

The Law of Freedom

John 8:31-32

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The last time I had the privilege of exhorting I spoke about love. And if you recall it seems like everyone wants the word on their side as a banner of their righteousness. After all, love seems like a good thing. Freedom is not much different. Many people just want to be free. The question is what is freedom, how do I take hold of it and how do I keep it?

I was recently looking at some old photos and found a beautiful photo of my grandparents, my aunts and uncles and many of their grandchildren including me. It was taken at a restaurant in Cuba, I must have been around 3 years old, and everyone seemed to be having a great time. Little did they know that tyranny was just around the corner.

In the twinkling of the eye, Cuba went from being a relatively benevolent dictatorship to becoming a virtual prison. What started as a mostly peaceful revolution became a violent tyranny where every aspect of life, including your personal property, your business, your speech, your freedom to come and go, and even your ability to worship was now subordinated to the new murderous idol, Fidel Castro.

Where did the Cubans go wrong. Although they had been liberated from Spanish rule in the early 1900, the Chicago mob, with the cooperation of the government, had turned many parts of Cuba in to a virtual red-light playground. Many Cubans regularly practiced a blend of nominal Roman Catholicism and Santeria. The stage was already set for tyranny when Castro arrived. Cuban syncretism lacked the foundational precepts to achieve and maintain righteous freedom.

We recently experienced our own dressed rehearsal of totalitarianism. In the twinkling of an eye, our liberty to travel, work, associate, and worship was restrained because of an infectious agent.

Is our culture sitting in a chamber with explosive gases waiting for a spark? Is there something that we ought to be doing to preserve our freedom?

Let's turn in our bibles to John chapter John 8 verses 31 and 32: Hear now the Word of God³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples,³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Thus far the reading of God's Word. Let us Pray.

There is a clear train of thought here: Abiding, living, continuing in God's Word goes hand in hand with being a disciple of Christ. I'm not sure where she got the idea, but my wife thinks it is something like a branch needing to be attached to the vine.

As a disciple that abides in the Word of God you will know the Truth. That is, we will have a clearer understanding of the reality around us: we learn to see the temporal things from an eternal perspective, and we begin to walk by faith and not by sight. This knowledge of the truth has the power to set us free.

You may be wondering, free from what?

We just need to go a little further in the passage to see that Jesus is talking about freedom from the practice of sin and its ultimate consequence: death.

During his dialogue, Christ delivers some sharp criticisms of the religious leaders that were promoting their own righteousness. During the dialogue we read:

³³ They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free?'"

³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.

Later in v 51

⁵¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see Death.”

If you have been abiding in God’s Word, you have already noticed that there is a close relationship between sin, bondage, and death.

In Romans chapter 8 the apostle Paul talks about how the entire creation is waiting for the revelation of the sons of God to free if from the bondage of corruption.

Hebrews 12 speaks of the sin that so easily entangles.

In Genesis 2 and 3 we see a clear fork in the road. We either trust and obey God or we lean on our own limited understanding. Remember, God has an exhaustive understanding of all things, and He is sovereign over all things. His revelation is a clear and sufficient representation of His understanding and power. It is authoritative Truth.

Adam, having been created in the image of God, was not God. Adam’s understanding of reality was categorically inferior and insufficient. We can speculate as to how much Adam would have flourished had he been obedient, but what we do know is that his disobedience led to bondage, corruption and death.

This brings me to the first big idea: Latitude, understood as the ability to do or do otherwise, combined with obedience leads to continued freedom and flourishing. Latitude combined with disobedience to God’s authoritative revelation leads to bondage, corruption and death.

One of the problems when we talk about freedom stems from the precision of our language. Our culture tends to overemphasize the subjective, emotional perspective while ignoring the norms and standards that define freedom and make it possible. Although individual latitude is part of freedom, it is not the whole story. Freedom is a dynamic situation that needs to be attained and sustained by the consistent application of specific principles directed at a goal.

It is like a loving relationship. It is not just a fleeting emotion fling, it is something that needs to be continually nourished by specific beliefs, attitudes and actions.

Our personal liberty, when conformed to God’s standards, is what lead’s to continued freedom and flourishing: I’m going to define that as being fruitful and multiplying, filling the earth with God’s image bearers and properly stewarding the creation. This is the realization of loving God and loving our neighbor.

Sustainable flourishing liberates us from isolation and the bondage of poverty.

