

Christian Freedom

(An Every-Verse Method study)

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(All Bible quotes from the NASB, unless otherwise noted)

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“You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophecy of you saying,
This people honors me with their lips,
But their heart is far away from Me.
But in vain do they worship Me,
Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.” (**Matthew 15:7-9**)

These were the words of Jesus as He responded to the Pharisees, a sect of elite religious leaders in His day. They had just accused Him and His disciples of sinning by not washing their hands before eating. Knowing that the Scriptures (which we now call the Old Testament) promoted no such rule, Jesus used the last line of this quote to accuse the Pharisees of favoring man-made religious rules over the laws of God recorded in the Scriptures.

Jesus’ accusation would have been of little significance had the Pharisees taken the Scriptures lightly. Had that been the case, the Pharisees might have responded by saying that the Scriptures were of little importance, because God spoke directly through their leaders. In reality, however, the Pharisees were obsessed with the Scriptures. They believed them to be the authoritative word of God, and they claimed total adherence to them. When Jesus alerted the Pharisees to their hypocrisy of favoring man-made religious rules over the Scriptures they cherished, they were furious.

The Origin of Man-Made Religious Rules

As we look back upon this encounter, we wonder how the Pharisees could have opposed God's will despite their love for the Scriptures. Most of us think that the Pharisees were just a bunch of silly Jews, hell-bent on evil, feeling nothing but hatred for God. And we think that if we had been in Judea during the time of Jesus' ministry, we would have been nothing like the Pharisees and forsaken their man-made rules in favor of Jesus' truth.

Before we write off the Pharisees as a group of people with which we have nothing in common, let's take a closer look at their situation. First, let's examine how the man-made sin of eating with unwashed hands originated.

Did one Pharisee say to the other, "Hey, let's do something evil that will make God angry?"

And then the other Pharisee replied, "I got an idea. Let's create a rule requiring the washing of hands before eating and tell people that they sin against God by not following it. That will really make God mad!"

It's unlikely that this rule was created with these intentions. These man-made rules came about in an entirely different manner.

The belief that it was a sin to eat with unwashed hands (as well as other man-made beliefs) had developed between the time of the Babylonian exile (586 B.C.) and the time of Jesus (4-6 B.C. – A.D. 29).

Prior to the Babylonian exile, God had trouble keeping the horses in the barn, as the Israelites continually ran away from Him to pursue other gods—a direct violation of the First Commandment, which prohibited the worship of any god other than God himself. God then used the Babylonians to discipline the Jews by conquering their land (then called *Judah*) and sending them into exile for approximately 70 years. After the 70 years were completed, God had Cyrus, king of Persia, conquer Babylon and return the Jews to their homeland.

The Jews learned their lesson. Over time, groups like the Pharisees formed and determined that they would do everything within their power to keep God's anger from crushing Judah (called *Judea* in Jesus' day) again. The Pharisees hated sin and hoped to

eliminate it. They not only opposed sinful behavior, but they ultimately developed new rules to keep people from coming anywhere close to it.

One of the sins they sought to avoid was that of eating unclean animals. God had declared through the law given by Moses (approx. 1400-1500 B.C.) that certain circumstances made people unclean for religious ceremonies and that certain animals were unclean and could not be eaten. Since the Pharisees wanted to play it safe and keep people as far away from committing this sin as possible, they created a rule requiring the washing of hands before eating.

The Pharisees were aware of the possibility that a person's hands might touch an object, such as a piece of wood, that an unclean animal might have brushed against at an earlier time, leaving dead skin, hair, blood, etc. on it; and through the touching of the object, these elements might attach to the person's hand. While eating, these elements then passed from hand to food to mouth, so that upon consumption of the food, elements from an unclean animal would be ingested, thus breaking God's law prohibiting the eating of unclean animals. By washing hands before eating, the possibility of unintentionally ingesting unclean animal residue that resided on one's fingertips was eliminated, and the breaking of God's law avoided.

The Pharisees wanted to absolutely eliminate any possibility of even the most insignificant sin being committed. They were just like many modern-day devout Christians—totally committed to the avoidance of doing anything that might offend God.

I'm sure the Pharisees, who were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, had expected to receive a congratulatory pat on the back from Him for extending the law to ensure that God's people came nowhere near committing sin. After all, God is always in favor of more rules, right? The more we can't do, the happier He is!

Wrong.

