

## Good For You?: Is Christianity Restrictive?

In the past, people may have struggled to believe, but they at least viewed Christianity as a positive benefit to society. But things may now be beginning to shift, because there's an increasing number of people who consider Christianity to be harmful. And therefore the first question that a skeptic might ask is not necessarily "Is Christianity *true*?" but "Is Christianity *good*?" Because if a person is not convinced that Christianity is good, there's no point in ever exploring whether it's true. That changes things for a person like me in my position because not only do I have to try to help you see that Christianity is in fact true, and there are good reasons to believe, but I also have to help you see that it's good — so good that you should want it to be true, even if you have doubts.

Accordingly, we're in the midst of a sermon series in which we are considering some of the common contemporary challenges to the Christian faith in order to determine if Christianity is good for you and good for the world. The question that I'd like us to take up this morning is "Is Christianity restrictive?" meaning is Christianity restrictive of our freedom? There are many people who have no interest in Christianity because they see it as nothing more than a set of oppressive rules and regulations that prevent you from having fun, living the good life, and becoming your true self.

On the one hand, I'm sure that we've all witnessed false, legalistic forms of Christianity that have turned people off to the faith because they have inflicted damage on people by twisting Christianity into a long list of dos and don'ts. But the question is whether Jesus' goal is to suppress us or to restrict our freedom as human beings. In response to that question, I'd like us to look at one of the most famous words that Jesus ever uttered, and as we do, I'd like us to consider what this passage tells us about 1) *the deep longing for freedom*, 2) *the challenging obstacles of freedom*, and 3) *the surprising path to freedom*.

<sup>28</sup>"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

## The Deep Longing For Freedom

Here Jesus issues what at least appears to be a welcoming and encouraging invitation: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." That sounds good, doesn't it? Then he goes on to tell us to take his yoke upon us. Yoke is an oppressive image. A yoke was a wooden crossbeam that was laid across the neck of usually two animals in order to fix them, fasten them together. They're tied together, so they can't do whatever they want. They can't go wherever they want. They can only go together. A yoke typically was used metaphorically to describe a state of hardship, or pain, or even slavery. No one wants to be placed under a heavy yoke. By using this image of a yoke, Jesus taps into our deep longing for freedom. At the same time, he simultaneously challenges both an ancient and a modern conception of freedom.

### Ancient Conception

Let's take the ancient conception first. The thing you need to realize is that in Jesus' day, people spoke very positively about placing themselves under the yoke of the Torah, referring to the first five books of The Hebrew Scriptures. Ancient people believed that the way in which you know who you really are and who you're supposed to be is by living a life of obedience to the moral code. Ancient people thought that if you really want to be free, you have to learn how to control your inner desires rather than allowing your inner desires to control you. To attain the good life, you had to place yourself under the yoke of the Torah. You had to study the Torah, and you had to bring your life in conformity with the finer points of the law.

There are at least two problems with that. If you're going to place yourself under the yoke of the Torah, only a few people actually had the time and the ability to do that because it required a significant effort. You had to be a scholar. You had to know the languages and the literature, and you

had to have the leisure time to be able to ponder and discuss and debate weighty, significant matters. Not everyone was up for that. It'd be like asking the average person today to go out there and become a microbiologist or a rocket scientist — not everyone could.

The second problem was that, in the first century in particular, the religious leaders of Jesus' day went well beyond what was written in the Scriptures and added their own arbitrary demands based on whatever they saw fit. That's why Jesus himself often criticized some of the religious leaders of his day for placing even heavier burdens on people than what was actually written in the Scriptures. In our own day, I am quite sure that we could all cite examples of people who have turned religion into a moralistic list of dos and don'ts based on their own point of view, which becomes oppressive and suffocating rather than freeing. Let's face it, that's why a lot of people move to New York. They move to New York to get away from religious communities or hometowns like that.

### **Modern Conception**

Jesus, on the one hand, challenges the ancient conception of freedom, but he also challenges the modern conception of freedom because he still calls us to take on a yoke. As modern people, we believe that rather than controlling our inner desires, we should express our inner desires in order to become our true authentic selves. We define freedom as the absence of all restrictions. You have to throw off every yoke. You have to get rid of all restrictions. We have to be free to do whatever we want, whenever we want, with whomever we want, as long as nobody gets hurt.

Why is that? We define freedom as the absence of all restrictions because we no longer believe that there is a cosmic order. We don't believe that there's anything essential to human nature. We don't believe in truth with a capital T. We don't think that there are moral absolutes or eternal values. We don't believe that there's anything really beyond the horizon of the self.

