

Introduction

Today, I'm going to preach from one of the two most misinterpreted verses in the Bible, Proverbs 29:18. Robert Schuller, Tony Campolo, and Jesse Jackson are just three of the many people I've read or heard misinterpret it. They, like almost all Christians, interpret it to be about goal setting. They take it to mean that if we don't set goals or have aims in our lives, we'll languish where we are and never grow,

But that isn't what it's about and I mean at all. What it is about is God's revealed word and the consequences of keeping it and not keeping it. And that's what I'm going to preach about today.

Where There Is No Vision

Let's start with the Hebrew word that the KJV and my NASB translate "**vision.**" That word is a technical term in the Old Testament that refers to the revelation that God gave the prophets. Simply put, it refers to His revealed word, which is for us the 66 books of the Bible.

With that in mind, look at the opening line of the verse and the state of affairs it describes, "**Where there is no vision.**" That state of affairs is one in which people or cultures reject God's revealed word, the Bible. "**Reject**" means they regard it as man's word, not God's. And because it's man's word, it's no more authoritative and truthful than any other writing or book is. Consequently, they don't think and live by it.

That does accurately describe our current culture. It's a culture in which there is no vision. Several years ago, the Barna Research Group conducted a survey that asked people to agree or disagree with the following statement: "**The Bible is the written word of God, and is totally accurate in all that it teaches.**" 42% of Americans disagree. Of the remaining 58% who agree, half of those inexplicably believe that it isn't binding on us – that we can obey it or disobey it as we please.

Putting those percentages together, 71% of Americans believe the Bible isn't God's authoritative word that's absolutely binding on us.

71% believe it isn't something we have to think and live by and so, don't. They think and live non-Biblically, not taking it into account at all.

That's why apologist and social observer Francis Schaeffer called our culture what he called it. It is, he declared, a "**post-Christian culture.**" I would say it differently for our purposes today but the meaning is the same. It's a "**post-Biblical**" culture. The masses of people in it reject God's revealed word, the Bible.

The People Are Unrestrained

29:18 identifies the inevitable consequence of that, "**the people are unrestrained.**" The Hebrew word translated "**unrestrained**" is also used in Exodus 32:25. The Israelites were having a drunken sexual orgy around the golden calf. Verse 25, in the NASB, describes their behavior this way, "**the people were out of control.**" Those then are the English translations of the same Hebrew word, "**unrestrained**" and "**out of control.**" Their message is this. People or cultures that think and live non-Biblically are unrestrained. They're out of control. They think and live as if what is good is bad and what is bad is good. As if what is profound is stupid and what is stupid is profound. As if what is admirable is shameful and what is shameful is admirable. As if what is significant is trivial and what is trivial is significant. As if what is normal is strange and what is strange is normal, and so on. That's the result of thinking and living non-Biblically. People are out of control.

Tragically, that's the case in our current culture. Examples abound.

Vulgarity is one of those. To be vulgar means to be noisy and crude or to lack reason, contemplation, and any sense of the transcendent. To the Bible and even good sense, vulgarity is a bad thing. But to our current culture, it's a good thing. In his book *The Triumph of Vulgarity*, Robert Pattison points out that vulgarity is actually one of its philosophical underpinnings. It's something that the masses and the intellectual elite in America value and pursue. Vulgarity, as a result, characterizes both the content and form of our cultural pursuits.

Compare 1980's movies, for instance, with current movies. You'll see that current movies commonly mention or demonstrate something, visually or audibly, that 1980's movies did not. I'm talking about bodily functions. Mentioning or demonstrating bodily functions is crudeness for the sake of crudeness. But it's one of the surest ways to get laughs from today's viewing audiences. Our current culture thinks and lives as if vulgarity is a good thing not a bad one.

Vulgarity is just one of countless examples that demonstrate what the wise man writes in 29:18. People or cultures that reject God's revealed word, the Bible, are out of control.

Think Biblically

Now look at the second half of verse 18, which stands in stark but refreshing contrast to the first half. In it, the wise man writes about "**he who keeps the law**" and that is our call today. It's to keep God's revealed word, the Bible. We keep it by doing two things.

The first is to think Biblically. To think Biblically means to perceive and interpret all things in light of the Bible. Those "**all things**" include the social issues of our day: homosexuality, living together, dress, looks, materialism, abortion, pornography, borrowing, divorce, tattooing, and more. To think Biblically means to perceive and interpret those and all things in light of the Bible.

We've already seen that 70% of Americans do not. They don't think Biblically. They think culturally instead.

There is a phenomenon that reflects how our culture thinks. It's called "**defining deviancy down**," deviancy being sinful harmful behavior. Former New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan popularized that term in an essay he wrote titled "Defining Deviancy Down." In it, he explained how society reacts when masses of people embrace a deviant behavior. It simply lowers the accepted norm. This line represents the accepted norm (attachment). The behaviors above it are normal and those below it deviant. Behavior A is below it and thus deviant. But

masses of people begin practicing or endorsing it. Society, therefore, lowers the line, the accepted norm, so that Behavior A is now above it and thus normal. The phenomenon is essentially this. Masses of people embrace a deviant behavior, creating societal stress. Society relieves the stress by lowering the accepted norm, which normalizes the behavior.

