

## Race for the Crown

If you've ever been involved in competitive sports you know it takes a great deal of time. It also takes work to become good at what you are playing. Hours of practice, combined with time to meditate on your mistakes are required. Then more practice till you make improvements. For those who want to be the best, it engulfs their life! Paul speaks about our Christian life in terms of a sport-- running a race. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 he says, "Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified."

We are to live Christianity as though it is a sport. The goal is to win thus obtaining our reward which is imperishable. This sounds like hard work! We often hear about our true freedom, our life in Christ and the grace that we have through Him, but not always a reasonable explanation about that life, its freedom and what it entails.

John speaks on this topic in 1 John 3:7, "Little children, let no one deceive you, He who practices righteousness is righteous." And in verse 10, "Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother." John speaks of our life as a Christian as "practicing righteousness."

But what does it mean to practice righteousness? What are the rules of this sport and how do we play it? There is obvious division in the Christian world on how a Christian is to live. Some proclaim we live by the "law of Christ" and that the law of God is nailed to the cross no longer applicable to our lives. Some teach a human, whether the pope, the pastor or the preacher has the right to proclaim what is righteous and what is not. Some teach we live by the commandments only, others say all the law and the prophets. Some say we live by the commandments but they are changed. Who or what defines righteousness?

What is our freedom in Christ and from what are we now free? What does this have to do with righteousness? Paul speaks of freedom in various ways. In 2 Cor.3:17 he says "where the spirit of the Lord is there is freedom...and we are being transformed into the image of the glory of the Lord". This implies that with the Holy Spirit comes power to change who we are and no longer be enslaved by our own image and way of being. In Gal. 2:3-4 Paul speaks of false believers who spied on their freedom in Christ. What freedom was being discussed? He says "yet not even Titus, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised." It sounds like freedom from being circumcised was an issue. And in Galatians 5:1 he again mentions this freedom by which Christ has made us free..."from a yoke of bondage." He explains in verse 2-3, that if a man is circumcised he is obligated to keep the whole law and you are fallen from grace if you attempt to be justified by the law. So is Paul saying here the law of God is what we are now free from because we have grace through Jesus Christ? That fits well with those who consider God's law to be burdensome and done away. This outlook by itself is a little puzzling. Why would a loving God (as He defines Himself) give his people laws that were a burden? Nevertheless, let's examine if Paul believes we need to be freed from this law.

In the book of Romans Paul speaks more about freedom and the end of slavery. He first explains that no man is justified (made righteous before God) by the law, for the law only gives the knowledge of sin. (Rom 3:20 ) So the false believers in Galatia were wrong thinking they could be justified by the law. Paul had explained in Galatians 3:19-25 that the law was a

guardian, or tutor, responsible for care and discipline. The law could not justify us, make us righteous before God. The law reveals the whole world is guilty of sin before God. (Rom. 3:19) But clearly the law teaches us righteousness. So if we are to practice righteousness the rules to guide us are the laws of God. Paul clearly says in Rom. 3:31, that because we have faith in Jesus and are justified by his blood, we do not do away with the law, we establish it. He also states that just because we have grace, we don't continue in sin. ( Rom. 6:1-2)

Has God's law changed to the law of Christ? Did Christ proclaim a different law than His Father? Jesus said he didn't come to destroy the Law or the Prophets and that whoever breaks the least of one of God's commandments or teaches men to do so would be least in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt.5:17-20) Jesus said he spoke what His Father told him to speak (John 12:49 ). Jesus did not teach differently than God, His Father. However, there were many times when Jesus spoke out against the teaching of the Jews. He stated "you have heard that it was said." (Matt. 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43) and then he would go on to correct their misunderstandings. The Jews of Jesus' day did not always teach the law properly and they also had many laws and traditions that were not always God's laws and were often opposed to the law of God. They rejected the commandments of God for their own traditions. (Mark 7:6-9)

Jesus was continually rejecting the law of the Jews. It's possible he did this when he healed the blind man on the Sabbath by putting spit in his eyes. (Mark 8:22-26) The Mishnah (the Jewish oral law) states, "To heal a blind man on the Sabbath it is prohibited to inject wine in his eyes. It is also prohibited to make mud with spittle and smear it on his eyes."

Jesus rejected their law to eat with unwashed hands. The Pharisees and scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?" (Mark 7:1-9) According to the Mishnah, "one should be willing to walk four miles to water in order to wash your hands rather than to eat with unwashed hands."