Jesus informed the Pharisees that they were acting in opposition to God's will when they preached that eating with unwashed hands was a sin. In fact, Jesus and His disciples openly and publicly broke this man-made religious rule. This wasn't the only man-made doctrine that Jesus publicly violated. Jesus healed on the Sabbath day—a day in which doing any significant amount of work was forbidden (Mark 3:1-6). He picked grain while walking through a field on the Sabbath day (Mark 2:23-28). He drank wine

and was accused of being a drunkard for it (Luke 7:34). He and His disciples did not fast during His ministry (Matthew 9:14-15); so the Pharisees, who fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12), accused Jesus of being a glutton for not fasting, and possibly for attending feasts (Luke 7:34). And Jesus ate with people who were known to be sinful, in a society where eating with someone was a sign of friendship and where the righteous were not to befriend the sinful (Luke 15:1-7). The Pharisees opposed Jesus in all these things, because He violated their man-made religious rules.

There's no doubt about it—Jesus hated man-made religious rules. He went out of His way to challenge them. He wanted us to be free of unnecessary religious restrictions. He even said of the Pharisees, “They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them [**Matthew 23:4**].” These heavy loads of which Jesus spoke were not physically heavy. It was not as if the Pharisees ran construction crews and made people carry large loads of bricks. Jesus was speaking of the spiritual burden imposed by the Pharisees: so many unbearable rules that even the Pharisees themselves could not adhere to them. That’s one of the reasons Jesus called them hypocrites.

God’s opposition to the burden of man-made rules

Why would God, whom Jesus represented when He spoke, want to limit the number of rules we have to follow? Why is God so offended when we add more rules to His rules? **Matthew 23:13-14** gives us the answer: “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.” (NRSV)

How could it be that these Pharisees, who tried to keep everyone from doing anything that might have led to sin, were actually keeping people out of the kingdom of heaven?

Is it because they told people to follow the laws that God gave through Moses? No, these laws were required by God.

Is it because the Pharisees taught legalism (some Protestants define *legalism* as trying to earn one’s own salvation by doing the works of the law rather than by placing

faith in Christ)? No, legalism was the only option at the time, because Jesus had not yet made His sacrifice on the cross when He made this statement.

Here's how the Pharisees locked people out of heaven: the Pharisees' numerous man-made rules created such a burden on the worshipers of God that they drove God's people away from Him and distracted them from performing His will.

That's a thought we Christians rarely have today. It's worth repeating: man-made religious rules drive us away from God and distract us from doing His will.

How do they drive us away from God? By making the Christian life unrealistically difficult. Christianity is tough enough to follow as it is. Biblical rules are hard to obey, because we must control our selfish desires so as not to harm others. How many people fail to follow Christ because the man-made rules added to Christianity make the Christian life twice as difficult as it has to be? I've known numerous people who have refused to even consider becoming a Christian because of a non-biblical rule or belief that they thought they would have to adhere to if they converted.

How many others follow Christ, but leave the Church after collapsing under the weight of man-made rules imposed by Christian leaders? I've known Christians to leave due to their church's restraints on who they could associate with, or what kind of music they could listen to, or where they could go on Friday night, etc.

How do man-made religious rules distract us from doing God's will? They divert our mental and physical energy away from it. Every minute that a preacher spends proclaiming a non-biblical rule is a minute that could be used to proclaim the will of God. Every ounce of effort devoted to obeying man-made religious rules is an ounce of effort that could be devoted to serving the will of God. Christians who focus on these non-biblical rules think they are doing right before God when, in reality, they have no idea how far from God's will their behavior really is.

Many Christians are distracted from doing God's will, because they've been driven into deep spiritual depression. I know this from my own experiences.

Why was I so depressed?

Because, I felt enormous guilt for not being able to live up to the standards of the church.

What I didn't know then, but know now, is that those rules that oppressed my soul were man-made! I would have loved and served God, rather than resenting and turning away from Him, if only I had known the freedom that God intended for me.

When we add man-made rules to God's rules and promote those rules as God's law, we imitate the Pharisees. We, too, become guilty of locking people out of the kingdom of heaven. We keep people from ever considering the faith, drive out those who attend our churches; and for those who stay in the church, we minimize their effectiveness by distracting them from the biblical will of God.

The Greatest Commandment

What is the biblical will of God? To provide a thorough answer to this question, I'd have to quote every law and instruction in the Bible, and that would take up quite a bit of space. Fortunately, Jesus summed it up in **Matthew 22:34-40**: "But when the Pharisees heard that He [Jesus] had put the Sadducees to silence, they gathered themselves together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?' And He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole law and the Prophets.'"

