

Galatians 5:1, 13-15

2 Cor. 3:12-18

Sept. 6, 2020

Freedom To Be

For the past three weeks I have talked about our freedom in Christ. You recall I spoke of two types of freedom that I see in the Bible: 1) “Natural” freedom: God-given to all humans to make choices about their lives, including the choice to ignore God; 2) “Spiritual” freedom: release from the bondage of sin which comes from living in Jesus Christ. These two freedoms are related and intertwined with each other. Consequently, when we fully realize our spiritual freedom in Christ, we will more fully and responsibly grasp the freedom God has given us, and all people, to make their lives. Additionally, Christians will live by the Spirit of Christ which gives them power to live as God directs.

Two Freedoms

All people are endowed by their Creator with natural freedom. We should recognize that people are free in the sight of God and their freedom should not be taken or crushed by others, be they neighbors or governments. Freedom is for all, not because of their race, language, or family heritage, but because it is given by God. We’ve been talking about freedom mostly in the context of the spiritual life, because that is really the source of freedom in the temporal life. Yes, the spirit does control the body. For example: the scourge of slavery, though widely practiced by many different cultures throughout history, though still practiced in our world today, this scourge of human trafficking is an abomination to God. It is an insult to God when God-given freedom is abused by some to deny freedom to others. That is why slavery cannot long stand the scrutiny of God’s word.¹

Given this freedom from God, does that mean people can do anything they like? In one sense it does. God has endowed all people with freedom to make choices on what they say and do. They are free to choose but also free to accept the consequences of their choices. All choices have consequences: not only for the individual, but for others as well.

There are those who refuse to accept the consequences of their choices and they fall roughly into two categories: criminals and voluntary slaves. Criminals do what they want, to satisfy their desires and passions, without regard to how it affects others: slander, theft, destruction of property, rape, murder, riot, mayhem, etc. They exercise their freedom without concern for consequences for themselves or others. They wreak havoc. We’re seeing some of this in the riots in various cities, led by anarchists and Marxists, and the gang shootings in many of these same cities. They destroy the freedom of responsible people by taking away their safety. And now calls to defund the

police? Really? What happens to your freedom when the political class in our country seems more concerned about preserving their power and privilege than protecting us?²

Now the voluntary slaves are those who want someone else to make decisions for them or provide for them or make the world run right so they don't have to take on responsibility for themselves or others. They avoid responsibility at the cost of their freedom. That's why I call them voluntary slaves. They have allowed themselves to become dependent on others for their livelihood: where they live, what they eat and wear, how much money they have, etc. Think of a child who never grows up still dependent on parents to provide, though fully capable of taking care of him/herself ... they don't have to be responsible for much but they have very little freedom. Maybe you know someone like that – the mooch, always asking for a handout, but avoiding work and responsibility. Some become dependent on government to provide for their needs. In a sense they've enslaved themselves, by giving up their freedom for perceived security.

There seems to be within the human breast a yearning not only for freedom, but also for utopia. People like to have their individual freedom but don't want to think about adverse consequences of that freedom – no hurts, no inequalities, no poverty.

Yet someone once said: life is like licking honey from a thorn... there is always some pain in the sweetness of life. The Bible reveals this. The perfect and pure society, where life is always good for everyone, does not exist this side of heaven. That is because humans are flawed – sinful if you will – wanting to live apart from God, exercising their freedom without answering to God! Alas, human attempts to construct that perfect society – and the most vivid, notorious, and recent examples are socialist. They all crush the individual and his/her freedom and they do not bring the promised equality, prosperity, and safety they proclaim. History shows that their utopia always becomes a gross dystopia, with privilege and power for a few and serfdom for the many. Pray that our nation does not go further down the road of government manufactured utopia - it never ends well.

Freedom and Responsibility

God-given freedom, exercised with responsibility, is the best way to bring the most goodness to the most people. There will be no perfect and pure society because even free societies must contend with the negative consequences of sin. (But some are better than others.) That is why freedom works best when a majority of people are virtuous... that is, they act with care and concern for others, they deal honestly, they do not shirk their responsibilities to family, community, and nation. When a preponderance of

people will answer to God for their lives and actions a virtuous society is preserved.

Without such virtue selfish and criminal activity increases and only imposed obedience and force can prevent chaos, mob rule, or tyranny. There is only moral virtue in obedience when there is a recognition of a higher authority whom we obey. This is what informs the virtue that can allow a free people to govern themselves. When we must be compelled to do right then we are no longer free. (Having the government mandate our actions takes away this freedom). We do right because we recognize the moral authority of our God who seeks to make us righteous. Power exercised without obedience to God is immoral. Os Guinness' classic, *A Free People's Suicide*, should be required reading. He says: "The plain fact is that no free and lasting civilization anywhere in history has so far been built on atheist foundations."³

One becomes a slave for obeying unless behind that obedience there is a recognition of a holy God. This is what Alexander Solzhenitsyn (author of *The Gulag Archipelago*) discovered in his years in Soviet prison camps. Concerning the great disasters caused by the communist regime in Russia he said, "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened."

