

Narrow Is The Way

God's Law Is a Hedge

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In 1976 Evelyn and I were in Nashville for the wedding of our daughter Carol to Mike Ford and while we were there in Nashville we made the obligatory trip to Opryland. I came away thinking that is the best theme park I have ever been in. It is not the rides or anything. It is the theme of the park because the theme is music and I relate to music very strongly and I was very impressed by the things that I heard that day.

But in 1976 it was this nation's bicentennial year and many of the musical offerings that they had at that time had to do with American music. There was one of a very serious nature and it was in the place where they hold the Grand Ole Opry (in the new Opry house though), and it was called Liberty Song. In it a narrator provided a background of historical material that led to the next medley of songs and what they were doing was showing how the music reflected the mood, the attitude, and the events that were going on in the United States from the time beginning long before 1776 but leading up through '76 and on up through the Civil War and up to the present time.

One that really impressed me was about halfway through the program. The narrator was walking around on the stage as though he were having a conversation with an invisible Abraham Lincoln. You could not hear Abraham Lincoln speak. You could only know to whom the man was talking by the words that he was saying. That presentation ended with these words—he said, "The essence of liberty is free choice."

That is a biblically true statement but I think that we all realize that Americans have perverted that principle to one which allows a person to believe and virtually practice almost anything one wants, to the extent that we have a nation today that is on the verge of economic, religious, and political bondage.

A couple of weeks ago we heard a sermon by Harold Way in which he said that a slave is a person who has few or no choices. He is a person whose life is directed by others. Perhaps even to the extent that even the most mundane things of life, like telling the person when he can eat and what he can eat and how much he can eat and when he can go to the bathroom—when he can do anything. That is a definition of a slave, and that definition is certainly true, but the freedom the Bible teaches us has some peculiar and sometimes very unexpected twists to it that one must understand if one is not going to fall into the trap that the Israelites did in the wilderness.

Biblical liberty is not the same as the liberty mankind generally understands and seeks for. It must be understood that nobody is entirely free to do whatever he pleases. There are always forces that constrain one to submit to its direction. These forces make us do things, not always but frequently. This is not always bad either. Sometimes forces make us do things that are good. In the biblical sense, the critical factor for all is for each person to have the ability to choose what he allows to constrain him to submit.

Did you get that? The word "constrain" means to force or to compel. It also means to draw to, and very frequently we are drawn to decisions by evidence that we receive and sometimes we are drawn to decisions that are not right at all.

Let us go back into the New Testament to Galatians 5. I just happened to think while I was turning here of Flip Wilson, who very frequently was saying, 'The Devil made me do it.' Everybody would laugh. Do you know why everybody laughed? Because everybody has made that excuse. Everybody can relate to that. "A force constrained me to do what I did." That is not biblical liberty. The Christian is to be in control of what he allows himself to be constrained or compelled or drawn by whenever he makes his decisions.

Galatians 5:1 Therefore, stand fast [Does that not give you the impression of 'do not let forces constrain you'? That has to be understood within the context of what he is talking about here.], therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.

Paul's thought here, when he was writing to the Galatians, was because he was hearing things about these people that were not very pleasing to him and so he said, "stand fast," plant your feet, gird yourself, tense yourself up, be stressed so that you are not just blown about. The people to whom he was writing had the liberty to choose. They could have done anything that they wanted to do but he warned them: "do not make certain choices," because it would inhibit their liberty. Even though they were free to make them, it was as though he were begging them, "*Don't do it*, because you're going to pull yourself into bondage."

Within the context of the book and of what we understand of history, these people were attempting to be justified by law keeping. It cannot be done and it would prove to be an exercise in futility. Human nature wants to be drawn along by what it has always done by habit. Human nature has a very strong tendency to resist change, especially if that change is for the better. This is why Jesus made the remark that He did there in Luke 5 where He said that new wine has to be poured into new wine bottles. Then He went on to say that the new wine will break the old bottles but the new bottles would be able to expand with the new wine that was in them. And then He concluded that by saying that people will say that the old wine is better. Human nature does not want to make a change, especially if it is for the better.

This verse here in Galatians 5:1 shows us a principle, and that is that making wrong choices is what brings a person into bondage in the first place. While spiritually all of us have gotten into bondage through ignorance, we did not even realize it was happening. It began when we were very young, and even if our parents were converted, it is very likely that they did not do a great deal to deflect the force that was compelling you, or your children, to move in a certain direction.

