

## THE LIBERTY OF OBEYING GOD

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John 8:31-36

TEXT: *Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*

*.... if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."* – John 8:31b-32 & 36

### INTRODUCTION

The first permanent English settlers arrived in America at Jamestown in 1606 more in search of gold than freedom to worship God. Things quickly fell apart. Riches were not found and there were attacks from Indians and starvation. There was little discipline and soon many of these Englishmen were returning to London. Sir Thomas Gates was sent from England to bring order to the chaos with instructions carrying the title: "Laws Divine, Moral, and Martial." While we are all grateful for our freedom to worship God, it also means freedom to not worship. But that was not the way it was in Jamestown when Sir Thomas Gates arrived to restore order. Consider these rules about religious observance. Those who failed to come to services twice daily would lose their food for the day. A second offense brought a whipping, and a third offense meant six months in the gallows. And, to break the Sabbath "by any gaming, public or private" or to miss church on Sunday was, on third offense, a capital crime. That certainly would help church attendance!

Liberty and freedom are great words in our nation's history– words we especially celebrate on the Fourth of July. We remember Patrick Henry's great rallying cry in a speech given at St. John's Church in 1775 with its conclusion,

"I know not what course others may take; but as for me,  
**give me liberty or give me death!"**

That speech was credited with singlehandedly convincing the reluctant Virginia House of Burgesses to commit Virginia troops to the Revolutionary War.

But liberty involves far more than slogans and rallying cries. The famous psychiatrist, Victor Frankl, observes in his classic book, Man's Search for Meaning,

"Freedom is only part of the story and half the truth.... That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast."

To use a different metaphor, the other side of the coin of freedom is obedience. There really can be no freedom without obedience. Almost all those founding fathers of our nation understood that there could be no freedom without submission to a sovereign God and obedience to His laws.

We are celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our interstate highway system– our freeways. We all enjoy the blessing of these great highways. But, do they offer us the freedom to drive anyway

we'd like? There would be no freedom for anyone to travel those roads if people weren't obedient to laws. You cannot decide to go any direction you feel like or drive in any way you like. Our freedom depends upon obedience.

In every area of life, without obedience to higher laws than ourselves, there can be no freedom. While the thinking of our age is that freedom means doing what we want when we want, it is a myth. In fact, our freedom is proportional to the greatness of our submission to the higher laws. Think of the gymnast floating, seemingly effortlessly through a floor exercise. They are free to do things I wouldn't imagine a body could do. The reason they enjoy that freedom is because they have submitted to countless hours of disciplined training. Or think of the musician, playing wonderful music so "easily." Well, that "easily"—that freedom—comes from denying themselves many things. They chose to practice rather than play with friends. They forced themselves to keep at it when they felt like quitting.

In John 8, Jesus gives us very important teaching about freedom. It is a perspective desperately needed both within the church and in our culture. Look at our text:

*Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*

*.... if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."*

— John 8:31b-32 & 36

Notice, it all begins with obedience, holding to Jesus' teaching which makes us disciples. Then, we are in a position to know "the truth." That truth then sets us free.

## **DISCIPLESHIP**

The other day, someone said to me, "They tell me they are saved, but they sure aren't living in obedience to the teachings of Jesus. I'm confused." Now they weren't talking about little inconsistencies and mess-ups with sin. They were referring to lifestyles, the big movements of the person's life not at all lining up with the way Jesus calls us to live.

Sometimes I wonder if, in our evangelical circles, with our emphasis upon "making a decision for Christ," and the personal nature of that decision we haven't sometimes given the wrong impression and people have missed the idea of discipleship. They respond to an altar call or have an emotional experience of opening their life to Christ and they equate that with salvation.

In a former church, our youth leader Zach, took the church van with a load of kids to a neighboring town for what sounded like a neat program at the fair grounds, sponsored by several churches. They invited youth from area churches to come and bring unchurched friends. It was Halloween— but of course they didn't call it that. There was a lot of fun stuff and a featured "House of Horrors." The next day was the day Zach and I usually got together each week. So, I asked him how it went. He was furious. The activities and entertainment were okay he said, but at the end they gathered everyone together— about 100 kids. After some purely fun stuff, getting the kids laughing, loosened up— one of the leaders gave about a five minute presentation on how to be saved, then asked those who wanted to accept Christ to raise their hands and about half of the group responded. That is what made Zach so angry. Now let me pause to explain that Zach was not a Presbyterian. He was from a conservative Mennonite church where altar calls were the order of the day. So I was surprised at his strong reaction. I asked him to explain. He said, "Ken,

those kids had no idea what kind of commitment they were making. I know some of them. And now, they will think they are saved— they're okay. What do I do? They did what they were told they needed to do to be saved, but they have no interest in obeying Jesus' teaching." I thought he had a point.

