

Isn't Christianity a Moral Straight Jacket?

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[0 : 00] I think another problem that a lot of people have with Christianity is that in this day and age, you know, it seems like it's just kind of a moral straitjacket, like a set of rules that is designed to just kind of suck creativity and independent thinking out of life, and that it's just meant to, like, stifle humans into a little box.

What do you, how do you answer that? Yeah, that, I mean, that's a good question. It's a common conception, right? And a lot of it depends on what Christians, who Christians believe God actually is.

Some people think Christians believe God is kind of like a heavenly robocop, or he's a heavenly killjoy, and that he's imposing arbitrary rules on humans so that they have no fun. But that's actually not the God we believe in.

Christians actually like to look at things quite differently. They believe that God created us and designed us to live and flourish. And not only that, but God loves us, and he wants our good.

Therefore, he wants to show us how we should live and how we're designed to flourish. So Christians kind of think of God's moral instructions like an owner's manual. God's telling human beings how they were designed to work.

[1 : 09] And when we live according to his instructions, then we actually get in touch with some of the deepest parts of our human design, of what it means to be truly human. So I actually think this leads to a lot of joy.

Jesus himself said he gives us commands because he wants our joy to be full. I think it seems kind of counterintuitive to people that joy would come from just following someone else's rules.

It kind of seems almost like a leash. Doesn't this kind of stifle our ideas of creativity and freedom and things that we think joy comes from? Oh, definitely. Yeah.

I think a lot of it depends on what kind of commands God's giving us that actually lead to our joy to some extent. And it's interesting you bring up creativity and freedom because the very first commands that God gives to humanity, actually in Genesis chapter 1 and 2, are be fruitful and multiply, have dominion over the earth, cultivate it.

And I think this is kind of a Hebrew way of saying actually be creative in a biological sense and in a cultural sense. So part of what it means to be human, I think, according to the Christian confession, is for us to be creative, to reflect God's creativity.

[2 : 18] And we don't have time now, but if we did, we could look through kind of 2,000 years of church history and see a rich tradition of creativity, of art and architecture and medicine and science and law and all these, I think, quite creative things that come out of the Christian tradition.

So, creativity, Christianity, yes, they go together. Okay. But you have to admit that there's definitely some limits on freedom. I mean, this set of rules that says you can do this, you can't do this, this limits our choice and our individual rights to do what we want.

Yeah. Well, yes. I think it's important that we establish that Christians want human freedom. They're not about restricting human freedom, but actually helping humans receive the genuine freedom that they were built for.

So Jesus himself says, if you know the truth, the truth will set you free. If I set you free, you will be free indeed. So it's not about limiting human rights. It's actually about teaching us to be genuinely free as humans.

So, yeah. Right. But we're still left with a list of limitations. I mean, don't get drunk, don't have sex outside of marriage, don't hoard your money, try to give it away. Yeah. I mean, these are all things that the Bible says that seem limiting.

[3 : 33] Yeah, yeah. I agree with you on that. Those are genuine limitations indeed. I think, maybe put it this way. Maybe the question that's undergirding what we're talking about is what is human freedom?

Is human freedom just the lack of all limitations or the absence of any restrictions? Or is real human freedom actually having proper restrictions and limitations that lead to flourishing?

Because how we answer that question, I think, determines a lot. Okay. Well, go ahead. Answer that question. What do you mean by these proper limitations? Yeah. Let's start with goldfish. Goldfish. Goldfish. Like the crackers? Yes. Yes. Goldfish crackers. You know, if you've ever had a little goldfish, you know they like to jump out of the water because they want to live on land. But a goldfish out of the water is not a free goldfish. It's a dead goldfish. Because the goldfish is actually designed to live in the water, not in open air in the land. And so it dies if it does.

[4 : 33] It lives in the water, and that's a genuine limitation. But it's for its good. Or take an example of a little kid. A kid wants to eat all the candy and ice cream they possibly can and have no restriction of it.

Now this, the kid will grow up not to be very mature, not to be very healthy, and probably not to be very strong if that's the case. But if some limitations are put in place and that kid has to get some exercise, can't eat all the ice cream they want, it's limited to once a week or once a day, depending on your preference, and they have to eat their meat and veggies, then you have a kid that grows up to be more mature and is able to actually thrive and is healthy physically.

