

Leviticus 11:1-8 (Opening)

¹ And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them, ² “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, These are the living things that you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth. ³ Whatever parts the hoof and is cloven-footed and chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat. ⁴ Nevertheless, among those that chew the cud or part the hoof, you shall not eat these: The camel, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. ⁵ And the rock badger, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. ⁶ And the hare, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. ⁷ And the pig, because it parts the hoof and is cloven-footed but does not chew the cud, is unclean to you. ⁸ You shall not eat any of their flesh, and you shall not touch their carcasses; they are unclean to you.

Have you ever tried playing a game, but you didn't know the rules? It's really hard.

I remember being introduced to a card game, but no one would tell me how to play, just that I had to get rid of all the cards that were dealt to me. The play was similar to the card game "Uno", but every time someone made a mistake, missed one of the rules, they had to take a card as a penalty. On top of that, there were rules that involved taking a penalty card, so you can imagine, people who don't figure out what the rules are tend to lose the game very quickly.

Life is kind of like that, in a way; like the first day of school in a new place. There are always unwritten rules that you need to follow, but since they're unwritten, how can you know what they are? Those unwritten rules get you every time.

But what about the rules that **are** written down? Sometimes there's so many rules, we don't know all of them, and we get confused. I mean, have you taken the time to sit down and look at the "Affordable Care Act"? There aren't many people who know every aspect of that law, mainly because it's so huge!

What about the tax code? Have you looked at that lately? The Income Tax is 100 years old this year. In that 100 years, the tax code has evolved from 400 pages in 1913, to over 70,000 pages today.

Rules are good for you. Trust me.

The problem is some rules really **are** good for you. But how do you differentiate between good rules and bad ones?

We, as humans, have a problem living life without rules of some sort. We always try to make things as controlled as possible. "Good order and discipline" is the term the military uses. Now, I'm not saying that good order and discipline is a bad thing. But some rules end up making

things too strict for people, and some rules just have no place in our lives.

That's a part of what Paul was fighting against in his letter to Colossae. There were false teachers there, teaching things that were outside of the Gospel. Evidently, they were also including some sorts of requirements that Jesus didn't require people to follow. Let's take a look at Colossians 2:16 – 3:4.

Colossians 2:16-3:4

¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—

²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

It's quite possible, but we don't know for sure, that there were Judaizers teaching in Colossae. A Judaizer is a person who is trying to impose the Jewish law on others, particularly Christians. Since Christianity came from Judaism, it sort of makes sense. Christians had so much freedom in Christ, it was scary, so Jewish Christians were reverting back to some of their old ways, not because it was easier, but because it was more comfortable. The unknown is always more scary than what we know.

Paul talks about those old laws, the dietary requirements, the special days, and how to observe them in verse 16, but he also wrote to the Christians in Rome about it, too. Let's compare it with Romans 14:5-9.

Romans 14:5-9

⁵ One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Paul says if we make one day more important than another, we should be convinced that it should be so in our own minds, and do it in honor of the Lord. Not because someone told us that's the way it should be, but because we want to honor God by doing that. There are some holidays that we celebrate that don't honor God. We should make sure that we're doing things for the right reasons, not just because it's always been that way, or because that's what we're told we're supposed to do.

Paul compares the restrictive aspects of the Law of Moses to a shadow. Shadows have no substance, and give us a basic outline of the object that causes the shadow, but sometimes we can't really tell what the original object is by looking at the shadow. Paul is comparing the Law (the shadow) with freedom in Christ (the object creating the shadow). If you look at the 10 Commandments, they're all easily summed up by Mark 12:28-34.

Mark 12:28-34

²⁸ *And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?"* ²⁹ *Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'* ³¹ *The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."* ³² *And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. ³³ And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."* ³⁴ *And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.*

These two concepts: love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. These sum up all of the 10 Commandments. If you're doing these two things, you will not worship other gods, or make idols, or use God's name falsely, you'll honor your parents, you won't murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or yearn for something your neighbor has that you don't. And you'll remember to rest.

