

“Let Go My Ego”

Ephesians 4:17-24

Sermon Series: Wrestling with God

Week 4: What Gives You the Right to Tell Me How to Live?

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During a sermon on living a virtuous and clean life, a minister decides to drive home his point with an experiment. Four worms are placed into four separate jars. The first worm is put in a container of alcohol. The second worm is dropped in a beaker of cigarette smoke. The third worm is plunged into a container of chocolate syrup. The fourth worm burrows into a jar of good clean soil. At the conclusion of the sermon, the Minister reports the following results:

The worm in alcohol? Dead.

The worm in cigarette smoke? Dead

The worm in chocolate syrup? Dead

The worm in good clean soil? Alive.

So the Minister asks the congregation, “What do you learn from this demonstration?” Sitting in the back, Maxine raises her hand and says, “As long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!”

That story brings up the next wrestling match with God. What gives the Church the right to tell me how to live? At one time, whole nations declared themselves officially Christian. Even in our country, which has no official religion, the Christian culture was dominate for more than two centuries. In these times and places, nearly all viewed the Church as the standard and the guardian of morals. The Church taught what is acceptable and what's not. Governments then turned some of these teachings into law.

This is no longer the case. Today many ignore, resent or outright reject what the Bible or churches say about how to live. Here are two objections from Tim Keller's book:

“Christians believe that they have the absolute truth that everyone else has to believe – or else,” said Keith, a young artist living in Brooklyn. “That attitude endangers everyone's freedom.” “Yes,” agreed Chloe, another young artist. “A ‘one-Truth-fits all’ approach is just too confining. The Christians I know don't seem to have the freedom to think for themselves. I believe each individual must determine truth for him- or herself.”¹

Essentially they are crying, “Let go my ego!” Keep your morality off my body, my mind, my life. The Church or any authority which attempts to force its rules on everyone else will be resisted and rejected. Not only do many disagree with certain Christian teachings

¹ Tim Keller, *Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. p. 35

on how to live, but many accuse Christians of being hypocrites, of not living up to their own moral teachings. Christianity, they claim, is a straitjacket and the enemy of freedom. Everyone should be free to create their own truth.

Let's first admit there is some truth in what they say about the Church. Through the ages when the Church held a position of power, it was used by corrupt people to justify war, abuse and oppression. It was never Jesus' plan to build an earthly kingdom or wield earthly power. He said to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" John 18:36. When the egos of the disciples got out of control,

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Matthew 20:25-28

So **The Church is a Servant Not a Master.** Instead of a clenched fist we reach out with an open hand. Instead of a pointing finger, we offer a helping hand. Instead of standing with condemning looks and crossed arms, we serve with caring words and open arms. Instead of issuing edicts we influence by example.

John Marks, a producer for television's 60 Minutes, was raised as a Born-again Christian, but walked away from the faith. Later, as a journalist he went on a two-year quest to investigate evangelicals and wrote a book called *Reasons to Believe: One Man's Journey Among the Evangelicals and the Faith He Left Behind*. The church's response to Hurricane Katrina became a key reason to believe again. One Baptist church in Baton Rouge fed 16,000 people a day for weeks; another housed 700 homeless evacuees. Years after the hurricane, and long after federal assistance dried up, a network of churches in surrounding states regularly sent teams to rebuild houses. What most impressed Marks, was the way churches served across racial lines in the Deep South. Marks observes:

I would argue that this was a watershed moment in the history of American Christianity ... nothing spoke more eloquently to believers, and to nonbelievers who were paying attention, than the success of a population of believing volunteers measured against the massive and near-total collapse of secular government efforts. The storm laid bare an unmistakable truth. The faith no longer travels by the word. It moves by the deed.²

When the Church is not in charge it can do what Jesus told us to do: serve.

