

Liberty of Conscience, Part 1

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Bible Text: Isaiah 29:13-14; Matthew 15:1-20

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Lord, help me, your imperfect, fallible, finite, fallen servant, to open my mouth with boldness, and would you fill it with the very words of scripture animated by the Holy Spirit so that we may hear Jesus saying to us again, "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest." Lord, hear our prayer. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, I want us to look at this passage of scripture and you will notice that in the margin of verse 13 it says Colossians 2:22, and so Colossians 2:22 and also the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 15, quotes this passage of scripture where Isaiah says, "Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men." So why don't we begin with Matthew 15, if you'll turn there in your Bibles, Matthew 15, and let's see what Jesus says about this passage of scripture. Let me give you that reference, Matthew 15, and that is on page 1,521. Now notice in context that Jesus says in verse 7:

"You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." And you can see at the bottom of the page little footnote 9, Isaiah 29:13.

Now let's think about this for a moment. You know, I happen to believe that the best summary of the Christian faith that human beings have ever written was written in the 1600's during a time of great trouble in England with the English civil war, and that's the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. I want to read you chapter 20 and paragraph 2 of that statement "Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience."

"God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word."

Now we've looked at that concept before as we were studying before Christmas, "God and Government," and the basic rule we discovered is this:

When an authority, no matter who that authority is, commands you to do that which is contrary to scripture, what should you do?

Respectfully decline to obey. What if they kill you? It's okay. It is okay. It's far better to have your life snuffed out instantly in this life immediately to come into the presence of the Lord where there's no more pain, no more suffering, no more trouble. So, death for the believer is always gain. As St. Paul said, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

So here is the basic rule of thumb regarding civil government: When they tell you, you can do this and you can't do that, if obeying them means contradicting God's word, violating scripture, you must disobey government.

Now how do you do it? Summing up what I said in about three sermons on this, the way you do it is you fly under the radar, you're very polite, you're very respectful, you implore the person to allow you at that point to obey God rather than men.

But I'm telling you, if things continue as I see them, there is coming a time when churches that want to follow scripture are going to face being shut down. That's what I think. I'm not a prophet, but I do read a variety of news sources in this country and in other countries, and I am a student of history. If things continue on the way they are, in the future we will not be able to be a biblical church without great repercussions, primarily in the form of taxation. If you took away the tax status of a charitable organization, a 501(c)(3) corporation, you will eventually shut them down. Think of the value of this piece of property or suppose the government decided to tax the property across the street, Texarkana Community College. What if they levied property taxes on it to such a degree that it was paying the same taxes as you may pay on your home. The power to tax is the power to destroy. So, what do you do? Let them take it. What is this? It's just bricks and wood. They can't destroy the church of the living God (1 Corinthians 6:7; Matthew 16:18).

I remember a hymn that I tried to teach us during the time that we foolishly shut down during COVID, and I repent of that. I think we should have continued to meet but taken real precautions not to contaminate others. But during that time, I introduced a hymn, "Built on the Rock the Church doth stand even when temples are falling." It's a great Lutheran hymn. "Built on the Rock," that is, Jesus Christ, "the church doth stand even when temples are falling." Buildings are destroyed but the church of Jesus Christ will

continue, and as someone wrote many centuries ago, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the saints.

When Mao Zedong and his followers forced the Christians out of China, all the missionaries left and there were roughly, at that time, four million Christians of any stripe whatsoever. Take the whole range of Christian denominations from cults to true Bible believing churches, there were about four million Christians. But what happened over the next years?

When I went into Communist China in 1981 to smuggle Bibles, breaking their laws gladly and willingly and deliberately but very carefully and surreptitiously, I discovered there were roughly 50 million Christians in China. Fifty million. Wow.

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the saints, and I just share this quick story. When we were going to smuggle the Bibles, we met in Hong Kong with a lady who had been imprisoned along with her professor husband, and the Red Guards had come to their house and demanded that their children renounce Jesus Christ and put their trust in Chairman Mao and *The Little Red Book*.

When their oldest son refused, the soldiers took the butt of a rifle and hit him in the lower back where his kidneys were so that they ruptured, and he died.

Now that lady whose name was Mrs. Quang, what was the remarkable thing about her? She was a loving person. She did not hate the Communists. She hated Communism, but she didn't hate the Communists. She did not hate atheists. She loved atheists, but she hated atheism. And she was the one that prayed for us, and we were told, "Go back to your room and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you whether you should smuggle Bibles or not."

There were seven people in our group, including a Roman Catholic priest, and of that group six of us felt led by the Holy Spirit to smuggle Bibles. We each had 40 Bibles in our suitcases. Forty Bibles. When we got to the airport in Beijing, I noticed something happened: None of us was searched by the people at the airport in Beijing but one person.