But what about the rest of the law? There are 613 laws that the Jews had to obey. Some of them fall under what I've just talked about, but

there are others that are different; dietary laws, laws about sacrifice, laws about specific days, weeks, months, and years. Do we have to follow those laws?

Paul says no. In verses 20-22, Paul talks about those laws and how restrictive they were; “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch.” That pretty much sums up what most of those other laws in Judaism covered.

I wouldn’t have made a very good Jew. I like bacon cheeseburgers, catfish, and shrimp too much. All of those were forbidden in the Jewish dietary laws. Like I said, there are 613 of them, so it’s pretty easy to find something that we do on a regular basis that would be considered wrong.

Paul clears things up and makes it easier to understand. If it deals with something that gets used up, something that isn’t eternal, and it doesn’t fall under “Love God, and love your neighbor”, it’s probably OK. Have that bacon cheeseburger. It’s OK. Well, it may raise your cholesterol and give you a heart attack, but it won’t disqualify you from being a Christian.

If you were paying close attention to the verses I was talking about, you may have noticed I jumped over 18 – 20. Let’s go back to them and see what Paul says here.

Paul talks about “asceticism”. That’s a big word that we don’t use much in everyday conversation. I had to look it up. According to the Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church:

*The term **asceticism** is derived from Gk. ἄσκησις as-keh’-o meaning to exercise, or training. It was already applied by the Greek philosophers to moral training, prior to the 1st century, often with the connotation of voluntary abstention from certain pleasures; it denotes (1) practices employed to combat vices and develop virtues and (2) the*

renunciation of various facets of customary social life and comfort or the adoption of painful conditions for religious reasons.

In other words, giving things up in order to become a better Christian. Now, don't get me wrong here. There are things we **need** to give up to be a Christian. You can't be a Christian and still live the same sinful life. The whole idea is to become a better person, to honor Christ and try to live the way He did. We won't succeed, but we're never told to be successful, just to try. Jesus tells us we need to give up things in Mark 8:34-38.

Mark 8:34-38

³⁴ *And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."*

Jesus says "deny himself"; but there's a point where this isn't a positive thing, and that's what Paul is talking about. What he's talking about here is the extreme measures some would try to impose on others to try to make them a good Christian. Some groups would forbid people to marry, eat certain foods on certain days, not eat for days on end, or even forbid people from talking. While these can have a positive effect on your Christian walk, it can also have the opposite for some people. Paul says it can be so bad as to actually disconnect you from the Head, that is, Christ. You try so hard to be a good Christian, that you actually do things that separate you from following God.

What if I told you that the number 4 is now forbidden? You can no longer use the number 4. You have to totally remove it from your vocabulary, and you can't use it ever again. Forget it completely. Now, what number did I tell you to forget?

The first four verses of chapter 3 sum up how we should be living. Think about things above, not things here on the earth. Paul reminds us that we were buried with Christ, and raised with Him, so we should be more concerned about what that life requires, not this one. Jesus put it this way in Matthew 6:19-21.

Matthew 6:19-21

¹⁹ "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

If we focus on earthly treasures, earthly things, the heavenly things will be at best secondary, and at worst, forgotten. We need to remember that since we've been raised with Christ, we are citizens of heaven, not of earth. What goes on here is important in the day-to-day aspect of things, but in the overall perspective, it's not such a big deal. Focus on what matters. If we are spiritual beings that will live forever, why do we focus on what's going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month, or next year? Yes, they're important, but not so important that we should forget about where we're going to spend eternity.

Matthew 6:31-34 (closing)

³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

³⁴ "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Questions

1. What are some things that you have had to give up because they caused too big a temptation for you as a Christian? Why did you do it?
2. There are many religious groups that rely on giving things up (physical things or actions). Is that a good idea? How can it be helpful or harmful to your relationship with God?
- 3.