

### SESSION 3 NOTES

## What Gives You the Right to Tell Me How to Live My Life? Why Are There So Many Rules?

### Opening Thought

People say, “Every person or culture has to define right and wrong for themselves.” But if you ask them, “Is there anyone in the world right now doing things you believe they should stop doing no matter what they personally believe about the correctness of their behavior?”—they would invariably say, “Yes, of course.” Then the question arises, “Doesn’t that mean that you *do* believe there is some kind of moral reality that is not defined by us, that must be abided by regardless of what a person feels or thinks?”

### The Objection

People say that the Christian belief in an absolute, one-size-fits-all truth that is objectively true for everyone is subversive to our individual and communal freedom. Christianity is an enemy of authentic personhood, social cohesion, and even freedom.

Video Notes — <http://youtu.be/3kdRlzbN-Vg>

### Questions for Discussion

1. **The French philosopher Foucault writes, “Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power.” Foucault is saying that truth claims are power plays. What is your reaction to this statement? Is it true?**

Foucault is saying that when you claim to have the truth, you are trying to get power and control over other people. If for example you made a truth claim such as “everyone should justice,” Foucault would question whether it was because you really love justice or because you want to start a revolution that would give you control. Jesus’ condemnation of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:2-4 makes the same point as Foucault. The Pharisees’ truth claims were a way of getting power over God and other people.

However, one cannot insist that all truth claims are power plays, that all truth claims destroy freedom, for such insistence would itself then be a power play. If you say that all truth claims about religion and God are just

psychological projections to deal with your guilt and insecurity, then so is your statement. To say that no one should make truth claims because they are just power plays is itself a power play. Everybody makes truth claims. It is not making a truth claim that leads to oppression; it is the content of the truth claim and the way it is held that may or may not lead to oppression.

2. **One of the video participants said, “I’m not exactly sure what freedom means.” How do people you know define freedom? What is your definition of freedom?**
3. **Some people argue that Christianity, with its rules and exclusive truth claims, is repressive to both individuals and communities because it divides communities rather than unites them and because it diminishes our humanity by robbing us of our freedom to determine our own path. How would you respond?**

Frankly, this can be true, but only when the resources of Christianity are misapplied.

First, the Christian community is not alone in holding exclusive beliefs. By definition, every community has particular beliefs and practices that are held in common by its members. For example, if you are in the leadership of some political party and then you change your views or position on some matter of importance to that party, you will be asked to leave. That is not intolerance or exclusivity—it is just that every community has goals or beliefs to which they hold people accountable. By definition, all communities are exclusive—but that does not make them intolerant.

Second, people think that what it means to be truly human is to be free to choose their own path, that what liberates humanity is to be free of restraints that dictate how we should live. But in many ways, this idea (that freedom is the absence of restraints) misses the complexity of what freedom is. The video host shared this example: you cannot just eat anything you want—you have to restrict your freedom of diet to get the richer, deeper freedom of good health and longer life. Musicians restrict themselves now (practice) to be released later into the far richer and deeper freedom of being able to perform and express themselves.

The key therefore is not to avoid every kind of restriction and constraint—but to find the constraints that are liberating. If that is true when it comes to vocations, hobbies, sports—why wouldn’t it also be true for the moral and spiritual realms? Freedom is not the absence of restrictions; it is the presence of the right restrictions. The commands laid out in the Bible are not there to limit us or to oppress us, but are the blueprint on how to unleash our full human potential.

Again, the video host illustrated this idea of freedom by referencing a car's designer manual. That manual's rules (i.e., change the oil every 3,000 miles) isn't meant to deceive or oppress the car owner, but rather to provide instruction on how to maximize the vehicle's potential. The instructions aren't busy work; they are absolutely necessary! The same is true in the animal kingdom—a fish must honor its design (living in water) or it will die. Its desire for freedom from all restraints will inevitably result in its demise. So it is likewise true for humanity—human flourishing will be known only if we honor our design and implement the right restrictions.

4. **During the discussion, Dr. Keller summarizes one of the participant's points as, "You, I think, are saying that it is not just Christians, and it is not even religious people, but actually everybody...is working off rules."**

**One of the participants responded, "I've got young kid, so we are busy imposing rules every day...and the rules are empowering."**

**It seems that people do not have a problem with rules in general; but some would say that certain rules in the Bible, such as those about sex, restrict individual freedom. How would you respond?**

First, God defines marriage and sex very carefully. Marriage is the union of one man and one woman, which must be publically acknowledged, permanently sealed, and physically consummated. The Bible envisions no other kind of marriage, nor sex in any other arena. Because sex is a God-invented way to say to another person, "I belong completely and exclusively and permanently to you" (i.e., not "alone" but instead "one flesh" in Genesis 2:18, 24)—it was not intended to be used outside the permanent, exclusive commitment of marriage. That is the designer manual's instruction for human sexuality, in order for human flourishing and full human potential to be known in that area.

Second, people say that God wants to restrict the way we have sex. But don't we *all*? For example, very few people think it is acceptable for adults to have sex with young children. (For another example, see <http://bit.ly/1zdXJRW>.) The issue is finding the right restrictions—the restrictions that will allow us to flourish (as the video put it, that are "in accord with your own design").