The first commandment, to love God with all your heart, is fairly simple to apply to daily life. It requires few actions, but does require us to be fully committed to Him and only Him—to love Him, adore Him, admire Him, etc. The actions resulting from our love for God are worship, prayer, and taking time to appreciate all that He has done for us and has done in the universe.

The second commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself, is where most of the rules come into play. (Notice that Jesus volunteered this commandment, even though the lawyer had not asked Him for the *two* greatest commandments. Jesus did this because it's every bit as important as the first one). God created a human race that He loves. He hates it when we cause each other to suffer. That's why Jesus says, in **Matthew 25:40**, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the

least of them, you did it to Me,” and in **verse 45**, He says, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.” When we love others, we love God; when we hurt others, we offend God.

God originally desired for us a society of love and happiness. If all people obeyed every biblical law perfectly, we would never suffer from the actions of others, and life would be great. Even God’s sex and marriage laws exist for the purpose of protecting others from the harmful effects of our selfishness. If all people obeyed them perfectly, none of us would contract sexually transmitted diseases, single mothers wouldn’t struggle to raise their children by themselves, men wouldn’t be forced to pay child support for kids they rarely get to see, and children wouldn’t grow up lacking family support. Many life-ruining events result from our disobedience to God’s sex and marriage laws, and God wishes to spare us from these painful experiences. Contrary to what some Christians have said, God didn’t create AIDS to punish homosexuals; He prohibited homosexual sex so that nobody would get AIDS!

The most remarkable verse of Jesus’ quote is the last one, “On these two commandments depend the whole law and the Prophets.” Jesus meant that all the rules in the Bible, from the Old Testament law, to the sayings of the prophets, to the quotes from Jesus, to the letters of the Apostles, exist solely for the purpose of protecting our fellow humans from any harm that we might bring their way, or exist for the purpose of loving God. Jesus omits the third option here: that God makes pointless rules because He’s a picky, demanding, selfish god who doesn’t care how much we have to suffer to make Him happy.

Every rule from God serves a practical purpose. We are not required to follow pointless, oppressive rules as a means of proving to God that we are worthy of His forgiveness. The people of the Old Testament had to do that, as they were required to follow numerous ritualistic rules in order to atone for sins. These rules were often tedious, but they were necessary in earning forgiveness from God. Fortunately for us, atonement rituals are unnecessary, since Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross atones for our sins if we believe in Him. Therefore, every rule from God exists so that we may love Him and love others as we love ourselves.

The Greatest Commandment is not an isolated verse like those that often lead us astray when taken out of biblical context. It appears eight times in the Bible. Here are the remaining seven:

Mark 12:28-31, “And one of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, ‘What commandment is the foremost of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The foremost is, Hear, O Israel! The Lord your God is one Lord; 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. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.’”

Context: The scribe responds by agreeing with Jesus and stating that loving God and others is far greater than observing such routines as offering sacrifices. We cannot be certain whether this discussion is the same one recorded in Matthew 22.

Luke 10:25-29, “And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, ‘Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ And He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? How does it read to you?’ And he answered and said, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ And He said to him, ‘You have answered correctly, do this and you will live.’ But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”

Context: This quote is sandwiched between the story of Jesus sending out 70 people to spread the Gospel and the parable of the Good Samaritan. It appears to describe a third instance in which Jesus emphasizes the Greatest Commandment.

Analysis: Jesus ties the Greatest Commandment to salvation, because it represents the core of the Christian life. If we fail to love God and others, we are probably not saved.

Leviticus 19:17-18, “You shall not hate your fellow countrymen in your heart; you shall surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall

not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people. But you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord.”

Context: These verses are included in a listing of miscellaneous laws.

Analysis: This is the Bible’s original “love your neighbor” verse. Notice that the first line addresses hatred in one’s heart and that these verses do not promote tedious rules as a way of loving others.

Matthew 7:12, “Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the law and the Prophets.”

Context: This quote is from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. It follows His statement that God will give good things to those who ask Him.

Analysis: Here Jesus encourages us to imagine ourselves in the place of others. When we do so, we place the interests of others on the same level as our own, and thus love our neighbors as ourselves.

Romans 13:8, “Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, ‘You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law.”

