

Using the Law to Motivate Christians

by Rene Brown

In thousands of churches all over the world, virtually every Sunday, Christians are subjected to more rules, laws, do's and don'ts, should do and should not do lists. Even when such things as "you should not do this" or "you should do this" are never mentioned, it is implied. At one time or another, almost every preacher or teacher of the bible has done this. It seems so right, so correct to tell people what they must do to live the Christian life. Or to hold up standards they should try for. Or how much bible reading or prayer is the minimum for the serious Christian. What is wrong with this picture?

Basically, what they are doing is trying to tell people how to live the Christian life by improving their performance. Every Sunday, a performance based Christianity is preached all over the world. Unfortunately, they are trying to improve the flesh - that is, get the self- life to come into line so our Christian life can line up with the scriptures. Unfortunately, Paul clearly tells us in Romans that nothing good dwells in our flesh. You can do all sorts of things to make the flesh look better, perform better. You can develop a top quality flesh life and finally that is all you have: flesh life or self-life. It will never have the life of Jesus in it.

Rom 7:18-19 (RSV) "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Paul admits in this verse what most of us already know also: ".....I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." It is like trying to swim upstream against a very fast current. We will try very hard but never make any progress and finally we just wear ourselves out completely.

Here is the reason it will never work: Rom 7:5 (NKJV) "For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death." The law (any law or rule or standard) arouses sinful passions. A good example may be seen in a small child. Without any teaching, if a small child of say age 2 - 4 years is told "Do not touch that object or vase or book or something!" and you leave the child alone but observe where you cannot be seen, the child will wait a minute, look to see if you are indeed gone, and then he will immediately reach out his little hand to see what touching it feels like. He cannot resist. His "sinful passions" are aroused by the rule - not deterred as you might hope.

Another scripture to go with the above on in Romans is 1Cor 15:56 (RSV) "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law." In spite of such scriptures with obvious meaning, we continue in the body of Christ to teach people to keep rules and laws and standards. It's like a sign that says, "Keep off the grass". Most people would not think of getting on the grass until they are told not to do so.

Here are some additional flesh scriptures. As long as we are walking in the flesh (which simply means walking in your old ways or walking after the self-life which means doing what you want to do) we will serve sin.

Rom 7:25 (RSV) "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin."

Rom 8:3-9 (RSV) "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot

please God. ⁹But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." [Christ]

It appears that in verse 9, Paul is suddenly seeing us in the eternal or heavenly realm, which is in our true identity.

Rom 13:14 (RSV) "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

1Cor 3:1-3 (RSV) "But I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh, as babes in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it; and even yet you are not ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving like ordinary men?"

We are trying to get people to accomplish something that is impossible. **We will never be able to live the Christian life successfully!** Only Jesus Christ can live the Christian life. We can only allow Him to live it through us. We will never be successful living it in our own strength. Trying to set and keep rules, laws, standards, moral values - call it what you will - we will never be able to keep these laws. It is self-defeating according to God's own word.

Rom 7:5 (NKJV) "For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death."

Rom 7:8 (NKJV) "But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead."

These scriptures would appear to be quite clear: The law (or rules or standards or values) arouse sinful passions. That is self-defeating; that is, the law itself, or rule or standard or value, carries within it the seeds of its own defeat. It even says that it resulted in all manner of evil desire! Yet, in spite of these scriptures which promise us failure, God's people, particularly leaders, keep right on trying to use the law (or rules or standards or values) to keep themselves and others in line - to keep them from sinning.

How long will it take before we begin to see the light? Rules do not work no matter if they came from Moses or if you make them up yourself. Why do they not work? Leaders think it seems so obvious that if we know how to do right, we will come nearer doing right. So we should tell people what is right and wrong so they can follow the rules. Isn't that logical? It seems very logical. Why does this method not work?

A very simple answer is this: **God doesn't want it to work!** Because it is **legalism!** It is not "Walking by the Spirit."

What is legalism?

Legalism is any approach to Christian living that focuses on keeping rules as a means of experiencing victory or growing spiritually. Legalism is a system in which a person seeks to gain God's acceptance or blessings by what he does. (from Grace Walk by Steve McVey)

Where did we get the sense of right and wrong, good and evil? Where did it originate? It's been with us a long time. Even total unbelievers around the world think in terms of right and wrong, good and evil. All religions have some sort of rules to follow to attain righteousness or to get to heaven or to do alright - that is, to do good versus do evil.

The source is very obvious: The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. If you remember, the book of Genesis tells us there were two trees there.

Gen 2:16-17 (NKJV) "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; ¹⁷"but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.""

Gen 3:22-24 (NKJV) "Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"; ²³therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life."

So Adam and Eve, through the deception of Satan, chose to desire knowledge instead of being obedient to God. So they ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. They could easily have chosen to eat of the Tree of Life. It was right there in the Garden of Eden. God did not forbid them from eating of this tree. If they had eaten of this tree they would have had Eternal Life which is the Lord Jesus Christ. But no, they chose to go to the self-life, to go their own way so they could be like God, knowing good and evil.

Man has been trying to get on the good side of God ever since by doing "good" things. God is not interested. Only God can please God by what He does - and for us that means the participation of Jesus the Son of God in our lives. Nothing we can do to live the Christian life apart from Jesus living it in us and through us will ever impress our heavenly Father. God has no interest in anything we accomplish in our flesh life. He has condemned it and will not change His mind. As He said, "no good thing dwells in our flesh".

*******End of Lesson*******