Now please don't think I'm against altar calls or calling for commitment to Christ. I affirm with Jesus, "You must be born again" (Jn. 3:7). And being born again often happens in a moment of time. A personal, heart decision is essential. BUT, there is much, much more. There is our commitment to following Jesus, discipleship, obedience. This first sentence of our text highlights this, "*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.*" Other translations in place of "hold to my teaching" have "continue or abide in my word." "Hold to," "continue," "abide in," are ongoing actions of the disciple, conforming our lives to the way Jesus tells us to live. Remember the parable of the sower where three of the four soil conditions didn't produce a crop? And Jesus warns at the end of the Sermon on the Mount,

*"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matt 7:21-23)*

This is not salvation by works. Salvation is a free gift from God, by grace through faith. However, when we are truly saved, the life of discipleship— conforming to Jesus will result.

### **KNOWING THE TRUTH**

Jesus is saying that unless we have submitted to His teaching, we can't even know the truth. Our capacity for self-deception is huge. Without our even knowing it, we are blind to truth that we are not willing to accept.

I've been told that physicians are warned against trying to diagnose themselves or their family. They lack the objectivity needed to accurately discern the truth. Important things can be missed because they don't want to face the truth. It is referred to as denial.

This is true of our moral and spiritual lives as well. We too need an objective, outside source to know the truth. Otherwise, we can bend it to fit whatever we want. Jesus' teachings and Scripture provide that objective measure. We have a huge capacity for self-justification.

Let's see how well you remember some of your physics. Here's a rock and here's a cherry. If I drop them both at the same time, which one will hit the floor first? Don't worry, I won't do it and dent the floor.

The famous illustration of this truth was done by Galileo. Aristotle had asserted that the heavier an object, the faster it would fall to earth. It just seems right. Everyone went along with that for almost 2,000 years. Then Galileo conducted a famous experiment to prove it was not true. He summoned the professors of his day to the Leaning Tower of Pisa in 1589 and went to the top and simultaneously pushed a one-pound weight and a ten-pound weight off the ledge. The both landed at the same time. But the power of belief was so strong, the professors denied what they

saw and continued to believe what Aristotle said.

Romans 1:18-32 speaks of those who by their wickedness, “suppress the truth.” It maps out an alarming, progressive degradation caused by willfully going against the truth until it reaches the point where Paul says, God “gave them over to a depraved mind.” Willful going against what we know to be right leads to denial and blindness where we can no longer even discern the truth. In fact, the truth is twisted to suit our ends. Jesus asserts in Jn. 3:21, *Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light....*

Jesus is the embodiment and perfect expression of truth. He said, “I am the truth” (Jn. 14:6). And in Him we find discover the truth that sets us free. Jesus says, “I tell you the truth” over 80 times. Truth is one of the major emphases of John’s gospel. John’s last mention of truth is in that chilling scene as Jesus stands on trial before Pilate and Pilate asks that mocking question, “What is truth?” Pilate shows us what happens when we are not willing to submit to the truth. Pilate only wants to wiggle out of any objective moral rule here. He doesn’t stay and wait for an answer from Jesus but goes out and checks with the Jews– listening to the popularity poll to decide what is right.

### **THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE**

The more we know the truth and work within it, the freer we are. Think of science and learning about the various laws of our universe. Understanding those laws frees us to do things people only dreamed of hundreds of years ago. An airplane doesn’t defy the laws of nature. It works within the laws of aerodynamics. People are walking, people are alive because of medical breakthroughs– discovering how things *really* work and then working *within* that truth.

The same applies to moral laws. God did not make rules to make life difficult. It is a description of how our human nature is put together and how we best can live in relationship. He loves us so much He doesn’t want us messing up our lives. Love is the way life is meant to work. Forgiving one another is right and getting even is bad.

In spite of what the sexual revolution of the 1960's said, and began, God is right when he taught us that our human sexuality is so precious and important that it demands the safety of marriage. Many scientific studies are in showing cohabitation is one of the worst things to do before marriage. Those marriages are twice as likely to end in divorce. The permanence of marriage is needed to enable us to share the most intimate parts of ourselves– letting one another know who we really are, knowing they are committed to us no matter what. This is just another example of the truth setting us free.

Only Jesus has the power to set us free from our sin, our guilt, our fears, our insecurities, and all the other bondages of life. Christ’s truth is intellectual, emotional, and relational. He enables us to understand ourselves and others. Yes, indeed, *if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed!*

When we are sure of God’s love and acceptance of us we are set free to be the person God created us to be. We begin to discern what our gifts are, and when we operate within those

“givens” we are much more free than when we are trying to be what we aren’t.

### **CONCLUSION**

While we celebrate the freedom of our nation, let’s not forget that it came because our forefathers were submitting to what they knew to be the laws of their Creator. True freedom is always in proportion to our submission to God. And in Jesus we see in practice what a life of discipleship really means.