

Study Guide for Liberty or Laws?

To be used along with the video of the same name on www.ChristianfromMuslim.com



Summary and Notes:

Quick Summary: This video lesson and study guide help us work through an age-old problem: is the Christian life to be characterized by freedom or obligations, liberty or laws? All Christians struggle with this. We usually end up emphasizing one side or the other of the balance.

As you might imagine, this question of liberty or laws is especially challenging for Christians of a Muslim background because everything in Islam, including their eternal destiny, depended on their successfully obeying laws.

Reality - Shopping Day

This video clip from the real life of former Muslim Huda and Dr. Cynthia might seem frivolous – just for fun or showing off. However, that is not the point. It brings to our attention the challenge of finding an appropriate wardrobe for Christian women, especially new believers who were raised Muslim.

Today we see Huda trying to find a suitable clothing. She looks to Dr. C for advice, but struggles to find something that they both think is acceptable.

Are there Rules in Christianity?

Every Christians must decide how their freedom in Christ will affect the way they live.

This applies to believers from all backgrounds, men as well as women. If we are not careful, liberty can lead to a license for wild living, or caution can lead to legalism and judgementalism.

Coming from Islam, a religion based primarily on laws, presents a special challenge to this dilemma. As a Christian, former Muslims learn that they are saved by grace, not law. Now they are free from rules about fasting, praying, diet, and dress codes. Does that mean that they can do anything? Or will they simply exchange one restrictive code of rules for another?

In Islam, religion is tied to culture and politics more than in the West.

Thus, they tend to see all Western behavior as reflective of Christianity, and acceptable to Christians. As a result, we find misunderstandings among Muslims of what Christianity teaches. This also impacts the thinking of Muslims who become Christians.

One of the things which often attracts a Muslim to Christianity is our freedom in Christ. The fact that we are loved and accepted by God without good deeds is a refreshing change for them. Their life in Islam is burdened with heavy labor, and every mistake recorded with no promise of salvation at the end. In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus said,

“Come to me all you who are tired and carrying heavy loads. I will give you rest... You will find rest for your souls. Serving me is easy, and my load is light.” (NIRV)

But for the burdened looking up, sometimes the attraction of freedom itself is too strong. Sadly, obtaining that freedom can become the Muslim’s chief goal, rather than the deeper blessing of knowing Christ.

For example: on-call to the houka bar: Brother E, an evangelist from Palestine who works with us, received an urgent night call from a Christian in a houka bar. It was from a young Arab man who was there with two young Muslim women. The women said wanted to convert to Christianity and needed a minister. Brother E is sociable, but does not go to houka bars. For this occasion, however, he went immediately.

After talking to the women for several hours, sharing the gospel, and discussing the Christian life with them, he realized that they did not want to become true Christians. Nor did they want to know Jesus personally. They simply wanted the life of license – dressing scantily, smoking, drinking alcohol, picking up men in bars – that they imagined Christians had. So, despite their requests, he did not pronounce them “Christians.” He left them as they were, simply “bad Muslims.”

It is not uncommon for us to find this motivation. We are thankful that at least these two Muslim women let Brother E share the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ with them. We believe that God’s word does not return void (Isaiah 55:11). Although they were not ready to respond to it at the time, we pray that later in their lives the Holy Spirit will open a door for the message that they heard to be received.

Are there Rules in Christianity? Dr. C & Rev. Georges Houssney in discussion

In the video lesson, Dr. Cynthia and experienced guest Georges Houssney discuss the challenge of bringing new disciples into discipline without delivering a burden of rules similar to what they carried under Islam. The two lay out guidelines reflective of how inward transformation can result in outward change.

Islam is a system with a long list of rules and laws. By following these laws, Muslims believe they obtain points, or *thawab*, and gain favor with Allah at the Day of Judgment. This gives them a better chance to enter paradise.

Dr. C explains to Houssney the challenges she has faced in encouraging new believers from a Muslim background. She wants to help them grow in disciplines like Bible study and prayer, without making them feel like they have simply entered another system of rules.

