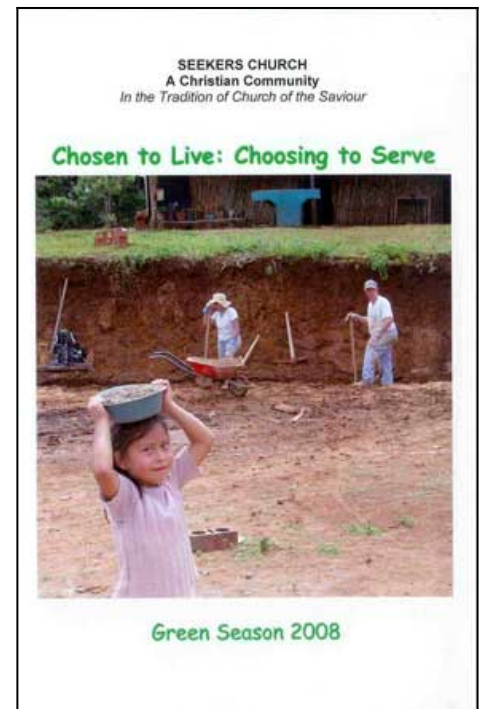


"Freedom versus Oppression" by Rachel Smith

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I had this thought a while back – about all the trouble that goes into the creation and enforcement of RULES. There are rules against driving anything over 65 even on the interstate, but only in certain states; rules against wearing brown shoes with a black outfit but black pants and a brown sweater is okay; rules against wearing open-toed shoes at work except on Fridays its okay, rules for how the proper way for children to stand and walk in line back and forth to the lunchroom at school, rules you make for your dog that he is allowed to eat

scraps from the table, but only if Dad puts them on a plate on the floor. The list goes on.

Then I started thinking about all the trouble that goes into finding ways around the rules. Which only creates the need for more rules. And the need for more, and better means of enforcing the rules. This cycle continues until the rules become something where we need a phone-book sized manual to be able to follow them, and we no longer understand the purpose or the need for these rules. (I will say, it was around the time I was preparing my tax return when I was having these thoughts...)

If we can't find a legitimate way around these arcane rules, then we either attempt to follow them (I say attempt because in many cases the application of the rules is not at all obvious- there is "room for interpretation" or maybe just room for obscurity), or, if we were born with a propensity for risk-taking, we allow the "evil twin" to come out (as InterPlayers would say) and we intentionally disobey the rules, hoping we will not be caught.

So, I started thinking of a world in which we would need no rules. Immediately I thought, "Well that would be anarchy." But, why? Why must our societies be rules-based in order to even make an attempt at a peaceful, civilized existence? Why this endless cycle of: the creation of rules intended for our own good, us as humans breaking the rules (intentionally or unintentionally), more rules being created to prevent us from breaking the rules again, stricter enforcement of the rules – all of this resulting in a continuous, increasing loss of the freedom we originally had. This is Oppression! We are not free to be who we are. We are so distracted in the dysfunction of the rules cycle, that we "miss the point." We are trapped. We are not free.

In his book of Toltec wisdom, *The Four Agreements*, Don Miguel

Ruiz puts it this way, "The real you is a little child who never grew up. Sometimes that little child comes out when you are having fun or playing, when you feel happy when you are painting, or writing poetry, or playing the piano, or expressing yourself in some way. These are the happiest moments of your life – when the real you comes out, when you don't care about the past and you don't worry about the future. You are childlike. ... But there is something that changes all that: We call them responsibilities [and I'm calling it Rules]. We are still children, but we have lost our freedom. ... The freedom we are looking for is the freedom to be ourselves, to express ourselves. [and] ... Most of us are not even aware that we are not free." Don Miguel calls this scenario the dream of the first attention, or the process of domestication. We domesticate ourselves by placing on ourselves self-constructed rules and boundaries by which we live our lives. And because of this, he says, all humans are sick.

I knew there was a Biblical application to this problem, this sickness. I wanted to apply it to how we live our lives as "followers of Christ." I did a word search and quickly confirmed my expectations that the Bible has much to say on the subjects of freedom and oppression. Here are a few examples to start with –

In the Old Testament, Isaiah and Jeremiah prophesy that they were sent to bring freedom to those in slavery.

Psalms declares that following God brings freedom and a good life. The gospels speak of Christ coming to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed. Paul declares in Galatians that the believers are called to be free. Galatians also speaks of mal-intentioned people "spying" on the freedom Christians have in Christ. Paul admonishes believers not use their freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather to serve one another in

love.