Now Christians believe that that's true of the physical world, but that's also true of the moral universe as well. Genuine freedom is not the ability just to do whatever you want, but it's actually the ability to live within certain limits, God-given limits, that lead to human flourishing.

So what's another example? Let's think of a musician. A musician doesn't think of music theory as a limitation to his task of playing music. That's why I'm not a musician. I saw you on the ukulele a couple weeks ago.

A musician looks at music theory as actually the limited constraints that enable them to play music freely and really, really well. And to bring it back to Jesus, he says truth is the foundation for us living free and genuinely flourishing human lives.

[6 : 02] Okay, well I mean that sounds nice, but then you bring up a whole other question of what is truth? I mean, we live in a world where truth claims, especially moral truth claims, what's right, what's wrong, seem like power plays that are really controlling.

I mean, lots of different groups claim that they know what is or isn't right or wrong. I mean, you've got philosophers or people like Marx who said that religion was the opiate of the masses and religion's been used to control people.

And so again, you come back to this, aren't we kind of just using truth, the idea of truth, to control people? Yeah, and that's a great question. And this is one that's been wrestled with over the last few decades particularly, I think.

And it's one we have to take seriously, especially given the massive atrocities that we saw in the 20th century, where we saw many people, Christian and not, who used truth claims to control and manipulate people in horrible ways.

And I think we just simply have to say where that has happened, it is horribly destructive to human life, and it's just wrong, full stop. That needs to be said. But I think we have a tendency to swing to the other end of the spectrum and believe that that means that there's no truth at all, or that all truth claims are simply power plays of some sort.

[7 : 16] And if that's true, then simply the claim that all truth claims are power plays is itself a power play that we should resist. The fact is, I think, is that everyone makes truth claims.

We can't live meaningful lives without it. So the real question is, what truth claims are actually true? Actually get us in touch with reality? Actually lead to human flourishing? I think that's what we have to wrestle with.

Okay. How do we answer that question then? How is one person supposed to know what's true, what's morally right? I mean, can one person or group even have a claim to know what's morally right or morally wrong?

It seems really narrow-minded or arrogant, frankly, for one person or group to claim that they know better than everybody else. Yeah, yeah. I think it is arrogant. I agree.

Left to our own limited perspective, especially with our cultural perspective and our historical perspective and our own personal experiences, there's no way I think any one of us can determine for everyone what is right and wrong.

[8 : 15] It would simply be my guess against your guess. And so I agree with you in that regard. So left with that, again, the best we can do is admit that we don't know, and then everyone's guess is as good as each other's.

Isn't it? Well, yeah. Sounds kind of weird, doesn't it? I think we have to start there. I think we have to start with a place of humility, saying, yeah, we as human beings actually don't know.

But I don't think we end there. And I think that's where our culture is a bit tempted to do that. It looks at us having limited knowledge and is tempted to throw in the towel. But as Christians, we don't do that.

For one reason is that we believe that God exists. Not just some vague God, but a good and all-knowing and loving God. So let me see if I can tease that out for you. If God is really good, Christians believe, then he wants human beings to flourish, and he has designed them to flourish. Now, if that good God is also all-knowing, he knows how human beings need to live in order to flourish. And if that all-knowing God is also loving, then he desires to do everything he can to let human beings know how they're supposed to live in order to flourish.

[9 : 27] And for Christians, that comes to fruition in Jesus Christ, but in the scriptures as well, where we believe that God speaks and says, look, humans, this is how you're designed to live.

Flourish. Flourish. Okay, but again, it's still a big claim. How can you be sure that you know that what the Bible teaches is true? I mean, it's not the only holy book. It's not the only religious book. And even within that, a lot of people interpret the Bible differently. Yeah. And teaching seems to be a lot grayer than black and white. How do we still find within that some kind of universal truth? That's true.

I mean, there's always different interpretations of any text, right? It could be Iliad and Odyssey. It could be Shakespeare. It could be yesterday's newspaper. Shakespeare, including the Bible. People are going to interpret things differently, and that's true.