All of us have gotten into bondage to sin through ignorance of what has been going on. We did not realize that Satan was broadcasting by his spirit and that our spirit was picking up his attitudes and that we were replicating those attitudes into action that is very similar to what Satan would have done under a similar circumstance and so his deceptions, of which we were ignorant, were pulling us into a life of sin.

So human nature was compelled, forced, drawn into living the same way everybody else was—everybody in the culture. Everybody's personality put a slightly different twist on things but as the way God would see it everybody was basically going a way that was enmity against Him. So that is what culture tends to do—it tends to pull us, draw us, and compel us to go along with it.

It is a matter of fact that ignorance is a root cause of very much bondage, whether it is physical or spiritual. But it is God's purpose to remove ignorance so that we will be enabled to be free to make choices on an informed basis and then if we fall into bondage, shame on us. We should know better.

I Corinthians 2:7-8 We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

They were ignorant, and their ignorance with the compelling pressure, the force of Satan, and human nature, moved them to make the choice to kill the God of creation.

Now answer this simple question: Would you, knowing what you know, make the choice to do that? Of course not! Because the revelation of God has removed the compelling force of ignorance and now you *know* and because you know you have the liberty—you are free to make a choice you were not free to make before. See what I am getting at here?

I Corinthians 2:9 But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." [Isaiah 64:4]

What he is basically saying is that we are not physically equipped to discern, to gather the knowledge that would remove this kind of ignorance, but God reveals it to us. So all the while that ignorance is there, that is, before the revelation of God; we are compelled to go in a certain direction.

I Corinthians 2:10-14 But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words that man's wisdom teaches but that the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. [Which we could not do very well before.] But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Did you notice how frequently the word 'know' appeared in that context? There was a time that we did not know God, we did not know His purpose, and we did not know His plan. We did not know about the Sabbath. We may have known of its existence, but we did not know of its importance. We were ignorant of that. We did not know of the holy days. There was a time when we knew almost nothing about the Bible, but God has revealed these things in order to break the bondage our ignorance of Him imposed upon us.

Are you beginning to see why Jesus said that eternal life is to know God? It is to be free to make the right choices that lead to eternal life but our former ignorance constrained us to a very great extent to live in a way that brought us even greater bondage. Those of us who are a little bit older, in our 50s and 60s especially, can look back on a time when we lived in the United States and look at it, at least comparatively, as a time of innocence compared to the way it is now.

It was not innocent! It was just that people had a greater respect for the Word of God and they had a more serious approach to its application to life, but as that waned, the ignorance of God, of the Bible, of making right choices has waned with it. As it has, the choices have become increasingly wrong and all of society, the whole culture, is coming up like a big mushroom cloud. Some day it is going to explode in immorality that is almost beyond belief—as evil

men wax worse and worse. It is not that men are any worse, but the increase in immorality keeps getting greater and greater because we are losing knowledge of what sin is.

I tell you, in 1940 you would have never seen a movie in a movie theater like is commonly shown to teenagers today. If you want to see the difference, just get out something like a 1930s, late 30s, early 40s movie and compare it to some R-rated movie, any R-rated movie.

Galatians 4:8 But then, indeed, when you did not know God [They were ignorant of Him.], you served those which by nature are not gods.

The context here involves the worship of the true God but the principle of how ignorance constrains us is shown. When one does not know any better, then one does just what everybody else is doing or what seems to be right at that particular occasion.

The possibilities of individual expression are almost limitless. It is limited only by the possibilities of how many variations on a theme are possible. If you want to start thinking about variations on a theme, just stop to think that there are only eight notes; do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do. Look at how many variations you can get from eight sounds.

There are 5 billion people on earth and about 99.9 percent of them are ignorant of God. Now right here is where there comes one of those unexpected biblical twists regarding liberty and that is that the knowledge of the truth is very limiting in terms of right choices that it offers to those who understand it. This is because we find that truth generally reveals that there is one way that exceeds all others as a choice. It all comes down to simple things, does it not? Right, wrong. And in many cases, especially in terms of morality, there is only one answer—Do not. There might be ten billion maybes or possibilities or do it that human nature can come up with.

This is a great childrearing principle to understand. Who is the greatest childrearing expert in the entire universe? There is nobody who knows how to raise kids like God does. He understands human nature inside and out, and He says here in Proverbs 22:6.