In Galatians chapter 5 Paul states:

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

We see that our free thoughts and actions need to be oriented toward loving our neighbor and not the flesh. Again, if we love God and loving our neighbor we will flourish. Later in chapter 5 he clearly describes the difference:

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

In Exodus Chapter 20, the preamble to the ten commandments God reminds the Israelites that:

² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ "You shall have no other gods before me.

God, having liberated the Israelites from slavery, is now providing clear and authoritative commands to help them from becoming oppressed again.

They are the norm or standard that define and preserve freedom. These commands refer to both individual and corporate beliefs, attitudes and actions.

At first it may seem counterintuitive that maintaining freedom is intimately bound to God's authoritative commands, but to the contrary, there is no lawless freedom. There is no lawless flourishing. There is no lawless love. All orderly corporate interactions need to be subordinated to some system of laws. Our brother L.J. just reminded me the other day that you can't even reason or debate without subordinating your thinking to the laws of logic.

The issue is not law v. no law, the question is who's laws? God's or man's?

The second point I want to highlight is the binding together of both individual and corporate consequences of obedience and disobedience. God's commands are given corporately and apply to each and every individual. Even the leaders are instructed to make themselves a copy of the law and to read it every day so that he would learn to fear the Lord and not have his heart lifted up higher than their brethren. Along with obedience comes the promise of a stable kingdom that extends both to the King and his children. Deuteronomy 17.

Take note of the warning given to the King:

Apart from a regular reminder of God's righteous commands, there is a risk that he will begin to think that he is greater than his brethren and more like God, determining for himself, what is good and evil. In first Samuel chapter 6 we read that: He will replace God's law with his self-serving law. He will take the best of what you have and put it to work for his purposes.

Look at most of history and most of today's nations. Apart from a high view of God's law, the king, the dictator, the president, the oligarchy all want to take on God like qualities, namely defining for themselves what is good and evil.

If you have been abiding in God's Word, you have already seen the link between adhering to God's law and corporate flourishing.

Deuteronomy 8 begins with the promise of living, multiplying and possessing the land, on the condition of being careful to do the whole commandment. Reminding us that even in difficult times God would provide manna so that we might know that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD. As we enter the state of temporal comfort and stability, we again are reminded that it is through obedience to God's commands and the power of His provision that we can gain wealth. On the other hand, if our hearts become lifted up and we go after other gods, we shall surely perish.

In Leviticus 18 we are warned that if we adopt the practices of the surrounding idolaters, the land itself will vomit us out.

As we move on to Joshua 1:7-9 (ESV)

⁷ Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. ⁸ This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. ⁹ Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

Notice the train of thought: meditating on God's law and staying within the boundaries of God's law leads to flourishing. It gives us the courage to move forward, reminding us of God's personal presence. In John chapter 14: 21-23 we learn that God will make his home with those who love God, keep His commandments and His word.

Notice also, that Moses is described as the servant of God. Joshua, like Moses, is a prototypical servant leader. He is not the ultimate authority; he is a representative of The Ultimate Authority: God. This is a model for leadership in every sphere of life.

This individual-corporate bond was not limited to the Israelites but extended to the surrounding nations, some of which degenerated to a level of corporate sin that warranted God's thorough judgement.

The point here is that if we want sustained liberty and flourishing, personal piety needs to include a vision and desire for corporate transformation. I'm using corporate in a broad sense that goes beyond the church.

As we move into the New Testament, we are told not to be anxious, but to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all our temporal needs will be added to us. We are taught to pray in a way that recognizes God's authority, our need for both his spiritual and physical provision, understanding that His Kingdom will be manifest when we do His will on earth as it is in heaven.

In the New Testament age, we also see the concept of one body with many members. We see

that just as a husband is to sanctify his wife by the washing that comes from the water of the Word, Christ is sanctifying the body by the same means.

This bond between the one and the many begins with God Himself being the archetype and the body being a collection of individuals that are corporately bound by their common belief in the Word of God.

Simply stated: It is not good for man to be alone. If you think about it, physical and ideological isolation is a form of bondage. We are made in God's Triune image and our constitution draws us to a righteous corporate unity.

Much of the confusion, anxiety and depression in our culture has its roots in alienation from God and our neighbor. Whether they admit it or not, everyone knows God and everyone knows His law, their consciences bearing witness to their guilt. Guilt and alienation are a great burden on our sense of contentment and well-being.

I'm not going to get too deep into it but isolation, anxiety and depression makes us vulnerable to totalitarian manipulation.