In my search of the Bible, I had been hoping to find a concrete answer to my questions about the Rule Cycle. Actually, I was hoping to find support for the hypothesis I had already constructed in my head (surely God would agree with me on this) – my hypothesis being that we are created to be free and freedom is the ultimate good. Freedom from the oppression of rules, oppression by another person, oppression of a government, a society, and even freedom from the oppression of one's own self as (Don Miguel discusses. I thought of Ephesians 6:12, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

So, if freedom is the ultimate good. Slavery, or Oppression, is the ultimate bad. After all, God created us in our natural state after His own image, so how could that not be the best possible scenario – for us to return to what is already good within us?

So, my quest began to see if God agreed with my hypothesis. I searched in the lectionary for this week, and it turned out the two-chapter discussion preceding the Romans 9:1-5 verses ended up being the outline for my sermon and the answer to my questions. Romans tackles the role of the Old Testament law in the lives of the new followers of Christ. And the Old Testament law, the way it had evolved and grown into scrolls and scrolls of interpretation by the time of Christ's coming, is the perfect example of the Rules Cycle. Paul's discussion and eventual conclusion of this cycle will be the answer to my questions. So, in the 10 minutes I have remaining, allow me to walk you through my attempt at the intended function of

humanity – I call this sermon: “Freedom versus Oppression.”

So, we start with a Problem – we (meaning humans, all of us who exist on this planet, in our various cultures, governments, and geographic regions) are Rule dominated; we are oppressed. The followers of Christ to whom Paul was writing were still bound mentally by the Old Testament Rules, the Hebrew Law. And, the Law had evolved so far with so many layers of interpretation that it had become near impossible to follow.

In Romans chapter 7, Paul breaks it down for the believers in Rome, versus 8-12: “Don’t you remember how it was? I do, perfectly well. The law code started out as an excellent piece of work. What happened, though, was that, [Listen closely here –] sin found a way to pervert the command into a temptation, making a piece of “forbidden fruit” out of it. The law code, instead of being used to guide me, was used to seduce me...The very command that was supposed to guide me into life was cleverly used to trip me up, throwing me headlong.” In chapter 8 verse 4, “The law always ended up being used as a Band-Aid on sin instead of a deep healing of it.”

So here we have a new element introduced – Sin. The Old Testament law, Gods Original Rules, was intended to “fix” our apparently pre-existing broken condition as humans, which God calls sin. So, the Original “Rules,” that God mandated were intended for our good. But they didn’t do the trick. And, it turns out, that we humans are the reason the Law didn’t work out!

So, there we go. We had a law that was intended to help us (free us,) but we messed it up because we saw the rules as a temptation rather than a beneficial guideline. So, we are still at the same point – the endless, dysfunctional RULES cycle, as I lamented at the beginning of this sermon! What do we do now?!

...Well, God had to intervene! This is because we cannot fix ourselves. According to Don Miguel, “[During that process of domestication,] All our normal tendencies are lost ... and fear is controlling the outside dream. ... We cannot see that we are not free.”

How does God intervene? ... God sent his son. And with his son, he sent a revolution. A revolution against the Rules!

Paul lays it out again for us in Romans chapter 8 verses 3-4, “God went for the jugular when he sent his own Son. He didn’t deal with the problem as something remote and unimportant. [listen closely here–] In his Son, Jesus, he personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity [which is our dysfunctional rules cycle] in order to set it right once and for all. [And here we go–] The law code, weakened as it always was by fractured human nature, could never have done that.” So, because the Original Rules couldn’t fix our problem, God had this other way – Jesus.

In Romans 7, versus 4-6 “When Christ died he took that entire rule-dominated way of life down with him and left it in the tomb, leaving you free to ‘marry’ a resurrection life and bear

"offspring" of faith for God. [read: Freedom!] For as long as we lived that old way of life, doing whatever we felt we could get away with, sin was calling most of the shots as the old law code hemmed us in. [read: Oppression!] And this made us all the more rebellious. [...it's the Rule cycle again.] In the end, all we had to show for it was miscarriages and stillbirths. But now that we're no longer shackled to that domineering mate of sin, and out from under all those oppressive regulations and fine print, we're free to live a new life in the freedom of God." Christ's death frees us from bondage to the rules and to sin and allows us the chance to live a new life in this "freedom of God!"