Houssney affirms that yes, Christians are saved by grace (Ephesians 2:8,9), not by our good deeds. But if we want to grow as Christians, we need to follow certain things called disciplines. We are not obligated to do these for salvation, but if we do not, we will not fully live in Christ.

For example, to live we need to breath, eat, and drink. Similarly, to live spiritually we need to read the Word of God and pray. The fruit of the Spirit of God living in us gives us self-control, and enables us to do these things (Galatians 5:23).

Although these are suggestions, not rules, for their own growth, strength and joy, we encourage all believers, former Muslims and otherwise, to:

- read the Bible daily
- memorize verses that encourage them
- take time for reflection and meditation on what they learned
- pray to God throughout the day as in conversation
- learn some spiritual songs to sing in their hearts
- join with other believers in fellowship, and
- serve God with their spiritual gifts.
- (For more information on growing in Christ, see lessons and study guides on *New in God's Family*, *The Christian Life*, and others.)

Are there things Christians shouldn't do?

Muslims often think that since Christians are saved by grace, that they are authorized to do anything – including immoral activities. Dr. C and Houssney discuss how much liberty we as Christians have. Can we do anything we want to and still be Christians? What about dressing scantily, drinking alcohol, swearing, sexual relationships, or going to R rated movies?

The Bible tells us that although all things may be permissible for us, not all things are helpful (I Corinthians 6:12). Houssney says that yes, we have freedom, but we are told not to misuse it. We must live in a way that loves others and considers their good. We should not put a stumbling block before someone else, that might encourage them to sin.

*“Be careful how you use your rights.
Be sure you don't cause someone weaker than you to fall into sin.”* I Corinthians 8:9 (NIRV)

“The only thing that really counts is faith that expresses itself in love.” Galatians 5:4-6 (NIRV)

More on the Christian wardrobe:

As introduced in today's reality video, a particular problem for the practice of Christian liberty that is in the area of dress. Dr. C has found this is especially a problem for women leaving Islam. Men leaving Islam do not seem to face the same challenge, probably because men's dress codes are less strict in both cultures.

First, know that it is not our policy to encourage any Muslim or former Muslim to take off their head scarf or dress in Western style. That should be a decision between them and God.

Imagine – you are a woman brought up that it is a sin to expose almost any of your body, possibly even your eyes or hands. How can you learn or “get a feel” for what is an acceptable amount of skin and/or figure to show now that you are a Christian?

Example, an Iraqi refugee woman: This lively and friendly 46-year-old Muslim woman is happy now to be safe in America, and is open to ideas of Christianity. But adjusting to dress standards in America has been difficult to her.

In Bagdad, Mrs. L always wore long skirts. Here, she got jobs that required her to wear pants/trousers – first loose, then tighter. Since she had to make the change for her job she did. She has been allowed a head scarf, which she still wears (*hijab*). Although it has been a few years, she has still not adjusted to wearing pants/trousers. She feels that people are looking at her body, and she is not comfortable with anyone – man or woman – doing that.

Example, Westernizing dress standards: Sometimes we see liberalizing of dress standards as an indication that a Muslim is becoming more open to the Christian message. For example, some Muslim women students that we followed for several years that removed their head scarves a year or two before they became Christian.

One, in her mid-twenties had worn a hijab outside the house since she was a young girl. She was thrilled with what Christians take for granted. On a lovely day, she was walking with Dr. C around a fountain in the town square near her campus. With an enthusiastic smile, lifted her hair with her fingers, and let the gentle breeze pass through it, saying,

“I just love the way the wind feels in my hair!”

Example, North African immigrants: Two married women in their thirties who were born overseas but grew up in America became frustrated with Islam and left it. One of them had dreams and became a Christian. The other has not. Both still wear hijabs for two reasons:

- For safety – so that their families and Muslim communities they live in will not know they have left Islam. (They and their children could face trouble.)
- Even when away from family, since they have worn head scarves their entire lives, they confess they have no idea of how to style their hair. This makes them insecure in removing their hijabs.