Human Secularism tries to hide the guilt by passing laws and promoting cultural ideologies, calling what is evil, good. This is like putting band aid on a cancer. It is like turning off your check engine light. The temporary comfort from the new so-called freedom quickly turns to a chronic dysphoria, anxiety and depression.

Let me suggest that the foundation for a righteous corporate unity begins with abiding in God's Word individually and corporately. This mutual abiding is what forms disciples that are obedient to God's commands. We all need to make it our business to be part of a body that is being edified in sound doctrine, developing a Christ-like maturity that is expressed in loving relationships.

Ephesians 4

¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

The body of Christ needs to have a level of loving maturity that would make those outside the church jealous to become part of the body.

In Romans 11:11 we read the salvation has come to the gentiles to make Israel jealous. Later in verse 25 we read that a partial hardening has come to Israel until the fullness of the Gentile has come in.

Let me suggest that the salvation mentioned in v. 11 is not just a beam me up Scotty salvation, but a salvation that includes a great number of mature Gentiles doing God's will on earth as it is in heaven.

In the same manner the fullness of the Gentiles in verse 25 is not limited to a specific number but uses the same word in Ephesians 4:13 as it speaks of the mature manhood to the measure and fullness of Christ.

Again, there is something about a mature church that would attract others. This maturity comes when disciples abide in God's Word and it is a mature church that is best equipped to effectively declare the wisdom of God, and the Gospel of salvation and restoration to a rebellious world.

Although the inward maturation of the church is of primary importance, a mature church needs to go out and transform the nations.

Returning to our original text in John chapter 8. Abiding in God's Word entails the development of sound doctrine, a doctrine that forms obedient disciples that know truth. It is the knowledge of the truth that liberates us from both the temporal and eternal consequences of sin.

How far does this liberation go? It sounds like Paul is talking about the entire creation.

In Romans 1 Paul declares that he has been set apart for the gospel of God to bring about the obedience of faith among all nations.

This fits in nicely with Matthew 28 where Christ declares:

¹⁸ ... "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

God's liberating salvation is to extend to every nation and every aspect of the creation. The gospel that has the power of God for salvation is not limited to our individual salvation, it is directed at the restoration of all things, including the nations.

Our individual and corporate freedom is intimately bound to our culture, our economy and our system of government. As Christians we need to be truth bearers and advocates for God's precepts in every aspect of corporate life.

Our culture, our economy and our government are highly interdependent. The culture that you and I live in is a summation of the beliefs of wheat and the tares. Remember that we are in a wheat field and not a tare field. Our culture influences what we value and how we manage our resources.

Government, via laws and policies, influences both the economy and culture. If we are striving to bring about the obedience of the nations, we need to be advocates for God's precepts in each of these spheres.

As Christians, we ought to be concerned with cultural and political issues because of the

infectiousness of sin. What the people around us say and do can influence all of us, but particularly our children and our weaker brethren. It is like a little leaven that infects the entire lump.

As Christians, we should not be afraid of civil dialogue and open debate. The wisdom of God is able to cast down any argument that exalts itself above the knowledge of God. Furthermore, the kingdom of God advances primarily by persuasion and not coercion. In the book of Acts we see repeatedly that Paul reasoned from the Scriptures persuading both Greeks and Jews. There is a sense in which the Logos of God is a persuasive argument or line of reasoning. Let me suggest that when we advocate and defend a biblical foundation for our civil laws we are engaging in a form of pre-evangelism and evangelism. We are giving an apologetic or a line of reasoning for the wisdom of God's law and the depravity of man's law.

When we advocate for God's law in the civil arena, we are teaching the nations about how to be obedient to everything that he has commanded. The first use of the law is a starting point to remind everyone of God's righteousness, our guilt and finally our need for a Savior. We, like Christ, are justified in challenging the Pharisees of Human Secularism, their man-made laws as well as the irrational justifications for those laws. We are justified in doing so in the public square, in the political arena, in media, in education, in the workplace, in the free market, and yes, even at our dinner tables.

By this point you may be saying enough about the law, what about the gospel? What role does it play in bringing about the obedience of the nations?

Earlier I mentioned that in the introduction to Romans, Paul declares that he has been set apart for the gospel with the goal of bringing about the obedience of the nations. A little later he declares that he is not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God to salvation.

The gospel has both a concise and a lengthy definition. The concise is that God sent His Son to pay for our sins so that who ever would believe in him would be set free from the bondage of sin and death.

But there is more, a lot more. There is a real sense that the whole counsel of God is good news. Good news from God Himself that is not just explained, but actually lived out by the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us.