He was accused of doing things unlawful. "The Pharisees said to Him, 'Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?'" This was the example of plucking heads of grain to eat on the Sabbath. (Mark 2:23-24) But again, this was not against God's law but against their laws and traditions.

In Galatians 2:11-13, Paul got after Peter for being a hypocrite by observing Jewish law. Peter rejected the Jewish law and ate with the Gentiles until certain Jewish men came and then he separated from the Gentiles. This was Jewish oral law, not God's law to separate from the Gentiles when eating. Jesus and Paul upheld God's law and lived by it, but rejected the Jewish law which was often held with higher esteem to the Jews.

So when we speak of practicing righteousness, we must follow the example of Jesus who obeyed God's law but rejected Jewish oral law and tradition which added to, took away from or opposed God's written law. Jesus said, "unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." Obviously what they thought was righteous was not!

What about Christianity today? There are traditions of modern day Christianity that are influenced by many pagan, idolatrous worship practices. These traditions were adopted into Christianity in the early centuries many years after the death of Christ and the apostles. Again, the words of Jesus ring clear, "laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men." Very few Christians actually live their life in accordance with the commandments of

God. The majority of Christianity is filled with teachings and traditions whose origins are not from the Bible and sometimes oppose the very teaching of God. God's instruction is that his people should not worship Him the way the other nations worship their gods. (Deut. 12:1-4, 29-32)

Paul spoke of the righteousness which is from God by faith, (Phil.3:9) and it was this he sought to attain. "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected, but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me." (Phil. 3:12) How do you attain this goal? Paul explained justification is about belief in God, faith in His Son's sacrifice and not about circumcision or doing works. Paul states, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Rom.5:1) There is no forgiveness of sin (justification) without the blood of Christ. Circumcision and keeping the whole law will not cleanse you of sin. There are no works you can do that will grant you forgiveness of your sins. Only believing in Christ crucified, as Paul preached to the Corinthians. (1 Cor. 1:23)

Once you are justified, forgiven of your sins, then what? Paul continues in Romans to say, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" (Rom. 6:1) Paul didn't want any confusion and so he states "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!" (Rom. 6:15) And yet Christians today use this very phrase to throw away the law! We are not "under the law" they say!

So what is freedom in Christ, and to what are we no longer enslaved? Paul immediately answers this question. "And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness." (Rom.6:18) Freedom in Christ removed the death penalty we all were under. "The wages of sin is death," (Rom. 6:23) but through faith in Christ's death, our sins are forgiven. That is tremendous freedom!

But we were also enslaved to sin, to practice and follow a life contrary to God's law. "The carnal mind is enmity against God and is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you." (Rom. 8:7-8) We are free again! We have freedom from sin by the Spirit of God in us. And "if you live according to the Spirit and you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God." (Rom. 8:13 -14) We must walk in the Spirit as Paul states often in his letters.

So Paul did not speak against God's law, he showed it teaches us righteousness. Sin is still disobeying God's law. As Jesus said, "I did not come to destroy the Law or the Prophets." (Matt. 5:17) John explains, "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, for sin is the transgression of the law." (1 John 3:4) For those who claim God's commandments are burdensome, John says, "For this is the love of God that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome." (1 John 5:3) Of course not, why would a loving God give us commandments that are burdensome? On the contrary, they teach us how to love God and how to love our neighbor and bring great peace to those who live by them.

I have heard it said that the Sabbath commandment is a burden to those who need to work to survive. Cannot the Creator God who gave us life provide for us all our needs, as He says he will do? What better blessing than a day off work, commanded by the One who can provide for us. But do we believe, as our father Abraham, in God's promises and His word. Abraham believed God, and as James explains, his faith was known by his works. (James 2:14-

26) Abraham left his country as God told him to do, and he also obeyed God's voice, kept His charge, His commandments, statutes and laws." (Gen 12:4, Gen. 26:5) He practiced righteousness.

We have the incredible power of God, His Holy Spirit, dwelling in us, freeing us from the power of walking in sin, to walk in the spirit and practice righteousness. John said, "I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus the Christ, the righteous." (1 John 2:1) If we sin we have forgiveness, but our goal, our life, is to walk in the Spirit and to practice righteousness. "Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching." Heb. 10:25

What is your sport? Is it a life of righteousness, led by obedience to His laws? As Christians, justified through faith in Christ's sacrifice, and now led by the Spirit of God, aim for the reward set before us. Eternal life is the gift of God, the reward of the new covenant in Christ. Let's practice righteousness, press on toward that goal, as Paul did, so that we too may lay hold of it! The race is yours to run!