

“ALL THINGS TO ALL MEN”

Toward a Truly Biblical Understanding of Liberty, Legalism & I Corinthians 9:22!

Paul said in I Corinthians 9:22b *“I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some...”* Does this verse, and others like it (e.g. *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage”*—Gal. 5:1; Gal. 5:7; Rom. 6:14b – *“for ye are not under the law, but under grace”*—Rom. 6:14b) give believers biblical authority to do whatever they have personal peace to do² since we are *“under grace”* and possess *“Christian liberty?”* Well-known pastors and Christian leaders such as Rick Warren, Chuck Swindoll (author of *“The Grace Awakening”*), etc., answer with a resounding *“Yes!”*

However, before we jump on that bandwagon and loudly proclaim our *“freedom and liberty in Christ”* to do or engage in whatever behaviour or action we have *“peace”* about doing, I would encourage us to go back and carefully read again the relevant portions of Scripture that address that question. I’ve come to the conclusion that Swindoll and those who follow in his train are wrong. **What I have become more convinced of than ever after engaging in a renewed study of passages such as Romans 13-15 & I Cor. 6-11, is that a believer with a true *“servants heart”* will consistently endeavor to *“go the extra mile”* if they think a brother or sister might be offended by something they are considering saying or doing.** Furthermore, it appears that Scripture teaches that mature believers will forego even legitimate activities/behaviours/locations, etc., if they think it might offend and be a stumbling block to other believers.

Those who loudly proclaim they are *“under grace”* whenever someone questions an activity or action that they are engaging in, seem to have forgotten what the Bible teaches about grace:

- *“For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world”*—Titus 2:11-12
- *“...brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another”*—Gal. 5:13
- *“For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace...Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness...for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness...being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness...”*—Rom. 6:14, 18-19, 22

Chuck Swindoll and others have loudly proclaimed that New Testament believers are *“under grace,”* and that rules, policies, and standards, are *“joy-killers”* and examples of restrictive unbiblical legalism. **However there are some theological problems with such statements:**

FIRSTLY, LEGALISM, BIBLICALLY SPEAKING, REFERS TO THE BELIEF THAT ONE CAN GET TO HEAVEN BY KEEPING A SET OF LAWS OR RULES. Such a belief is of course false! However for churches, schools, colleges, mission boards, etc., to have standards for dress, conduct, behaviour etc., is *NOT* biblical legalism. Does anyone in such organizations think that the following of such rules and standards will earn them a place in heaven? The idea is ludicrous on the face of it. In fact, if you told them that, they would probably look at you as if you were crazy!

SECONDLY, WHILE IT’S TRUE THAT WE ARE UNDER GRACE (and we should thank God that we are!), BEING UNDER GRACE DOES NOT MEAN THAT ONE IS FREE TO DO WHATEVER ONE “HAS PEACE ABOUT” OR FEELS LIKE DOING. As noted above, Galatians 5:1 says that *“It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of bondage.”* But as one individual has pointed out: *“just a few verses later we read: ‘For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh...’ (Gal. 5:13).* Some Christians who wish to be free to do whatever they feel comfortable with, quote the last part of Romans 6:14 (*‘...we are not under law but under grace’*). But to do so without reading the context ...grossly ignores the first phrase. Romans 6:14 says, *‘For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.’* **In the context, grace is not a license to do as you please, but rather the enabling to be free from the dominion of sin.** It is God’s supernatural help, His supernatural enabling to help us do that which we

¹ By Mike Edwards. Originally written, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, West Indies, Nov. 2010 & Sept. 2012 (revised Madison, Ohio, 2017, 2018 & 2019). Note: British spelling used throughout.

² Apart from actions clearly forbidden or condemned in Scripture.

cannot do in our own flesh.... Ephesians 3:7 refers to grace as the ‘*effectual working of His power.*’ That’s what grace is. It is the effectual working of God’s power in our lives so that we can walk with Him and do right. Interestingly, Titus 2:11-12 says, ‘*For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us*’—All right, what does grace teach us? ‘—*that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world.*’ What a statement! Grace then teaches a denial of ungodliness and a responsibility to maintain a standard of godliness according to the authority of God’s Word. So grace is not an excuse to do what you want. It’s not a license to sin; it is God’s supernatural enabling to free us from the dominion of sin.”³

While it’s probably impossible to not offend some believer by something we may do, say, or engage in, does that relieve us of the responsibility of trying? I think not. Romans 12:19 declares: “*If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.*” John Ashbrook once observed: “*Does the fact that we may not be completely consistent excuse us from at least trying? Every student taking a math test is trying for a perfect score, though he knows he probably will not achieve it.*”

It seems to me that the most biblical position to take is for us to do our very best to avoid unnecessarily offending other Christian brothers and sisters, as well as the unsaved! I also believe that this was the attitude of the vast majority of Bible-believing Christians until the past few decades, when a very different attitude has arisen. To state it bluntly, it’s an attitude of arrogance that says:

