

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

80 How Free Can We Be?

Scripture: Acts 5:16-33

Last week I had the privilege of participating in a church conference which was held in Gettysburg, Pa. and which brought together delegates representing thousands of Christians across America. The timely theme of that conference was "Proclaiming Liberty Throughout All The Land" and was drawn from Leviticus 25:10. The note of freedom and liberty was well sounded in preparation for the nationwide celebration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, on July 4, which happens to be today. Two hundred years ago today in Philadelphia fifty six brave and wise men put their names on the line before the entire world declaring their belief under God to be free and independent states. This is the way they expressed their convictions in part, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Theirs was a glorious vision. Surely no more wonderful concept has entered men's thinking than that of freedom and liberty.

Yet, as wonderful as freedom is, it can be an experience to curse as well as to bless. It can both lift as well as lower human life. It can be a sword to cut one way and than another. Misunderstood and misapplied it swiftly becomes license. In the kind of world where anything goes, it is not long before everything is gone, including freedom itself. It is only as freedom operates within a framework of certain laws can it survive. It is for that reason that freedom is anything but free. In fact, it is very costly. Furthermore, it can never be paid for all at once. It can never be purchased outright, it is bought on the installment plan and the final payment is never made. The payments are due by each passing generation, and the best that one generation can do for another is to pass forward the opportunity to remain free. I think John Adams must have had this in mind when he said, "Posterity! You will never know how much it cost the present generation to preserve freedom. I hope you will make good use of it. If you do not, I shall repent in heaven that I ever took half the pains to contend for it." This

man, who was to become the second president, said that he hoped freedom would be made good use of. Unless this is so, unless freedom is properly guarded, it will fast turn to lawlessness and anarchy. Only as prudent laws are obeyed are people free to become what they were meant to be. Without law, freedom becomes a nightmare, it is only to enthrone a worse tyrant. Thus freedom, in a manner of speaking, is a kind of bondage, but it is bondage to the best.

The Bible teaches that men are made free in Christ. Familiar are the words of John 8:36 to most Christians, *"If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed."* This is a truth we hold dear. However, it can be misunderstood and as a result, misapplied. Therefore, we come to ask this question today. "How free can we be?"

What did Jesus mean when he said that he would make people free and that they would be free indeed? Did he mean absolute freedom, the kind that allows you to do what you want to do? That is the kind of freedom that was spoken of by a Hebrew prophet centuries before Christ. It was Isaiah who wrote: *"All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way..."* (Isaiah 53:6) There is no question that many people think of freedom in this way, the "doing your own thing" kind of freedom, so called. This is not the kind of freedom which Jesus had in mind for He was very careful to qualify his teaching with the words, "If the Son shall make you free..." Many Christians wrestle with the problem of how far freedom does extend for them. What is true Christian freedom in a permissive society? The answer for the Christian lies in the fact that he does not confuse freedom with autonomy. Autonomy means not being, responsible to any person or thing. It can mean limitless self expression without the obligation of being answerable or restricted in any way. Christian freedom operates within the framework of accountability to God. The Christian believes in what we call absolutes, he believes there is no way to avoid them. There is no way to deny absolutes without suggesting an absolute in the process of denial. For instance, the person who declares that one should **never** use the word **never** has just used it himself. Similarly, to suggest it is **always** wrong to use the word **always** is to be caught in one's own trap. One cannot demand that there are no absolutes without creating one of his own. This can be illustrated in many different ways, but our study has to do with the fact that the Christian considers the Word of God to be true in what it says and thus fixes the limits within which true freedom exists. The norms of Scripture restrict our freedom, or as Tunis

Romein, writing in **Christianity Today** has said, "Choose to be a slave in the right way and be free, or choose to be free in the wrong way and become a slave" We can better understand what Christian freedom is by studying what the Word of God tells us it is not..

I. WE ARE NOT FREE FROM THE PRECEPTS OF GOD'S LAW:

The law of God can be defined as an expression of His will which is enforced by His power. Law therefore has to do with a lawgiver, a subject to whom the law applies, an expression of the will, and the enforcement of will by authority and power. The law of God is considered to be moral and ceremonial. God has declared His moral precepts in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). The ceremonial legislation which God laid upon His people had to do with offerings (Leviticus 1-7), the laws of the priesthood (Leviticus 8-10), and the laws of purity (Leviticus 11-15). Now, there is a great deal of difference in the believers relationship today as compared with the past. Paul makes it very clear, that we are no longer under law, but under grace. (Romans 6:14) He did not seem to distinguish between the ceremonial law and the moral law. (Romans 6:14; 7:6; Galatians 4:30; 5:1; 5:18) Yet, Paul also writes that the law is holy and good Rom. 7:12-14) and that it is spiritual. Jesus taught in Matthew 5:17 that He did not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. The Christian is not under the law of God in the following ways.

1. We Are Free from the Ceremony of the Law:

In Hebrews 10:1 we read, *"For the Law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect."* Here we are taught the temporary nature of the Old Testament ceremonial law. Please read Hebrews 9:9-12 where the first tabernacle, representing the ceremonial law, was replaced by Christ. In Hebrews 8, the contrast is made between the old covenant which included the ceremonial law, with the new covenant in Christ's blood.(Hebrews 8:13) We conclude we are no longer under the ceremonial law.

