

RAISING STANDARDS

Even though there is actually no redemption in just following rules, there is still safety. In James 1:14-15, we are warned about men being drawn away of their own lusts and enticed. But there must be something, an area of safety, they can be drawn away from, and for that matter, find their way back to. Before there can be any choices regarding obedience or love, there must be rules and guidelines to obey. Before there can be a line to cross or protect, someone must draw that line. This is unfortunate for church leaders who institute such guidelines. Too often they are seen as arbitrary exercises in power rather than the acts of concern and love which they represent.

Imagine with us for a moment. You are a warrior in a mighty army. Encased in state of the art armor and weaponry, you rode into the initial clash of the opposing forces with confidence. Riding your opponent down, you broke through the enemy lines with ease. Now you are fighting for your life. The dust swirls around you, obscuring your vision as you engage the enemy seemingly on all sides at once. If you could only get a breather, but you dare not lower your guard for an instant. You are in enemy territory and it seems you are all alone. It doesn't seem like there are allies left anywhere on the field of battle. Upon your weary ears falls the sweet sound of music. It is a bugle, sounding the call to regroup. Suddenly, in the distance, above the struggle, the battle flag of your company is raised. Knowing where all of you belong, you and your comrades-in-arms slowly fight your way back to the rallying point of the flag. If the king is on the field, he will be there at the flag. So you fight your way back to the group. Knowing you are no longer alone, knowing your back is covered, taking direction from a beloved leader, you fight on with renewed vigor.

The enemy also understands the value of the battle flags, or company standards. Without these, chaos and confusion become a weapon which can be used against you. Without these, there is no means of identity in the thick of the battle. So they attack in an effort to tear down the standards as soon as they are raised. Pity the poor soldiers who offer to raise the standard. Many die for the honor as they come under concentrated attack. Yet, they rarely suffer for replacements. It is an honor to give your life in the service of your fellow warriors. It is for their benefit alone that the bearer of the flag stands resolute against attacks. When the standard is forced down to the point where it drags the dirt, it is a shame and a dishonor to those who serve what it represents.

We have always liked the scripture in the sixth chapter of Solomon that talks about God being beautiful and terrible as an army with it's banners. Both at the same time. Place in your mind for a moment the image of an army slowly appearing over a hilltop. Rank after rank, company after company, standards of battle raised high in challenge. If you are in need of help and belong to that army, it is an beautiful sight indeed. If you are on the side opposing that army, it is a sight capable of invoking terror. Same army, different viewpoints.

The church of the living God is supposed to serve as soldiers of the cross. We are to be clad in the armor of God, bearing in our hands the sword of the Word of God. Through the power of the name of Jesus, we have dominion over every foe. So we ride forth. To conquer and to rescue. Awesome and terrible as the God we serve. Although we are fully equipped by the whole armor, shouldn't we also have banners that strike terror into the hearts of the enemy? Shouldn't there be standards that identify us? As those who served in Vietnam can attest, it is a terrifying ordeal when everyone looks the same on a battlefield and we can not tell friend from foe. How do we reconcile the need for rallying points and drawn lines against the obvious truth that works and rules can not in any way make us righteous? We submit that "*standards*" are needed to both identify camps and to make choices of love truly possible.

There are some lines that have been drawn for all eternity. These will never change. They are recorded in the Word and will stand when this world has been destroyed. What was an abomination and a stink in the nostrils of an Old Testament God is still disgusting to Him. James 1:17 says that there is no shadow of turning in Him. If the scripture expressly commands us, then disobedience is sin. We like the saying that the ten commandments were not called the ten suggestions. The two commandments given by Christ were even more difficult to follow, for they were commandments that affect every decision in life. Those lines are fixed. What is specifically labeled as sin by God, will always be sin.

Yet most “*standards*” that are taught in churches as ways to live holy before God are neither specifically commanded or defined as sin in the scriptures (lines). This is because most of them evolve from the pressures and conditions specific to the times in which we live. Instead, they are best viewed as pastoral applications (precepts) of timeless principles given by God. We believe that pastors who have been given the responsibility for the souls of a flock are also given wisdom to help them shepherd. In every age, not only have pastors had to preach against actual sin, but also to carefully consider Paul’s admonition in Heb 12:1 to “lay aside every sin and every weight that so easily besets us”. There is obviously a difference between sins and weights. Using Paul’s illustration of a race, pastors’ admonishments against situations not covered by chapter and verse can be compared to track coaches advising runners. There is nothing in the rules that prohibit runners from strapping fifty pounds of weight around their necks, but as a coach, they feel obliged to point something out. They won’t win and they probably won’t be able to finish the race, a metaphor of being lost. This is like engaging in activities that we know good and well will draw us away from God. While perhaps technically lawful, they are just not expedient.

