

Is God Trying to Control My Behavior?

Someone was talking about the way Christians *try to control other people* by labeling certain behaviors as *sinful*. That was a new perspective to me, but I guess it makes sense. It might be similar to the way the strict Pharisees and Jewish leaders of Jesus' day controlled the people through their interpretation of the Law.

The people were warned about violating the 'traditions of the elders,' that is, the *interpretations* of the Law of Moses which had been handed down for centuries. If a person's thinking and/or behavior did not line up with the expectations of the religious leaders, he could be "put out of the synagogue."

The threat of being *put out of the synagogue* was not an idle threat, but one of grave religious and social consequences that in some cases could also have economic implications. Two instances of such a threat are found in the Gospel of John:

- ◆ On one occasion a blind man was healed by Jesus. His parents were afraid of saying that Jesus was the Christ because they would be "put out of the synagogue." (John 9:22)
- ◆ John later mentioned a number of Jewish rulers who believed in Jesus. Yet, they were afraid that they would be "put out of the synagogue" if they confessed their belief in Jesus. (John 12:42-43)

To explain the consequences in a more general way, to be *put out of the synagogue* was to lose the acceptance of the religious leaders, and consequently family, friends, and acquaintances.

What a terrible prospect! If a person did not believe the accepted teaching or did not display the accepted behavior, he would be rejected by the society in which he lived. It is easy to see how such a threat could be used to control an individual's behavior.

The idea of control suggests forced behavior. So, it would appear that the Jewish rulers exerted control and forced compliant behavior. It would also seem that some people today believe that Christians wish to force certain behaviors on others. They presume an attempt to regulate behavior by labeling behaviors as sin.

I do not believe that Christians in general are guilty of such a practice, but I can understand how some people

might think that about some Christians. Perhaps there is a deeper concern: *Is God trying to control my behavior?*

The gospel answers the question. The gospel *calls*, or *invites* people to respond to Jesus Christ. An *invitation* suggests choice, not force. The Apostle Paul admitted that he desired to *persuade* people to respond to the gospel. However, persuasion still allows personal choice. Also, consider Paul's motivation:

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men.... —2 Corinthians 5:11

Paul was not trying to control anyone. He simply knew that one day God would judge people.

So, the gospel call/invitation allows people to accept or reject Jesus. Those who reject Jesus are not obligated to conform their behavior to be like Him. People should bear in mind, however, that all choices have consequences. Still yet, no one is forced to accept Jesus.

So, let's further refine the question: *Is God trying to control the behavior of Christians?*

Again, control suggests force and God has chosen to allow people, even Christians, to make their own choices. Forced behavior diminishes or even destroys faith and love. Just look back at the example of the Jewish rulers. Also consider the 'Great Commands.' They are worded as commands, but even so, they are not forced on people. God allows us to choose whether we will *love Him with all our heart, soul and mind*. It is as if God has said, *IF you really do love me, you will do what I ask*. Actually, God did say that in both the Old Testament (Exodus 20:6; Deuteronomy 7:9) and in the New Testament through Jesus. (John 14:15; 15:10; among others.)

God does have high expectations from those who devote their lives to Jesus. His expectations may seem strict, but they are attitudes and behaviors that reflect his divine character. So, when we (Christians) respond to people about Jesus, it is reasonable to say that God's expectations are demanding, even restrictive. It is reasonable to say that God allows every person to choose how he/she will live (and bear the consequences for their choices). Finally, we can tell people that we are really serious about our convictions and want to persuade others because of God's judgment. Even then, God simply does not force anyone to do anything.