Context: The verses leading up to these address obedience to the government, and the verses that follow create a sense of urgency for the Roman believers.

Analysis: Jesus’ claim that the law and the prophets were summed up in loving God and others was no misprint or misinterpretation. In these verses, the Apostle Paul supports the same concept. The Apostles never indicate that the law exists for any other purpose or for no purpose at all.

Galatians 5:13-15, “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love, serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You shall love your neighbor as

yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another.”

Context: In this chapter, Paul addresses the issue of circumcision as well as the quarreling among the church members over it.

Analysis: Paul probably omitted the purpose of loving God here, because so few laws specifically address it.

Almost all laws address our relationships with each other. Paul made it clear to the Galatians that the laws exist for the primary purpose of loving others. In other words, the “whole law”—every law—exists for one another’s benefit.

Knowing that the entire law is to make us love our *neighbors* as ourselves, we can conclude that this law is created for our well-being, not for God’s. So the principle that Jesus applies to the Sabbath when He says, “...The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath [**Mark 2:27-28**],” applies to the entire law. When Jesus said this, He was correcting the Pharisees’ erroneous belief that the purpose of the Sabbath was to make us sacrifice our freedom to please God.

Jesus lends further support to this theology in **Matthew 12:7-8**, when He says to the Pharisees regarding the Sabbath, “But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire compassion, not sacrifice....’” Again, God wasn’t looking for us to “sacrifice” our enjoyment, freedom, etc. by observing strict Sabbath rules. Rather, He created the Sabbath out of His “compassion” for us.

This can be said of all of God’s law. God takes no pleasure in limiting our activities. He takes offense, however, when we hurt each other. Obedience to the law benefits God in that He is pleased when we forsake selfish desires in order to ease or prevent the suffering of others.

There’s a reason that Jesus refers to God as our “Father.” Just like any caring parent, He wants His children to treat each other well and to have a loving relationship with Him. The purpose of the law is really that simple.

James 2:8, “If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well.”

Context: James warns Christians against favoring the rich over the poor.

Analysis: James lends additional biblical support to the Greatest Commandment. But like Paul, he does not mention loving “God with all of your heart” since nearly all laws address our relationships with others.

Having to worry about nothing more than loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves, we are now free from the burdens and distractions of man-made religious laws, thanks to Jesus. As we encounter man-made rules throughout this book, ask yourself how they result in better loving our neighbors. I assure you that you will not find one man-made Christian rule, practice, or belief that is designed to love or protect other people. Man-made rules serve no other purpose than to distract us from God’s will and drive us away from Him completely.

Freedom in Christ

We often hear Christians use the phrase *freedom in Christ*, but not to speak of the freedoms we have examined thus far: the freedom from having to obey man-made laws and the freedom from the ill effects of each other’s sins. Instead, they refer to either freedom from sin or freedom from the law. That’s because the word *freedom* is most often used in the New Testament to describe these aspects of the Christian life. Using the Every-Verse Method, let’s examine the concept of freedom (sometimes translated as “liberty”) in Christ as it occurs throughout the New Testament.

Matthew 11:28-30, “Come to Me all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my load is light.”

Context: This quote appears to be unrelated to the preceding passage directed toward unrepentant cities or to the Sabbath day issues which follow.

Analysis: Just as the burdens imposed by the Pharisees were not physical but spiritual, the rest which Jesus promises is spiritual as well. He is not offering freedom from manual labor, nor is He promising rest in heaven. His easy yoke is one which is free of man-made religious rules.

Luke 4:18, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden.”

Context: Jesus opens a speech in a synagogue with a quote from Isaiah, the prophet, and uses this verse to speak of Himself as He says, “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Analysis: “To set free those who are downtrodden” cannot refer to monetary oppression or slavery, since Jesus’ ministry was not an economic one. When an economically impoverished person becomes a Christian, their poverty does not disappear. The freedom here has to be spiritual.

John 8:31-36, “Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. And the slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. If, therefore, the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.’”

Context: Jesus addresses Jews who had not believed Him and who questioned how He could make them free when they had never been slaves.

Analysis: This is the first Bible verse in which Jesus speaks of freedom from sin. God’s rules are not only for the sake of those we may hurt, but some are for our own good, as well. We all know the destructive power of addictions, but other sins, like pride, vengeance, and overall selfishness also diminish our freedom. In Christ, we are free from being controlled by sin, because we are now controlled by the Holy Spirit, who we receive as believers in Jesus.

