

I WANT TO WALK FREE, BUT I STILL HEAR THE CHAINS RATTLING

by Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

“It will be easy” — that’s what you kept telling me, Steve. It will be easy to write a book on walking free. I don’t know why you thought so. Maybe it’s because you are so free in Christ yourself. Maybe it’s because you think I am. I don’t know why, but I found out something else very quickly. The more I have tried the harder it has become. Walking free? I want to walk in the freedom of Christ, but I still hear the chains of legalism rattling with each step I take.

Everywhere I turn I hear them. But I have noticed something. Not all of these chains sound alike. The pitches are different. The tones vary from one person to another. As I have listened more closely, I have discerned at least three kinds of chains, three kinds of legalism that keep us from walking free.

Chains around Our Necks

The first set of chains are not hard to spot. Lots of people wear them around their necks with great pride. They make a

noise that sounds something like this: “I can earn my way to heaven by being good enough to deserve it.”

I grew up in the church and I wore these chains most of my youth. I was always a good boy. Too good. I was president of the youth group, a leader of young boys, worked with the poor. I sang in the choir and even preached my first sermon when I was nine years old. Pretty good, huh? I thought so. So did everybody else. I had such an air superiority that it even got to me sometimes. How can someone be as good as I am? God must be very happy with all I’m doing for him.

I know it’s hard to believe but there are even adults who think this way about themselves. Maybe they don’t say, “I’m so good,” but they say, “I’m not as bad as everybody else. God must be pleased with all I’m doing for him.” You’ve met them. A lot of them sit in the pews of churches where you and I preach. Some of them are on the stage with us.

It seems to me that this kind of legalism is easy to spot and destroy. It was done a long time ago, at least on a theological level. That’s what the Protestant reformation was all about. The Church was selling salvation, telling people they could earn it through sacrifice and hard work. How did our Protestant forebears respond?. *Sola Fide*, by faith alone. It’s by faith alone that we are made acceptable to God. “For it is by

grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8).

I think we know each other pretty well. Sometimes I think we’re both crazy, but I don’t think we’ll ever be crazy enough to put on those legalism chains again. We’ve both caught a glimpse of the holiness of God. He’s too good to be impressed with what we can do. We’ve both tasted the bitterness of our own inadequacies and sinfulness. Trying to be justified before God by good works is like trying to jump high enough to reach the moon. It just can’t happen.

So I can honestly say to you that I’m not tempted at all by the sound of those chains. When I hear them, they only make me sad — sad that there are people who are choking to death because they have these chains wrapped around their necks. I suppose that’s the good news of the gospel. We cannot make ourselves right with God, but he has offered good standing with him to those who trust his Son.

Chains on Our Shoulders

The first form of legalism was easy to handle. I gave my life to Christ. But soon I learned I had a second set of chains. These chains weighed heavily on my shoulders and they made a terrible sound. You know its sound too. “I think I’m a

Christian, but I can't be sure unless I prove it by good works." I can't tell you how many years I lived as a Christian with these chains rattling every time I moved.

Yes, I knew the verses: "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" (Galatians 3:1-3); "We live by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

But those verses were drowned out by other voices: "He who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:13); "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12); "If we deliberately go on sinning after we have received the knowledge of truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (Hebrews 10:26-27).

Now don't misunderstand me. I never in my life thought a person could lose his or her salvation. I grew up in a Baptist church that taught eternal security, once saved always saved. But I was also taught another angle that robbed me of freedom that eternal security should have given me. You've heard the

line. You've probably even used it. I know that I have offered it countless times in the past, and will probably say it to somebody later today. "You can't lose your salvation, but you can't be sure you're saved unless you're bearing fruit." Another way to put it is, "Saved by faith alone, but faith that saves is never alone."

In principle, I think this is exactly what the Bible teaches. In fact, I believe it's one of the precious truths emphasized in the Reformed tradition which you and I represent. We often call the teaching, "Perseverance of the Saints." Those who are truly born again will demonstrate their new birth by walking in the ways of holiness. I believe this teaching in principle, but I deplore the way so many Christians misuse it. They use it as an excuse to hold onto chains of legalism.

I have a Dutch Calvinist minister friend who once said to me, "You know the difference between an Arminian and a Hyper-Calvinist?" "No", I said, unable to anticipate the punch line. "The Arminian fears he might lose his salvation, and the Hyper-Calvinist fears that he never had it to begin with!"

That's the way a lot of my friends abuse the doctrine of Perseverance of the Saints. So concerned that they may prove that they were never really saved, they are utterly consumed with fear and self-determination. The center of their religious

life shifts away from Christ and his goodness to other things. They make it sound very biblical — “Christian duty,” “mortification of the flesh,” “holiness of life,” “the Lordship of Christ” — but behind the nice words are chains that bind and eventually pervert the Christian faith into a deadly legalism.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm all for good works. I believe that the Christian walk sometimes requires gritting your teeth and doing the right thing. I also believe that a healthy dose of the fear of God never hurt anybody. It is “the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). My problem is that these truths take such a central role with many Christians that they actually take us away from our only source of spiritual power and hope: conscious reliance on Christ.