Example, Saudi Arabian women, now Christian: Several women we know who had to cover all but part of their face and hands in Saudi, are now sincere Christians in America. They want to wear miniskirts and low-cut tops showing cleavage. What should we say to them?

What is the appropriate way to dress now that you are a believer?

Think about how you might feel about changing from Muslim to Western dress. You might feel odd or “guilty” about showing anything – hair or even fingers, since you are breaking an ingrained pattern. But does that mean if you are going to feel guilty anyway, that you might as well show everything that anyone in Western culture shows?

In the Balance: Believers need to learn to balance freedom in Christ with modesty and Western lifestyle.

- Housney reminds us that although people look on the outward appearance, God looks on the heart (I Samuel 16:7).
- True beauty comes from the inside, as we are told in both the Old and New Testaments (Proverbs 31:30 & I Peter 3:3,4). We should let our internal beauty flow out. In that way, we should care about what others think.

Example, a journalist: In Islamic countries, Westerners might be surprised to learn that a woman’s most attractive feature, after her face, is considered to be her hands. Once Dr. C read an article by a woman journalist in the Middle East. She was concerned about women’s rights and accepted dress standards. She pointed out that if hands are the only part of a woman that men can see, they will lust over a woman’s hands.

This shows Dr. C that no matter how modestly a woman dresses, it will not be modest enough to prevent sin in a man's heart.

Example, an Imam: A high-ranking Imam in a large American city told Dr. C that if a man sees a woman and lusts – no matter what she is wearing – the sin belongs to the woman, not the man. She has somehow enticed him. This sharply contrasts with what Jesus taught,

“Here is what I tell you. Do not even look at a woman in the wrong way. Anyone who does has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Matthew 5:28 (NIRV)

This important verse confirms that it is the heart that God is most concerned with. But Dr. C expresses concern that if women worry too much about how men see them, they can be reduced to covering their faces and hands with gloves, as in strict Islam.

Example, the covering: Once when Dr. C was volunteering in an immigrant friendship center, she saw something that made her sad. Dr. C was in a room of Arab Muslim women who were studying English as a second language. One of the women was totally covered in black, with only narrow slits for her lovely eyes (*niqab*). Beyond that, even her hands were covered with black gloves.

The friendship center was directed by a man. When that man walked into the room to make an announcement, Dr. C was surprised to see the veiled woman bow her head, cower, and retreat into herself. Even covering everything was not enough. She had to become invisible.

So, Dr. C says there has to be a balance between a woman's rights and a man's lust. Women should respect men's weakness, and not try to tempt them sexually. But shouldn't women have the right to wear something in public that pleases them, without needing to cower or hide?

Houssney agrees. He quotes a saying, “If we dress sexy, we will get sex, if we dress lovely, we will get love.”

Of course, different cultures consider different areas of a woman attractive, and encourage different dress standards. So, it is not really possible to select one appropriate wardrobe for all Christian women in every situation. Somehow there must be a compromise.

The Compromise: In the end, Houssney and Dr. Cynthia agree that guidelines for Christian dress in America or Europe could be to try:

- **not to be a stumbling block** (seductive)
- **to reflect well upon the Lord**, and
- **generally, follow how a conservative person** in Western culture might dress, in terms of how much of their body is shown. That way they will not stand out as looking for attention. (*Usually this would mean nothing too tight, low cut, above the knee, or revealing the shoulder or upper arm.*)

(For specific wardrobe suggestions for Christians working with Muslims, see lesson and study guide on *Building Bridges*.)

Legalism and Judgementalism:

Muslims that were comfortable with the rules of Islam, may feel comfortable continuing with rules as Christians, and fall into legalism.

- There may be a necessity to continue in these laws outwardly in order to live as secret believers in their culture.
- Some of the early Jewish Christians were very comfortable with laws, and tried impose rules back upon other Christians (see Acts 15 and the book of Galatians). The church leaders spoke to this error to correct it.