They opened up his suitcase. They went through absolutely everything and what did they find? Absolutely nothing, because he prayed, and he felt a check in his spirit not to take any Bibles.

Now when we disobey government, we do so surreptitiously, sub-rosa, that's under the table. We do it sneakily, we do it being friendly and joking, trying not to show nervousness, and we do it because we ought always to obey God rather than men and that's what the apostles of Christ said when they were

called to account by the government, “We must obey God rather than a man” (Acts 5:29; Cf. Acts 4:19).

And so, in this statement, which I believe is profoundly biblical, God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his word.

But where are we going today? It’s the next one, it says, “or beside it in matters of faith and worship.” Beside it in matters of faith and worship. What does that mean?

It means that this church cannot command you to do that which the Bible does not command you to do. I want to say it again. This isn’t about disobeying ungodly commands; this is about obeying a church authority when it commands you to do something that isn’t in the Bible.

So, if a preacher ever says to you, or a group of elders says to you, or a presbytery, or a synod, or a general assembly, or a diocese, or the pope in Rome, if they ever tell you, “You must do this,” you need to be able to say, “Sir, where is that in the Bible?” And if they can’t point you to the Bible, what they’re telling you is of no account.

Let me read again what the *Confession of Faith* says:

“God alone is Lord of the conscience. He’s left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.”

So if I tell you, “You’d better believe this,” or if I, like Jim Jones, the famous preacher who was in the Disciples of Christ and had the People’s Temple in San Francisco where prominent politicians often attended, including Rosalynn Carter, the first lady of the United States, and I were to say to you as I throw the Bible out of the pulpit, as Jim Jones did, “Get your eyes on me! Too many of you have your eyes on that book!” Wow.

Do you know what you need to do at that point? You need to get out of there because you know what’ll happen next? The man was confiscating their Social Security checks, and he got a bunch of them to travel down to Guyana, an English-speaking colony on the northern part of South America where they established a “paradise.” The trouble is that eventually he went stark raving mad because he was a demon-possessed preacher and, believe me, there are plenty of those around.

And so, he had his workers mix into the Kool-Aid, poison, and finally when investigators arrived, they found over 900 people lying dead, their bloated bodies in and around the jungle because of the poison.

I remember that, and I remember opening up a conservative magazine and they referred to the man as a fundamentalist. He wasn't a fundamentalist; he was a fun-damn-mentalist, and what I'm saying there is this:

Jim Jones did not believe the Bible was the word of God. He did not hold to a single essential of the Christian faith. He was not a Christian. But you see how the press often takes an issue, and they twist it to make it sound a certain way—because you need to understand something: This world is not a friend of grace, and people who have never been born again oftentimes allow their own prejudices and biases to get into their writings in such a way that they write deliberately to distort what you're reading, so that what you're reading is actually a lie. I remembered that. I remembered that. Wow.

He was not a fundamentalist. He hated the Bible. He hated the Lord Jesus Christ of scripture. He didn't believe in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. He didn't believe that Christ died for our sins. He was a charlatan and a conman.

So, when somebody commands you to do that which is evil, disobey no matter who it is, but when somebody begins to tell you to do things, and they're a religious leader, and you say, "But Pastor Jones, show me that in the Bible," he can't. Would it amaze you if I told you that most preachers don't really study the Bible?

"Are you kidding?" No, I'm not kidding. Most preachers don't really study the Bible. There are all kinds of tools out there, particularly now with the internet, where they can steal somebody else's sermon, and it's amazing. I never trust anybody else, to rely on anybody else's sermon. I want to dig it out for myself. How many preachers are that way? Not a lot.

So, when a preacher says, "You shouldn't do that. You shouldn't do that. You can't be in this church if you do that." Do you know what? Get out of that church! Get out of that church.

"Or beside it, in matters of faith and worship." Now let's see how this is so biblically expressed. You see what's going on in Matthew 15 is that in verse 1, "Some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!'"

Now I believe in washing my hands before I eat, in fact, there's a little bit of Lady Macbeth in me. You know the story, "Out, out, damned spot!" (William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene 1) She's washing her hands because she's guilty of the murder of a man, "Out, out!"

But this is a religious thing. This was a matter of tradition. This was ceremonial cleaning. And notice what Jesus said, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?" (Matthew 15:2)

Let me tell you something, when churches command people to do things that there's no biblical warrant for, it won't be long before they excuse people for breaking God's commandments. And basically, to sum up what he says here is this—and reading in the Talmud is an amazing experience. There's even a recorded prayer for successful evacuation of one's bowels. The Talmud writes out all of these traditions that were around in Jesus' day, and many more, and in there they had a deal.