How our culture thinks about homosexuality is an obvious example of this. At one time, America viewed it as both a sin and a crime. It prohibited it not only morally but legally as well. But masses of people began practicing or endorsing it, which created great societal stress. America then relieved that stress by defining deviancy down. It lowered the accepted norm, which normalized the behavior. It mainstreamed homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle that increasing numbers of people are accepting and even admiring.

But it isn't just our culture and secularists that define deviancy down. It's the church and professing Christians as well. They've allowed the non-Christian world to successfully squeeze them into its mold.

Chuck Colson illustrate this well in an article he wrote titled "The Normalization of Evil." In it, he tells about a group of Christians discussing a huge homosexual march on Washington D.C. One, having absorbed the enthusiastic media coverage, declared: **"I know it's supposed to be wrong. But it just doesn't feel wrong to me anymore. Don't you think standards have changed?"**

That question is easy to answer, **"No, they haven't changed."** God's revealed word is absolute and unchanging. Whether it's living together, materialism, anger, or whatever, we must perceive and interpret all things in light of the Bible not the culture. Some will view us as hate-mongers and bigots if we do. But God will view us as faithful and that's what counts. Think Biblically, not culturally. That's the first thing we have to do in order to keep God's revealed word, the Bible.

Live Biblically

The second thing we have to do is to live Biblically. Living Biblically

is a two-step process.

The first step is to know the Bible. We obviously have to know something in order to think and live according to it. Do you know what the Bible says about the things that matter in life? A youth director once told me that the biggest problem in his group is the girls in it **“dressing sexy”** as we say it now. When he confronted them with it, they sincerely asked, **“What’s wrong with dressing sexy?”** Suppose those teenage girls asked you that? Would you know what to say? Do you know what the Bible says about how to dress? If not, you need to in order to dress Biblically yourself and to help others do the same.

To know the Bible, of course, we have to study it. When I say study it, I mean read it with the intention of learning and remembering what it says about the things that matter in life. You can supplement that by learning and remembering the sermons you hear. Two years ago, for instance, I preached one titled “Dress the Part” from 1 Timothy 2:9-10. That text teaches us how to dress. So, if you remember the sermon, which explained and applied the text, you know what the Bible says about how to dress. And you would be able to answer the question, **“What’s wrong with dressing sexy?”** Anyway, however we do it, we need to do it. Know the Bible by studying it.

The second step in living Biblically is to deliberately obey the Bible. It doesn’t take a genius to figure that out. We make and carry out the decision to do what it says to do and not do what it says not to do.

Let’s go back to dress. The guiding principle of cultural fashion is sexuality. Dress the part, the culture says, and means by that, as a seductive person would dress - revealingly. But the guiding principle of Biblical fashion is godliness. Dress the part, the Bible says, and means by that, as a godly person would dress – modestly and discreetly, to quote 1 Timothy 2:9. Thus, we have two guiding principles before us - the cultural and the Biblical. To live Biblically means that we choose the second of those principles over the first. We deliberately obey the Bible over everything else including the culture.

Happy Is He

That then is what it means to keep God's revealed word. We think and live Biblically. And the last line of 29:18 reveals the inevitable consequence of that. It's happiness.

Secular people simply don't grasp that. An attorney once commented to me that it must be very difficult to be a Christian. I asked him why he thought that and he told me: "**To be burdened with all of those rules.**" But he was wrong.