Unlike ancient people who thought that you find freedom by living in conformity with the moral code, we modern people define freedom as the absence of all restrictions. There are no limits. The Oxford professor C.S. Lewis once captured the difference between the ancient and the modern like this: He says,

“For the wise men of old, the cardinal problem of human life was how to conform the soul to objective reality, and the solution was wisdom, self-discipline, and virtue. For the modern, the cardinal problem is how to conform reality to the wishes of man.”

The problem here is that this way of ultimately pursuing freedom is empty and unsatisfying. Why? Because it doesn't offer any interesting answers to the questions that matter most, like “Who am I supposed to be? How am I supposed to live my life? What should I aspire to?” Years ago, there was a Harvard student speaking at a Harvard graduation ceremony who very eloquently described the emptiness of these kinds of answers. He put it like this:

“Among my classmates ... I believe there is one idea, one sentiment, which we have all acquired at some point of our Harvard careers; and that, ladies and gentlemen, is, in a word, confusion ... They tell us that it is heresy to suggest the superiority of some value, fantasy to believe in moral judgment, slavery to submit to a judgment sounder than your own. The freedom of our day is the freedom to devote ourselves to any values we please, on the mere condition that we do not believe them to be true.”

## **The Challenging Obstacles to Freedom**

That brings me to my second point. We long for freedom, but there are challenging obstacles to freedom. If we define freedom as the absence of all restrictions, then our pursuit of freedom so conceived will lead to a number of problems. It is *counterproductive*, it is *corrosive*, and it is *crushing*.

### **Counterproductive**

First of all, if we define freedom as the absence of all restrictions, then the pursuit of freedom will prove to be counterproductive. It is unworkable. Here's why. A number of years ago, the British Pastor

John Stott offered this analogy which I have since personalized. When our children were younger, we kept an aquarium in our living room filled with bright, beautiful guppies. We gave them all names based on their appearance. There was one fish that had stripes, so we called him Stripey. There was a yellow fish that we named Lemon. And there was a pink one, which we called Pink One. Remember, my kids were young at the time. Let's say, out of a desire to be free, Stripey decides that he is tired of this glass-bowl existence because he knows that he was made for greater things. He says, "No one tells me what to do," and he leaps out of the glass bowl. As he flies through the air, you can hear him say, "I'm free! I'm free! I'm finally free!" The exhilaration would be brief. Believe it or not, Stripey actually had a habit of jumping out of the fishbowl and would then flap on the counter, and we'd have to scoop him up and put him back in the bowl. The only problem is that he did this a few too many times. The experience did not lead to liberation; it led to death. The reason is simple. Because fish are meant to thrive in water. That is the environment in which they flourish. The point is that we human beings thrive in certain environments, and we break down in others. When God gives us directives, when God tells us, "Don't steal. Don't lie. Don't be selfish. Don't bear a grudge," this isn't arbitrary, busy work. Rather he's providing these directives because he designed us, and therefore he knows how life works best. To break his directives is to violate our own nature, and therefore we lose our freedom.

People say you should be free to do whatever you want, whenever you want, with whomever you want, as long as nobody gets hurt. That sounds eminently reasonable to modern, sophisticated adults. You should do whatever you want, as long as no one gets hurt. But there's just one little problem: How do you know what will ultimately cause harm? How do you know what will actually cause harm to a fellow human being? It may be that we know what causes harm physically, but how do you know ultimately what will cause harm psychologically, relationally, socially, spiritually? We can't know what will cause harm unless we know what is the essence of human nature. If we don't even believe that there is an essential aspect to human nature, we'll never be able to answer those questions.

Let me put it like this. Let's say Stripey encourages one of his fellow guppies to join him in his adventure. He turns to Lemon, and he says, "Lemon, come on! You were made for more than this. Let's be free. Let's jump out of the glass bowl together," and Lemon agrees. There is mutual consent. They both jump to their freedom together. What could possibly go wrong? When you violate your design, it's not as if you're just breaking some law, but rather you're going against the grain of the universe. We can't ultimately know what will cause harm unless we know who and what human beings are and what they're for. We don't know what will lead to more or less freedom unless we understand our nature and our purpose.

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre once said that you could take the watch off of your wrist and you could use it as a hammer if you want. You could hammer nails with your watch, but inevitably, your watch is going to break because that's not what your watch is for. In a similar way, modern conceptions of freedom fail to consider whether or not human beings have an essential nature. They fail to consider what is our purpose. And therefore, this pursuit of freedom, so understood, is counterproductive. It won't work.