Reading further in Romans chapter 7, versus 29-30, "God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him." So, not only did God use Jesus' death to knock down the "rule-dominated way of life," He also intended Jesus' life to be an example – a "model life" for us to follow. I immediately thought of instances during his life in which Jesus intentionally flouted Jewish rules and customs such as the time He harvested on the Sabbath by picking grains of wheat to eat and again when he engaged in casual conversation with a Samaritan woman in a public place.

So, how do we achieve this life in the "freedom of God," as Paul boasted in chapter 7? We get an answer in Chapter 8. Versus 5-8, Paul says, "Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who [pay attention here–] trust God's action in them find that God's Spirit is in them—living and breathing God!

Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God.” Here I read that focusing on God = a Free life! Focusing on self = internal obsession and the failure to achieve a free life. That is the answer! That is how we achieve this “freedom of God!” By “focusing on Him” and not ourselves.

Focusing on God is good. Is there more? How, practically, do we “focus on God”? Do we have any guidelines, now that we have overturned the old “rule-following way of life”?

Even Paul struggles with this himself, in chapter 7 versus 14-16, “What I don’t understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can’t be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God’s command is necessary.” We see that, although Jesus had overturned the old Laws, Paul still found himself “bound” to a cycle of destructive behavior. Therefore, God’s command (read: Rule following) is still necessary, according to Paul.

Continuing in Chapter 7 verse 7, “But I can hear you say, ‘If the law code was as bad as all that, it’s no better than sin itself.’ That’s certainly not true. The law code had a perfectly legitimate function. Without its clear guidelines for right and wrong, moral behavior would be mostly guesswork. Apart from the succinct, surgical command, ‘You shall not covet,’ I could have dressed covetousness up to look like a virtue and ruined my life with it.” We read from Paul’s words the same message we saw at the beginning – that we must be saved from ourselves – “I could have dressed covetousness up to look like a virtue and ruined my life with it,” he says,

indicating that we are naturally inclined to do that which is not moral.

So, let me get this straight. The law had a legitimate purpose – to provide a “moral compass” to direct us to that which is good, without which we otherwise would lead ourselves into immoral, destructive behavior. And Paul is saying we can still use the rules for this original intent, but we should look deeper into the purpose behind the rules, rather than getting caught up in the legality of the particular applications.

So, what does that get us? What does the Life in this Freedom of God look like?

Romans chapter 8 verses 15-17, “This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It’s adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike “What’s next, Papa?” God’s Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children.”

Wow! THAT is what freedom in God is – we are “adventurously expectant,” “free to live a new life.” And, God’s Spirit confirms who we really are. He accepts us as-is which is fine! Just like we said at the beginning – we were created in His image in the first place, so how can that not be good?

Romans 8 verses 9-11, “But for you who welcome him, in whom he dwells—even though you still experience all the limitations of

sin—you yourself experience life on God's terms." Then, in verses 1-2, "With the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, that fateful dilemma [referring to Paul's continual struggle against himself, 'doing what he does not want to do'] is resolved. Those who enter into Christ's being-here-for-us no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud. [read: the Rule cycle] A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death."

We are free – free from tyranny, free from legalistic rules, and even more – freely confirmed in who we really are! Paul continues further in Romans 8 verses 35-39, "So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition [read: confirming who we really are, not covering up, not slapping a bandaid on us] and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture..."

So, there you go! God's got our back. He frees us from the old life of rules and oppression, he allows us to live "life on his terms" which will bring us freedom of God, and he confirms us – who we really are – he calls us by name, and he is here to stay. This is not a temporary solution. It is

permanent, eternal.

I started with the problem – the “Rule Cycle” that was broken, dysfunctional. We create rules for ourselves, we break them, we create more rules, we break them again. And each time we become more oppressed. We are not free to be the good person we naturally are inside. I found out that God has rules for us (the Old Testament Law) that were created for our own good! They were created to “fix” us. So, we actually aren’t okay on our own. According to Paul, we are broken and the rules God created for us (to free us from ourselves) didn’t work because we distorted them. So, God had to intervene. He sent His son to start the revolution – the Rules Revolution. His son was sent to overturn the old laws and replace them with the new “spirit of the law.” Which is actually is the source of our freedom. And, God intended Jesus to be our example. And if we follow Jesus, we can see that he didn’t follow the rules in the legalistic way. He followed the Spirit of the rules. Furthermore, God gives us the “freedom of God,” he confirms who we really are, and he calls us by name. And he is here to stay. Nothing can take away this new freedom. It is true freedom. But it is not found within ourselves as I originally wanted to believe. It has to come from God. It has to come from listening to God and following the Spirit of his laws for us. And from following the example Jesus left us.