

WHY IS CHRISTIANITY SO STIFLING?, 1PET.2:11-25

WHY: Questions for Christians #11

◆**Intro:** This text was used by white, southern preachers in early America to justify slavery of the African peoples. Every culture in the world had slaves in the First Century with Peter is writing, so he's applying Gospel to the common practice of his day, not justifying slavery. And slavery then was quite different than America's version of it. In addition, I should also remind us that it was the Christians, no one else, that led the charge to end slavery both in America and the United Kingdom! Yet people sometimes point at the errors of some Christians and then make the exaggerated claim that Christianity as a faith is itself oppressive and stifling; that if you are a Christian, you have consigned yourself to oppressing and to being oppressed, to keeping lots of rules and trudging through life in slavery and making others join in. It's a curious jump.

◆Let me share a story from my childhood. As a military brat we moved about every two years. You'd go to a new school and other military kids would ask you what branch of the service your parents were in and what they did. "Oh my dad's a pilot, or My dad's on the Destroyer Goldsburo, or My dad's a doctor at the Navy hospital." We'll my dad was a chaplain, you know, a pastor in the military. And then would come the oft' repeated response, "*Oh your dad's a priest! Oh you can't have any fun!*" Now where did they ever get that from? First of all priests don't have kids, at least not then anyway. Secondly, what's this about automatically

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knowing that I am not allowed to have fun?! How has such a distortion of the faith come about?

◆1. Lets make a **concession: some who have called themselves Christian have (maybe we have) contributed to making our faith appear restrictive**, as though if you are laboriously enduring being a Christian, and are certainly unhappy, then you must be doing a good job of it; as though the Devil is about fun and God is about misery. This is a lie straight from hell and Christians ought not to help pass it on.

◆The **Pharisees** did it with all their extra laws added to the law of Moses. Early **Americans** in an attempt to lead holy, god-fearing lives did it too. It was Sunday afternoon in 1893, NY. A gentleman farmer was relaxing in his boat on his own private lake, fishing pole in hand, and enjoying the cool summer breezes while he waited for the bass to strike. The gentle rocking of the boat, the quiet sounds of nature almost lulled him to sleep before he was startled by a shout. Was it his wife? No, it was the Tithing Man! The feared, hated, and also respected church police of the day. Our gentleman rowed to shore knowing full well what was in store: he would be arrested, tried, found guilty and fined for fishing on his own lake on the sabbath.

◆Example two: I read of a **European** pastor in years gone by who discovering that the roads were blocked by snow decided to skate to church on the river. The Elders were

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horrified that the preacher skated on the sabbath, so after the service, they held a meeting. The reverend explained it was skate or not come to church. Finally one asked if he enjoyed it at all. When he said "no" they decided it was ok.

◆ Without a doubt we christians have contributed to the notion that our faith is against enjoyment. Sunday was made for worship of God, enjoyment of his goodness and rest! Is anyone getting that impression from you?

◆ B. Another strange distortion in the Church has been the idea of self sacrifice. Many think this means sacrificing things for themselves, doing without as though that was delightful to God.

In reality self-sacrifice is meant to be the giving of yourself to another, not merely denying yourself some joy. Lewis in *The Weight of Glory* writes, "We are filled with the idea of virtue as unselfishness. Christianity teaches the virtue of love. The negative term (unselfishness) has substituted for the positive term. The negative view of unselfishness does not pursue primarily good things for others, but attempts to go without ourselves, as if our abstinence and not their happiness is the point. But this is not the same as the Christian virtue of love."

◆ So our first consideration this morning is if we, like many others of our faith down through the years, are in fact aiding this challenge that the Christian Church is stifling and oppressive.

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◆ Do you give the impression that following Jesus is a system of "can't do" regulations, or an experience of joyful freedom in salvation?

◆ **2. But is real Christianity a stifling concept? Only if you hold the absurd view that any limitation means oppression.**

◆ A. Truth and freedom do not allow all things, but truth leads to real freedom. Jesus said "you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." All truth, as we have seen before in this series, says "no" to some things and "yes" to others. It is the nature of truth. There are not multiple answers to a mathematical equation. There are not multiple options for a person's gender just as a cat cannot be a dog. Definition requires limitation and discrimination. This is merely a matter of rational thought. True freedom, says Tim Keller, cannot be defined as the absence of confinement or constraint.

