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Are Christians *'Free From the Law'*?

**"Free from the Law, Oh happy condition"
goes the popular hymn. Really?**

by James McBride

Around the world, prisons are stuffed with law-breakers. These men, women and children are guilty of murder, rape, embezzlement, burglary, thieving, mugging, parent and child abuse, and perjury - the whole range of offences prohibited by the laws of their nation. It would be stretching things to imagine they are in a happy condition!

The hymn, of course, refers to the *Law of God*, specifically to the Ten Commandments. What do they prohibit? Murder, rape, embezzlement, mugging, abuse, and perjury - in principle, every law that is essential for an ordered society. So, what's wrong with the "terrible ten"? Why would you be "happy" to be free of the divine instruction? There has to be a reason why good "law-abiding" Christians have such virulent animosity towards God's revealed Laws.

A Holy Law

Jesus, after all, told His disciples: *"Do not think I am come to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill"* (Matthew 5:17 pp). He perfectly obeyed those laws throughout His life. Indeed, half a century later he inspired his apostle John to write, *"...Sin is the transgression of the Law"* (I John 3:4).

The apostle Paul, too, had a different perspective from much of modern Christianity. He wrote, *"...the law is holy and the commandment holy and just and good"* (Romans 7:12). "Holy" is a practical word meaning it is set apart for a good use, usually a divine use.

Like all good Jews, Paul understood that the laws of the Old Testament are universal principles for the

proper regulation of society. They are the framework within which God created mankind. When we are in harmony with them, life works much more smoothly.

Paul wrote to Timothy:

"I know that the law is an excellent thing, if a man makes a lawful use of it; that is, if he understands that law is not enacted for upright people but for the lawless and disorderly, the godless and sinful, the ignorant and profane, people who kill their fathers and mothers, murderers, the immoral, men who practice sodomy, men who enslave others, liars, perjurers, or anything that is contrary to sound teaching as measured by the glorious good news of the blessed God" (I Timothy 1:8-11 pp)

Our traffic laws are man-made, yet we transgress them at our peril. But they are based on the principle of the divine Law - and of sound human reason - that you *"love your neighbour as yourself."* Incidentally, Jesus quoted this from the *Old Testament* - Leviticus 19:18. It is, therefore, pretty stupid to claim "the Law is done away." Again - there has to be a good reason for sensible Christians to make such a claim.

The Law Misused

The apostles, even in their day, encountered false teachings about the Law of God. Paul battled with those who saw it as the way to eternal life. Some wanted to force Christianity into the mould of a formal Judaism that had largely sunk into a legalistic blind obedience to a written law and its oral interpretation.

In Jerusalem, he confronted these men from "the sect

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of the Pharisees” who demanded that for salvation, converts must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:1-5). He understood that the true belief expressed from the beginning was based on God’s mercy and grace. Citing the faith of Abraham, he says to the Galatian Christians: “...*did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law - or by the hearing of faith?*” (Galatians 3:1-9 pp). No-one, he continues, can be justified - made right with God - by what we do.

As we’re told in the Old Testament book of Genesis: “*Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness*” (Genesis 15:6pp). Abraham - a man who comprehensively “*obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My law*” (Genesis 26:5) - was “saved by grace.” Indeed, as Hebrews 11 graphically explains, all God’s stalwarts, through time, lived out their lives *by faith* and *not* by their works.

The Mind of God

Only through that freely-given divine gift, the sacrifice of Jesus, is salvation possible. No one can enter God’s Kingdom by means of a life-time of good works or keeping of laws - divine or man-made. Only the sacrifice of our Saviour, individually applied in faith upon repentance, will suffice. By acceptance of that sacrifice, we become the children of God and embark on a life-time walk to perfection.

We were created to be in God’s image, to develop His mind - a mind which expresses itself as pure love of God and of neighbour. The Law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments, reflects the mind of God for humanity.

The incredible purpose God has for man of eternal life as sons and daughters of the Almighty God (II Corinthians 6:18) cannot be bought or earned by anything we do - not by keeping the Law, not by acts of mercy, not by self-denial. It is by grace we are saved and not by our works (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Elsewhere, (I Corinthians 13) Paul pinpoints the key ingredient: *love* - a heart that is being transformed into the divine image through willing submission to our Creator. God’s nature is love, and that’s the image into which He is shaping each of His children through life’s experience. As long as we are “in denial” regarding the Law of God, we are “carnal,” wrote Paul - i.e. devoid

of the Spirit of God: “...*the carnal mind is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the Law of God...*” (Romans 8:7f).

Lawless Christianity

Peter and John tackled the role of law, too - but from another angle. They illuminate the background of the modern mainstream Christian opposition to God’s Law.

John, towards the end of the first century, laid out his stall: “He who says “I know Him” and keeps not His commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him” (I John 2:4). Strong words. However you may understand “His commandments,” it’s clear from this that “grace” certainly isn’t enough!

John faced an overwhelming surge of gnostic philosophy that engulfed the entire civilized world and threatened the entire church of God. At the heart of this philosophy was the exaltation of the better, “spiritual”, side of human nature. The “immortal soul” in man, according to this philosophy, is innately good and doesn’t need to be informed by external guidance.

In the church, the notion led to a rejection of any constraint to obey the Laws of God as presented in the Old Testament. Christ, went the argument, has kept it for you. It was a slippery slope which led to an “anything goes” attitude to the faith.

But John was blunt. “*Sin,*” he said, “*is lawlessness*” (I John 3:4). And if you want to abide in Christ, then you do not commit sin, you are committed to a life of obedience to the divine Law. Indeed this lawless attitude is Satanic, he says (v.8). It’s the very attitude Jesus came to destroy.

Heretical Tradition

Peter warned of false teachers bringing “*destructive heresies*” into the church of God. They would, by their behavior, scorn the foundation principle that Jesus “owned” them (II Peter 2:1), that they were in effect His “slaves.”

They presumptuously assumed they could go beyond his teachings and add their own humanly-devised fables “as the Spirit led them.” As John commented: “*Whoever transgresses and doesn’t remain in*

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Christ's doctrine doesn't have God. He that remains in Christ's teachings has both the Father and the Son" (II John 1:9pp). Now that's a frightening thought! Yet most Christian denominations have substituted their own traditional beliefs for the teaching of Jesus.

Where Do You Stand?

What about *your* "Christian" practice? Where, for example, did Jesus authorize your "holy days?" James in his letter states that if we are breaking just one of God's Laws we're guilty of all and are thus lawless sinners. You may not be committing adultery—though many who claim to be Christians are. But what about the commandment which perhaps in God's eyes carries the most weight, the seventh-day Sabbath - the sign of the covenant He makes with His people?

Is it logic to pick and choose which commandment you will obey? Perhaps this is why the vast majority of Christians reject the Ten Commandments, but "voluntarily" bring back nine of them! Yet James - having just cited two of the divine commandments (v.11) - also warned that the only verifiable expression of our faith is our actions, our "*works*," how we live (James 2:17-26), and our willing submission to the divine Law.

By contrast, our "happy condition" as Christians is expressed by the inspired Psalmist: "*Happy is the man... [whose] delight is in the Law of God, and in His Law does he meditate day and night*" (Psalm 1).

(All Scripture references are KJV unless otherwise noted. [pp:paraphrased])

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