And it's also true that there are some things in the Bible that just aren't that clear, or that the Bible doesn't speak to. But it's also easy for us to overstate the case and say that the waters are a bit murkier than they really are.

[10 : 26] Because I think the heart and soul of the Bible's moral teaching is basically this. It's two things. Love God with all of who you are, with your heart, mind, soul, strength. And the second is love your neighbor as yourself.

So you have love God, love neighbor. And I think all the other commands that we get in the Bible from kind of cover to cover, whether it's teaching on money or sexuality or, I don't know, social relationships, all those commands are simply reiterations of these two commands, love God and love your neighbor, in different contexts and in different cultures.

So I think the Bible fleshes out what love looks like for us. Okay. Well, I mean, that sounds nice, and I see how it makes sense for you. But I don't see why Christians then insist on kind of imposing their beliefs on others.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, imposing. You know, this is a huge thing these days, especially with conversations around marriage that are swirling in North America, I think.

And it's an unfortunate reality that some people really do impose their views on others quite forcefully. And I think this often comes for us out of a place, a sense of fear of losing control.

[11 : 40] Fear of losing control of society or of our own lives or a depreciated sense of identity to some extent. But such desires for control, I think, are actually against the Christian faith, which is more about loving service than desire for control.

But this doesn't mean, this doesn't mean, I think this is important, that Christians or anyone else should simply be quiet and not bring their beliefs into the public sphere. This idea that we can just have, we should put religion in the private and everything else in the public, I think is a bit of a false division.

And it's the beliefs of some that we should have a public-private divide that they're then imposing on everyone else. I think in reality, we're just all bringing our beliefs into the public sphere, and that's the reality of it.

And it's one of the joys of getting to live in a democratic society. Now, that being said, Christians don't give their opinion in public just because they want to be heard. They give their opinion because they feel like they've been given something to say that is going to lead to the flourishing of all people.

So they want people to know about it. Well, again, that sounds nice, but then why are so many Christians jerks about it? I mean, you're telling me that Christianity is about love, and we hear that all the time, but one needs to just briefly peruse the internet to know that a lot of things said are not very loving.

[13:02] Yeah. The media likes to highlight that. It's true. It's there. You're right. Some Christians, and this is a massive understatement, are less than gracious in the way that they express their views.

It can often come out of a place of hate, of arrogance, of condemnation, even. And I think we have to admit that that's actually offensive to God, according to the Christian faith, when it happens that way, and that's a sin.

And in fact, the Bible itself actually commands us to live and relate differently. It says, And I think gentleness and respect for Christians is a way of acknowledging the dignity of human people, even in the midst of differing opinions.

So I'm willing to say we failed, and we need God's help to grow in gentleness. Yeah. I forgive you, Dorothy. Okay.

Okay. One last question. So you are admitting that Christians fail all the time at living out their own beliefs and these moral convictions. So how can, if you're failing at this all the time, how can you ask others to live this way?

[14:16] Isn't it kind of hypocritical to set this standard that even you can't keep? Yeah, it does seem that way a little bit, doesn't it? Well, I think this is the point.

It would be a great tragedy for us to end this conversation with you and I and all of us simply thinking that the heart and soul of Christianity is a certain set of ethics or morality.

That's important to Christianity, but that's not the whole point. The whole point, the center of it, is actually this person. It's a living and breathing human being. It's Jesus Christ. And what that does for us as Christians is it reshapes the ways we think about human flourishing and freedom.

It's not primarily just walking according to a certain set of rules, although I may include that. It's primarily about knowing and loving and enjoying and obeying and following this person, Jesus Christ.

Now, how that helps answer your question is this. If Jesus is at the center, he calls us to a really, really high moral standard. But when we fail, as we all do, Jesus responds to our failure with compassion and with grace and with forgiveness and with new hope to live differently.

[15:26] And so as Christians, that's what compels us to keep trying to live the way that Jesus calls us is actually his grace in the midst of our failure. So, yeah, I think that's the best I have.

Well, you've given me a lot to think about. Well, we'll continue this conversation next week, Kathy. Thanks for chatting again. I appreciate it. Let's pray.

Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening? In Christ's name, amen. Let me add my welcome to Jordan's.

My name is Aaron. So Jordan and I look after the service, just if you're new. If you are new, just come and say hi at the end to myself or Jordan. We love meeting new people. Now, we're looking at the book of Proverbs this evening and how it relates to the topic at hand, the question at hand, which is, isn't Christianity just a moral straitjacket?

And because we're jumping right into the middle of Proverbs, would you just give me 90 seconds to give you sort of a bit of an overview before we dig into chapter three here? Okay, so Proverbs. Proverbs contains kind of like seven units or blocks or sections, some big, some small.

[16:49] And a lot of Proverbs is what you think. It's sort of short sayings, and they're fantastic. If you haven't really dug into Proverbs, they're brilliant. Let me read out a few to you. The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

Isn't that brilliant? Of course, it makes total sense, doesn't it? A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. It's true. Like a dog returns to its vomit, so does a fool repeat its folly. I mean, it's fantastic stuff. Now, the technical term for these things, they're called aphorisms. So an aphorism is a statement. It contains truth, and Proverbs is full of them.

They're God's truth about an enormous number of things, and they're designed to be short and sometimes witty because you want to remember them.

So sometimes they're quite funny. However, one little aphorism, one little proverb by itself cannot handle the complexity of life, and so you can't sort of just go, oh, this says this.

[17:50] Therefore, this will always happen. It's not like a slot machine. If you're going to read a proverb about money, read them all to get a bigger picture. For example, Proverbs 26.

Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it. You might think, well, I know a person who was raised really well. I'm not looking at you, Jordan. You notice I just did that?

I'll read the proverb again. Train up a child in the way he should go. Even when he is old, he will not depart from it. You might think, I know a person who was raised really well, and they're totally off the rails.

Folks, the proverb is saying, be a great parent. Be a fantastic parent. It's memorable. It's pithy. But it doesn't contain all truth about parenting. Okay, that's a quick overview.

Mostly aphorisms. Except for, you know, the first section. The first long section of the book of Proverbs. That's kind of like the first nine chapters. There's a preamble and an introduction to the whole thing.

[18:51] And in those first nine chapters, it's outlining why it's really, really important that you make Proverbs part of your regular reading. And the word it uses to describe the thing that you should be aiming for in life, the direction it's trying to take you in, what you gain from Proverbs, the Bible calls wisdom.

Wisdom. Gaining wisdom is what the book of Proverbs is all about. And those first nine chapters are saying, yeah, wisdom. It's fantastic.

Get into it. Let me tell you about it. So how do we define wisdom here? It's very interesting. The Hebrew word basically means like a masterful skill.

So it's used in the Bible to describe like a really amazing diplomat and also to talk about woodworkers, really amazing woodworkers, masterful woodworkers. So Proverbs, when it uses the word wisdom, it's talking about the skill of living, being a master at life.

So the book of Proverbs covers an enormous variety of topics, anger and friendship and communication and money and parenting and marriage and all great stuff. In fact, it's so good, these Proverbs.

[20:02] Wisdom is so sought after. It's something that you should be so focused on that in our passage, our readings, the first bit of it there is like a song of praise to wisdom.

It's like the song about wisdom. It's like wisdom's really great. And you look at it. This is verses 13 to 18 here. Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, for the gain from her is better than the gain from silver.

She's more precious than jewels. Long life is it, her right hand. Her ways are the ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace. She's a tree of life, et cetera, et cetera. So wisdom here, praise, a song about wisdom, it's so great, is personified as a woman, which is helpful to make sort of, the Bible does that sometimes, to make something abstract, sort of clearer to us.

And do you see what it says? The big thing there? Wisdom. It's more valuable than money and shiny things and precious metals. Why is that? Why is wisdom so great? Because wisdom, sorry, because money, what can money do?

Well, a lot of stuff, a lot of good stuff. But, I mean, money can buy you a really nice house, but it doesn't make it a home. Money can put really expensive, lovely food on a table, but it can't put fellowship around that table.

