

# No Laws?

*A sermon on 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 by Nathan Nettleton, 14 January 2018*

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## Message

Our freedom in Christ renders the law irrelevant as a factor in our relationship with God, but we are set free to grow into union with Christ, not to fall into new slaveries.

## Sermon

The recent same-sex marriage debate was, in reality, only partially about marriage. The bigger issue, for which the right to marry was largely a vehicle, was about the ways that LGBT+ people are regarded and treated in our society, and the Church is one obvious place where much of the debate is still ahead of us rather than now disappearing in the rear view mirror.

Who religious celebrants can conduct weddings for is governed by Church law as well as Commonwealth law. We often used to forget that because for a few decades at least, Church law and Commonwealth law were largely agreed on who could be married, but now they're not. Daniel Bullock, the head of our Baptist Union in Victoria has flagged that sometime later this year, a process will be commenced to help our churches come together to work out how we respond to the diversity of opinions in our churches now that the Commonwealth marriage law has changed. And so we will again be debating our various interpretations of what the Bible does and doesn't allow, and whether it is a book of immutable laws.

Such debates always turn a spotlight on the church's addiction to law. They remind me that as a person who has been divorced and remarried, a generation earlier these debates would have been about me, and I would have been disqualified by church law from serving as a pastor. The Baptist Union of Victoria back then refused to ordain John Sampson's wife, Ruth, because John had previously been divorced. She was later ordained in the USA and her ordination was recognised when she returned to Australia because we were getting over that debate by then.

When so much blood and tears are shed in the churches over trying to get nail down and impose a correct interpretation of these laws, it is something of a surprise to hear what the Apostle Paul said in the reading we heard tonight from his first letter to the Corinthians. "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything," says Paul. When I hear that, I can't help but wonder how we still get so caught up in declaring people in or out on the basis of laws. Do we believe what the Apostle says, or don't we?

This is not a new question. You can go all the way back through the history of commentary on this passage, and you will find writers saying things like, "Well obviously Paul doesn't mean that ALL things are lawful", and no doubt there is a some truth in that, but why is that so often our starting point? Why is it that we get this almost panicked reflex desire to defend the idea of Christian law?

I can think of no other explanation than that we are so familiar and comfortable with using the idea of law as our basic frame of reference for understanding our relationship with God, that we feel naked without it. Although we sometimes feel a bit resentful and rebellious about

some of the laws, we still like things to be clear cut and certain, and a law based religion gives us that. If we can boil down our religion to ten commandments or to a sinner's prayer to be prayed and the current well-publicised list of hot-topic sins to be avoided, then we feel secure. We know where we stand with God and the church, and all is well.

But if all things are lawful, but not all things are wise or beneficial, then we have choices to make and we are responsible for the outcomes of our choices, and it is not all black and white and carved in stone for us.

It is perhaps particularly strange that we evangelicals have so fallen into this addiction to law, because we are the ones who have most championed the idea of a personal relationship with God. We don't conduct our other personal relationships that way. Marriage is not a set of laws to be obeyed. Friendships are not a list of do's and don'ts. We don't parent by numbers. We feel our way freely in these relationships, growing in our understanding of one another and becoming more able to engage deeply and richly and mutually beneficially as we do. And yet it is we evangelicals who have so often fallen prey to the temptation to reduce Christian faith to a new law, always with its latest hot ticket sin as the focus of our our angst.

If we are to take the Apostle Paul seriously here, then we have to conclude that such a law based approach is clearly wrong. "All things are lawful for me." All things are lawful. Not just some things that used to be against the old Hebrew laws are now lawful for me; but *all* things are lawful for me. "Not all things are beneficial." Not all things are a good idea. Not all things are the right thing to do, but all things are lawful.

Now the only thing that that can mean is that, from God's perspective, nothing is outlawed. If all things are lawful, then there is no law against anything. God is not much interested in laws, and certainly not interested in expending any energy or attention in in policing your behaviour or being against things. And therefore, no one's relationship with God can be judged by measuring them against a check-list of things that disciples of Jesus are not allowed to do.

We can't say "Oh, she drinks and that's against God's law, so she's out," or "He's gay and that's against Gods law, so he's out," or "she's living with a man she's not married to, and that's against God's law, so she's out."