Acts 15:28-29, “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourself free from these things, you will do well.”

Context: As the Apostles meet at the Council of Jerusalem, they decide to avoid laying unnecessary burdens upon the Gentile (non-Jewish) converts. The greatest of these is circumcision, which had been required for the Jews since the days of Abraham.

Analysis: Here the Holy Spirit frees the Gentile converts from pointless man-made rules, and He even frees them from having to be circumcised, as the Old Testament required. The only acts forbidden in this quote were the worship service rituals of the Greco-Roman religion from which the Gentile believers had converted. The Gentile Christians were given this freedom for the sake of growing the church. Had circumcision been required, Christianity may not have spread as successfully as it did throughout the Roman Empire.

Romans 6:7, "...for he who has died is free from sin."

Romans 6:18, "And having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness."

Romans 6:22, "But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life."

Context: The Apostle Paul describes how Christians are to die to sin and live for Christ.

Analysis: A few verses later, in **verse 14**, Paul summarizes by stating, "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace." Sin is not to control us. God is.

Romans 8:2, "For the law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death."

Context: The Apostle Paul explains the difference between being under the law and under control of the flesh, versus living life through the Holy Spirit and through the grace of Christ.

Analysis: This is the first Bible verse that speaks of freedom from the law. We are free from having to live up to the impossible standards of the Old Testament law, which no person can perfectly obey. Therefore, we are justified by believing in Jesus rather than by earning points before God through obedience to the law.

1 Corinthians 8:9, "But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak."

Context: Paul addresses a church controversy regarding the eating of meat that had been offered in sacrificial ceremonies to Roman or Greek gods.

Analysis: This verse implies that Paul (and perhaps other Apostles) had been preaching a message of freedom from man-made rules. This freedom was apparently extended to defy the command in Acts 15:28-29 (see above) to abstain from meat that had been sacrificed to idols. A problem resulted, which I will explore in the *Alcohol* study.

1 Corinthians 10:28-30, “But if anyone should say to you, ‘This meat is sacrificed to idols,’ do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience’ sake; I mean not your own conscience, but the other man’s, for why is my freedom judged by another’s conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks?”

Context: Once again, Paul discusses meat offered to idols.

Analysis: Apparently, some Christians were slandering others who ate meat that had been offered to idols. Paul argues that nobody has the right to pass judgment on another person’s freedom.

2 Corinthians 3:15-17, “But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”

Context: Paul again compares the letter of the law given through Moses in the Old Testament to the grace of the new covenant given through Jesus Christ.

Analysis: The liberty to which Paul refers is our freedom from having to live or die by the letter of the Mosaic Law, now that we are covered by Christ’s sacrifice and the grace that goes with it.

Galatians 2:4, “But it was because of the false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage.”

Context: Paul describes his involvement in the council at Jerusalem in which the Apostles decided that Gentile (non-Jewish) converts could remain uncircumcised upon becoming Christians.

Analysis: The liberty to which Paul refers is the freedom from the ritual of circumcision that had subjected the Jews to the letter of the Old Testament law. Under Christ, this ritual no longer needed to be followed, because Jesus brought about a new covenant, the sign of which was baptism rather than circumcision.

Galatians 5:1, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.”

Context: Paul continues to address the circumcision issue.

Analysis: Paul promotes freedom as a central theme in Christianity. It’s one of the main reasons Christ came to earth. According to this verse, Christ not only set us free, but He came to earth with the intent to do so. He set us free for no other reason than that God desires to us to be free. Thanks to this freedom, we no longer need to obsess over every little possibility that we might sin. The Old Testament law still applies to us (“How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” **Romans 6:2**), but we no longer have to be perfect in it to be saved from God’s wrath on Judgment Day. The Jews, who were under the burden of the Old Testament law, had to worry over such things. That’s why the Pharisees added so many man-made rules to God’s law. But we are free from the bondage of the man-made rules, thanks to Jesus.

James 1:25, “But the one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become an effectual hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does.”

Context: James calls Christians to perform God’s will and not merely listen to good preaching.

Analysis: The “perfect law, the law of liberty” is consistent with Paul’s theology of being free from the law through Christ.

Hebrews 2:14-15, “Since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver [‘free’ in the NRSV] those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all of their lives.”

Context: The writer explains how Jesus was rendered lower than angels by coming to earth and then became our high priest, “to make propitiation for the sins of the people [verse 17].”