Let's suppose that you're a young man, and God's word commands you to make sure your mom and dad are okay, but if you said to them regarding some money of yours, "It's korban," that is, it is a gift dedicated to God, just saying those words, exempted you from your obligation to obey your parents and to provide for them. It's pretty amazing, and that's why he goes and says there in verse 6, "He is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus, you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you," and that's when he quotes from Isaiah 29.

And listen to what Jesus says. Have you ever had people tell you it's a sin to partake of a particular substance? Have you ever heard anybody tell you that? Listen to what he said in verse 10:

"Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'"

Then the disciples come to Jesus in verse 12, page 1,522, "Then the disciples came to him and asked, 'Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?'"

I deliberately put things on the internet to provoke people to think, and do you know that sometimes those things make people angry with me. Do you know that I—over the years, and I've been preaching as a licensed preacher since 1965—that I've said a lot of things over the years that offended people? Can you imagine that?

What did Jesus say? “Oh, I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to offend those folks. Those are good Bible believing people.” Now the Pharisees believed they were Bible believing people, but they really weren’t and listen to what he says in verse 13:

“He replied, ‘Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.’”

Now do you see what Jesus is saying? The leadership of many denominations, including those who don’t think they’re a denomination, if you look at 1 Corinthians 1 and 3, those who were the most denominationalistic of all were the ones that said, “We’re not a denomination. We’re of Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:12).

So, what happens? He’s saying they’re blind. Any group of religious people who tell you you’ve got to do this or can’t do that, and it’s not based on God’s word, they’re blind leaders.

Now listen, Peter then asked, “Explain the parable to us.” So, in verse 16 Jesus says:

“Are you still so dull? Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean’; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him ‘unclean.’”

Now let’s go to the other place in the New Testament where Isaiah 29 is cited, and that’s Paul in Colossians 2, if you’ll turn there, and look there at page 1,834 in verse 16, Colossians 2:16:

“Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink.” What does that mean? Well, he’s drawing a conclusion. He’s saying that when the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross, he blotted out the curse of the law. When the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross, he wiped out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, and we’ll see some of that in a moment (Colossians 2:14). And he says:

“Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.” (Colossians 2:16)

What should you do on the Sabbath day? As I survey the New Testament, what you should do on the first day of the week, which I will say is the Christian Sabbath, but it's not the same as the Sabbath of the Old Testament.

The Sabbath under the Old Testament was very strictly observed from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday.

So, people read, for example, in the book of Acts that when Paul and others went into a strange town, they looked for the synagogue, and they attended the synagogue services on the Jewish Sabbath. Why did they do that?

Well, it would be like somebody deciding to come attend worship services at Trinity Evangelical Presbyterian Church and coming tomorrow afternoon. They'd beat on the door. They wouldn't find anybody here. And so, the apostles, as they were missionaries in the Gentile world, went to the Jewish synagogues on the Jewish Sabbath.

Well, what about the first day of the week? That's obviously when the church worshiped as we read in Acts. They gathered together on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Well, how should you do it?

I'm going to say that our *Westminster Larger Catechism* overstates it (WLC, Answer 117). I cannot conclude from the Bible that it's sinful to engage in recreation on the Lord's Day. There's nothing wrong with taking a walk. There's nothing wrong with pitching a softball in the backyard with your child or bouncing a basketball with your grandson. None of those things are wrong. We should rest and enjoy that which helps us reboot our brains. We should attend worship because scripture commands us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together after the manner of some (Hebrews 10:25). We should gather with the Lord's people but what is he saying?

He says don't let anybody sit in judgment of you regarding these Old Testament things: a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day (Colossians 2:16).

And this is what he says about them, this is the way you can think of the entirety of the Old Testament with its ceremonies and religious laws. Listen to what he says:

"These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Colossians 2:17). Should Christians observe the Passover today? The answer to that is yes and no.

If you were invited by a Jewish friend to attend the Passover—first of all, they're breaking the law unless, if you're a man, if you have not been

circumcised, they cannot partake of the Passover with you (Exodus 12:48). But let's suppose they do, should you go? Sure. And what should you do? You should pray as they are observing the Passover:

“Lord, give me an opportunity to share the substance of this, the reality of this,” because the Passover meal is only a shadow.

Just as my hand casts a shadow, I'm not going to climb up on the pews to cast a shadow, but just as my hand casts a shadow, the reality is my hand, the shadow is something that lets you know there's something blocking the light.

So, he's saying of all of these ordinances of the Old Testament whether it's circumcision or the Passover or Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, they are all a shadow of the things to come but the reality to which they point is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now look at verse 18. This is very important.

“Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize.” What's he saying? There are people that want to tell you stories, “Well, I saw this. I've been to heaven. I've that. I've that.” And they want to bind your conscience and get you to delight in their wonderful stories.

Just this past week as a favor to a friend, I listened to a person broadcasting, and this person described heaven. “I've been there over a thousand times,” she said. Do you know what she described? Disney World. I'm not kidding. Disney World. You know, this scripture warns about people like that who are bloated with their own self-importance and have become insane.