◆ Watch Brad Paisley riff on the **guitar**. He's "free" right? He can do what he wants. That's because he's spent thousands of hours in his life under the rules of scales, and keys, and patterns. No rules; no music. What if we all went out to the the **baseball** diamond and threw balls or hit balls at whoever we wanted all at once. No rules; no game; no fun. Yes there are all kinds of "can'ts". You can't hit it outside the baseline. You can't run all over the field between bases like some sort of freeze-tag game. You can't drop the ball.

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You can't miss stepping on the plate. All kinds of "can't"s make the fun of real ball!

◆ Now all restrictions do not necessarily lead to liberty.

Liberty is only found with the restrictions of our nature. A **fish** is "free" only under the water. What if it says, "Living under the water is restrictive and discriminating. I identify as a seagull." and it jumps out of the water onto the dock? His freedom is no freedom at all, because in it's nature it's a fish. Put **gas** in the tank and the car runs. Fill it with the garden hose and it does not because it was made to run on gasoline. You're free to add water, but that won't get you freedom. And the car cannot be an airplane, but it can certainly function as a good car. So freedom is not the absence of restrictions, but the finding of the right ones that fit our nature. If this is true in bodybuilding, or engine tuning, or sports, why would it not be true in spiritual matters and morality? Christianity says that following Jesus is like putting gas in the tank and not water. You are not free to put anything in it you want, but through obedience to Christ you will have freedom on the open road!

◆ Let me ask you this; Where in your life are you contesting constraint? Where are you bucking against a barrier because you think you'll be happier defining your own life? And do you really think that you'll do a better job than all

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the learning of millions of humans before you? Or than the wisdom God has shared for millennia?

◆ How about negative truth. Isn't Christianity an oppressive faith when it says everyone is a sinner, that our hearts are dirty. I'm sorry but doesn't that just lower our self-esteem? Yes it does, but it also is the first step on the road to health. Nobody looks for medicine that doesn't feel sick. Telling a person they have a broken bone, or a cancerous tumor is not good news, but it sure is news you want if your to heal and live.

◆ **B.** The message of Christianity is actual truth and real freedom. Far from making a person less of a person, following Jesus is about becoming more of a person!

◆ Verse 11 urges us to say "no" to (constrain) things for the sake of real life in the soul! This is a biblical theme by the way. Would you like to have a soul at peace? To be at rest deep down? To be in a spiritual place where you say to yourself "This is living, really living!"? That my friends, is what God wants for us. That is what is behind all the things he says.

*Jer 6:16 This is what the LORD says: "...ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find **rest** for your **souls**.*

Mt 11:29 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**

De 10:13 and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for **your own good**?

1Co 7:35 I am saying this for **your own good**, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

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◆Verse 12 urges the Christ followers to live such good lives that unbelievers actually praise God for it! In fact Peter uses the term "live" repeatedly. The only dying is dying to sin (24). Otherwise it's "live such good lives", and "live as free men" (16), and "live as servants" (16), and "live for righteousness" (24).

◆Lets ask a question. How do we know if a community is really caring and open or oppressive of others? It is not whether anything goes, and anyone can join. Rather it's whether the community's beliefs lead it to treat other communities with love and respect and kindness? and which community's beliefs lead it to demonize and attack those who dare counter their positions.

◆In verse 19 Peter commends suffering even unjustly because of your faith. His example is none other that God's Son himself who suffered for us rather than suing us for slander.

◆This reality tells us that God is for humanity. In reality God is for you. In reality God is for us. The very central act of the Christian faith illustrates this: out of love, God sent his Son to die for humans, pay the price of evil.

◆*"What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along*

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with him, graciously give us all things?" Romans 8:31, 32, NIV.

◆ This is what you must tell your doubting friends and seeking neighbors: God is for you. He's all about life and real joy. We Christians have at times clouded that truth in our fears of evil, and slipping into it, but in reality God's way is the way of real life.

◆ **Conclusion:** The objection to Christianity that it is stifling is simply mistaken. It assumes that regulations mean unhappiness when in all areas of real life the opposite is true.

◆ Rom14:17, For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,

◆ Jn.10:10, The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

◆ Mk8:34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?