Analysis: What does it mean to be “subject to slavery” due to “fear of death?” Since everybody on earth dies sooner or later, this verse cannot address death on earth. It can only address eternal death. How are we then “subject to slavery” by fearing eternal death? We are enslaved by barely being able to move without chancing sin. **James 2:10** says, “Whoever keeps the whole law yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.” And we know from **Romans 6:23** that “the wages of sin is death.” So if committing one sin leads to eternal death, then anyone aspiring to eternal life must be paralyzed with fear, knowing that they can’t screw up even once. But thanks to Jesus bearing that punishment for us through His death on the cross, our sins no longer bring about eternal death if we believe in Him. Since that is the case, we no longer have to fear sin and no longer have to follow man-made rules designed to keep us from sin.

1 Peter 2:16, “Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God.”

Context: Peter urges Christians to submit to the authority of the government and to others who hold earthly authority over them.

Analysis: Even though Christians are free from man-made religious rules, they are still to obey the government and other earthly authority in order to set a good example.

The Four Fundamental Freedoms

Now that we have reviewed the Bible’s freedom verses, as well as Jesus’ sayings and actions, we can look back and find the *Four Fundamental Freedoms of the Christian Faith*:

1. Freedom from sin's control
2. Freedom from the ill effects of each other's sins
3. Freedom from fear of breaking the law
4. Freedom from man-made religious rules

Most theologically conservative Christians (those who hold to traditional beliefs) understand the concept of freedom from sin's control. It means that the Holy Spirit enables us to obey God rather than obey our sinful desires. Where Christians often falter is in the application of being free from the law, and understandably so. At first glance, being free from the law appears to mean that we no longer have to obey the law and are free to do what we want. Of course, this interpretation is contrary to the rest of the Bible, and it is especially contrary to the concept of being free from sin, since the definition of sin is "breaking God's law." Thanks to this apparent contradiction, many Christians ignore the concept of being free from the law and focus only on the concept of being free from sin. They then use "freedom from sin" as a reason to enforce man-made Christian rules.

The proper approach for Christians is to fully enjoy both freedom from sin and freedom from fear of the law. How does this look in everyday life? Since we are guided by the Holy Spirit and not governed by sin (Freedom #1), we do our best to avoid breaking the laws of the Bible. When we obey biblical law, we free others from the harmful impact of our sins (Freedom #2), as Jesus implied when discussing The Greatest Commandment. But since we no longer have to fear breaking the law (Freedom #3), thanks to the grace we have received through Christ, we are free from having to follow man-made rules designed to keep us from breaking it (Freedom #4).

The Freedom Defeaters

If most of us Bible-believing Christians are familiar with stories of Jesus' opposition to man-made religious rules, why do we continue to embrace these rules rather than enjoy our freedom in Christ? There's no single answer to that question, but I'm about to share with you four reasons why Bible-believers deny themselves and others the freedom that God intended for us. I call them the *Freedom Defeaters*.

Sin-preventionisms

Sin-preventionisms are man-made religious rules designed to keep people from sinning. A sin-preventionism results from turning something that is not a sin into a sin in order to prevent a sin. Their enforcers claim that these man-made religious rules are from God, and they claim that anyone disobeying these rules sins against God.

The Pharisees' law requiring the washing of hands before eating was a sin-preventionism. It was designed to keep people from breaking the law that disallowed the eating of unclean foods. Their Sabbath day laws limiting how far a person could walk or how much a person could carry ("It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet," said the Jews in **John 5:10**) were also sin-preventionisms. They were designed to keep people from breaking the Sabbath day commandment.

As I stated earlier, Jesus had no regard for the sin-preventionisms of the Pharisees. He broke them in plain view of everyone and criticized the Pharisees for "teaching as doctrines the precepts of men [**Matthew 15:9**]." Jesus' opposition to sin-preventionisms conflicts with the attitudes of most Bible-believing Christians today. We believe that any act that might somehow lead to sin is forbidden. If drinking a drop of alcohol might somehow lead a person to become a drunk, it is forbidden for everyone. If listening to a certain song might somehow lead a person to think an evil thought, it is forbidden for everyone.

To most of us, sin-preventionisms make sense. Sinning is bad; therefore, we conclude that anything that might lead to sin is bad. I would have to agree with this way of thinking, if it weren't for Jesus' opposition to it. His teachings and examples show us that God thinks differently than we do, because, unlike many Christians, God hates sin-preventionisms.