5. **One of the video participants said, "I believe there are some rules or stories that basically think that homosexuality is a sin. I think that might be a rule that in spirit was trying to be helpful, but played out in contemporary society can be very problematic." How would you respond?**

Some acknowledgements: (1) When this topic comes up, the rhetoric often gets heated—and those who represent the Christian position are not always respectful of those who disagree, nor do they have sound reasons for their position. (2) We all have ways we think the world should be; and we all have the right to try to contend for those views respectfully. (3) The gospel—that we are saved only by sheer grace—should help Christians do this without self-righteousness, a poor character trait that has been hurtfully directed toward many homosexual people. For an example of how a gospel-centered, gracious Christian might deal with this topic, see <http://bit.ly/Xz3818>.

Now, some biblical considerations. First, homosexuality is not God's original design for sexuality (that is, it is not in accordance with God's designer manual to maximize human potential and flourishing). Sex is designed for marriage between a man and a woman. But that belief should have no impact on a church's or a Christian's desire to love and serve the needs and interests of all their neighbors (Luke 10:29-37), including gay people, people of other faiths, and so on.

Second, note that there is *not* widespread division over what the Bible says about homosexuality. All three branches of Christianity (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant) agree—and the vast majority of Bible scholars have agreed for centuries—on at least four conclusions: (1) that every mention of homosexual practice in the Bible says that it is wrong; (2) that it is specifically prohibited in both the Old and New Testaments; (3) that it did not just reflect the prejudices of the day, but rather cut against the views of ancient cultures; (4) that the whole arc of the Bible begins with a heterosexual marriage (Adam and Eve) and ends with the vision of one (the wedding feast in the book of Revelation).

6. **Aldous Huxley says, "The philosopher who finds no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in pure metaphysics. He is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants to do" (*Ends and Means* [New York: Harper, 1937], 269-273). What are the implications of his line of reasoning.**

Huxley went on to say, "For myself...the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument for liberation...political and...sexual." Huxley was speaking frankly and saying (1) that if there is a God, I'm not free. So, (2) if I'm going to be free, I'll have to decide there is no God. Indeed, if there is no God, then nothing has been created; there is no design. Nothing has an author and everything is meaningless. So he is effectively saying, it is all an accident, it means nothing—that is the price of absolute freedom.

7. **One of the video participants said, “I think...rules...are necessary for freedom. I think we can have an abyss of liberty where there is too much freedom, and then you become paralyzed because there are too many options.” Some people argue that the idea that real freedom is having no restraints or restrictions and being able to do whatever you want does not work. Explain.**

Here are some reasons why this idea of freedom does not work:

First, it is naïve about the complexity of the human heart. People have lots of wants, and they often contradict each other. For example, people often want to eat whatever they like, but they also want good health. Freedom, then, in that scenario, is choosing the right restrictions—contrary to their model, they have to decide which of those wants is the liberating one and which one will bring them into bondage.

Second, it is naïve about the complexity of motivation. We have hundreds of choices every day, usually between good options—why do we choose the ones we do? Every person has an ultimate value, what the Bible often calls an idol. We all believe that if we could just attain that “one thing” (e.g., money or status, etc.) we would find freedom. The trap is, unless that one thing is God, the object of our pursuit ends up controlling us.

Third, it is naïve about the fabric of reality. Reality is like a fabric—there is a pattern, a design to reality that must be honored or the fabric tears or unravels. In our previous illustration, the fish must honor its design—it is designed for water, not for land. That is a restriction. But if it honors its design, it is free to do all it was designed to do.

What are human beings made for? The clue is to look at how human love works. If you are selfish and not married, that is hard. If you are selfish and married, it is a disaster. John Stott put it this way, “True freedom is to be one’s true self, but my true self is made for loving, and loving is self-giving. So in order to be myself, I have to deny myself and give myself. In order, then, to be free, I have to give up my freedom. In order, then, to live, I have to die to my self-centeredness. In order to find myself, I’ve got to lose it.”

Real freedom is not doing what we most want to do. Real freedom is knowing which of the things we most want to do is siding with what we were designed to do. Real freedom is finding the right restrictions, and that is why Jesus says, “If you hold to My teaching...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32); “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39); “Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

8. **The video host said, “It is a little hard to understand how rules actually function inside the Christian faith. They actually don’t operate the same way that rules operate in other philosophical systems or religious systems.” Explain.**

The video host used the illustration of loving a girl and restricting yourself to do what pleases her. That is a natural expression of “true love,” and is a good illustration of how “restrictions” and “rules” work within the Christian faith. He explains, “Traditional religion says if I obey the rules, then God accepts me. Whereas Christianity says that because I believe in Christ who has done everything for me, he has died in my place, I am accepted—and therefore, I obey the rules. ... For Christians the rules are not at the center.”

### **Final Thought**

One of the video participants said, “I don’t have to experience some form of genocide to form an opinion about it. I have this overwhelmingly passionate feeling that any life should be protected if I can step in. Where does that come from? I don’t know where that comes from.”