

II Corinthians 3:12-18
Galatians 5:1-6
John 8:31-36
Romans 8:2

LIBERATED OR FREED?

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.” (Galatians 5:1, KJV) *“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”* (John 8:32, KJV)

I have loved these statements for as far back as I can remember. And that’s pretty far back because the wording in my head is from King James, and my father bought the Revised Standard Version as soon as it came off the press. I did not understand very well what the passages were driving at, but I did not *realize* that I did not understand, so I happily loved them and took them at face value: their face; my values.

What is “freedom”? Back then, freedom was when all my chores were done, nothing special had come up, and I was not in trouble – meaning, under extra restrictions. In short, I could go do what I wanted to do. That usually meant the horse and the hills. Looking back, I realize that some of it was just me getting out of sight. I needed to catch and saddle the horse, get out of the driveway, turn right for a few paces, and turn left up the wash. About twenty yards up the wash, I was out of sight, with literally thousands of acres to go play in. Twenty yards up that wash was the point of no recall: freedom! If I made it that far, it was too late to call me back. No call or sudden memory of one more chore could catch me past that point. I was gone until dark. Sometimes it felt like I was holding my breath until we reached that point up the wash. Then my horse Becky would break into a run automatically, and we were out of there! Freedom.

So “freedom” to me meant what it means to most of you – what it means to most Americans: turned loose. “I can do whatever I please.” “I can come and go as I like.” “Nobody telling me what to do.”

This is *not* at all what Paul or John or any of the early Christians meant by “freedom.” But I did not know that then, so it did not trouble me. Over time, like many of you, I discovered that logic and experience did not support my first assumptions about freedom. It turned out that being a Christian was not just a matter of having everything my way, getting what I wanted, or having things come out the way I thought they should.

Don't jump away from me too fast here. Even though that sounds a little ridiculous when I put it into words, it is also true that it is painful to have this clearly stated and then denied. Being a Christian is *not* a matter of having everything my way, getting what I want, or having things come out the way I think they should? Then why would we want to be Christians? It doesn't work that way even if I'm one of the good guys? Even if I am a servant of the Lord? Even if I love my neighbor and believe in Jesus?

I do suspect that on some level of future, spiritual development, this crazy statement will turn out to be very nearly true. That is, with time and life and growth – and our wills coming more and more in tune with God's will, and with our wisdom discerning more and more of what God is like and what God is after – it may one day be less ridiculous to say that being a Christian is a matter of having everything our way, getting what we want, and having things come out the way we think they should. Maybe that is why it is so painful to realize that the statement is still so ludicrous today.

Anyway, for most Americans, freedom is about being turned loose, getting to do whatever we want to do, having nobody telling us what to do or how to think. Freedom is being on vacation: not having to work or answer the phone or get up in the morning. Freedom is anarchy: "Do your own thing." Freedom is Pinocchio on Pleasure Island: not having to go to school, grow or learn, be responsible, or do what Father says. Freedom is the supreme joy of making an ass of yourself. Do I exaggerate or caricature?

In parts of modern Christian theology (at least some claim it is Christian), this is often supported – and made more confusing – by strange new notions of grace, forgiveness, and unconditional love. Under these notions, Jesus saves us by loving us and supporting us – never judging or scolding while we seek to gratify all our desires on Pleasure Island.

On the other hand, I think a lot of us, as adults, have lost all hope of ever being free in that "turned loose" way we once dreamed of. We mourn those lost dreams; it makes us feel like we are getting old and brittle. Then if somebody starts talking about some "inner child" that we have neglected or rejected, we get emotional and feel a great loss, and we want to somehow recapture the "freedom" of who we really are.

However, the reality of work and children, the responsibility of goals we have set for ourselves, and the needs we have sworn to do something about not only surround our lives with commitments and engagements, but we can no longer imagine keeping up with it all. We learn to go day by day, surrounded with unfinished tasks – never finding a true respite, but only stealing moments of “freedom” out of the endless sea of responsibilities and commitments all around us.

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.” What sort of strange message is this? Who is talking about what?

Many people, especially in the Sixties (but not limited to that decade), decided that real Christians should “drop out.” The only way to get “free” was to “shine it on”: turn from the normal patterns of this culture and cut through all the hooks that hold us to the bondage of things and commitments. Not everyone did it for Christian reasons, of course, but many did. And the myth was that true and total Christians would walk away from the tyranny of earning money and let Jesus support them as they became missionaries or evangelists of various sorts. Jesus has always called a few individuals in every generation to forsake all normal patterns for a special task, so a few among these hordes were right on track. But most other Christians were doing little – or worse – for the Kingdom.

“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” I think many Americans began to hear this as a reason to find a good psychologist or psychiatrist. A trained therapist would help them unravel the secrets of their childhood complexes; when they knew them all, they would be free to be their true selves.

In a more general sense, many in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries wanted to believe that if we could just get the facts – enough correct knowledge – we would be free, or at least less confused; we would at last be able to make correct decisions and bring about a golden age. While that great hope has increasingly faded, the search for knowledge and the hunger to know are part of the sacred pilgrimage. But that has little to do with this particular statement from John’s Gospel.

