys to the car to go into the city. The father asked the boy “Son, do you love me?” the boy said, “Yes”. The father threw the keys to the boy and sent him on his way. A little bit later the weaker son came to his father and asked for the keys to the second car so that he too might go to the city. To this son the father said, “I want you back by midnight. I don’t want you to have more than two friends go with you in the car. I want you to stay out of the bars and if I find out that you break any of these rules, I’m going to ground you for two weeks. Do you understand?” The boy looked at his father and said, “I understand.” The father threw the car keys to his son and said, “I love you.” The boy said, “I love you, too.”

In this little parable, our God is, of course, like the Father in the story. We, of course, are like the weak son. In our sinfulness, we must obey commandments, statutes and ordinances to guide us in doing the things that would be best for us. The law, however, is there for our weakness. It is God’s will that we become free of commandments, statutes and ordinances, that we become free of the fear of punishment. It is God’s will that by following Jesus Christ we would be like the strong, responsible son. It is God’s will that the only motivation in our life be that of love. Jesus said the greatest command is this: “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. And the second is this; you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Christianity is about love and freedom. St. Augustine is reputed to have summed this up with the advice, “Love God and do that you will.” The so called “Law of Love” is not a law in the common understanding of that word. In the common understanding of that word, a law is imposed; it coerces, demands, rewards and punishes. Love, on the other hand, is not imposed; it is given. Love includes mercy, grace and forgiveness. Law sets up barriers, lines which cannot be crossed, actions which are demanded under the threat of punishment. Love is freedom. In St. Paul’s hymn of love he writes, “Love is patient, love is kind, love is not jealous or boastful, it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ends.” (I Corinthians 13).

Some people come to religion seeking commandments, statutes and ordinances. They seek a set of rules for daily life. Yet, love makes Christians free. We are free but we often disregard our freedom. Because freedom is so free we think it is cheap. We ignore the responsibility of freedom and cling to the demands of slavery. It’s just simply easier to have someone to tell you what to do.

Martin Luther suggested to those who sin “if you are going to sin, sin boldly.” At least, that way you will better appreciate the power of forgiveness when it is offered. Those who sin by dribs and drabs

appreciate neither the gravity of sin nor God's forgiveness. I must confess that as your pastor and rector, I often feel the guilt of leading the flock in my care by dribs and drabs. For the care of the souls of this congregation perhaps I have been lax on the commandments, statues and ordinances.

Our office staff has just about completed the Annual Parochial Report for 2014. Our attendance at worship on Sunday is at a 10-year low with average attendance on Sunday at two services of about 80. The Rotary Club would not permit that level of absence at their meetings. They have rules for attendance: miss too many meetings and you are kindly asked to resign from the Rotary. They have rules. We depend on love, but, maybe, we need rules. Instead, we drib and drab encouraging members to do what they know they should do. Maybe boldness for the benefit of your soul is what is called for. Perhaps, it would do your soul good if we tacked up the pledge and giving records on the bulletin board so everyone would know who supports this church and who does not. At church, anyone can sit anywhere on any Sunday. Everyone receives equally Holy Communion from common bread and a common cup. When you die, anyone on the membership rolls gets a free burial, with a free use of the Parish House for a reception for your friends and relatives. We make no distinction if you supported sacrificially the ministry of your church or if you just ignored us. Even the airlines have diamond, platinum, gold and silver level members so that they can reward their loyal members. But, the airlines have rules. We depend on love, maybe we need rules.

If I were bold, I would take away your freedom to ignore this Holy Institution, the church. I would tell you that if you spend more Sundays on the golf course than you do in church, if you pay more on country club dues than your pledge, I would tell you to take your pledge money and buy better golf clubs since that is what is more important to you. If I were bold, I would say to the parents who seldom bring their children to Sunday School, that if your child knows more about the starting lineup for the New York Yankees or the participants on American Idol or, God forbid, if they know more about the Kardashians than they know about Jesus Christ, and you still don't bring them to Sunday School... then you deserve the anxiety you have about where your children get their moral teachings. For your sake, I

should sin boldly. In St. Paul's words, "For I could wish that I were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren." For your sake, I should betray the Gospel of Freedom and give you commandments, statues and ordinances. I could turn this Christian Church into a club with rules. But then it would be too easy for you and you would not be free.

We have a nature corrupted by sin and so we seek rules. Yet realize that the law we seek for ourselves only accuses us of the very sins we are seeking to avoid. The very laws that we seek for our life, reminds us that we are in bondage to death.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about grace and about love and about freedom. So much freedom that it can be terrifying. As contradictory as it seems to be, slavery is easier in many ways than freedom. Rules are easier than freedom. Christians are the freest people in the world. Christians prepare themselves and the world for the Kingdom of God. The reign of God has no commandments, no statues, and no ordinance. The letter of the law passes away. In its stead is the Spirit of the Law of Love. There is no sin in heaven because there are no commandments, no statues, and no ordinances, none except this one. That you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. *Amen.*