



The Christian's Rule of Life

One of the prominent privileges of the Christian's life is that he has spiritual freedom. He is no longer the servant of sin. He is not in bondage to the power of Satan. His conscience is not enslaved to manmade traditions or rituals. This freedom contrasts strikingly with the servile spirit which is to be found in other religions. It contrasts with the superstition which mars the customs of a large part of the human race and which holds people back from a grateful and joyful freedom of mind and heart.

A Christian's freedom is a prize bought dearly for him by the Cross of Christ and one which he should guard jealously. No freedom is so fruitful of good to the human personality as that which Christ bestows on all who are his devoted disciples and servants.

But no sooner do we discover our freedom in Christ than we become conscious that freedom is a privilege which can be easily abused. To put it into the words of the Apostle, the problem is to appreciate that we *'have been called unto liberty'*, yet we dare not use this liberty *'for an occasion to the flesh'* (Gal. 5:13). Liberty has its limits and freedom its boundaries.

The increased freedom from regulations which a Christian has over and above the freedom which an Old Testament saint had is a thing which brings both joy and also responsibility. A son who is come of age has greater freedom than he had in his minority, but he is also now expected to be more mature in the way he exercises his freedom. No good father allows his children to turn liberty into licence, and God is no exception. Even freedom has its wise and benign rules.

There is something however about the very word 'rule' which seems to threaten us and to cast a shadow over our joy. The spirit of cynicism deep in fallen man is apt to suggest to us that our freedom in Christ cannot be very 'free' if it is regulated by rules and laws after all. 'What can be free about a believer's freedom if it is bounded by rules at the same time?' This question has very often suggested itself to the minds of immature Christians and scoffers.

The answer is to pay closer attention to what is meant by 'freedom'. In a world where there was no God (if such a world could have existed) freedom might have meant living entirely as one pleased. For where there is no absolute standard of goodness or truth, everything is right and nothing false. That of course is the atheist's dream: to have a world without rules, laws or regulations, where he could do as he wished without fear of punishment or of a bad conscience. But a moment's reflection ought to show us that such a 'freedom' would be more terrible than a lifelong prison sentence.

The 'freedom' of men in a world without rule or law would be the 'freedom' of the jungle or of the deep sea, where the stronger devours the weaker and the larger feeds on the smaller. It would be a nightmarish existence. A world where there is no fear of punishment is a world where there is nothing but fear.

The term 'freedom' then ought not to be thought to imply absence of law but observance of law. Freedom begins when law is observed, not when it is abolished. I am free to travel about and live peacefully when I know that the law which protects me and my family will be respected by my neighbours and enforced against any would-be attackers.

So is the Christian in this world. He understands that his life is bounded on every hand by the good and benign laws of a holy and powerful God. The Ten Commandments are not a yoke of lead around our neck but a framework of blessedness and happiness as we live on earth. We could no

more live happily without the Ten Commandments than we could live safely without the law of gravitation. Just as gravity anchors us safely to our earthly home, so the Moral Law of God is designed to keep us from harming ourselves and others. The Moral Law is *'holy and just and good'* (Rom. 7: 1 2).

The only reason why 'rules' are felt to be a limitation of our freedom is because we misunderstand their true nature. They are given by God, not to restrict our freedom, but to define and safeguard it. The first three commandments give us freedom from false religion. The fourth gives us a free day in which to worship God and benefit our body and soul. The fifth commandment is designed to free us from authoritarian tyranny. The sixth defends our life. The seventh our chastity. The eighth our prosperity. The ninth our reputation. The tenth our secret thoughts.

The Ten Commandments are nothing if they are not bulwarks to protect us from the slavery and misery which sin in all its forms reduces men to whenever they attempt to live without law.

The way to look at God's Moral Law is to view it as the heaven-sent formula for happiness on earth. By this we do not mean that the Moral Law can give us salvation but that, once we are saved, it points us to the kind of life where everything good is to be found. *'Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them'* (Ps. 119:159).