That is why we should not live by bread alone but from EVERY word that proceeds from the mouth of God. That is why we should abide in His Word.

In Acts chapter 20 Paul connects the dots between the gospel, the kingdom and the whole counsel of God:

²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of

God.

Furthermore, it is the Word of God that informs us that we will be given power to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. That is the Spirit of Truth. From Isaiah 11:2

The Spirit of the LORD,

The Spirit of wisdom and understanding,

The Spirit of counsel and might,

The Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

Written words have a tangible dimension, yet there is a meaning, a Logos that transcends the written Word. It is through the Spirit of God that we come to understand and gain the might to do His will. It is through faith in the blood of Christ that we are lifted up when we stumble clearing our guilty consciences so that we can do the works that God has prepared for us from before the foundation of the earth.

In Romans 10:17 we read that:

¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

That saving faith comes by understanding the reasoning of God, whether we hear it in the private setting or whether we hear it declared in the public square.

In summary, as we move from old to new, we also see the redemptive work of Christ, the pouring out of the Spirit of God and the completion of authoritative revelation. It is through the sanctifying effects of the Word and the power of the Spirit that we can be effective witnesses to all nations in both Word and deed.

God's laws are no longer only written on tablets of stone, now they are written on our hearts as well. The believer moves from a mindset of feeling coerced to a mindset of being persuaded.

Hosea 2:16 poetically declares:

“And it shall be in that day,” Says the LORD,

“That you will call me My Husband,

And no longer call Me MY Master”

Before we conclude I would like to address a few common objections to the idea that we should advocate for biblical laws in the political arena. The goal here is not to give an exhaustive explanation and critique of these views but rather that you would get a birds eye view of some of the cultural and in house debates regarding our advocacy.

First is that a biblical form of government would be authoritative or perhaps too authoritative. Some of the supportive soundbites include “the separation of Church and State”,

“you can’t legislate morality”, “government can’t save you” or “keep your religious views to yourself”.

In Genesis 9 we see the continuation of the mandate to flourish but because of the fall, God establishes government to protect and defend the image of God from evildoers. In Romans 13 we read that the magistrate bears the sword as a terror to evil and to carry out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.

All government is by nature authoritarian. All forms of government make faith based moral decisions about what is right and wrong. All legislation presupposes a religious system of morality and yes government does not save us but it is biblically justified to restrain the evildoer so that God’s laborers can continue to persuasively advance His Kingdom.

I would argue all forms of government are religious constructs and that any government that is not subordinated to the authority of God’s Word will succumb to the totalizing tendency of the state. Eventually, every aspect of life, family, community, welfare, health care, education, worship, and labor will be subordinated to the state and not God.

Without a demonstrably transcendent, objective standard, plural subjectivism becomes progressively chaotic, opening the door for an unacceptable level of authoritarianism. Again, I have all of history and every news channel as a witness.

To the contrary, the Bible set limits on the authority of each sphere limiting the totalizing tendency of the state. The role of the church is to inform and persuade each sphere and not to govern them.

The second objection is that there are two kingdoms, a common kingdom and a ministerial kingdom. There are several schools of thought but generally the idea is that there ought to be a separation between the two and that the role of the church needs to be focused on internal development and less concerned with cultural and legislative matters.

Regarding cultural and civic engagement, there are only a few options. Either we focus on sound doctrine, try to be good people, evangelizing in private settings alone, letting the culture around us grow into a Leviathan that will restrict our liberties or we include a transformational aspect of our doctrine and piety that is concerned with influencing and redeeming the institutions around us. Perhaps sound doctrine and personal piety ought to include an attitude of cultural transformation. Again, influencing the culture is a form of pre-evangelism and evangelism.

The third objection is that the kingdom of God has yet to be ushered in. It is frequently justified by a narrow interpretation of John 18:36: “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting...”

The question is not whether all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Christ. In the larger context of Scripture and the verse itself, “world” would be better understood in a moral sense as opposed to a literal sense. God’s kingdom is not advanced through the worldly ways of coercive physical battle.

We do not battle according to the flesh, we have been given divine power, we have been given the belt of Truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God and the ability to always

pray in the Spirit. It is with these Divine powers that we are enabled to destroy strongholds and cast down every argument and lofty opinion that exalts itself above the knowledge of God.

Ladies and gentlemen, Jesus is Lord, we are in a battle. It is a battle of the ideas that rule the minds and hearts of those around us. Let us go out and make disciples of all nations, that they would know the truth and that the truth would set them free and keep all of us free.

Let's Pray