- *I have peace about doing this or that, and you have no right to criticize me or say that it is wrong!*
- *If you don’t like what I’m doing you don’t have to do it/say it/watch it/participate in it, etc.*
- *I’m under grace, so what I’m doing is none of your business and you have no right to judge me or criticise me!”*
- **Others quote Matthew 7:1 – “*Judge not that ye be not judged.*” But they have obviously forgotten to read the context in which Jesus almost immediately commands His listeners to judge! (cf. vv. 5-6 & 18-23).** Such modern-day advocates of this new style of “grace” claim it’s wrong for anyone to criticize or question them, where they go, what they do, what they wear, etc. They even often respond by calling their critics “*hypocrites*” and tell them to “*get the beam out of your own eye!*”

It is certainly true that before we admonish someone else, we should first check ourselves and make sure we indeed do not have a “*beam*” in our own eye. However, in responding in such a way they have failed to remember, or else are unaware, that believers are commanded to rebuke, challenge and correct believers walking disorderly e.g. a multitude of verses in the book of Proverbs such as “*Open rebuke is better than secret love*”—Prov. 27:5; Rom. 15:14; Gal. 6:1; II Thess. 3; the entire book of Proverbs, etc.

It should also be pointed out that individuals such as the apostle Paul had absolutely *no hesitation in judging other believers by their external conduct and even publicly rebuking them for it!* (e.g. Paul confronting Peter in Galatians 2:11-13). If believers aren’t allowed to challenge or question another Christian’s behaviour, actions, places they frequent, etc., then such individuals are truly “*set for life!*” They’re untouchable! That’s a pretty nice position to be in!

However, having witnessed the spiritual wreckage this attitude has produced, I would like to suggest that it’s time to reevaluate our thinking and learn a lesson from our godly forefathers. Today we probably hear more about “*being a servant,*” “*having a servant’s heart*” & “*servant leadership*” than perhaps ever before. Those phrases & buzz words are parroted everywhere. But one key mark of true servanthood is a willingness to put others first and forego *even legitimate desires & practices* for the sake of others—especially our Christian brothers and sisters (see verses below).

I would ask you to prayerfully consider the following Bible verses that speak to this issue. I believe they present a scriptural case for the belief that biblical liberty is not a license to do whatever we feel comfortable doing. Rather, it is a willingness to demonstrate a *REAL* servant attitude by “*going the extra mile*” & even foregoing legitimate desires, wishes, plans & pleasures, in order to not offend or become a stumbling block to others—including “weaker” Christian brothers and sisters.

³ John VanGelderren, “*A Heartbeat for Holiness*” (Preach the Word Ministries: Woodridge, Illinois, 1996), pp. 17-18, underlining & bolding added.

PASSAGES IN ROMANS 13-15

WHICH REFUTE THE IDEA THAT LIBERTY or FREEDOM IN CHRIST MEANS THAT WE CAN DO WHATEVER WE “HAVE PEACE” ABOUT DOING:⁴

- Rom. 13:10 – *“Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”*
- Rom. 14:7 – *“For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself.”*
- Rom. 14:13 – *“Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way.”*
- Rom. 14:15 – *“But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.”*
- Rom. 14:17 – *“For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.”*
- Rom. 14:19 – *“Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify (build up) another.”*
- Rom. 14:20 – *“For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence.”*
- Rom. 14:21 – *“It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.”*
- Rom. 15:1 – *“We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak and not to please ourselves.”*
- Rom. 15:2 – *“Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification.”*
- Rom. 15:3 – *“For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me.”*
- Rom. 15:4-6 – *“For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope. Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded (i.e. like Christ) one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

PASSAGES IN I CORINTHIANS 6-11

WHICH REFUTE THE IDEA THAT LIBERTY or FREEDOM IN CHRIST MEANS WE CAN DO WHATEVER WE HAVE “PEACE” ABOUT DOING:

- I Cor. 6:12 – *“All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient (i.e. profitable): all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.”*
- I Cor. 8:9 – *“But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak.”*
- I Cor. 8:13 – *“Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.”*

⁴ All verses taken from the King James Version.

- I Cor. 9:4-7 – *“Have we not power to eat and to drink? Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas? Or I only and Barnabas, have not we power to forbear working? Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges (expense)? Who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of the fruit thereof? Or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock?”*
- I Cor. 9:12 – *“If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ.”*
- I Cor. 9:15 – *“But I have used none of these things: neither have I written these things, that it should be so done unto me: for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void.”*
- I Cor. 9:19 – *“For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more.”*
- I Cor. 9:24 – *“Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run that ye may obtain.”*
- I Cor. 9:25 – *“And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible.”*
- I Cor. 9:27 – *“But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway (disqualified).”*
- I Cor. 10:23 – *“All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.”*
- I Cor. 10:24 – *“Let no man seek his own, but every man another’s wealth.”*
- I Cor. 10:31 – *“Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.”*
- I Cor. 10:32 – *“Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God...”*
- I Cor. 10:33 – *“Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit but the profit of many, that they may be saved.”*

A FINAL RELATED QUESTION:

“BUT ARE WE SUPPOSED TO FOLLOW PAUL’S EXAMPLE?”

- I Cor. 4:16 – *“Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me.”*
- I Cor. 11:1 – *“Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.”⁵*
- Phil. 3:17 – *“Brethren, be followers together of me...”*
- Phil. 4:9 – *“Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.”*

⁵ Note: A careful study of Christ’s life will evidence a similar—in fact FAR SUPERIOR—example of a servant attitude and willingness to forego His legitimate rights and entitlements in order to redeem mankind! e.g. Matt. 20:25-28; John 13:1-16; Phil. 2:3-11, etc.