John is not talking about facts or information. For John, the truth is Jesus: *“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”* To know Jesus does not give you information or some new possibility by which you

can eventually earn or learn your way into becoming free. The truth *makes* you free. Jesus liberates you! There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it. That is who Jesus is and what He does. We don't even think on those levels or in those concepts anymore, which means some of you are having trouble following what I just said.

So what did we *do* to all the passages and great concepts about freedom? Well, speaking for myself, I mostly turned them into the category of Law versus Gospel. We are free from the Law of judgment and punishment of our former understandings of God – because of the Gospel of God's grace and love. Underneath that, Christ frees us from the terror of earthly authorities; we do not have time to be afraid of mothers, fathers, bosses, spouses, children, or friends or what any of them may finally think of us. Our only real task and desire is to please God.

Hey, that's good stuff! At least it's on the subject. But often it is a little twisted and convoluted because I got there the hard way, through language and conceptualizations that are pretty far from what was originally intended. Not too surprising; it has been quite a few years since Paul wrote, *“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”*

If I am free, why do I have to stand firm? If Christ is so powerful and has *made* me free, why this warning of impending slavery if I am not careful – watchful – about submitting again to a yoke of slavery? (“Don't you get it?” No I didn't get it.)

With the breakup of the communist regime a few decades ago, we had a proliferation of countries, peoples, and religions coming out from under the control and suppression of the communist system. It seemed both wonderful and frightening to us. We could not keep up with all that was happening. We were wondering: Were these people now free? (Well, some of them were free from the control of the communist party.) Were they all turned loose to do anything they feel like doing? What about hunger, shelter, public services, medicine, and crime? Who would decide everything now? We were wondering, and they were wondering even more than we were: **WHAT WAS THE NEW ORDER?**

We keep running into it, don't we? There is no such thing as “love”; if you love, you give (offer) what you are. There is no such thing as “faith”; there is faith **IN** – we put our trust **IN** something or someone.

Love is nothing without a being on both ends of it. Faith is nothing without the subject putting faith IN the object, and the object of that faith coming through for them. We talk about “having faith” as if it were a bowl of oatmeal or something and we want more: “Give me another spoonful, please.” You either trust somebody or you do not. You put your faith in God, or you do not.

Freedom has that same sort of twist in it. There is only freedom in relationship with bondage; it is a release from some form of slavery. There is no such thing as a state or condition of freedom. What is the new order? Freedom releases me from bondage – moves me out from under one order into another order. Moses freed the Israelites from bondage in Egypt to go *serve God* on the mountain. They moved to a new order – from Pharaoh’s dominion to God’s dominion. It never crossed their minds that they were going into some nameless anarchy with no goals, no responsibilities. Actually they *did* get forty years of that, but it was a punishment. It is probably the moment their story comes closest to describing what most of us would define as “freedom” – being fed and taken care of in the wilderness for forty years with nothing to do, no responsibilities, just sitting around. Yet it was their deepest experience of shame and rejection.

Today’s sermon title is totally contrived. There is no difference in our definitions of freedom and liberation. But being liberated may come closer to revealing what Paul and the early Christians were talking about. I remember when the Allied Forces during the Second World War liberated Rome, liberated Paris, etc. It meant that people who had been living under the bondage of a cruel and foreign power were now free to take up their lives again under their own leaders and according to their own goals and purposes.

The early Christians (Paul and John and Peter, and as near as we can tell, Jesus among them) believed – really believed – that life on this planet was under the dominion of Satan. Some individuals, some systems, and some governments were more completely under Satan’s control than others; you could tell by the degree of cruelty, greed, and domination that was going on. But *everybody* lived under this dark and cruel power. Even people who tried to live by the best codes of behavior still felt the dark side – the depression, the urge to force others to their will, the anger, the despair. There seemed to be no hope or power anywhere that was strong enough to break this bondage, as even the best systems seemed to end in tyranny and hatred and division.

It's a free country, and I am not telling you what to believe. But Paul and John and much of the early church believed that Jesus was more powerful than Satan – that Jesus had broken Satan's power in the Cross and Resurrection event, which happened on earth but had repercussions far beyond this physical dimension. Jesus freed us from bondage to Satan's regime. If you have no awareness or comprehension of Satan's dominion over you, then Paul's statement sounds like gibberish: "*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free.*" But if you *do* comprehend the bondage of Satan, then this is the great victory cry – the Good News so good we thought at times we would never hear it. We do not have to live in the old ways for the old reasons! That's what they are saying. And they do not mean that we are now free to do as we please in some realm of spiritual anarchy. We are free to live in a New Order: to give our lives over to the reign of God.

But Satan and those still under Satan's influence will try to win us back – through coercion, persuasion, pressure, anxiety, our natural fears, and all the events and affairs of life going on all around us. They will try to hook us and draw us back into our former and familiar ways of slavery – to our sin, alienation, inferiority, deadness. They cannot help it, as long as they are under the bondage. Only, we can invite them to leave their slavery and come join us in the New Order that lives in obedience to the Holy Spirit. We cannot help it, if we belong to Christ.

Some say there is no real in-between. And I believe it. "*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has set us free.*"