"All things are lawful for me." All things. I'm not saying for a moment that God doesn't care what you do or don't do. The Apostle is clear here that God does care. But I am saying that measuring you against a code of laws is the least of God's concerns. God simply does not look at us that way. God does not look at us and see a grading on law keeping. There is no ATAR score for entry into God's favour. No "he's 92.75%, he can come in; she's 48.4%, she'll have to repeat the year and try harder."

There is absolutely nothing like that. God is not keeping score and has not even put in place a system by which to keep score. "All things are lawful for me."

Is there no right and wrong at all then? Yes there is. Bishop Theodoret of Cyr in the fifth century commented on this text saying, "Now that we are no longer under the law, we have the freedom to make choices, but we need to realise that some choices are right and others

wrong.” But Bishop Theodoret is not just substituting a new law. This right and wrong is not a legal concept. Something can be perfectly legal and still wrong.

When I head for home after church tonight, there are some right ways to get there, and there are some wrong ways to get there. It is perfectly lawful for me to get on the ferry at Station Pier. It is lawful, but if I want to get home, it won't be beneficial.

If I want to get to know my friends better over a drink, there are right ways to do it and wrong ways to do it. It is perfectly lawful for me to drink tequila until I become erratic, out of control, and perhaps violent, but if I'm wanting to deepen my relationship with my friends, it won't be beneficial.

And as Saint John Chrysostom said on this passage, “Paul means that if we are free to choose, then we should remain free and not become a slave to any particular desire.” “All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything.” It is always one of the crazy things about freedom; you can freely sabotage your own freedom.

As the Hebrew people were so often tempted to do during their forty years in the wilderness, you can use your freedom to walk back to slavery. There is no law against making yourself a slave, but it is not the right thing to do if you wish to become the whole and healthy and joyous and free human being you were created to be.

There is no law against running my car without ever changing the oil, but it is destructive and wasteful. There is no law against ignoring all my wife's interests and wishes, but if I want our relationship to grow and deepen, then it would be the wrong choice. And similarly, if I want to grow closer to God and deepen my union with Christ, then there are choices that are good and beneficial and there are choices which would undermine the thing I am saying I want. There are no laws to comply with to earn the relationship, there are just relationship-friendly choices and relationship-harming choices.

If my daughter gives me gift, there is no law against throwing it on the floor and walking on it, but unless the gift is a rug, then doing that is probably going to increase the distance between us, not draw us closer to one another. And if God has given me gifts, then mistreating those gifts is not a legal issue, but it is likely to distance me and God from one another.

That's what Paul is talking about when he goes on to talk about our bodies, and why cheap and trivialising sexual behaviours are wrong choices. It is not a matter of law, it is a matter of treating good gifts as though we didn't value them or care about them at all. If you treat sex cheaply and casually, God doesn't look at you and see a lawbreaker; God looks at you and weeps over the damage you are doing to the gifts he gave you and over the distance you are putting between yourself and the wholeness and beauty God desires for you and created you for.

That's what Paul is talking about when he describes your body as a temple of the Holy Spirit. You were created sacred and beautiful, holy and magnificent. You are capable of good choices, choices that make you and Christ closer to one another and more alike, that make the Holy Spirit more and more at home and more and more evident in your life. But you are free, and you are also capable of trashing the lot; of desecrating the temple.

As Tertullian said in the second century, in many religions, the body is seen as a prison, as an evil and unpleasant thing (and we are certainly capable by our choices of making it that), but in Paul's teaching here, "it is the temple of God because it is in Christ". And we are capable by our choices of making it more and more fully so.

And so, as Paul concludes this passage, remember that you were bought with a price, and so glorify God in your body and in your choices. It cost Jesus no small price to get through to us with the message that God couldn't care less about laws and rules and compliance rates or entry scores. What God wants is a profound loving relationship with us, and God is doing everything to make that possible. And if we will offer ourselves to that, and seek to make the choices that are consistent with that, that are relationship-friendly, then, while we will inevitably make plenty of mistakes along the way, just as we do in all our relationships, then God will honour that and meet us joyously and welcome us into life in all its fullness.