Proverbs 22:6 Train up a child in the way he should go [Did you get that: In the way he *should* go.], and when he is old he will not depart from it.

Now the word 'train' is really interesting. Do you know what it means? It means "narrow in." It means "hedge your kid in." Do you know what he is saying? I am going to make it very plain. God is telling parents: "Don't allow your kids to have a lot of choices because it causes confusion." Parents want to let their kids grow up and let them choose which religion they are going to have—S-T-U-P-I-D. They do not know any better. You are the one who is responsible to hedge them in and make that kid go in this direction. That is what God says, hedge them in, and train them up in the way they should go. Now we might say that there is a wrong way and a right way to do that but we will not get into that. I just want to mention this principle.

When God began things with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, He did not give them a complex law with all kinds of oodles and oodles of fine points. "You can eat from all of those trees, but this tree over here—do not eat from it. If you eat from this tree over here you will have life. If you eat from this tree over here, it is going to kill you." That does not seem hard, does it?

It was not complicated. God is a wise Parent. There was a right and there was a wrong, it is that simple. Guess who it was who came in and said, "Oh, God's withholding from you; there are far more choices than that. Why, if you take from this tree over here it's going to make you wise and when you take from this tree look at how many more choices you're going to have because it's going to make you wise. Oh, did God say you were going to die? Forget about it. You won't die." It is simple rights and wrongs.

God's basic premise regarding law has not changed. Why then are they so complex? Why are there so many gray areas? Why do you have to be a lawyer to understand law? Why do we have to be afraid to conduct our life in this world without a lawyer somewhere close at hand or an accountant so that they can explain things to us? It is because of human nature—it keeps coming up with all kinds of variations on a theme to get around the law.

The truth of the matter is this: The twist on liberty is that knowing truth severely limits one's choices if you want to do right. In other words, when God gives us liberty He is taking away probably about 99 percent of the choices that we would have if we continued living carnally. I do not know whether 99 percent is accurate or not but I am just trying to set a proportion of some kind so that we will understand.

Have we not been taught that it is the slave whose choices are limited and it is the free man who has many choices? It is not really that way, is it? It is the one who is free whose choices are limited by a Creator who loves him.

Now let me show you an example of how following God actually limits a person's choices if one is going to follow God and do what He says.

Numbers 11:4-10 Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: "Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but [Here we are free men, God has set us at liberty.] now our whole being [life, soul] is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!" Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color like the color of bdellium. The people went about and gathered it, ground it on millstones or beat it in the mortar, cooked it in pans, and made cakes of it; and its taste was like the taste of pastry prepared with oil. And when the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna fell on it. Then Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, everyone at the door of his tent; and the anger of the Lord was greatly aroused; Moses also was displeased.

When one understands that manna symbolized the Word of God, there is a powerful lesson here in regard to free choice. Jesus used manna in John 6 to represent Him—the *living* Word. We read it on Passover at the service that we are to eat of Him; we are to drink of Him. Words are food for the mind and they become the basis for thinking and belief, and therefore a host of things that are very important to life.

We have all heard the cliché that "variety is the spice of life." That may indeed be true but the question is, how much spice does one need in his life? If you want to take a tip from God and what He fed the children of Israel in the wilderness, it is very clear God was not impressed by variety. Now do not let it go spread abroad that Ritenbaugh is saying we should not have a variety in our food. We are looking at this spiritually. Remember this manna represents what feeds the mind, what feeds the spirit. So as far as what feeds the mind is concerned, the variety was limited to what could be done with the *one* product He supplied—His Word.

What feeds the mind may very well be the most important area of life when one thinks about the almost overwhelming variety of books, magazines, athletics, entertainments (like movies and television), and those things that are available—all of them filtering in through the mind becoming part of the food that becomes part of the process of decision-making—then one surely has to wonder how many of them are truly good for food in a mind that is being transformed into the image of God. I will make it real plain. What God is saying is that the only food that He really puts His stamp of approval on, the only food for the mind, is His Word and that is it.

Solomon said:

Ecclesiastes 7:29 Truly, this only have I found: That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

God made us capable of many things but we have twisted it and perverted it. That is what He means by schemes, inventions. He is showing us that our mind is capable of producing an almost unlimited variety of inventions. So you see, Solomon is questioning, "How many of them are really good?" Do you see what I mean about the choices being limited by this God? The only Word He really endorses, the only reading material, the only thing He endorses is His living Word—His Son and the written Word.