Quoting Os Guinness again: "A culture with no claims on its members - or curbs on their desires - would be a culture with no future. Freedom requires a firm refusal of what is false, what is bad, what is excessive, what is ugly and, above all, what a person is not and should never try to become. When everything is tolerable, nothing will be true; and when nothing is true, no one will be free."⁴

Virtuous people preserve freedom. This is where freedom from sin comes in ... that second freedom that we have in Christ. Christians ought to be in the forefront of exhibiting responsible freedom, championing freedom, and recognizing when freedom is threatened.

Christian Responsibility

Christian virtue is built upon the foundation of freedom from the bondage of sin realized in Christ. Christians are set on a new course in life; a course that brings one more and more into conformity with the character of Jesus. Some might well say, "Hey I'm free. I can do whatever I want, and God will forgive me. That's his job!" This only shows that they don't understand the Gospel at all. It's Janis Joplin singing, "Freedom's just another word for nothing else to lose." We are not set free to do whatever we want to do. The only master of your heart is Jesus Christ. If I stand before Christ and say to Him, "I will not," He will never insist that I do. But that is when I have signed the death warrant of the Son of God in my soul; that is when I have retreated from the new life brought by His Redemption.⁵

The Apostle Peter admonished early believers, *Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil...* 1 Peter 2:16. Because Christ lives in us by the Spirit we can use our natural freedom to serve God and love others. That is what makes for a healthy family and a healthy nation. That means that sometimes we voluntarily limit our freedom for the sake of another. As Paul says, *... take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to the weak,* 1 Cor. 8:9. He was talking about eating meat sacrificed to idols. A modern example might be this: I refrain from a glass of wine or a beer because my friend is a recovering alcoholic. In freedom I choose to love my neighbor in this way.

Living For Christ

No longer mastered by sin, we are free to live into the original goodness that God intends for us. This includes adhering to what Jesus told his disciples: *Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,* Mark 8:34. Theologian Thomas Oden sums up what John Wesley taught his followers (that would be us) about Christian self-denial.⁶ He writes: All of our natural inclinations rise up against the very idea of self-denial. Those who live their lives out of unredeemed human nature, which is self-assertive and fallen, rather than living by the grace of Jesus Christ, will abhor the very thought of self-denial. Even some who call themselves Christians ignore the notion of denying themselves, that is their fallen, natural desires, for the sake of becoming more like Christ. St. Paul warned in his letter to Timothy of times when, *... people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money ... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power,* 2 Tim. 3:1-5.

Neither the moralistic legalism that constantly looks for imperfect behaviors, nor the licentiousness that overlooks all because “God is love,” understands Jesus’ call to a gracious form of self-denial that lives out of God’s love. Gracious self-denial is simply this: If God’s will is our will, we will not press our own naturally self-assertive will as if above God’s will, but simply accede to God’s will.⁷ Our faith in Him moves us say, “I no longer obey God, I agree with God.” Self-denial is especially hard when viewed apart from God’s grace. Gracious self-denial allows us to refuse our own distorted will and allow His grace to transform our will to conform to His.⁸ Faith in divine grace has a deep conviction that the will of God is the only rule of action to make us happy and to bless our lives.⁹ *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life,* Romans 6:22.

Let me just say here: A church with no claims on its members, with no insistence on strong commitment to Jesus and a lifestyle guided by Scripture, and transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit, will be a church with no

future. Freedom requires a recognition of what God has revealed of Himself to us in Jesus and in the Bible, so that we can distinguish what is true freedom in Christ from what is the desires of our unredeemed and fallen human nature. St. Paul said much the same: *You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love, Galatians 5:13. When churches falter from this high calling, they are no longer relevant to a faltering society.*

Our Destiny

Jesus' goal for us is perfection in Him; a return to the pre-fallen state before sin entered into human life. Will this happen in your lifetime? I don't know, but I do know that it is the direction for us to be heading. *I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus, Phil. 3:14.*

I do not have a date for when I recognized or declared my freedom, but this is what I can tell you: the declaration of my independence is that I am no longer dependent on the old ways of sin and death, nor am I dependent on an anxious, guilt-inducing attention to detailed rules when it comes to God, nor am I dependent on the dictates of unredeemed culture or governments. Rather, I am dependent on the One who gives us the Way, the Truth and the Life, and ushers us into the glorious presence of our Heavenly Father.

To Him who keeps you, by HS power, from falling back into the sinful life, so that you will finish the course of life shaped by His grace, fully trusting in Him and be found without fault; to Him be glory and honor forever. Amen.

¹ *Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so, 1 Corinthians 7:21.*

² We have laws against riots, property destruction, assault, and a police and justice system rightly constituted to protect people from criminals. Tear that down and you embolden criminals. You have to wonder about politicians who allow the mayhem to go on. I am reminded of Thomas Jefferson's comment that there are two enemies of the people: criminals and government.

³ Os Guinness, *A Free People's Suicide: Sustainable Freedom and the American Future*; 2012.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*, July 18.

⁶ Thomas Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings, Vol. 4*, 88-90

⁷ *Ibid*, 89.

⁸ *Ibid*, 89. God made us with a rational will, and despite the corruption of sin, we are capable of following His plan for our living, not by our natural strength but through God's strength, since with God all things are possible.

⁹ God's will is exactly right because He has made us, not we ourselves. *Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture, Psalm 100:3.*