

# Are you a performing pony?

Imagine a horse participating in a dressage event. The horse has been carefully prepared for the event. It has had its diet carefully managed. It has been meticulously groomed to look 'immaculate' with a shining coat, and a stylish mane of hair. As it prances around the arena it follows a carefully orchestrated routine that it has been trained to do. Its job is to act a certain way and not deviate at all.

This horse is not free. It is captive to its master's wishes. Yes, it may be 'happy' to please and follow its master's bidding as it does receive rewards. But it's not free. It's not free to explore. It's not free to discover and express other aspects of itself. It's not free to lead any other life, except for the one dictated by its master.

Imagine another horse on a large cattle station. It's not confined but is free to roam and eat what it wants. It doesn't have to look a certain way. It's free to explore and mingle with other horses. It can run and jump as it wishes. The station owner of course intends that his horse not hurt itself, or hurt the other horses, and he also intends for the horse to be useful on the station. So, he will work with the horse to train it, but he will never do so in a way that controls his every movement.

## So which horse are you more like?

When **God** chose the **Jewish** people to be his special people, he certainly gave them a lot of laws to live by - moral, ceremonial and civil. This could look like God intended for his chosen people to be 'performing ponies' whose behaviour was strictly managed. But was this really the case? At one point, God, through the prophet Hosea (6:6) said to his chosen people: *'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'*. Yes, God had set up an intricate sacrificial system for his people, but the system was meant to express not just the holiness, but also the mercy of God. But the people had lost sight of this. They had become so

fixated with following the letter of the law, that they had actually disconnected from God and his merciful heart.

So much so, that when their Messiah arrived, they did not recognize him. The one whom their law pointed to, the merciful God, had become present in their midst in the person of Jesus Christ the Son of God, but instead of receiving him with joy and thankfulness, they condemned him because he didn't live by all the rules they had come up with.

The Jewish body of law today contains 613 commandments derived from the Torah. It also contains laws that the Jewish rabbis have come up with over time. One set of laws the rabbis came up with were ones aimed at ensuring people didn't accidentally break any of the Torah laws. For example, one law in the Torah has to do with not working on the Sabbath (Saturday). Instead of receiving this law for the gift of rest it was, the rabbis went in the direction of first of all trying to define what constituted work and what didn't. It was decided that lighting a fire was work, and so people were directed to not light fires on the Sabbath. It was then determined that driving a car and turning electricity on and off was lighting a fire, so that was not to be done on the Sabbath. Then, in order not to even accidentally work on the Sabbath the rabbis decided that people should not even pick up any item that could be used for work, like a hammer, or money, or a pen.

Would it not be true to say that the Jewish religious system only creates 'performing ponies', people who are trying to win God's approval by following an intricate system of laws and rules? Who is their master in this? It isn't God.

**Jesus** came to set the Jews and all people free - '**For freedom God has set us free**'. Jesus set us free from a rigid engagement with a set of rules, and joined us in relationship with God; a relationship where we would learn to respond to the **Holy Spirit's** inner

guidance. Yes, there is a moral and spiritual law that reflects the holy standards of God (embodied in the 10 commandments – essentially love God and love your neighbour), but this law is not accompanied by a massive, exhaustive list of rules to govern every little dimension of our lives. Instead, we are to live 'by the Spirit', not 'under the law'.

Jesus came to set people free from being the devil's 'performing ponies'. The devil of course doesn't like this, as it means he loses control and ownership of people. So he is ever at work to influence people to step back 'under the law'.

In the book of Galatians the apostle Paul expressed his dismay that having started with faith in Christ, the Christians there had stepped back into rule keeping by submitting to being circumcised. This was an act which saw them start to step back under Jewish law (rather than be guided by the Spirit in freedom).

600 years after Jesus, a new religion emerged that once again trapped people under the law, and turned them into performing ponies. **Islam** says no to everything in Christianity that brings about freedom. Islam says:

*'No, Jesus is not God's Son. No, Jesus did not die on the cross to pay for your sin, and bring you forgiveness. He did not die to set you free from being under the law. He did not set you free from having to obey a big set of rules. No, God does not send you his Holy Spirit to live within you and guide you in his way. There is no Holy Spirit'*.

1.4 billion Muslims have been set up to be performing ponies. The Islamic system of rules contained within Sharia is massive, exhaustive, covering every arena of human behaviour. Muslims for example are directed to pray 5 times a day, at exact times to the minute. They are to prepare for prayer with elaborate rituals of water purification (with further rules about what water to use, how much, and what utensils are appropriate). They are

to pray in a certain way, using particular body postures and actions, reciting set words.

The rules seem to be endless, covering even the most minor actions of human behaviour. For example, Muslims are told to put a shoe on their right foot first. They are then to first take the left shoe off. They are even told how they are to wipe their bottom when they don't have water available for cleaning.

These are rules which their 'god' requires them to obediently do as their act of submission / worship. Muslims do them with the hope that their 'god' will be pleased with them and accept them. This is not freedom!

The Bible clearly states that if we don't worship the true God we will be ***'enslaved to those that by nature are not gods'***. Galatians 4:8

Dear Muslims, you may feel good about how you are 'performing' in your submission to your god, but in truth are you not enslaved to that which is not the true God? You may truly believe you can earn your god's acceptance through your submission to his rules, but the true God says that 'no one will be put right with God through their obedience to any law' (Romans 3:20) This is because no one can meet the incredible standards of God's holiness. No one can get anywhere close. Human rebellion and disobedience runs deep (and includes the foolish thought that we can actually meet the standard God requires).

God does not compromise his holiness. Sin is deadly serious and cannot just be flippantly dismissed or forgiven as if it didn't really matter. But the God who is holy is also love, and he acted in love to satisfy the demands of his holiness. He sent his Son Jesus to become one of us. Because he was one of us he could represent us before God. Because he is also God he could be the perfect sacrifice for all humanity's sin. He did this by dying on the cross, then rising again. When we

humbly put our faith in Jesus, giving up the idea that we can perform well enough for God, we pass all our sin over to Jesus and receive his holiness in return. Clothed in the holiness of Jesus we can stand before God the Father as holy saints, children of God, his people. With God's Spirit now within us, we are guided by him in life, and led to live in a way that pleases him. As we keep in step with the Spirit, he grows his fruit in us – **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, self control.**

As Christians we still have to battle our 'sinful flesh', and this means we will be tempted by the devil to step back under the law, and become performing ponies again. The SDA church for example insists that Christians must observe the Sabbath day as the Jews do, and so in that sense have stepped back under the law. The JW's rejected the belief that Jesus is divine, and as a result they have totally stepped back under the law, defining all manner of rules for their people, seeking God's approval through their performance. Individually Christians may grapple with ideas and feelings that emanate from their flesh: 'Am I doing well enough? Is God happy with my performance?' But Paul in Galatians 5:1 says:

***'For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.'***

Freedom is on offer  
through  
Jesus Christ.  
Will you take up the offer?



# Are you a performing Pony?