That woman has not been to heaven over a thousand times. That woman said that she rode a roller coaster in heaven, and as it went up it was just going out over in space and then landed way over somewhere else.

She described a place made out of Jell-O where children enjoyed playing. You know, everyone that I've ever known who's had an out-of-body experience, their experience lines up with what I read in the book of Revelation and in Isaiah. God is awesome. His majesty is overwhelming, and when people are in heaven, they're compelled to worship the Lord, not to try to titillate their own senses and enjoy life.

So, he says, “Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions” (Colossians 2:18).

Now what does Paul say about such a person? Verse 19, “He has lost connection with the Head.”

Notice that our translators had capitalized the word “Head” because they’re referring to deity. When a person begins to focus on carnal things and holds out a carnal reward to you and me for serving Christ, what have they done? They’ve chopped off the head of Jesus. They’ve disconnected themselves from Jesus, because Jesus is about teaching us to worship our Lord God, to worship him with reverence and with awe.

And then he says in verse 19, “He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.”

What’s the most important thing in the Christian life? Staying connected to Jesus. How do you stay connected to Jesus?

When you sin, you confess it then and there. “Lord, you’re right, I’m wrong.”

And you remember again the promises of God and believe the promises of God (1 John 1:8-10).

Now notice we go on further because this is very important, and I’m almost done. Look at verse 20:

“Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ‘Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!’?”

Now one day in a midweek Bible study, the people who were studying together, someone was asked, “Give me a verse that proves that we should totally abstain from alcoholic wine,” and do you know what the man cited? “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”

I want to say it again. There was a man in a Bible study, and they were asked the question, “Give us a verse that supports teetotalism, that supports never drinking alcohol in any form as a beverage.” And he quoted this scripture. Do you see in context what this is saying? He’s saying that people that tell you that are lying to you.

They’re telling you to disobey God by their commandments. Do you see there he says if you’ve died with Christ, why do you submit to rules? And he cites the worldly carnal rules, “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”?”

Notice what he says in the next verse, “These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings.” See how he’s alluding there to Isaiah 29? Based on human commands and teachings.

And then look at verse 23, “Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility, and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.”

Am I telling you to go out and have a glass of wine with lunch? No. I’m not telling you that, but I’m saying it’s not a sin to do that, and when people start telling you that’s a sin, you’d better watch out, because they’re making up things out of their own head, and out of the traditions of men, and they’re binding your conscience.

I want to read again that statement out of the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 20, paragraph 2. He’s “Left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it,” that is, in addition to it, “in matters of faith and worship.”

And then they add, “So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.”

So, we close with these words: watch out who you listen to. The internet is full of gobbledygook. There’s more nonsense on the internet than you can imagine. I remember when I first bought a computer in 1988. It was a DOS computer, and I bought a modem, that is, I was able to connect it to a phone line, a 1200 baud modem, and I was able to get some information.

And then I began to discover when the bandwidth increased, and when I was actually able to get real material, and when we went from DOS to Windows, and the bandwidth incredibly increased, I discovered that the biggest source of lies and pornography and foolishness and nonsense you have ever been able to find in the history of humanity is there available. It’s available right there.

I read the *New York Times*. Do I believe it? I believe it when they’re telling the same story that *Russian Times* and the *Jerusalem Times* and two British papers, and the *National Review* all agree.

When they all agree, I say, “Oh, well, this must have happened.”

What I'm telling you is, it's pure nonsense and somehow people get your email, and my email box is flooded with things telling me that the economy is crashing, this, that, and the other, subscribe to my newsletter for \$50 a year.

All of that stuff, dear ones, please guard your heart and when it comes to religion, say to any preacher, any religious leader, "Show me. Show me in the book."

And if they can't show you, just disregard what they're saying to you. You don't have to be obnoxious about it but just disregard it. No church has the authority to bind your conscience and tell you this is how you must do.

May we pray.

Lord, we pray that as we have liberty in Christ, we would not be obnoxious people, defiantly saying this and defiantly saying that, Lord, but we pray that we would always obey you even if it costs us our lives when it comes to civil authorities and others. But Lord, when it comes to religious leaders, Lord, may we always ask, "Would you show me that in the Bible?" And may we do that with a humble spirit, because what we don't want is to get disconnected from Christ, as so many religious leaders in the days of Paul cut themselves off from Christ himself who is the source of salvation. May we never do that.

Day-by-day, Lord, would you grant that each of us holds on to Jesus, knowing by your grace you are enabling us to do that. Please, Lord, help us.

And if there's anyone listening to this message today who has never come to that point of bowing their knees and submitting their wills to you and giving up on their own self-righteous rags and trusting in the finished work of Christ, may today be that day. For Jesus' sake. Amen.