What Makes Us Different?

I still remember the movie “Chariots of Fire.” It portrayed an episode in the life of Olympic runner Eric Liddell. By refusing to run an Olympic race on Sunday, Liddell jeopardized a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to compete in the Olympics.

His dedication to personal achievement paled in contrast to his love for God as expressed in that simple, yet powerful act of renunciation.

I was, like many viewers, deeply moved. In later conversations about the movie, I didn’t hear anyone call Eric Liddell a fool. Perhaps that was because everyone knew that Liddell raced another day, won a gold medal, and the episode had a happy ending.

Has our aversion of legalism diluted our witness?

Or perhaps it was because, regardless of whether they agreed with his theology, people admired him for the extent of his willing self-denial in order to honor and obey God.

Because I am a Christian who wants to know how God expects me to live, I return again and again to reflect on Liddell’s decision not to run on Sunday. Because Christians are free from the law (Romans 6:14, was Liddell’s expression of Sabbath-keeping really a foolish and unnecessary risk? Or is he a godly role model for Christians today?

Many Christians believe that Sabbath-keeping in any form is a lapse into legalism which should be avoided. The Bible certainly does teach that Christians are under the new covenant of grace and not the old covenant of the law.

The Holy Spirit now writes God’s laws on the Christian’s heart. Our relationship to God is not based on external obedience to the law but on internal spiritual rebirth.

The Bible also teaches, however, that once we are born again, we “must no longer live as the Gentiles do” (Ephesians 4:17). Obviously our inner rebirth is to be manifested in our external behavior.

Christians are to be distinguishable from the people of the world. We are called out of spiritual darkness into light to become “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Peter 2:9).

I sometimes wonder how distinctive the people of the Kingdom of God are in our society. In exercising the liberty of grace, have we so emphasized the internal and spiritual that we have lost our visible distinctions as Christian people in our society? Has our aversion for legalism diluted our witness?

We live in a culture that operates on an “open seven days a week” schedule. Work at home and on the job competes with church attendance, family time and rest. Sunday in America is little different from any other day of the week. Even many Christians choose Sunday to work rather than worship, to play rather than pray, to shop rather than serve.

Sundays present a weekly opportunity for Christians to “no longer live as the Gentiles do.” A sincere expression of one’s love for God by visibly distinguishing Sunday from other days is a testimony to our society.

Liddell’s refusal to run on Sunday in the face of great personal loss was a more powerful statement about God’s existence and man’s relationship to Him than a dozen sermons. Through such incidents, unbelievers who never darken the door of a church receive a message about who God is.

Christians must look to the Bible for instruction on how to live in this world. Eric Liddell’s search of Scripture apparently led him to deep convictions concerning how to honor God on Sundays.

Was he a fool? Or is he a role model for you and me today?

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