

Freedom in Christ

Freedom: something talked about by many, but how well understood? What is freedom and why is it important? How is freedom known in our lives? Ask most anyone you meet if they think freedom is a good thing and they will say “yes.” There is something inherent in each of us that desires freedom. None of us wants to live in bondage. And yet, people respond to freedom in different ways. Some don’t think about it at all. Some will honor freedom, even fight for freedom; while others may dishonor it by denigrating symbols of freedom or by denying freedom to others or themselves. Some people are jealous of others’ freedom and some are afraid of freedom. Whatever your response to freedom, there is no question that it is valuable and costly.

What does freedom mean for Christians? The fact is Christians realize that a freedom more costly and valuable than our natural freedom is given us through Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins. In Him we have freedom from the bondage of sin and legalism... and that is good news!

Look to the Bible and you will find no single, systematic description or doctrine of human freedom. However, freedom is spoken of in enough places that we can begin to discern a divine intention regarding human freedom. In fact, I believe we can find enough in the Bible and in the experiences and reflections of God’s people to believe that freedom really is a God-given gift. That is why I believe that freedom is morally superior to no freedom.

The Bible has numerous references to freedom: Psalm 119:45 says, *I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts.* Jesus said, *Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,* John 8:32. He also said, *So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed,* John 8:36. Understanding freedom from a biblical perspective will help us understand God’s gift to us and how this freedom is to be lived in God’s design.

Two Freedoms

As I read and study the Bible it seems to me we can discern two types of freedom: 1) freedom given by God to every human to make choices about their lives, “natural freedom;” 2) freedom from the bondage of sin (which is also God-given) through the grace of Jesus Christ, “spiritual freedom.” These two freedoms are related and actually intertwined with each other.

The first type of freedom has its roots in the creation and God’s original intentions for humanity, and it seems to be in our DNA ... a desire for personal freedom. The second type of freedom is the result of receiving God’s remedy for humanity’s abuse of the first freedom.

Our nation was founded with the purpose of encouraging and honoring our natural freedom; the freedom given by God to every human to make choices about their lives. Our nation's founders understood that humans have often abused that freedom, including abuse by rulers and governments. That is why our form of government is designed to be limited lest it abridge our God-given freedom. History shows that freedom has often been denied to many people. Slavery is an obvious example, and though it has been practiced since the beginning of recorded history it is still an evil no matter when and where it is found. For most of human history freedom has been denied to the majority of people by rulers and governments. Additionally, freedom is denied those who live in fear because of criminal activity. Lawlessness destroys freedom. As Thomas Jefferson once said, "There are two enemies of the people: criminals and government." The very design of our government (the Constitution) seeks to limit the abuse of freedom that governments so often practice, while balancing the need to keep in check the abuse perpetrated by individuals. Many of the early leaders of this nation also understood that the second type of freedom - freedom from the bondage to sinning through faith in Jesus Christ - is a necessary undergirding for the survival of the first type of freedom.

Spiritual Foundation

***Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom, 2 Corinthians 3:17.* The freedom which humans yearn for is God-given and truly a spiritual thing, as God is Spirit. That is why so many of the verses in the Bible about freedom are in the context of freedom from the bondage of sin. This is a hard truth for many to understand because ... well because we don't realize how pervasive is sin in ourselves. We may have the freedom of travel and opportunity and association that we've been blessed with in this nation, but many still do not recognize how much of a grip sin has on their lives. And this, in turn, to a greater or lesser degree, influences how every person lives. It is sin that causes people to abuse their God-given freedom, for they (you and I included) make choices about their lives without reference to God and often without any concern for others. How much does sin rule what you say and do? Does God have any influence on your life choices?**

The Bible reveals to us that sin controls just about everything we say and do because it has infiltrated our very being like a cancer and continually pulls us away from God. Even when we realize that we want God in our lives, it tugs at us to turn away from Him. The Bible reveals that we are hopelessly in bondage to the pull of sin and therefore not really free ... it's also the reason that our natural freedom is so often abused. God does not look at us through the prism of race, or language, or political affiliation, and all the other divisions found in our sin-broken world. He sees us all as sinners, shackled by our sinful condition.

Yet there is hope! The Bible also reveals to us that God has done something about the sin that binds us and prevents us from being the truly free people God intends. That something is actually Someone: Jesus Christ. This is what Jesus was talking about when He said, *So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed*, John 8:36. This is the hope Peter was talking about: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*, 1 Peter 1:3.

Freedom In Christ

So back to a question I posed earlier: What does freedom mean for Christians? It means that we have discovered that true freedom comes from trusting Christ that *...through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence*, Ephesians 3:12. Since Christ has paid the price of our sinful nature (which is alienation from our holy God, the Source of life) we are freed to approach our holy God as His children, unashamed because our unholy nature has been clothed in Christ's sinless nature. Freedom is really a spiritual reality, and freedom from sin is what makes possible the responsible enjoyment of the God-given freedom for individuals that our nation has so long cherished. Freedom, then, is a blessing that comes from reconciliation with God.

God really wants right relationship with His creation ... a wholesome relationship not marred by sin but restored to original goodness. That's really the whole message of the Bible. Being in right relationship with the Lord is where blessing is found; the blessing of true freedom. Christ came to be that truth in the flesh. Before Him King David said it: *Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust*, Psalm 40:4. Wisdom told it: *blessed is he who trusts in the LORD*, Prov 16:20. Jesus made it plain: *... if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed*, John 8:36.

This is not some give and take negotiation that we have with God. Like, if we read our Bibles more, God will do this ... if we pray more, then God will do that. If we serve in the church, then I can expect this from God. It's not a business relationship. God wants us in a personal relationship with Him.

It's a relationship that looks more like this: "Lord I love You and I want to know You better through Your word, that's why I read the Bible every day. Lord, I love You and Your people are important to me, that's why I am going to serve Your church." Reading the Bible and serving are good things but not so we can gain God's favor or the praises of others. We do them so we can deepen and strengthen our relationship with the One we need and love. Blessings come from being in a living relationship with Christ - which gives us a desire to show our love for Him.

Just to review: people are free in the sight of God and their freedom should not be denied by others, be they neighbors, governments, or criminals.

Freedom is for all, not because of their race, language, or family heritage, but because it is given us by God. That freedom is rooted in the true freedom we have in Christ Jesus, who frees us from the tentacles that sin keeps trying to wrap around people.

In the coming weeks my messages will primarily be focused on the second type of freedom: freedom from the bondage to sin. That freedom is central to the Christian faith but also foundational for enjoying the first kind of freedom that God intends for all people. In upcoming messages I'll be talking about how faith in Christ frees us from sin, frees us from fear, and death, and frees us to be the true and whole persons God has designed us to be. In Christ we are freed to fulfill our destiny to be true sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free, Galatians 5:1.