Bill here for LifeResource Ministries.

Today we’re talking about the tail wagging the dog. I was taking a walk several days ago and I encountered a man walking his dog. The dog was one of those “never met a stranger,” filled with good will and enthusiasm kind of dog. He was so happy to meet me that he could barely stand it! He was just brimming over with excitement. Not only was his tail wagging, but so was his whole back end. His tail was wagging so hard it looked like it was wagging him.

Now all of us have seen that, haven’t we? So when we say, “This is a case of the tail wagging the dog,” we know that it means that something’s backwards in some way. But what does that have to do with Christianity? In Christianity in general, and in our churches, and in our personal lives, when does the tail wag the dog?

Let’s take a look at some examples out of the Bible. There is, in Genesis 25, a story of Abraham and Sarah’s son, Isaac, who married a woman named Rebekah. She eventually had twins. The first born was Esau and he was kind of a macho-hunter kind of guy – kind of hairy, outdoorsy. And his younger brother was Jacob. He was more of a thinker – schemer, actually. And God promised to make the firstborn – that would be Esau – the father of so many people that they would be like the sand of the sea and to give his children control over vast portions of the earth. And from his children would come forth the line that God would choose to bring forth the Messiah. He said the younger son would be a people, too, but his children would be subservient to the children of his older brother.

Now I know what you’re thinking. Jacob is commonly recognized as a Jewish name. And Jesus was a Jew. So what happened? It looks like the younger son got the birthright. Well, let’s look at that story, beginning in verse 29 of chapter 25 in Genesis.
Genesis 25:29 – Once, when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field and he was exhausted. And Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted.” (Therefore his name was called Edom – which means red.) Jacob said, “Sell me your birthright now.” And Esau said, “I’m about to die. Of what use is a birthright to me?” And Jacob said, “Swear to me now.” So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Now this is a really big deal. Esau traded his birthright for a pot of beans. The Messiah could have come through him. He could have been in the direct line from Abraham to Jesus. But he was starving and he traded away his birthright. He had a problem and he resolved it his way instead of God’s – a case of the tail wagging the dog. He said later that Jacob cheated him, but the Bible says that he despised his birthright, or didn’t value it properly, or didn’t trust God to give it to him.

But he was starving. What good is a birthright if you’re dead? But that’s exactly the point. God had promised to give it to him. So, to do that, wouldn’t He have had to save his life? Well, of course! All he had to do was trust God to solve his problem or realize that it was God’s problem, not his. But he didn’t.

The apostle Paul, in the New Testament, has something interesting to say about this incident. It’s in Hebrews 12, starting in verse 15.

Hebrews 12:15 – See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God – that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled – that no one is sexually immoral or unholy, like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you that afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance for repentance though he sought it with tears. You know, you can’t unring a bell. No amount of crocodile tears could entreat God. He did what he did. When we freelance our lives, we live or die by the results of our choices.

Let’s look at another way the tail can wag the dog in our lives. I read an article some time back about a man who got caught embezzling from the company that he worked for. Over fifteen years he had moved a quarter of a million dollars out of company accounts into his own. When he was caught he said, “I told myself that I needed it more than they did. My daughter is sick and the co-pays were killing us.” So, in his desperation, he justified his stealing by looking at his need for money. But then look what happened. He went to jail for fifteen years. So where was his daughter then? We don’t tell God how we ought to behave. He tells us. In this case, it was, “Thou shalt not steal.”

By the way, do you pay God the first tenth of your income? If you don’t, God says in the Bible, “You’re stealing” – not from your employer, but from Him. It’s the tail wagging the dog. It’s in the book of Malachi, if you want to look it up. It’s not a long book.
So, is the tail wagging the dog in your life? Do you let God control your life? Or do you live life without Him in it?

I was talking to a man some time ago, who, after fifteen years of illegal drug sales, decided to stop. He and his wife were currently both out of work. They made all their money doing things illegally before, but now they were going straight and it was tough. They had three small children to care for. When I talked to him, he literally did not know where the next mortgage payment was coming from, or even the gas money to come to counseling. They were desperate. They were destitute. And I asked him, “If you’re so desperate for money, why don’t you sell some drugs, like you’ve always done?” And he said, “I’m done with that. It’s wrong. Drugs hurt people. And, eventually, I’ll get caught. And then I would not be able to take care of my family at all. But I’ve changed. I used to pray to God for help. And that way worked better. I’m trying to get back to that.” So he decided he needed to solve his problem, but he was going to do it God’s way this time. No more tail wagging the dog.