The 'great peace' which believers who love God's law have flows to them as an inward reward from God for their delight in doing his will. This 'great peace' is that which gives to the believer his sense of freedom. The freedom is that of a soul filled with blessing and a felt enjoyment of God's love.

There are words of Christ's which make this point very clearly: *'He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him'* (John 14:21). If ever we felt the commandments of God to be a limiting of our freedom as Christians, surely we cannot do so any more when we understand these words of Christ!

The above promise of Christ to Christian believers is too precious to read over hastily. Our Lord is saying this: 'If you want to enjoy a felt sense of my love in your life you must as Christians show your love to me, your Saviour, by a careful keeping of my Moral Laws'. It is clear that the Ten Commandments have a most vital part to play, then, in a Christian's life. They are the path we should walk in, the air we should breathe, the element in which we are to live. To put it in one word, we should say that the Moral Law is the believer's rule of life. In the careful keeping unto Christ of the commandments there is *'great reward'* (Ps. 19:11).

The Holy Spirit given to every believer is the author of our graces and the nourisher of our spiritual life, but he is not the rule of our life. If we make the Spirit our rule of conduct we become a prey to every fleeting mood and every passing whim. 'Did I feel an urge to do this? It is the Spirit's prompting. I must obey.' 'Do I not feel led to go here or there. It is the leading of God which I must obey.' 'I felt a warm pulsation in my heart. I am being guided in such a way.'

In these and similar ways do Christians argue and reason when they make the Spirit their rule of life. Not that the Holy Spirit truly guides them to such decisions necessarily, but believers are apt to think so when they look to their inward feelings for a rule of life.

The Spirit's way of guiding us is not subjectively by our own feelings but objectively by the Bible. The Spirit points to the Word. Whatever exceptional experiences some great Christians may sometimes have, we must make the above our norm.

It is not legalism to seek to keep the Moral Law of God conscientiously, provided we keep it as unto Christ and out of love to him. *'If a man love me he will keep my words'* (John 14:23). *'If ye love me, keep my commandments'* (John 14:15). The misuse of a thing is no good argument against its proper use. That there are Pharisees who keep the Moral Law in a legalistic way is no reason why Christians should not keep the same Moral Law in a right spirit.

Our reasons for observing God's law as our rule of life are many. First, we are called on to do so by Christ in order to show the genuineness of our love for him. Secondly, the law is the pattern of love to our neighbour: *'Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law'* (Rom. 13:10). Thirdly, the Moral Law is the blue-print of Christian holiness:

'And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments ... He that saith he abideth in him ought himself so to walk as he walked.'

(1 John 2:3, 6)

Obedience is more than a courtesy. We owe God our whole-hearted devotion and submission. His laws oblige us to conform to his will as perfectly as we can. In practice this means that we ought to look at the Ten Commandments as the great standard of perfection to which we are to strive to conform. Our blessedness in time and eternity is related to our attitude to God's Moral Law. We are to run towards it as toward the *'mark'* (Phil. 3:14). However much we discover within our sluggish hearts of reluctance to obey the Moral Law, we are to cry out to God for more grace to love it and to keep it. Even the great Apostle Paul at the height of his powers did so: *'I delight in the law of God after the inward man; But I see another law in my members warring against the law of my mind...'* (Rom. 7:22-23).

The Christian regards the Ten Commandments as God's *'perfect'* rule (Ps. 19:7). So long as we are in this body we shall sadly come short of a perfect conformity to its demands. But we do not thereby despair or give up our endeavour to keep the Law ever *more perfectly* than we did in the past.

Obedience to God is not aiming at some arbitrary target of our own making but a striving to do what he has commanded. It is the labour of a life-time to get the commandments written on our renewed hearts translated into flesh-and-blood examples of that mature obedience which the Moral Law of God requires.

To assist us in this great task God has given us his Holy Spirit, with whom we are to cooperate with all our might and main.

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