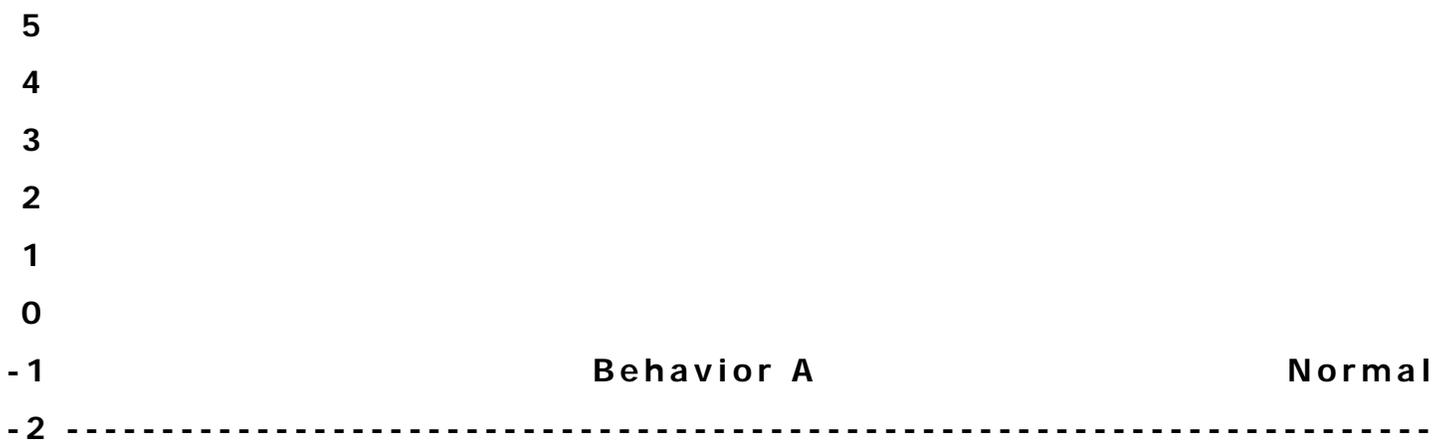
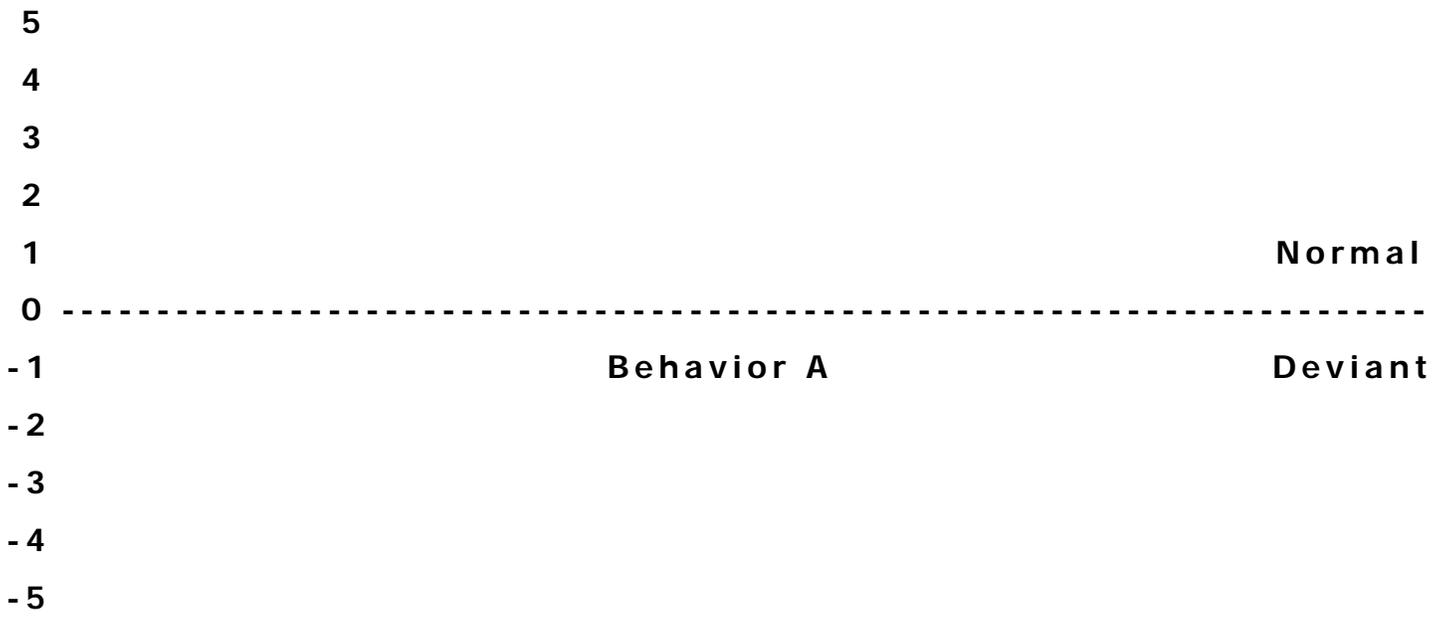
God's rules, His commandments, are by their very nature a joy, not a burden. For one thing, they're pictures of reality. They reflect the way the universe is spiritually, psychologically, microbiologically, relationally, financially, and so on. For another thing, they're pictures of God Himself. They reflect the way He is, His nature, His qualities or traits.

The implications of that are profound. Those who don't keep God's revealed word, the Bible, are living insanely (against reality). That in turn undermines well-being and joy. But those who keep it are living sanely (according to reality). That in turn cultivates well-being and joy.

A variety of texts in the Bible, for instance, teach us to play to an audience of One (God), not many (people). By trying and training, I'm now doing that and can tell you this. I have a lot less tension and a lot more peace in my life as a result. That teaching of Scripture is a picture of reality and of God Himself. Consequently, thinking and living by it has made my life and me far better than they were before.

Conclusion

Some years ago, the *Peanuts* cartoon had a running story line called "Happiness is _____." It would be something different each time. Happiness is the smell of a puppy's breath, the last day of school, a mother's hug, and so on. But none of those things is what happiness ultimately is. Ultimately, happiness is keeping God's revealed word, the Bible. So do just that. Try and train to keep it.



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Deviant