Besides trying to solve our problems our way instead of God’s way, there’s another, more insidious, issue to look at. Let’s turn this time, in the scriptures, to Genesis 16, verse 1. This is a story about Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, who was Sarah’s handmaiden. Genesis 16:1:

**Genesis 16:1** – *Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had born him no children.*

And in those days, it was considered a shame – an extreme shame – if a woman could not bear a child. She felt humiliated. Genesis 16:1 – the second half:

**V-1** – *She had a female Egyptian servant, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, “Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children.”*

I wonder how she arrived at that conclusion. Was she a bit paranoid? So what are we to do? “So what are we to do? God has promised to give us a great family, and bless that family, and make it a great nation, and give a Savior through our line, and He won’t even let me have children. Woe is me!” So here’s her solution:

**V-2** – *Go into my servant, and it may be that I shall obtain children by her. And Abram listened to the voice of his wife, Sarai.*

So she was really humiliated – really desperate. Even though it was her idea, Abram became a partner in it. There was no argument from him. Now, remember, in spite of his weaknesses, this man is called a friend of God and the father of the faithful. Even the New Testament church is called the Israel of God. And Israel was the grandson of Abraham. He’s going to hold a high standing forever with God. Verse 3:
V-3 – So after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar, the Egyptian – her servant – and gave her to Abram, her husband, as a wife. And he went into Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you. I gave you my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me.” So now, all of a sudden, it’s all Abram’s fault. But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your servant is in your power. Do to her as you please. Hey, what do I have to do with this? This is between you two. I’m staying out of it.” Well, he didn’t quite, did he? So then Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar, and she fled from her.

What a mess! And for all that, they really didn’t have to do anything. They were trying to do God’s job for Him. You know, that’s never a good idea – to try to do God’s job! And it all went south on them in a big way! And it got way worse later. Let’s read in Genesis 16:7:

V-7 – The angel of LORD found her – that’s Hagar – by a spring of water in the wilderness. The spring was on the way to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” And she said, “I am fleeing from my mistress, Sarai.” And the angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” And the angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so they cannot be numbered for multitude.” And the angel of the LORD said, “Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man.” I think, in the King James, it says, “a wild ass of a man.” “…his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him.”

Ring any bells? Where did all this happen? Well, it happened in the Middle East. Didn’t God promise to make a huge number of people come from him? And what is the stance of many people who live there toward everyone else? And what is everyone else’s stance toward them? Is everyone else worried about them and what they’re going to do next? It’s a big problem! Chaos is erupting in the Middle East now. There are threats of nuclear action against Abraham’s progeny. If those two people had just let God do His own job, we wouldn’t have this problem today. But no, they had to try to wag the dog.

Let’s look at another example. I’m really going to step on some toes now. Did you know that the New Testament church worshipped on Saturday? So how did it get changed? Not a single mention of any change in the Bible. It all happened after all twelve of the original apostles died. And when did it happen? Well, we don’t know exactly, but we see clearly the biblical picture in the New Testament of Sabbath observance by the New Testament church. Then a curtain goes down and for several hundred years, we know nothing. There are no records to read about. And when the curtain lifts some two to three hundred years later, the church is keeping Sunday.
Why do you suppose that happened? Well, we can’t say for sure, but it is interesting to know that, after Jesus died, there was a gradual shift in the Roman Empire away from the worship of Saturn toward the worship of Mithra, the sun god. Since Saturn was worshipped on Saturday and Mithra on Sunday, the church was looking more and more out of step with society, and more and more like Jews, who were hated by the Romans. Even in the biblical writings, we see the beginning and worsening of persecution by the Roman government and the population against the Jews and the church. So we can imagine the leaders of the church trying to find a way out of the problem. And they were fabulously successful. They changed the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. That did not happen by accident. It was done by the church leadership. And that made it safer and easier to become a Christian – so much so that, eventually, even a Roman emperor, Constantine, was converted. And so Christianity became the mainstream religion of the day, and with it huge numbers of followers and buckets full of money.

So the church followers, like Abraham and Sarah, attempted to play God and solve a problem they thought God had. The tail was wagging the dog. Actually, God did not have a problem. He doesn’t have problems. He’s never had a problem and He never will. To apply their solution, they had to break one of God’s laws in existence from creation. And that shift caused the church to grow in numbers and power, but to lose its way – to lose sight of God’s plan – and so be derailed from the true course God had set for it.

Well, how do I know that? Because Sabbath observance puts a person in touch with God’s plan for humanity. It’s a rest of one day after six days of work. And that picture is a metaphor for something much, much greater down the road for all of us. We’ve talked about this before in our series on baptism. You can look it up on our Website or YouTube channel, if you’re interested. Instead, the church has spent energy making up arguments to justify their violation of God’s word. Each new argument takes the church further off track and further away from the clarity that the Sabbath brings to anyone who observes it. All we have to do is let the dog wag the tail, instead of trying to make the tail wag the dog.

So, in each case I’ve mentioned, there’s a gigantic red flag that should warn us off of the tail wagging the dog in our own lives. Do you know what it is? Well, it’s a violation of the laws of God. Sometimes it seems so tempting to do things our way, instead of God’s. You know, “Let’s just suspend this rule for this one time, and then, everything will be all right.” And every time we do that, in the end, it comes back to bite us in the tail. (Please forgive the pun.) So when that idea comes up, don’t even think about it. Don’t think about thinking about it. Don’t do it! In the well-lived Christian, there’s a determination to do things God’s way rather than our own – to walk as He walked, instead of walking down our own path.

So where have you walked your own path, or tried to solve one of God’s problems, or tried to solve one of your problems, but not God’s way? Think about it. And remember, if you
try to solve your own problems your own way, instead of God’s way, that’s like the tail wagging the dog. Things are backwards.

Well, that’s it for today. Check back in two weeks for our next presentation or subscribe to this channel to be notified automatically.