Why does God oppose sin-preventionisms?

One reason is that *they don't prevent sin*. We assume that we know exactly which acts and thoughts will lead us to sin when, in reality, only God understands such things perfectly. We Christians commit sins every day, even when we obey sin-preventionisms. Not only do we commit sins like arrogance and judgmentalism, for which there are no sin-preventionisms, but some of us commit sins of sex, violence, and greed, despite having followed the sin-preventionisms as instructed. The Pharisees are biblical proof

that perfect obedience to sin-preventionisms fails to prevent sinful behavior and sinful hearts.

The other reason God hates sin-preventionisms is that He wants us to be free from the fear of sinning and from pointless suffering(as we discussed previously), so we need not imprison ourselves by adding rules to God's rules to prevent sin.

Why does God want us to be free?

Because He loves us! That's why.

How amazing is it that God loves us so much that He hates to see us weighed down with an overabundance of oppressive rules? Why do we still think, even if it is in the back of our minds, that God is happy when we are unhappy, that God likes to see us suffer out of our fear of sinning, or that He wants us to suffer to prove our worth? It is the other religions of the world which oppress their people with pointless man-made rules. Christianity is so much better than that!

God is indeed a loving Father who wants His children to be happy. No good father cares about himself more than he cares about his children. Likewise, God created the law not out of His selfishness, but out of His selflessness. When He made the rules, He made them to protect His children from harming one another or from ruining themselves. He did not make the rules so that His children would suffer to please Him. Isn't this purpose of the law what we should expect from a God who made a personal sacrifice on the cross so that His children may have eternal life? God's nature is consistent! In everything He does, He places our well-being ahead of His!

Measurable Sins/Sin-Boundaries

A measurable sin is the breaking of any law that can be measured or the crossing of any boundary that is not to be crossed. Unlike sin-preventionisms, which are unbiblical, the Bible contains some measurable sins. For example, the sin of stealing is measurable. We can measure the quantity that has been stolen, and we can count how many times the sin occurred. We can, in most cases, draw a boundary that, if crossed, transforms a person from being a law-abiding citizen into a law-breaking thief. In other words, you either steal or you don't steal. There is no grey area (in reality, there are some grey areas, like borrowing and forgetting to return).

Almost every world religion has measurable sins, and every country has laws in which the crossing of certain boundaries is forbidden. What makes Christianity so special, however, is that its laws tend to be immeasurable. They address the intentions of our hearts. The first occurrence of an immeasurable law in the Bible is the 10th Commandment, “You shall not covet...” The Bible later shows that God also hates such immeasurable sins as arrogance, jealousy, hatred, and gluttony. With these sins, it is impossible to set a sin boundary. For example, we can’t count how many arrogances and jealousies we commit in a day.

Immeasurable biblical sins tend to frustrate us, because many of us desire to be perfect before God in our deeds and want to have the ability to identify our sins and then eliminate them, a goal that’s more easily accomplished when our sins have well-defined boundaries. However, God didn’t make it that easy. He is most concerned with the intentions of our hearts, from which all sorts of evil originate. But rather than focus on the difficult task of overcoming these sins of the heart, we focus on the much easier task of eliminating man-made sins that have clear-cut boundaries.

Just as Jesus’ opponents, the Pharisees, were guilty of creating sin-preventionisms, they were also guilty of dwelling on measurable sins while ignoring the sins of the heart. Jesus said to the Pharisees in **Matthew 23:23**, “...you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness....”

These weightier matters of which Jesus spoke are hard to measure. The Pharisees excelled at performing measurable duties like tithing and fasting, but they failed miserably at obeying these weightier immeasurable matters of the law. How similar are we to the Pharisees in this regard? Isn’t it a lot easier for us to follow a bunch of rules than it is to change our behavior and attitudes? We can just put our minds and souls on cruise-control and follow the same old routine, while having cold hearts toward others, as the Pharisees did.

Penitent Deeds

God has given us great freedom in this life that many people find hard to accept. Other religions of the world heap loads of strict, pointless rules upon the shoulders of

their members. These rules often make little sense, but most people feel that the more they restrict their activities, the more pleasing they are to their gods. They have to avoid enjoyment as a way of punishing themselves for their sins, so their gods will lessen the severity of their impending judgment. They don't have a savior to bear that punishment for them as we have in Jesus Christ.