Legalism leads to judgementalism. A risk for former Muslims, as all Christians, who are successful with laws is judgementalism.

Several professional and reliable sources, and our own experiences, have reported a critical spirit in many people from the Middle East, especially Muslim women. Someone who falls easily into a legalistic Christian life style is at risk for developing a critical attitude toward those less strict than them.

In fact, it is common among all Christians to view someone more strict than them as legalistic, and someone less strict as morally loose. We should pray to avoid both these extremes.

Although we must be cautious about who we associate with, and encourage them to seek Christian virtues, we should also refrain from being judgmental.

“Don’t let anyone fool you. ‘Bad companions make a good person bad.’ You should come back to your senses and stop sinning. Some of you don’t know anything about God.”

I Corinthians 15:33, 34 (NIRV)

“Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others.”

Matthew 7:1 (NIRV)

Returning to Islam

Dr. C shares reasons that we have found for Muslims returning to Islam after leaving it. (Technically, this is called *recidivism of an apostate*).

For Christians working with Muslims, it is always sad to see a former Muslim returning to Islam. But this is not a new trend. It has been happening since the early days of missions to Muslims. Then it was at a very high rate of up to 70%.

One of the reasons for recidivism, returning to Islam, is that the new believer from Muslim background came to the faith for the **wrong motives**. Maybe they were getting something in exchange for converting – food, increased status, marriage, free life style, acceptance, etc. In that case it is very doubtful as to whether or not they ever sincerely believed in their heart, or if they were simply making a bargain which lost its appeal over time.

A common reason for returning to Islam is **fear and intimidation**. When a Muslim leaves Islam, they are automatically under a *fatwa* for death, which extends all the way back to the time of the Prophet Mohammed. It does not need to be specifically pronounced for each of them. Although new converts to Islam don’t always know, those raised in Islam know the fatwa is on the head of an apostate, and any Muslim is justified in killing them anytime. (See lessons and study guides on *Fear, Persecution, and Spiritual Warfare*, and *Violence in Religion*.)

If someone has left Islam and been captured, before execution takes place, they are given three days of reflection to consider returning to Islam. In reality, this becomes a time of intimidation and attempted brain washing This period of reindoctrination and reflection, is often accompanied by imprisonment and

beatings. Only by great strength of will power, or the Holy Spirit is someone able to withstand these pressures. (See many published testimonies of Muslim converts to Christianity.)

Another reason for returning to Islam is because of missing **family and cultural** support. Anyone leaving their family and culture is prone to miss it, and Muslims especially so. Why?

- First because Muslim culture is much more socially interconnected than Western: more group than individual.
- Secondly, because being disowned and shunned by one's family is a painful thing for anyone, and
- Thirdly, Islamic culture is intimately entwined with their religion. The Muslim has been programmed to base their year around the events of Islam. The special foods, the activities, the ceremonies which formerly made their lives rich are now gone.

Economic survival is another reason for returning to Islam. Muslim economies are typically not strong and without government safety nets. Their safety nets are based on family, clan, and the mosque. When one leaves Islam, they not only lose family, but often their job and any means of survival. The Qur'an tells them that apostates should face hardships in this life. Not everyone faces starvation and privation willingly. In the short run it is easier to submit to Islam and eat, than risk starvation, even for heaven.

In America, thankfully economic survival is not tied to religion, so here that is not such a factor. However, it is not always easy for even well-educated English-speaking Americans to find a job; how much more difficult for immigrants, even international students, to compete with Americans? Dr. C has seen examples of Muslims who return to their home nation for economic survival, where they then face all the above pressures to return to Islam.

Sometimes, Dr. C has found, that former Muslims are so repulsed by Islam that it is not Islam that attracts them to leave Christianity. If what attracted them to become Christians was freedom from the bondage of Islamic Law, then they might be **attracted to become secular**. They become and more entangled in the ways of the world until they are little different from anyone in Western culture, and scarcely have any faith at all.

Dr. C tells Christians working with Muslims that they can *assess what kind of risk Muslims have of returning to Islam by finding what most attracted them to Christianity*.