2. We Are Free from the Condemnation of the Law:

In Galatians 3:24 Paul writes that the law was a "paidagogos" to bring us to Christ. This strange term was employed in the days in which Paul lived to describe a trusted slave whose responsibility was the moral supervision of a child in the Roman home. He guided his ward toward what was right and

away from what was wrong. Thus, the law affords an awareness of the wrong. A person knows he is a sinner by conscience, but more objectively through the published law. His understanding is intensified. (Romans 5:13; 7:7; 13.) Our disobedience has now become measurable and we stand condemned. Since the believer now enjoys the righteousness of Christ he no longer is subject to the condemnation of the law. (Romans 8:1)

3. We Are Free from the Curse of the Law:

In Galatians 3:13 Paul writes that we have been made free from the curse of the law. That is precisely what the law of God did for us. It said, "*curse you.*" It would forever have been a monkey on our backs had it not been for Jesus and what He has done. The law says, "*love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, mind, and strength.*" Curse you! Curse you! Curse you! Curse you! But Christ has redeemed us from those shortcomings and the curse of them. He has born the curse and the penalty of the law and has perfectly fulfilled it for us.

4. We Are Free from the Compulsion of the Law:

What has happened is that now believers have been married to another law. It is the law of Christ. We are not "*without law to God, but under law to Christ.*" (I Corinthians 9:21) According to Hebrews 8:10 there is now a law written upon our hearts. We seek to fulfill it willingly rather than dutifully. The precepts which are grounded in the Decalogue find their origin in the very nature of God. Since they are rooted in God's character they are eternal. Every commandment of Moses, except the fourth, is reaffirmed in the New Testament. The resurrection of Christ has given us our Sabbath rest principle nonetheless. Let me conclude by saying again, we are not free from the precepts of God's law. The law of God is in effect, grace has not cancelled it, though we have been made free from aspects of it.

II. WE ARE NOT FREE FROM THE PRONOUNCEMENTS OF MAN'S LAW:

In Luke 20:19-26 we have recorded a conversation between Jesus and spies sent by the scribes and chief priests in order to catch Jesus in some statement. The intent was to trick Him, to back Him into a corner so that no matter what He said He would be in a bind. They felt that if He opens His mouth they will have Him just where they want Him. The trick question was, "*Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?*" If Jesus answered, "*Yes*" they would accuse Him of being disloyal to the Jews. If He answered "*No*" they would say He was a revolutionary

and should be reported to the authorities. To their amazement Jesus answers their question in a most unusual way. He exclaims, *“Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesars, and to God the things that are God's”* With that statement Christians have come to understand something of their responsibility to the laws of men. This teaching is enlarged upon in other places. Sometimes it is going to be a matter of paying taxes (Romans 13:6-7), sometimes a matter of showing respect to the place and dignity of high office (I Peter 2:17), sometimes a matter of obedience (Romans 13:1-5; 1 Peter 2:13-16), it may be a matter of bearing arms (Romans 13:4) or of prayer (I Timothy 2:1-3). Christians are not free from obeying the laws of men. There is only one exception. That is when the law is in open contradiction to the stated will of God. We have a good example of this in Acts 5:29.

III. WE ARE NOT FREE FROM THE PROBLEM OF HUMAN NEED - THE LAW OF NEED:

One area of thought and involvement which has long been neglected on the part of Evangelical Christians is that of social responsibility. Either we have forgotten or have never been taught that Christian responsibility is both social and spiritual. People who live in this world are natural brothers of each other, and God has instructed that in this world-wide fraternity of persons we are one another's keeper. (Acts 17:26, 28) The New Testament abounds with exhortations to Christians to care for one another and others. (Philippians 2:4; Gal.6:2) We have a responsibility to care for ourselves (Ephesians 5:29; I Thessalonians 4:11-12; II Thessalonians 3:7-8), to provide for our families (I Timothy 5:8) and for our fellow believers (Galatians 6:10; James 2:15-16). Furthermore, there is the responsibility to all men. First, to the poor, Romans 15:26; Matthew 25:35-36,40), to the widows and orphans (Exodus 22:22-23; Mark 12:40; James 1:27; I Timothy 5:9; Hebrews 13:2; Matthew 25:36), and to the oppressed (Colossians 4:1; Philippians 16; Exodus 3:8-9). God desires help be given to those who are oppressed whether politically, economically, or whatever. There is much more which can be said here, but the point has been made.

IV. WE ARE NOT FREE FROM THE LAWS OF LIFE;

The God who created this world in which we live and who gave life to man has programmed certain principles into life that are unavoidable. They are what I am

calling laws of life and they cannot be disobeyed without a very stiff penalty being paid. Let me share a few of them with you.

1. You Can't Do Wrong and Get Away with it:

The game of wrong doing is an unbeatable game. The cleverest person in the world today is not clever enough to do wrong and get away with it. If a person does not get caught in body, they are caught in character. You reap what you sow in one way or another. There is always payday someday. God has organized the universe against wrongdoing.

2. You Have to Live:

I remember talking to a man one day who told me he was on his way to end his life. The simple little thought I am now sharing with you jolted him. I told him that he couldn't take his life. Of course what he meant was that he was planning to just snuff out his life. This is an impossibility! You simply can't stop living. Someday our bodies will be put to bed with a shovel, but we can't stop living. We are not like stones or other members of the animal world. We worship. They don't. God has put eternity into our nature. It is impossible to go out of existence.

3. Behind Every Failure in Character There Is a Slow Process of Thought:

It is thought which is dishonoring to God. The Bible says, "*that as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.*" No one ever became a moral or spiritual wreck over night. If you fall down in these areas, it is because you began thinking early and you kept thinking wrong until it was too late.

4. The Door of Success Swings on the Hinge of Opposition:

Nothing worthwhile comes easy. .Success is a valuable commodity, but the price is high. That is why God tells us that we are to do with all our might what our hand finds to do.

How free can we be? We can be free to be the person who lives under the impulsion of a new nature which God has given, free to be the person we were born to be, a person whose life glorifies Jesus Christ and serves the needs of others. At the end of life we will have found a wonderful freedom that we have experienced.

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