[21:16] Money can put a beautiful necklace around the neck of a woman, but it can't give her the love that she really wants. So you may be looking for lots of things in life. You might be going after many things.

The Bible here is saying, go after wisdom. You know, these other things might follow on, might follow on from that wisdom, but aim for wisdom. Go after it.

And do you see that it's something you actually have to put a bit of effort into getting as well? It uses these verses, look at verse 18 there.

Do you see how it says, lay hold of her, hold fast. Those are strong verbs. It's saying, really go after wisdom. Dig into this book.

Dig into these proverbs it's saying. In these chapters, what you learn from them in terms of setting out for real life is going to be a finer education than you'd ever get at a college or university.

[22 : 14] Now after the hymn, praising wisdom, have a look at the next section. That's 19 to 20.

That's the next little just sort of idea. That's separate from the rest. Now let me say, if you tend to tune out during sermons, I can tell. That's fine.

I forgive you. But if you do, and you only really listen to like two minutes of a sermon, this is the two minutes to listen to. Okay. Let me read these two verses to you. The Lord by wisdom founded the earth.

By understanding, he established the heavens. By his knowledge, the depths broke open and the clouds dropped down the dew. In case you thought the book of Proverbs is just like, hey, here's some Jewish hot tips on life, right?

This passage grounds the whole idea of wisdom in the most solid of foundations. Because here's what it's saying. It's saying, it's saying, wisdom is how God operates.

[23 : 19] That's an awkward sentence. Okay. Wisdom is how God operates. Human wisdom that presents itself in sound judgment and discretion and careful planning and hard work and patience and all these other things mentioned in Proverbs.

All of the virtues taught in Proverbs. All of the good ideas in the book of Proverbs. Human wisdom finds their basis in God's wisdom. Wisdom is very, very valuable to God.

It should be very valuable to us. And one of the implications of this bumps up against some very precious contemporary cultural values. Let me give you the big one.

That humans can define their own life. That humans can define their own way of living. Now, how does this, just these two verses here bump up against that? Well, you see these three words, see the three words there in 19 and 20.

Three really important words. Wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. You know, these are, interestingly, these are building terms in the Old Testament. So when they're building the tabernacle, they use these words to describe the people that are building the tabernacle.

[24 : 30] What is this all about? Why would the Bible use these words to talk about creation? It's because God didn't just twiddle his fingers when he made the universe. It's like, off you go.

Just sort of like, you know. It'll be all right. No, it involved wisdom. It involved understanding. It involved knowledge to make everything work together.

There is an order to creation, including us. There is a certain way things should operate. Now, do you see what this means? There is an order.

A wise person tries to understand the order of creation. The alternate position to this is very attractive and is widely held and can be summed up well in the Supreme Court of the U.S.

Let me, a different one, but we'll come to that other one. So, Roe versus Wade, long time ago. So that legalized abortion in the States.

[25 : 38] A couple of decades ago, that was challenged. It was a big challenge. It went all the way to the Supreme Court. And the Supreme Court reaffirmed the original Roe versus Wade case for the right for woman to choose to have an abortion.

In the summary, let me read out what the court said. And this is like the guts of it. Here we go.

Quote. At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.

I'll read it again. At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and the mystery of human life. I mean, it sounds really cool.

And you're like, yes. It's so true. I love it. It's fantastic. So they're saying freedom. Yeah, freedom.

We want freedom. Freedom is the right to define your own concept of existence.

It sounds great, right? But the Bible here is saying, no. No. You don't get to define it. You get to discover it. You don't define.

[26 : 43] Christianity says you discover it. And that frees you. See, God created the world with wisdom and understanding and with order. The wise move is to get in line with that, to discover that order, to base your life around that.

That is the reason I can't define what marriage is based on my ideas, no matter how noble those ideas sound, no matter my motivation, no matter how cool it makes me feel.

I can't get to define what marriage is. God has ordered that in his wisdom. I don't get to decide what life is about. I don't get to decide how humans interact with creation.

We discover it. We discover it because there is an order. Folks, wisdom says live your life with the grain of the universe. Live your life aligned with the truth at the heart of creation.