Thanks to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, in which He bore God's wrath for our sins, we don't have to make pointless sacrifices to please or appease God. To be justified in His sight, we only have to repent (through Christ) of our sins. Any sacrifices we make to please God don't count, because they are overshadowed and nullified by Jesus' perfect sacrifice. If we make the sacrifice of abstaining from something good, we are no more pleasing to God than if we enjoy it.

Unfortunately, the chains that bind the believers of other religions have found their way into conservative Protestant Christianity. Even though we Protestants claim not to believe in penance as Roman Catholics do, we often find ourselves practicing our own form of penance: not one where we have to inflict punishment upon ourselves to appease God, but a penance in which we deny ourselves a non-sinful pleasure or make up a new rule in order to please Him. It's as though the Roman Catholics give themselves spankings, while we Protestants make ourselves go to bed without dinner. We don't have to go without *anything* to please God. That's not to say that we can't replace a pleasure in our lives with an activity that serves Him. For example, we can spend less time watching sports and more time helping those in need. But for us to give up watching sports, just for the sake of giving it up, is of no value to God.

It's sad to see people who have a great love for God try to please Him by creating more restrictions for themselves, and thus, place heavier shackles on their souls. They simply have the unbiblical idea that the more rules they follow, the happier God is. They fail to realize that they can do nothing to further please Him, because Christ did it all for them on the cross. What's even worse is when those in ministry promote man-made religious rules, so that their followers are robbed of the freedoms that God intended for them out of His love. In addition to that, non-Christians see us pointlessly denying ourselves good things, so they refuse to give Christianity a chance, because they want to avoid such self-imposed suffering.

Wearing the Christian Uniform

Imagine an army that neither defends nor helps anyone, an army in which each soldier does nothing but recruit other members; and once they succeed in bringing in a recruit, they dress him in an army uniform and make him a full-time recruiter, too. I can't help but liken some forms of Evangelical Christianity (which focuses primarily on recruiting new Christians) to an army consisting only of recruiters. I fully support bringing people into the flock. I am not opposed to evangelism. It's the uniform that new recruits are told to wear that concerns me.

Many Evangelicals believe that once a person becomes a Christian, they have to look like a Christian—they have to wear the Christian uniform; and since the new recruit is *born again*, that is, starting a new life in Christ, his or her new life must result in a new lifestyle. While repenting of sins and having a changed heart are biblical requirements for a new believer, many new believers are forced to go beyond that and follow new rules and routines not required by the Bible. It's as though their entire daily existence must change as evidence of their new life in Christ—they must look different than the rest of the world.

As I have opposed man-made Christian rules over the years by demonstrating that they are unbiblical, numerous conservative Protestants have opposed my view by arguing, “Christians are supposed to be set apart. If we don't follow these rules, we will look just like the rest of the world.” Their argument, however, couldn't be more incorrect. Plenty of biblical rules will set us apart from everyone else if we obey them. These rules are not pointless restrictions, like the man-made rules. Rather, they are intended by God to ensure that we love Him and love our fellow human beings. When we follow pointless man-made religious rules, that's when we look like the rest of the world's religions who do the same.

The belief that we need to wear the Christian uniform is not only a common modern-day misconception among God's people, it was a common misconception during Jesus' time, too. In **Matthew 23:27-28**, Jesus exposed the Pharisees by saying, “You are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so, you too outwardly appear righteous to

men, but inwardly, you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” While this verse does not detail exactly what it was the Pharisees were doing, it’s clear that they were following man-made rules and practices that made them appear righteous to others. Meanwhile, they failed live the life God required. Like some of today’s Christians, they might have argued, “If we don’t follow these (man-made) rules, we will look just like the rest of the world.” But God wasn’t concerned about whether or not they *looked* righteous to outsiders. He was concerned about whether or not they *actually were* righteous on the inside.

When we let the Freedom Defeaters control our lives and the lives of others, we create a barrier between God and His children. Like many Christians, I used to think to myself, “The only reason I’m a Christian is so I don’t go to hell. If it weren’t for that, I wouldn’t adhere to all of these unbearable rules.” In those days, I loved God because I was afraid of what would happen if I didn’t. And that’s not true love.

Today, now that I know how God puts our needs ahead of His, I love God because I love what He’s all about. I’m a Christian because I think Christianity is the most beautiful religion in the world. I don’t live a biblical lifestyle out of a selfish fear of where I’ll spend eternity; I live it out of a desire for a loving relationship with God and others, and to make life better for everyone involved.