And in any case, it is advisable for Christians discipling Muslims to provide for them emotional and social support to help make up for what they have lost in leaving Islam.

Facing Insecurity

Many in the Muslim world are facing insecurity. With the economies of most Muslim nations being weak, people wonder about finding jobs and supporting their families. Women especially face insecurity: what if my husband divorces me? What will happen to my children? If I struggle to study will my husband become angry at my new independence? To whom will my father marry me? Will I be beaten tonight?

Mark Vyka is facing insecurity. In fact, he is dying of cancer. In this video he shares what has helped him face the insecurities of life.

When facing insecurity, Mark recommends that we read the Bible and look for a verse that encourages us, then "camp on it." By this he means that we would think about it, meditate upon it and even memorize it. He encourages us to seek God first, because when we do, everything else falls into place (Matthew 6:33). If

we walk in faith, God will provide for us what we need and a way to escape from our fear, temptation or problem (Genesis 22:14, I Corinthians 10:13).

(This video is in memory of our beloved brother in Christ, Mark Vyka 1957-2016.)

Scripture References for this Episode:

II Corinthians 5:17
Matthew 11:28-30
Isaiah 55:11
Ephesians 2:8,9
Galatians 5:23
I Corinthians 6:12
I Corinthians 8:9
Galatians 5:4-6
I Samuel 16:7
I Peter 3:3,4
I Samuel 16:7
Proverbs 31:30
I Peter 3:3,4
Matthew 5:28.20
Acts 15
Galatians
Matthew 7:1
Matthew 6:33
Genesis 22:14
I Corinthians 10:13

Islamic References:

Mohammed said to kill those who leave Islam:

Qur'an in Surah 4:89

Hadith - *Sahih Bukhari* 52:260 & 84:57.

Study Questions:

1. If you are a former Muslim, how did the freedom of Christians you knew personally, or saw in media, impact your decision to become a Christian?

- Was it favorable or unfavorable?
- What part of your conversion was desiring the freedom that you thought Christians had?
- If time allows and you want to, perhaps you could share these ideas with the group.

2. How might the Christian lifestyle be different than that of a strict Muslim?

- Dress for men?
- Dress for women?
- Prayer and other spiritual disciplines?

3. What are some principles that Rev. Houssney and Dr. Cynthia suggest might be helpful in assisting new Muslim background Christians in adapting to Western behaviors which reflect Christ, rather than worldliness?

4. In reflecting over the course of your Christian life:
 - Have you been more inclined to liberty and license, or laws and legalism?
 - If liberty vs. laws is a spectrum from one extreme to the other, where along that line do you see yourself at this moment?
 - Do you think there is something you could do improve this balance?
5. What are the disciplines that Houssney and Dr. C encourage all Christians to participate in.
 - To what point do you think it would be good for Christians to participate in these?
 - Can you think of what might be too much or too little participation in these?
6. Are there ways that you could apply Houssney and Dr. C's dress guidelines to your life?
7. Have you ever been used to wearing a watch or ring, and then lost it, forgotten to wear it one day?
 - How did you feel going without it?
 - Does this give you insight into how someone might feel when they start to dress differently?
8. It is not easy to assist someone walk through the transition from a life of rules to a life of controlled freedom.
 - Do you know someone who might be in need of guidelines such as Dr. C and Houssney present?
 - Without being judgmental, what might be an appropriate way to share these guidelines with them?
 - What response might you expect at first? Over time?
9. How do you think a person's clothing reflects who they are and what they believe?
10. Dr. C loves to go out with Muslims. Mostly this is to connect with them and make friends. But another thing she likes is seeing how people react to her, a blond woman, with one or more people in Islamic dress. She thinks this is good for several reasons, including the people she is with and those watching them. Why do you think it would be good:
 - For the Muslims she is with?
 - For the people watching them?
11. Would you consider dressing as a Muslim in your community some day as a learning experience?
 - Do you think that would be a good idea?
 - Why or why not?

by Christian from Muslim, 2019
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