

#256 "Freedom in Christ"

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John 8:31-32 says, "So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, 'If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'" Those who truly believe in Christ for salvation will have fruit to demonstrate the authenticity of their faith. They will become increasingly convinced of the truth as they study the truth of the Scripture, and in so doing, they will be increasingly set free from deception, wrong behavior, and any other sin that might hold them back from increased fruitfulness. The truth of the gospel sets a person free from bondage to the devil, for before we know Christ we are indeed his captives held to do his will rather than God's (2 Timothy 2:26). But when we die to sin by faith in Christ, we are made new and are no longer slaves to sin but slaves of God (2 Corinthians 5:17, Romans 6:4-7). **Our slavery to God is our freedom because we are kept by Him by His power and grace so that we are enabled and empowered to do His will.** It is His ownership of us and the fact that He is our Master that keeps us free from Satan ever regaining total control over us. We can become deceived and think that we cannot escape sin or evil, but the chains have been broken for good if we are in Christ. We are not bound to the devil no matter our predicament if Christ is in us. There are no more chains, and we don't have to continue in sin. This is freedom, the ability in Christ by His grace to do His will and to never be chained down to sin and to the devil. Even our flesh does not have mastery over us, for it is Christ Who has set us free from the law of sin and of death (Romans 8:2). Will we struggle at times? Sadly, yes. Will we do things we despise sometimes? Unfortunately, even Christians stumble. But never are we bound inextricably to sin and to the devil.

The call then for believers given that we are free in Christ is not to use our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. Galatians 5:13 says, "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." 1 Peter 2:16 says, "Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God." Even as believers, we can still live as if we are children of the devil by making poor choices. God has not turned us into robots which are incapable of sin and thus equally incapable of obedience and worship. Rather, He has made it possible for us to willingly and delightedly choose to worship and obey as we yield to His presence and power working in our hearts. Our freedom should not be used as a means to suppress the Spirit within us (Ephesians 4:30), but it should be used to allow the Spirit to fill us (Ephesians 5:18), empower us, teach us, lead us, and motivate us onward to do good works. We are bondslaves of God, after all, and thus it is our calling and responsibility to present our members as members of righteousness (Romans 6:13). This does not mean that this is a joyless drudgery of going through some religious motions or trying to keep some behavioral law imposed on us by another professing Christian. **We are free in Christ to make God-honoring choices before Him, not because someone else has told us that we must but because Jesus within us brings us joy when we do.** God desires a willing spirit (Matthew 26:41), and the love of Him within us controls us (2 Corinthians 5:14) and compels us to do what is good, right, and pure and to hate evil and grieve over what is corrupt. The

battle between the flesh and the spirit is won as we believe God's promises and goodness to us and remember that a rejection of Him leads only to sorrow and emptiness. We don't need a list of external behavioral rules to make us obey, for our flesh will not be removed of its power by more restrictions. Rather, we need to use our freedom in Christ to make good, God-honoring decisions, walking circumspectly and being careful to make wise choices. In Christ, we have this ability if we have faith by God's grace.

When we are saved, Christ comes to live in our hearts, for He gives us new hearts that can delight in Him and have God-honoring desires (Ezekiel 36:26). Some Christians live constantly in fear of their hearts, and some distrust emotions altogether. Perhaps they believe that it is an external code of rules that will keep them from succumbing to evil. But a thorough reading of the Bible shows men and women of God who were filled with passion and zeal for truth and for righteousness within their hearts. They were not stoic robots who were afraid that a little release of emotion, passion, or excitement would corrupt them. A dark dragon does not dwell in our hearts if we are in Christ, but Jesus Himself does. He gives us the desires of our hearts as we delight in Him (Psalm 37:4). He makes our hearts pure and clean in Jesus' blood (Psalm 24:3-5). We cannot afford to lose our zeal, for, in Revelation 3:19, God rebuked the Laodicean church for losing its zeal. Titus also said that we are to be zealous for good works (Titus 2:14). Christians get themselves in trouble when they start getting zealous for certain preferences or rituals such as a certain way of singing, a certain modality of music, a certain style of preaching, a certain pattern of vocal inflections, and a certain liturgy of worship. Add to this a certain prescription of dress, conversation, scheduling, approved or not-approved this and that, and so on, and zeal for God gets displaced by zeal for impressing others by adhering to *legislated preferences* of man. Christians cannot exchange Christian liberty with an imposed, external moral code and still expect to experience Christianity in its fullest sense. Sure, there is a time to limit one's freedom of conscience for the sake of the weaker brother whose conscience will be defiled by a certain activity (1 Corinthians 8:10-12), but establishing universal spiritual boundaries of conscience for everybody takes away from a person's ability to walk before God and choose righteousness *simply because it is right*. Freedom is not consistent with an environment that mandates complicity and conformity beyond what Scripture has already asked of us, nor does freedom thrive within a system where we look to others within the system for their approval in order to make sure we are advancing. Rather, as we become freer, that is, more controlled by the Spirit rather than by a system, we are living out the totality of Christian experience. Passion and freedom go hand in hand as we seek out only the approval of God rather than that of man (John 12:43) and solely obedience to His Word rather than concerning ourselves with other people's preferences and imposed morality. We must listen to our own conscience and do our best not to defile the conscience of another believer. But let us not make matters of personal conscience into expectations, written or unwritten, of corporate "sanctification."

Isaiah 61:6 says, "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners." This verse was quoted by Christ at the launch of His earthly ministry as a sort of declaration and purpose statement of why He came. He came to bring the gospel to the hurting to set them free from their sin. He came to encourage those who were without hope with the hope of

being set free from sin and being given eternal life. He came to show people the liberty found in Christ even if they were behind bars on earth. Freedom of conscience and of the soul leading to eternal freedom is indeed a great reward, for before we come to Christ, we are all behind Satan's prison bars. To keep in line with Christ's purpose, we cannot go backwards and start conforming to a system of law-keeping and man-made expectation. Galatians 5:1 says, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." We cannot afford to put on the yoke of legalism and performing to earn favor as opposed to *enjoying the favor of God given to us in Christ*. Christ came to set us free, and His yoke is easy and His burden light (Matthew 11:30). His way is the freedom to decide and discern God's will for ourselves before God and to be able to approach the throne of grace without having to go through another person. It is the freedom to be who God made us in Christ and to serve as He leads us to serve. It is the freedom to not have to worry about making other people feel good by adhering to their preferences. It is being released to have to make difficult decisions on our own without somebody telling us what the "right" answer is. Most of all, freedom in Christ is no longer having to keep succumbing to sin after sin, for as 2 Peter 2:19 says, "For by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved." As Christians, there is nothing that has the power to totally overcome us such that Christ's power cannot keep us free. Romans 6:22 says, "But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life." A context and condition of freedom and liberty in Christ alone is the prerequisite for sanctification, not a return to a Pharisaical, oppressive, rule-keeping, people-pleasing, externally-judged, performance-based system. **Even the flesh can conform to a man-made code of behavior, but only a willing spirit can make God-honoring choices when nobody is looking.**

We are free, and we should live that way, following our conscience and being led of the Spirit in our hearts. "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).