So we thank God for a pastor who raises up “*standards*” for living. They serve the same purpose as those raised in any other battle. Our rallying to those banners strengthens our identity as part of the group. When we meet there with others of like precious faith, we draw from their strength to help protect us. Some may need our protection, for on their own and without a standard to rally to, they would quickly be surrounded and vanquished. Sometimes it just feels good to fight under the banner of a king we adore. But there is a far more important reason for the soldiers of the cross to raise up standards.

God has always required separation from those whom He has chosen to be His people. Over and over we hear Him say in scriptures such as 2 Cor 6:17, “Come out from among them and be ye separate”. God desires our sacrifices, to be sure. But more than sacrifice, He desires obedience. So we look at the standards of the church as opportunities for obedience. A line drawn gives us a chance to choose sides. A rule laid down gives us a chance to demonstrate loyalty. A request made, a preference voiced, gives us a chance to demonstrate our love for Him. Sometimes the burdens we lay on each other are simply too heavy to bear. More often, they are a test of our willingness to separate ourselves from the values of this world and rally beneath the flag of another kingdom. While principles of separation may not be specifically commanded in scripture, we are commanded in Heb 13:17 to obey them that have rule over us. God started a promise in Ex 6:7 with, “And I will take you to me for a people”. As we run for the glory of God, removing any weights that hold us to this earth and hinder us will surely aid us in finishing. It is worth any sacrifice to hear Him complete His half of the promise, “and I will be to you a God”.

What follows is a collection of thoughts on some of the teachings of the church. They represent the efforts of men and women who watch out for our souls to draw us back into proximity to Christ. They represent a separation from the identity and the values of the world we live in. They represent a chance to say “Thank You” to a Savior whose sacrifice we could never match or repay. We know that adhering to them can not make us more righteous. Nor does following them

represent any real fulfillment of the obligation created by the command "Follow me!" Instead, they represent a way, as we seek to please Him more than ourselves, to demonstrate through obedience what we often whisper in words. "I love you"

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are some rules that you think were put in place for your safety?
2. Would you agree that without lines, there can be no obedience?
3. Who are the people in the different areas of your life that have drawn lines for you, in the secular as well as the spiritual areas? What are the lines? What are they called?
4. Have you ever been struggling with something and felt all alone in the fight? Is it easier when others are battling the same thing with you?
5. What are some traditional family or church standards that you think are under attack? Are you part of the defense or part of the attack? What do you think the long term results will be if the standard falls?
6. Have you ever been the one to raise the standard and consequently come under attack? Does that idea frighten you?
7. Realizing that you can not be neutral in this fight, when the army of God advances with its standards raised, do you love it or fear and scorn it?
8. If there is no way to identify each other, if they look like us and we look like them, and if no one rallies around standards, how do you know who your enemies are? Can you think of examples where it is becoming hard to discern who is serving God and those who are not?
9. What are some things that will always be sin, no matter what church or pastor you are involved with?
10. Why do you think that the two commandments of Jesus might be more difficult to follow than the ten commandments given to Moses? Which are easiest to obey? General commands or specific?
11. Have you ever witnessed your pastor do something that seemed like a poor decision at the time, but later turned out to have been a wise thing to do? How did they do it? Do you think God helped?
12. What do you think are examples of weights, but not sins?
13. If a pastor asks you not to do something you consider a weight, does disobedience afterwards become a sin?
14. Have you ever been around someone tempted to do something foolish, but your strength helped preserve their walk with God?
15. Is there anything you can think of that you feel you could safely enjoy that might cause a brother or sister following your example to lose their relationship with God? How would you feel if that happened? Do you think God would hold you accountable?
16. Can you think of any weight you can strap on that would be worth chancing the inability to finish the race for Christ?
17. Do you think adhering to the standards taught by your church represents obedience to the command, "Follow me!" or an answer to the question asked Peter, "Do you love me?"