But let's go back to the critics who say Christians impose their morality on others. In actual fact, **Everyone Imposes their Morals on Others.** After a Sunday service a young man greeted the pastor at the door by saying, "There is no such thing as absolute

² Philip Yancey, *The Question That Never Goes Away* (Creative Trust Digital, Kindle Edition, 2013)

truth. Everything is relative.” To which the pastor replied, “Do you believe that absolutely?” All of us believe there are certain behaviors which are unacceptable. Our laws are formal statements of what is acceptable and unacceptable, legal or illegal. People cannot live together in a community without rules which define the boundaries and keep order. Parents know the value of rules. My friend told her children – you may learn about democracy in school but at home you’re not old yet to vote.

That leads to the reality that **Freedom Requires Limits**. It’s assumed that true freedom is the absence of all restraints and restrictions, to do whatever you want. This simplistic view ignores the fact that freedom depends on rules and discipline. My grandsons love to play board games. Seven-year-old Ben knows how to play a board game called Catan Junior. The rules of this child’s version made my head spin. Maybe that’s why Ben crushed me. There was one problem: his brother Isaac. He started playing but, being three-years-old, he got bored with the board game and decided to play by his own rules. Suddenly he morphed into hurricane Isaac and swept all the pieces off the islands. We could not freely play the game so long as even one person did not follow the rules. Freedom also requires discipline. I would not be free to play guitar if I did not discipline myself to learn chords and practice. You cannot be free to do your job if you didn’t put in the hours to master the knowledge and skill required.

By contrast, the freedom to do whatever your ego desires often leads to the opposite of freedom. You are free to eat whatever you want but overeating makes people overweight and subject to diabetes and heart disease. You are free to smoke all you want but it causes COPD and lung cancer. Drink, drugs and other “freedoms” make us slaves. The late Wilt Chamberlain had great numbers as an NBA star, but the number he will probably be remembered for most is 20,000. That’s the number of women the never-married Chamberlain claimed to have slept with in his autobiography. What few may remember though, says columnist Clarence Page, is Chamberlain “went on to write that he would have traded all 20,000 for the one woman he wanted to stay with for keeps.”

The Good news is Jesus came to set us truly free.

Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?” Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:31-36)

Up to now we’ve looked at two ways to live: An Unrestrained Ego – what some today call freedom - and a Rule Restrained Ego – what Religion and Morality attempt to enforce. Both lead to trouble. An Ego without limits makes us slaves to sin. An Ego forced to follow rules will resist and rebel. What Jesus offers is a third option: A Redeemed Ego within. Change cannot be forced from the outside. It has to occur inside.

Jesus not only sets us free from the penalty of sin, He also works, through the Holy Spirit, to free us from the power of sin. Freeing us from the penalty happened once and for all on the Cross. This is what makes us not slaves but children in God's family. This occurs not by our efforts but by God's grace. We are welcomed into His family. The second part occurs over time and it does involve our cooperation with the Holy Spirit. This is where rules come into play. We obey God's rules not for admission into His family, but for attrition of our sin – so the power of sin is gradually worn away. How does this freedom happen? Paul wrote to the Ephesians,

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22-24)

First, Paul tells you to “**Put off your old self.**” We stop living the way we did before we came to know Christ. Paul writes “So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do” (Ephesians 4:17). Becoming a follower of Jesus requires more than covering over your lifestyle with a Christian suit. God wants to break the chains which hold your ego hostage. You and I need to hear the truth about what's going on inside and what we need to eliminate.

Imagine going to the doctor's office for a check-up. The doctor says to you, "You are a magnificent physical specimen. You have the body of an Olympian. You are to be congratulated." Later that day while climbing the stairs, your heart gives out. In the hospital you discover your arteries were so clogged you are one jelly doughnut away from the grim reaper. You go back to the doctor and say, "Why didn't you tell me?" The doctor says, "Well, I knew your body is in worse shape than the Pillsbury doughboy, but if I tell people stuff like that, they get offended. It's bad for business. They don't come back. I want this to be a safe place where you feel loved and accepted." You'd be furious! You'd say to the doctor, "When it comes to my body, I want the truth!" The same is true for our soul and spirit.

What do we need to eliminate? Paul describes the old lifestyle this way:

They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity with a continual lust for more. (Ephesians 4:18-19).