When fear and hard work become the driving forces of our daily walks, we reduce God to a relentlessly strict, pedantic judge. It's as if he sits in heaven just waiting for us to do something wrong so he can grab us, smash us like bugs, and send us to hell. What a terrible portrait of God! But it's the picture which lots of Christians hold dear to their hearts. I did too, for the longest time. In fact, I have to admit that it still rears its ugly head from time to time.

Believe it or not, it was my study of the Old Testament, not the New Testament, that helped me turn the corner on this

one. One of my favorite passages in the prophets is the second chapter of Joel. That chapter is the well-known passage about the locust plagues which God threatens to send against Israel. After going on and on about how terrible God's judgment will be, Joel encourages the people to fast and pray. That seemed like a strange thing to me when I first read it. I would probably have told the people to run!

But Joel exhorted Israel to pray. Why? He explained himself by referring to his belief about the character of God. Joel knew something about God that Christians often forget. He is not a monstrous ogre waiting for us to stumble so that he can destroy us, "for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity" (Joel 2:13). What a vision of God! A patient, slow to anger God. I was so relieved when I realized that God was not waiting for me to mess up so he could squash me. I am so happy that he delights in putting up with sin in my life. It's his way of showing his true character. It's such a relief that I fail and he picks me up. Not just once or twice, but again and again.

I have to admit that patience is not one of my strong points. Although I try, it's just not my nature to be patient. If anything, I'm just the opposite by nature and I have to work

hard at giving people another chance. I have to force myself to be understanding and sympathetic. It's so hard sometimes that I feel like I'm going to explode.

When I finally took Joel's words to heart, I understood how very different God is from me. It's my nature to be impatient, but the very opposite is true of God. It's his nature to be patient; it takes him a very long time to get angry. That's why he doesn't do it very often.

When I saw God like Joel saw him, I felt the second chains of legalism falling off my shoulders. I don't have to worry that I'm going to prove I was never a Christian every time I do something wrong. He doesn't worry about it, and I don't have to either.

Chains Tangled about Our Feet

Now for the really hard one, the chains around our feet. It's the most subtle form of legalism. You've heard these chains rattle too. They sound like this: "I am so committed to Christ that I'm going to figure out precisely what he wants you and me to do for him."

This kind of legalism isn't new. It follows the Bible everywhere it goes. In a collection of Jewish Rabbinical sayings, a teaching appears which parallels Christian legalism

of the third kind. IT says, “We must build a fence around the law so as not to transgress the law itself.” To build a fence around the law means to develop a system of rules that go beyond what the Bible actually says. These rules specify what we are to do and not to do in great detail. If we keep these rules, so the thinking goes, we will never violate what the Scriptures actually teach.

In reality, there is some wisdom in this outlook. “Put a boundary between yourself and the edge of a cliff. Keep a margin of safety.” It makes good common sense when hiking in the mountains.

But it makes for terrible religion. It reduces the Christian life to constructing long detailed lists of right and wrong. Our hearts become preoccupied with figuring out precisely what God expects of believers in every imaginable situation, and with insisting that everyone meet those requirements.

I once heard these chains rattle so loudly that I knew they were tightly wrapped around my own legs. A well-known preacher stood before us in a chapel service at Covenant College. He spoke on the need to mortify the flesh. Undoubtedly, we college students needed that encouragement. But he went much too far. At one point, the preacher shouted at us, “And if you eat breakfast before you spend time with the

Lord in prayer, then you are putting the flesh before the Spirit!” What? Eating breakfast before spending 15-30 minutes in prayer is putting the flesh before the Spirit? It sounded holy and pious; it probably made a few people pray earlier in the day. I had to ask myself, “Where is that taught in Scripture?” The answer was plain. It isn’t.

That’s the problem with this form of legalism. It seems to the legalists that they honor God by taking seriously the responsibility of applying the Bible to life. So, they make pronouncements of what God precisely expects of his people. The difficulty is that they have built a fence around the Bible. They go far beyond what the Bible actually says. They wrap chains around their feet and happily do the same to anyone gullible enough to let them. Jesus saw something similar in the Pharisees and rebuked them: “You load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them” (Luke 11:46).

I like the English Puritans a lot, but one of the pejorative terms applied to some Puritans was “precisionist.” This title stuck because of the way many of them understood this aspect of the Christian life. They believed that God required them to figure out what he wanted them to do in precise terms, and to spend their energies making sure they met all of these

requirements. The story is told of one of them, “Why are you so precise?” He replied with sincere conviction, “Because I serve a precise God.”

I use to revel in that line. “There’s a man who took his faith seriously. He really loved the Lord,” I thought enviously. Now I hate the line. I guess in comparison to the relativism and lawlessness so rampant in our day, God is precise and we should all be “precisionists.” But let’s face it. We don’t usually talk this way with godless relativists. This kind of talk usually appears when Christians pressure other Christians to wrap the chains of long lists of increasingly precise responsibilities around their feet.

“Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch! These are all designed to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. 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.” (Colossians 2:21-23). That’s the way Paul spoke of the third kind of legalism. When we legislate what God expects of us in ways that go beyond what the Scriptures teach, we are not pursuing godliness. We are piling on the chains of legalism.

Now to say something positive about the Puritans. They had another doctrine that is important to remember at this time. They called it the “liberty of conscience.” During the 17th century the Church of England tried to force a Prayerbook on all churches. Many Puritans refused to accept the Prayerbook because they felt it violated their freedom, their liberty of conscience. The argument went something like this. The Bible tells us to pray. It also tells us to pray in worship. But it does not tell us precisely when, how, or what to pray. For this reason, these matters must not be legislated. They are matters of freedom for Christians to pursue in different ways.

When the Bible does not tell us precisely what to think, do or feel in a particular situation, we have a measure of liberty. We must not use that freedom as an excuse to violate what Scriptures teach, but we also must never allow our conscience to be violated by the legalism of those who insist that we follow rules that go beyond the Scriptures.

Unfortunately, many Christians isolate liberty of conscience to just a handful of issues. For instance, we often speak of things like dancing, going to movies, and the like as matters of conscience. But in reality, there is a measure of liberty of conscience in *every* issue of the Christian life. The Bible guides us because it is God’s authoritative revelation. We

must not ignore even the least of the commandments in the Bible. But we must also recognize that the Bible does not specify in utter detail what we are to do in the particular circumstances we face in our lives. It draws parameters, but it does not pinpoint issues in minute detail.

Why would God give us a revelation that left so much room for the freedom of conscience? I can think of at least two reasons. First, in many respects Christian freedom comes from the fact that God has given us revelation in a book. The apostle John admitted that “the whole world would not have room for the books” it would take to write down all that Jesus did (John 21:25). Can you imagine how many volumes it would take to give specific instructions for every situation human beings face? Judaism has tried to work out these details in the never-ending volumes of the Talmud. Happily, Christians have resisted the temptation to form a Christian Talmud. We seek to live by the one book God has given us. But this book only describes general policies; it gives broad brushstrokes of what God would have us do with our lives. Beyond these teachings we live with liberty of conscience.

Second, the freedom we enjoy in Christ also helps us see that our faith is more than a matter of rules and regulations. There is a personal, dynamic dimension of the Christian walk

which must be nurtured if we are to live for Christ. In other words, even with the Bible in hand we have to be led by the Holy Spirit who lives in us. He illumines and convicts us of the ways in which Christ would have us apply the Bible to our lives. We have to remember that the Holy Spirit never leads anyone to violate Scripture, but we must also hold firmly to the belief that his personal ministry to each follower of Christ leads us into proper application of the Bible for the particular challenges we face.

I like to compare learning to live for Christ to learning how to drive a car. A driver's instruction manual is a vital piece of the process. It gives us information that must be learned. It sets out general policies and procedures for many different circumstances we face as we drive. But every one of us knows that you can't drive well simply by reading the instruction manual. A living human instructor is very important as well. Having a live instructor in the car with you provides opportunities to see how to apply the rules of the book to real circumstances we come upon as we drive down the road. Live instructors help us see when rules apply and when they don't. They warn us of dangers; they assure us that some options don't matter at all.

Christians who bind their own feet and the feet of others with long lists of precise rules that go far beyond the Bible run serious risks. They begin to think their lists are equal in authority with the Bible. Moreover, they soon eliminate the need for the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit. After all, they have worked out the details for themselves. Walking in Christ has become reduced to following a set of rules.

We will be dealing with this kind of legalism time and again as we write this book. To walk free as a Christian is not to live without the Bible. That's a sure path to imprisonment in sin. Rather, to walk free is to make several important distinctions. First, what principles does the Bible teach us? As followers of Christ, we must insist on these principles. They are his gifts of freedom to us. Second, what applications of the Bible are worthy of serious consideration, even though they are not absolutely necessary? These suggestive examples will help us flesh out our own ways of living before God with a good conscience. Third, what options does God permit us to choose with the full assurance that none of the options will violate biblical revelation? As we will see, this area of open choice is much larger than many Christians think.

I venture to talk with you about this freedom with a great deal of fear. Many believers who read this book will not be

happy with us. They would prefer that we tell them precisely what God wants from them. They would love for us to be spiritual tyrants, controlling the details of their lives. They will read our discussions of issues such as the family, worship, Sabbath, recreation, etc. (whatever they are), and then they will accuse us of giving up the Faith. But let's not permit them to turn us away from this project.

I know that we are committed to doing our best to follow Christ in all areas of life. But let's also be just as committed to resisting the folly of human legalism. I don't just mean the legalism that says we must earn salvation, or the kind that says we must prove our salvation. I want to resist legalism of the third kind as well, the legalism which insists that we submit to some standard in addition to the revelation of God's will in Scripture.

I still hear the chains of legalism all around us, Steve. But I want them taken from our necks, lifted from our shoulders, and removed from our feet. It's the only way we can ever hope to walk free.