### **Corrosive**

Secondly, this pursuit of freedom understood as the absence of all restrictions, is corrosive. It's corrosive of our relationships. In his book "Making Sense of God," Tim Keller provided this analogy. He says, imagine a man in his 60s who loves food. He loves to eat, and he eats all of his favorite foods without abandon, but he also loves his grandchildren. One of the primary ways in which he finds meaning in life is through the time that he spends with his grandkids. But then he goes in for his annual physical, and the doctor tells him, "If you keep eating all of your favorite foods, it is going to worsen your heart condition. If you don't place any limits on your diet, you are going to die of a heart attack. And you will not be around to spend time with your grandkids." The modern definition of freedom is that he should be free to do whatever he wants. But you can't have it both ways. Either

he's going to voluntarily place limits on his eating, or he's going to involuntarily place limits on his health and on his relationships.

It's a simple analogy, but it reveals the very root of the problem. All relationships require self-sacrifice. All love relationships involve constraints. If you take a self-actualizing, me-centered approach to your relationships, it will corrode those relationships from the inside out. We all know that to be true. My wife, Ashley, and I are about to celebrate our 23rd anniversary a month from now. Let's say 23 years ago, on our wedding day, I stood before the congregation, and I said to Ashley, "Ashley, I want to marry you. There's just one thing you should know. I have to be free to do whatever I want, whenever I want, with whomever I want in order to be my true authentic self. So don't expect me to spend a lot of money or time on you. Don't expect for us to go out on dates or to spend a lot of time talking with one another. Don't expect me to listen to you or share my thoughts and feelings or to work through our differences unless I feel like it in the moment."

If you witnessed a wedding like that, you would say, "That one is not going to last very long," because every love relationship confines you. It limits your freedom. The point is that we willingly make these sacrifices. We willingly make sacrifices for our family and our friends, for our romantic partner, for our spouse, for our children. Why? Because we know that's the only way our relationships will grow. It's the only way we'll be able to enjoy a meaningful connection with another person. If you define freedom as the absence of all restrictions, the pursuit of such freedom will not only be counterproductive, it will be corrosive, and then finally, it will be crushing.

## **Crushing**

If you say, "I'm not going to let anyone else tell me what to do. I'm going to do my own thing," then you will look to someone or something else to tell you that you are significant and that you are secure. You'll look to someone or something to tell you that you matter, that your life counts, and that you are ultimately going to be OK. You will take a good thing and you will make it an ultimate thing, because we cannot live without significance or security. You'll take a good thing and make it an ultimate thing. It could be wealth. It could be power. It could be status. It could be recognition. It could be the approval of others. It could be reputation, career success, critical acclaim. Whatever it is, it will crush you in the end because all of these counterfeit gods will never deliver what they promise, and if you fail them, they will never ever be able to forgive you.

It's graduation season, so here's another excerpt from a commencement speech. The author David Foster Wallace once said this at Kenyon College. He said,

"In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things — if they are where you tap real meaning in life — then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you in the ground. Worship power — you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart — you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out."

If you take a good thing and make it an ultimate thing, then that counterfeit god will never satisfy, and when you fail it, it will never be able to forgive you.

John Steinbeck wrote a novella titled "The Pearl" which poignantly describes this dynamic. It's the story of a poor diver named Kino who dives for oysters, looking for pearls. One day his young son is stung by a scorpion. He calls for the doctor, but the doctor refuses to help — refuses to treat the boy — until he learns that Kino has found a pearl of immeasurable value. When Kino discovers this pearl, he thinks that this is the key to freedom. Now he can get married. Now they can buy new clothes. Now he can ensure that his son gets a proper education. But he obsesses over this pearl, and it ruins his

life. People try to cheat him out of it. They try to kill him in order to steal it. They burn his house down, and in the end, he murders his attackers, he hurts his wife, and his son survives the scorpion bite only to be taken out by a bullet. He took a good thing, a pearl, and made it ultimate. And it destroyed his life. He thought the pearl was the key to his freedom, but instead, he became its slave. Do you know what he does at the end? He takes that pearl of immeasurable value, and he throws it back into the sea. If we define freedom as the absence of all restrictions, then its pursuit will prove counterproductive, corrosive, and crushing.

## The Surprising Path To Freedom

How can we experience true freedom that will allow us to actually thrive and flourish as human beings? Jesus here offers a rather strange path to freedom. He tells us the way to be free is by giving up your freedom in service to something greater. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Jesus is suggesting that there's a kind of freedom that leads to service, but there's also a kind of service that leads to freedom.

Notice here that Jesus critiques both the ancient and the modern conception of freedom. Against the modern view, Jesus insists that there is a yoke that we have to bear. There is a yoke to which we must submit. He's not suggesting that he doesn't place any constraints or demands or obligations upon us. He does. But he's saying that *his* demands are comparatively light and easy. But why? Because against the ancient conception of freedom, Jesus doesn't tell us to place ourselves under the yoke of the law. He's not telling us to submit ourselves to the yoke of the Torah. No, the yoke he offers is not a moral code; it's a relationship. The yoke he offers is not a principle; it's a person. "Take *my* yoke upon you."

