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Ephesians 5:15-21  
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### YOU CAN'T DO AS YOU PLEASE

In spite of the title which I have appended to this sermon, I wish to begin by stating that the fact of the matter is, one can do as he pleases. Yes, one can do as he pleases if he is not concerned with the consequences of what he does. One can do as he pleases if he doesn't care about others and if he doesn't care about himself.

But of course everyone does have some measure of concern about himself, however little it may be. The very assertion that we would like to do as we please indicates a concern for that self we wish to please. Almost all of us likewise have some amount of concern for others even though we may argue to the contrary.

Nevertheless one does often hear it protested: "I'm going to do as I please and I don't care what anyone else thinks!"

The desire to do what we please, when we please, and if we please, is probably a special and highly developed animal desire existing only in man. No squirrel ever said to himself, "I don't give a hang what others do, I'm going to do what I please this year and not gather any nuts!" No animal decides for himself that he is going to change his habits and not hibernate during the winter. No bird concludes that it is not going to fly south when the urge comes. These are powerful instinctive forces and although there is some argument as to whether man has any instincts at all, it is nevertheless true that if he does have them they are extremely limited. He must make his decisions on some other basis, namely his power to reason.

But reason is not the total governing factor. Man is also a creature possessed of powerful emotions and his emotions often play a larger part than reason in urging him to do what he pleases rather than what reason says he ought. Emotionally he rebels against laws, rules, public opinion and social restraints. Yet when he examines the experience of his race he realizes that some restraints are necessary because man is imperfect. Man often chooses that which is pleasant over that which is wise.

## II

Basically the reason we can't all just run around doing what we please is that there are principles, laws and rules, many of which are beyond our power to alter. Man can break them or ignore them, but not without unhappy consequences. If we want order and peace in our own lives and in society we must respect and obey those objective principles. Let us offer some examples.

Young people often resent some of the rules and regulations placed upon them by parents and society. They would like to do as they please and the standard challenge to parents is, "Don't you trust me?" But I once knew three fine young people who one night were doing just what they pleased with the best of intentions and tried to drive their car over a railroad track at the same time as a train was proceeding down the track, with the consequent tragic death of all three. They never seriously considered the consequences of breaking the parental rules against drinking and driving. Their good intentions could not save them. Death intervened to prevent them from learning that you can't just do as you please.

We live in a society today where young people often appropriate the idea that they can do as they please from the adults whom they observe. Our strong and continued emphasis on rights and privileges with little or no emphasis on duties and responsibilities is turning our traditional concept of freedom into a craving for license which leads finally to chaos. It is reflected in a recent poll by the Daniel Yankelovich organization revealing that even the four years between 1969 and 1973 the number of college students who regarded living a clean moral life as an important value dropped from 45% to only 34%. Only one-third of our college students now value a clean moral life!

Another example. For many years our nation has been following a policy of fiscal irresponsibility. We, through our politicians, have not wanted to make any sacrifices or limit our access to the comforts and conveniences of our highly technological society. We thought the economy could go on growing and expanding forever. We thought there were no objective principles, rules or regulations. We are now discovering that we were wrong. Inflation is teaching us that and it has yet a lot more to teach us.

In science also we have done whatever pleased us that was within our power to do. Our philosophy was, "All things are possible and we should do anything that is possible." Again, we forgot that there are rules and principles to consider. Is man morally able to control all that man's brain can conceive? Two atomic bombs have been dropped on heavy population centers and no one knows when or if the next will drop. Of that we must now live in constant apprehension. The question again is not alone can we do these things, but should we do them?

And our new freedom and lack of restraint is surely visible in the arts as we move ever further toward abstraction and meaninglessness.

Often when one is admonished that he ought or ought not do something, he will reply, "I don't care what anyone else thinks." When he says that he may unfortunately be nearer the truth than he himself even supposes. For is it not a lack of care and concern for others that usually impels us to do what we please without restraint?

Not to care about others is a sorry and a tragic thing. No society can long remain healthy if that is the state of its moral and ethical philosophy. That condition, I would suggest, is caused by a fault even more basic; a loss of reverence for God--for any ultimate, objective reality.

Kenneth Vaux makes the point in his book, Biomedical Ethics:

"The good must have objective reference if it is to have subjective power." \*

Reverence for God and the consequent reverence for life precludes anyone going through life doing as he pleases. You can't do as you please if you love God and love your fellowmen.

Albert Schweitzer during his glorious lifetime caught this sense of responsibility men must have if they are to justify the tremendous mental and spiritual potential with which God has blessed them:

"You must give some time to your fellowman. Even if it's a little thing, do something for those who have need of help, something for which you get no pay but the privilege of doing it. For remember, you don't live in a world all your own, your brothers are here too."

You can't do as you please, not if you care what kind of a world you live in, not if you care what kind of a world your fellowmen live in.

#### IV

Certainly no Christian can ever live by the philosophy, "I'm going to do what I please." That is the antithesis of Christianity. Can you imagine Jesus, who cried out in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Oh, my Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless not my will but thine be done"--can you imagine this man saying, "I don't care what anyone else says, I'm going to do what I please"? With him it was first, last and always, "What does God want; what will please Him?" Because he had that objective reference he also had subjective power.

Was it the desire to do what he pleased that sent Paul out to be beaten, shipwrecked, imprisoned, and finally executed? Or was it his loyalty and devotion to a higher authority than himself which impelled him to will to do the will of God and to declare:

"For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more."  
(I Corinthians 9:19)

\* Harper & Row, 1974, page 41

The person whose highest authority is himself, who proclaims that his highest desire is to do what pleases himself above all else, has himself for a god, and that god is as false as any idol can possibly be. Such a person concedes that he recognizes no rules, no principles, no law above himself. God save us from any society made up of men and women like that.

Let me refer again to the book by Kenneth Vaux, Biomedical Ethics, in which he discusses the objective principles that must be considered when one deals with modern scientific techniques that can so vastly influence the human condition. Commenting specifically on abortion, now the most widely practiced form of birth control in the world, he says,

"As father of two healthy sons and one son whose life was taken early, I have a small understanding of the mysterious goodness of life when contrasted to death. I feel we should choose life with all the strength God gives us. Remember the words of Pearl Buck whose retarded daughter was the strength of her life: 'Beyond life lie only faith and surmise, but not knowledge. Where there is no knowledge except for life, decision for death is not safe for the human race.'" \*

If that is true in an area where we have little or no knowledge, how much more is it true where so much of the history of the human race testifies to the tragedy of men doing just what they please. To choose to do only what we please is to choose some form of darkness, disaster and death. To choose what centuries of human experience have revealed to be good, true and beautiful, to be productive and constructive over the long run, is to choose light, well-being and life. You and I are making that choice everyday. May God help us to make them wisely.

\* Ibid. page 68