And I know from the outside, that looks like boundaries and it looks like restrictions when you actually want to be free to do whatever you want and think what you want. But real freedom is existing within the right boundaries.

[27 : 58] And in that conversation, Jordan gave us a couple of fantastic examples that we can only flourish within the boundaries that God has set.

Now, let's move on. We've talked about why wisdom is so awesome, a praise for wisdom. We've talked about the foundation of that wisdom. It's God. It's God's wisdom. Now, have a look at 21 to 26 quickly now.

We'll do these last verses pretty quickly. Here we read about the benefits of a wise life. What does wisdom do for you? Well, it says it's life for your soul. It says you can walk on your way securely. Your foot will not stumble. It says if you lie down, you won't be afraid. Your sleep will be sweet. Oh, that's awesome. You don't have to be afraid of sudden terror. You don't have to freak out that something terrible is about to happen.

The Lord will be your confidence. Look, I know we are cynical people, right? And we're used to being oversold. And the writer does seem to promise a lot from wisdom here, security, and like progress in life, and constant refreshment, and great sleep.

[29 : 01] But it's all grounded in verse 26 here. The Lord will be your confidence. The Lord, that's Yahweh. And in the Bible, when it uses that phrase, it's talking about the Lord who keeps his promises. The point is this.

Going through life, believing that God is on your side, the way of wisdom, this little section is saying, that should make a difference to every aspect of your life. Lastly, let's look at 27 to 31.

What we have here is a really practical example. We've talked about wisdom is fantastic. It's grounded in God. And the last thing that I see, which I can't remember right now.

And this section, practical example about being a neighbor. You see, look at verse 27 there. It says, the wise person shouldn't withhold good from your neighbor if you can help them.

If you can help them, you should help them. Verse 29, it says, don't do anything towards your neighbor. Don't throw your weeds over the fence. Verse 30, don't make false accusations.

[30 : 07] Don't lie about people. Don't lie about people. That's hard, particularly if you felt like you've been unjustly treated, right? Verse 31 warns against being jealous of somebody that's doing really well in life, but who's done really well because they've done unjust things.

Don't be jealous of that person. These are great examples. I'm going to finish up here, though. All right, so the writer of Proverbs spends nine chapters waving his arms in the air going, wisdom is profitable.

It's value. It's life-giving. It's life to you. Don't underestimate the value of wisdom. Go after it. It means we need to ask God how to live. It means we say, God, what do you have to say about finances?

God, how are we to speak to people? God, how should we relate to one another? Now, from the outside, this kind of life, it can look like a moral straitjacket, but it's not.

That's what freedom looks like. Because it's working with the grain of the universe. Now, everything I've said so far cannot be reduced to you just sort of going, okay, I'm going to read the book of Proverbs, and I'm going to try and live it out.

[31 : 17] I mean, I hope you do that. I hope you kind of, I hope you get into this book. It's fantastic. I want you to hear what Paul says in Colossians 2. He's speaking about Christ. Listen to what he says about Christ. Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

So, we can feed on the wisdom of Solomon and Proverbs. It's a banquet. Get into it. Aim for wisdom. But you want to recognize that we are New Testament Christians.

That means the greatest expression of wisdom is found in the person of Christ. So, if you want to live the wise life, if you want life, it means feeding on Jesus.

It means following him. Now, there is so much more to say about this, and we don't have time to do it here. But next week, we're going to talk specifically about this.

Because the question is about the arrogance of the Christian faith. How can you say there's only one way to God? How can you say Jesus is the only, only way?

[32 : 20] So, if you're here, and this idea of Jesus is still new to you, you may not be a Christian, or like really right at the start, I want to invite you to two things. I want to say to you, come back next week.

And hear us talk more about Jesus. I'd also invite you to a four-week thing that's just an introduction to Christianity. It's going to be at David Short's house.

David's the rector of St. John's. David, you want to just give us a quick wave? There he is. You can come and see me afterwards, and I'll introduce you to him. He's doing four Monday nights from eight to nine o'clock, one hour.

You can ask tons of questions. It will be really, really low pressure. David, in his home, is just going to explain to you the Christian faith. See me afterwards about that. All right.

That's enough for us.