This again does not mean we cannot read other things, but I am showing you we really have to be thoughtful about what goes into our mind. Do you see how the choices are limited? That is what the liberty that comes from God does. God hedges us in because having all these choices, brethren, is not

good. What is bad about it? It introduces confusion, so that our mind cannot be fixed on one thing—attaining to His Kingdom.

Let us go to Romans 6. Something I have not mentioned to this point and that is that we are still slaves.

Romans 6:16-20 Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free [from] righteousness.

Let me reinforce back in Matthew 7:13 what becoming the slave of righteousness does, becoming the slave of God. This will reinforce Proverbs 22:6. You can see that it makes a great deal of difference which master is giving us choices. The bad master gives us many choices because he wants to confuse us. The good master cuts the choices away and narrows us in so that we can think clearly and make the right choice.

Matthew 7:13-14 "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

You think Jesus did not preach the same thing that was in the Old Testament? He sure did, He was the one who inspired the Old Testament. He is the one who caused Proverbs 22:6 to be written. And I will tell you, it is going to be the wise parent who limits his children's choices, especially the younger they are. They are just not capable of handling it. It throws their mind into confusion. I have been in people's houses where there have been literally rooms full of toys for those kids to play with. That is too many

choices. A kid would do far better with a refrigerator box and not have all those choices. All he has is a refrigerator box. He can make it into a fort. He can make it into a house. He can slide down the hill on it. He has plenty of choices just with a refrigerator box. Fun times, our kids had a lot of fun with refrigerator boxes.

The bad master's many choices produce the broad way of life and the good Master's fewer choices produce the difficult and narrow way of life.

The story of the children of Israel coming out of Egypt is told in political terms but that was symbolic so that we would understand that the real issue of abundant living is spiritual. The real issue involves elements that are internal and invisible and yet far more important than that which is external and visible.

Matthew 4:4 says that man is to live by every word of God. That was extracted from Deuteronomy 8:3 so it is not a New Testament concept by any means. Man has a spiritual element in his makeup and it is internal and it is invisible and it can be influenced by a number of factors, such as words. Our spirit is affected by beauty. Children should be surrounded by beauty, as much as lies within us. A disorderly house creates confusion.

Music has a powerful influence on our spirit. Music can send us soaring into the heights or it can send us into the depths. It can put evil impulses into our minds or it can soothe us—whatever.

The major issue for our well-being is what external spirit being—they are external to us and they are invisible—are we permitting to compel us to make choices? Which spirit being are we choosing as our master? When we began our lives, we had little or no choice, so we were under the influence of Satan from the get-go and that was really one of the issues that were revealed at the Garden of Eden.

In Deuteronomy 30:11-20 God makes the issue very clearly defined. He says, "This day I have set before you life on the one hand, death on the other." Sounds just like the Garden of Eden. The choices regarding life are much fewer than the choices regarding death. It begins to become a very simple issue that revolves around the Ten Commandments. We do not have

really very much to learn in this regard. To be moral or immoral, and if we are going to be moral our choices are limited by those ten things. Ten laws that are spiritual, that are eternal, and that are living. They are, in a sense, invisible but we can allow them to impact on our life and so God commands us, "choose life." He does not give us a choice as to *what* it is we are to obey, because He has already determined that.

You see, He has limited it because He knows what works and He knows what does not work, and so He tells His children, "choose this one." The choices might not always be easy because human nature does not want to change. Sometimes we have to grit our teeth and set our will to go in a certain direction because human nature will come up with justifications as to why we should equivocate, shave the truth, cut the corners, but in almost every case what we need to do really is clearly seen. It is etched in those ten laws and it comes down to simple right or wrong.

Romans 6:21-22 What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, eternal life.

You see, there is the choice. It is the equivalent to Deuteronomy 30 where God said to choose life. God has freed us, not to give us many choices, but actually to limit the choices and to remove the ignorance and increase our knowledge of Him and His way.

We are never going to feel the freedom or have the political freedom like Israel did because God's purpose for us now is different from what it was then. But what we witness in this Babylon as it careens to its destruction is limitless choices and human nature unrestrained in choosing. You do not want to go that way with the knowledge that He has given to us. And only those who have been freed to choose and have rightly chosen consistently are going to be in His Kingdom. And that is where we will really know that we are free because then all the shackles that bind us to humanity and sin and all of their consequences will be stripped from us because we will be like Christ.