

Rules in the Christian faith; What they are and are not

Romans 3:20-24

²⁰Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. ²¹But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Today, the topic that I'll be exploring is Christian rules. More specifically, what are Christian rules and how they are not what they seem to be.

We all have encountered rules somewhere in our lives. It is usually a list of Do's and Don'ts. We just played a game of softball and that has rules. It actually has a lot of rules. If you know the umpires on your team, especially the head umpire, I would recommend thanking them for volunteering. If you're interested in what the rules are, I'm sure the head umpire will be more than happy to take on more volunteers for this role.

Rules put down boundaries on what is acceptable and what is not. In softball, it regulates what you are allowed to do. You cannot run around and do whatever you want and then say you scored a home run. It allows fairness and orderly behavior. In the society that we live in, we have the government that enforces these rules so we can have order. When the rules are followed, you are free to do whatever you want. When these laws are broken, penalties follow to encourage the laws to be followed. In the most severe cases, the penalty involves separation from the rest of society because the behavior is so destructive.

In contrast, without rules and regulations, chaos ensues. If any of you watched kids play cops and robbers, you'll know what happens when there are no rules. One kid will shoot, and then they argue whether the other got hit or not. It's also just as bad when the rules are ignored. In certain neighborhoods, it just isn't safe to be outside after dark.

Rules, according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, mean a prescribed guide for conduct or action. It has order in mind, not chaos. It puts an objective distinction between what's acceptable and what's not. The basic requirement for a softball player is that they play by the rules, and the basic requirement for a citizen is that they obey the laws of the land. Similarly, Christianity has rules, it distinguishes what is required to be a Christian, and there are consequences of not following these rules.

So far, nothing seems out of order. Christianity has a standard of requirement, and the details of this standard are accessible through the Bible. The standards are pretty high though, as stated in these two verses of the Bible:

James 2:10-11

¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

So it's no good to keep just one law and break another. You break one law, you're guilty of breaking all of it. The standards of Christianity aren't above average, or almost perfect, or 99.9%, but total perfection.

But what about the consequences? If the standards are so high, then we better find out what the consequences are for not meeting these standards. Part of a verse from the book of Romans reads as such:

Romans 6:23: *For the wages of sin is death.*

The sin here is talking about disobedience to the standards of God, which is what is written in the Bible. The "wages" here is talking about the consequences for sin, and that is death, a very severe penalty. So let me rephrase the verse as such:

"The consequences of disobedience is death."

Although all this seems grim, it still makes sense. Rules, when disobeyed, have consequences. The consequence of disobeying God is death. However, the Bible also contains details of who can avoid death by following the rules perfectly. Let me quote this single line of the Bible found in the book of Romans, chapter 3.

It reads as follows:

²⁰Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

The law in this passage talks about the rules and regulations of the Bible. The term "righteous" here is talking about acting in accordance with this law. It means someone that did not ever sin, did not ever break a single rule. It also means law abiding. So let me rephrase part of the sentence as such:

Therefore no one will be declared [law abiding] in his sight by observing the law;

This is an even more grim declaration. The Bible presents a lot of rules. If you break one, you are guilty of breaking them all. The consequence of breaking these rules is death, and it also states that "no one will be declared righteous". The sentence then continues with specifics to what this "law" actually does. Let me re-read the passage again:

"Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

So after all these rules and regulation, the only conclusion about what any of it does is, it makes us “conscious of sin”. It makes us aware of how wrong we are. It is not even possible to attain the standard by observing the law. So what's the point of all this? Why even give us rules and regulations that we cannot keep?

This is where Christianity and its rules set itself apart from every other set of rules that you will encounter. For every other set of rules, it is about you obeying them, you following them. Christianity, right away, tells you that you have no capacity to fulfill these rules. If this is all Christianity is, then it is a not worth listening to, because it is only futility. So if your mind is starting to drift, then I would rather you forget everything than to remember just the parts up to now.

So how does the Bible continue after that grim declaration of our inability to follow these rules? Let me re-read that verse and continue a bit further:

Romans 3:20-24

²⁰Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. ²¹But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Now this is something worth hearing! Since we cannot fulfill the regulations, God has provided another means to attain righteousness, or in other words, to become law abiding people instead of lawbreakers. To no longer need to fear the consequence of death because we're not law breakers, but law abiding people! To no longer need to worry that the “wages of sin is death”. In the same book of the Bible, in chapter 4:4-5, it reads as follows:

Romans 4:4-5

⁴Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

So the response to the Christian rules and regulation is not “Ok, I think I can do this”, but instead, it is “I am completely unable to do this. God, you need to do this on my behalf so I don't have to face the penalty of death.” This passage specifically says “his faith is credited as righteousness”. Righteousness isn't earned, it is a gift! Let me re-read it with emphasis on the contrast between an obligation, and a gift.

Romans 4:4-5

⁴Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

And how do we know that righteousness is a gift? Remember the previous passage saying “For the wages of sin is death”? Let me finish the whole sentence:

Romans 6:23: For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Bible is plain and clear! The gift of God is eternal life, which is the complete opposite of death. If disobedience means death, then obedience, or righteousness, is eternal life! So the ability to be righteous and attain eternal life doesn't start with us, but God. When we look at the rules in the Bible, it isn't a means to earn eternal life as a wage, but evidence and guidelines as to what the path to complete righteousness looks like. It is what you can expect God to be doing to shape your life. The rules are no longer expectations for you to meet, but a foretelling of God's work in your life. The promise of eternal life, and a life that is good, meaningful, without worries, all credited to you as a gift, not as a wage or something for you to earn.

Are you finding yourself failing to meet your personal expectations? Are there areas of your life that you just can't seem to control? God knows about our inability to live up to a perfect standard, so He has presented the ability to live a good and perfect life as a gift to all of us, and this gift is accepted by looking at Jesus Christ and asking him to do for us, what we cannot do for ourselves. To be credited with righteous, escape the penalty of death, and attain the gift of eternal life.

This devotion can be found at:

www.cgygfellowship.com

Under the "Softball" section, subheading "Devotionals".