Do you see the progression? Ignorance and curiosity tempt you to try something. It gives you an incredible sensation, a sensual experience. You try a bigger helping. Despite the pleasure, you think you've taken in too much. You vow to give it up. But then you find yourself right back with your hand in the jar. Now it doesn't feel quite as enjoyable so you take an even larger helping. You begin building up a tolerance or, as the Bible says, your heart becomes hard and calloused and you lose all sensitivity. Soon you are freely

indulging and feeling an insatiable, continual desire for more. What begins as a curiosity ends as a curse. What has a hold on you? What do you need to give up?

Step 2: **Let God give you a new attitude in your mind** (v. 23). Paul describes his own transformation this way:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Galatians 2:20

The word “I” in Greek is EGO. The old ego, the old way of living, must be put to death so the new ego, your new identity in Christ, can come alive. The attitude of the world dies, the attitude of Jesus rises up in you. The world says, “Grab.” Jesus says, “Give.” The world says, “Put others down.” Jesus says, “Build others up.” The world says, “Be first.” Jesus says, “The last shall be first and the servant will be the greatest of all.” Imagine how different your family and our community would be if each member served all the others. That’s the new attitude God wants to give you, the attitude of Jesus.

Finally, Paul says, **Put on the New Self** “Put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24). You and I are created in the image of God. But sin and selfishness have so disfigured and covered up the family resemblance to our Father that we can’t see it. You might live your whole life never knowing your Father in heaven is looking for you. He wants to have a relationship with you. He wants to make you part of His family. When you tear off the old selfish ego, take on the new attitude of Jesus and put on the new self, created to be like God, the family resemblance to your heavenly Father starts to shine through.

In November 2000, Coach Jim Fassel of the New York Giants football team went on television to make a now-famous prediction. The Giants were reeling from two consecutive losses. Most believed they were done for the season. But Fassel used his post-game news conference to boldly predict his Giants would make it to the playoffs. Far away from New York, a young man named John Mathieson watched the news conference. As Fassel made his risky prediction, Mathieson turned to Kristi his wife and said: “That’s what I would have done. That guy is doing the right thing. I’d have done the same thing.” Coach Fassel’s prediction came true. They went to the Super Bowl.

Two years later, John Mathieson discovered why he felt such a kinship with the courageous coach of the New York Giants. After an extensive search, Jim and Kitty Fassel called John and revealed he is the child they gave up for adoption 34 years earlier.

The year was 1967; Jim and Kitty Fassel were freshmen in college in Fullerton, California when they met and fell in love. In the late summer of 1968, as they were getting ready to start their sophomore years, they found out Kitty was pregnant. Kitty left southern California to attend a Colorado business school and have the baby. On April 5, 1969, a healthy baby boy was born and three days later given up for adoption.

Even though Jim and Kitty married two years later and raised four more children, the unanswered questions about their firstborn son haunted them. They tried for years to make contact with him but were unsuccessful, until a change in Colorado adoption laws in July of 2002. On Mother's day, May 2003, they spoke on the telephone with John for the first time. Three days later they met face-to-face. The Fassel's reunion with their son, John Mathieson, turned into a genuine reconciliation. Coach Fassel said:

For John, Kitty, and myself, we have lived with an unanswerable question for all these years. If someone had granted us one wish in the world, it would always be to be together and to know things were okay. So today is a miracle.

The family resemblance between Jim Fassel and his long-lost son John is obvious even at a glance. He was unaware he bore the image of his father.³ Coach Jim Fassel called it his "sweetest victory." On the day they met John said, "I've waited my whole life for this. My wife used to tell me that there's always hope, that there is a family that I belong to."

You and I were created to be like God in righteousness and holiness. God didn't give us up. We walked away. Yet your heavenly Father wants a reunion with you. So long as you follow the old self-centered ego, you will never be what you were meant to be. Tear off the old self, take on the attitude of Jesus and put on the new self. Then people will see the family resemblance with your Father. And you will be a miracle.

³ Bill Pennington, "34 Years Later: One Coach's Sweetest Victory," *New York Times* (5-16-03)