Jesus promises that if you place yourself under his yoke, rather than enslaving you, it will set you free. How is that? Let's return to that analogy of the fish. Fish thrive in water because their gills are designed to absorb oxygen from H<sub>2</sub>O. Fish were made for water. But what about us? What is the element in which we as human beings thrive? The answer is love. The element in which we find our true humaneness is love. This is how John Stott once put it. He says,

"The element in which humans find their humanness is love ... It is in love that we find and fulfill ourselves. Moreover, the reason for this is not far to seek. It is that God is love in his essential being, so that when he made us in his own image, he gave us a capacity to love as he loves. It is not a random thing, therefore, that God's two great commandments are to love him and each other, for this is our destiny ... True love, however, places constraints on the lover, for love is essentially self-giving. And this brings us to a startling Christian paradox.

True freedom is freedom to be my true self, as God made me and meant me to be. And God made me for loving. But loving is giving and self-giving. Therefore, in order to be myself, I have to deny myself and give myself. In order to be free, I have to serve. In order to live, I have to die to my own self-centredness. In order to find myself, I have to lose myself in loving. True freedom is, then, the exact opposite of what many people think. It is not freedom from all responsibility to God and others, in order to live for myself. That is bondage to my own self-centredness. Instead, true freedom is freedom from my [silly little] self, in order to live responsibly in love for God and others."

True freedom is not the absence of all restrictions but rather a matter of submitting to the right ones that enable us to love the right things in the right order. It's not freedom from God and others to live for ourselves, but freedom from ourselves to live for God and others in relationships of love, because it's only in relationships of self-giving love that we find and fulfill ourselves.

But if you're paying attention, you might be thinking to yourself, "OK, I get the idea that love relationships require the loss of independence. Both people in a relationship have to say to the other, 'I'm going to put you first. I'm going to adjust myself to you. I'm going to make sacrifices for you.' But if only one person in the relationship is willing to accommodate themselves for the other, that's not love,

that's exploitation.”

How does that apply to our relationship with God? This is what separates Christianity from absolutely every other religion in the world. In every other religion, if you want to have a relationship with god or the moral code or spiritual reality, it is one-sided. It's all up to you. You have to do the work. You have to follow the rules. You have to observe the rights. You have to say the prayers. You have to be good. God, the moral code, spiritual reality is not going to change for you; you have to change for it. You have to do all the submitting, all the sacrificing, all the accommodating, all the adjusting, but not with Jesus. This is what separates Christianity from all the religions in the world.

Christianity is the only religion where God says to you and Jesus, “I'll adjust for you. I'll accommodate myself for you. I'll sacrifice for you.” Jesus not only empties himself of his glory in order to become a human being, but he says, “I'll live the life that you should have lived. I'll die the death that you deserve to die.” That's why you can trust him. When Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light,” the reason why you can trust him when he says that is because he already took the horizontal wooden beam of the cross on his neck.

On the cross, Jesus was pinned, fastened, fixed to the cross. Talk about giving up your freedom. He couldn't move. He couldn't do what he wanted to. No, Jesus yoked himself to you in order to set you free. That's what changes everything. Jesus' yoke is easy and light because Jesus has already lifted the ultimate burden from your shoulders. Jesus has lifted the burden of guilt and shame. Your past can never be held against you. Jesus has removed the burden of trying to save yourself through your own striving, through your own efforts, through your own achievements. He willingly went to the cross for you to do all that was required. Jesus has removed from you the burden of having to try to prove to yourself or to other people that you're worthy of love, because he shows the depth of his love for you by going to the cross. Jesus is the only master that you can serve who will satisfy, and the only one who, when you fail, will forgive you.

There's a kind of service that leads to freedom, and that's the service that Jesus offers. Jesus can be trusted because he sacrificed his independence and gave up his autonomy by going to the cross for you. Now he calls you to give up your independence, to hand over your autonomy in service to him, because he knows that that's the only way you'll ever be truly free. His service is perfect freedom.

*Let me pray for us.*

*Father, we acknowledge that we're often confused about where true freedom can be found. In our modern world, we define it as the absence of all restrictions. And yet when we pursue freedom so understood, it leads to a counterproductive, corrosive, and crushing path. Help us instead to find the surprising pathway to freedom that Jesus offers — not the absence of all restrictions, but submitting to the right ones, the ones that actually free us. Help us to take upon ourselves the yoke of Jesus, which is not conformity to an outward code but rather commitment to a person, and help us to see that we can trust him. We can trust him with our lives, because he already gave up his life for us so that we might become truly free. Help us to experience that now for ourselves. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*