

Liberty Starts In The Heart

A Sermon by Pr. David Johnson

There is a lot of talk these days about liberty and personal freedom. Facebook posts, emails, and a host of other venues declare the importance of standing up for one's liberties; fighting for the freedoms of those who seem to be bridled in one way or another.

But what I find interesting is that this call for freedom has no definition or boundaries, no way to assess its achievement or function. You have those on one side calling for the reinstatement of certain liberties which they perceive as being lost or taken away. You have others who portray freedom as something not yet achieved – something yet to be seized.

This dichotomy begs the question, “Are we talking about the same freedoms, the same liberty?” The answer to this very critical question is, NO! We're not speaking the same language, though we're using the same words.

If you talk to one group, you'll hear them speak of freedom as the ability to choose one's course and pursue one's own goals, within certain preordered, (read *established*) boundaries; boundaries that are clearly defined and paired with certain responsibilities. Another group however, view liberty as an unqualified license for full self-actualization; the unbridled freedom to be what you want, do what you want, and say what you want – whenever and wherever you please. For this group, all others are expected to comply and applaud. But there is a third group, found somewhere in the middle, with a strong sympathy for the second group, while wanting to apply some generic social limitation for the sake of order; though the framework is constantly evolving.

Unfortunately, while the third group likes to feel safe from the cultural chaos of the second group, the end result is eventually the same (*similar to what's happening within many splinter groups among compromised denominations*). Without an established guide by which to measure the proper boundaries of behavior and thought, the consequence is ultimately the pursuit of the culture's lowest common denominator. The outcome of such a journey is detailed in the closing verse of Judges:

Judg 21:25 **In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.**

This statement is a summary of what we theoretically refer to as *Libertine* – “a person who behaves without moral principles or a sense of responsibility, especially in sexual matters.” (Oxford) Now, we sometimes confuse a Libertine with a *Libertarian* – someone who values limited government in the lives and choices of a citizen. And though there are many similarities, they're not the same.

But was this what our founding fathers had in mind; the idea that each citizen is an island unto themselves, bound only loosely by our common social needs? I don't

think so! To believe this line of thinking we're left with, “I have met the enemy, and he is I.” (*Alexander, Perry, or Pogo*)

But why would I discuss the issues of freedom and liberty on the same Sunday when we have passages from Romans 6 and Matthew 5 before us. Because it's in these chapters that we see some of these principles confronted.

We start with the first chapter of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. As we've studied in our Thursday evening Bible Studies, we begin the chapter by encountering the wonderful verses of *The Beatitudes*. These are verses that seem to lessen the role of rules and objective guidelines for/against behaviors, and instead, affirm a standard based on a person's heart or motivation.

But just about the time we think Jesus is moving away from the rigid “bondage” of the Old Testament, we encounter an eye-opener in vs. 17:

Matt 5:17 **"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.**

Similarly, just as we're feeling more comfortable with the “kinder, gentler” direction of Jesus' message, and the possibility of a more understanding religious system, He speaks instead of an even loftier standard.

Matt 5:20 **"For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses {that} of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.**

Jesus lays out a clearly defined expectation, “Unless you're more righteous than the scribes (*Hebrew lawyers who defined the Law*) and Pharisees (*Teachers who applied the Law*), you don't have a prayer of getting into heaven.” Now talk about taking the proverbial wind out of the sails of a hopeful believer. If you had to be better than the “lawgivers” and the “law-instructors,” what possible hope do common people have? NONE!

Then we see Jesus drive this principle even more deeply into the heart of His listeners.

Matt 5:21 **"You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'²² 'But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty {enough to go} into the fiery hell.**

Jesus isn't listing a hierarchy of sins, with a verbal curse listed as the most grievous. Neither is Jesus trying in some way to give instructions on which court is to decide which type of sin, beginning with the civil court, moving to the Supreme Court (*Sanhedrin*), and ultimately ending up at God's Divine Court.

Jesus' point in this little comparison is that according to God's righteous standards, there is no hierarchy of sins and varying punishments as you would find in a human justice system. God doesn't start with murder and work down to anger. God starts by identifying anger as a damnably offensive, the underlying motivation for a host of other sins. He then moves up the scale from there. We

see Paul do the same thing as he writes to his young charge, Timothy:

1 Tim 6:10 For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. (also 1 John 3:15 – hate = murder)

The inference is that God not only despises the hurtful actions we commit (*assaults/murder*), but equally condemns the inner attitudes that drive both our actions and words alike. By introducing the consequence of hell-fire into the equation, any attempt to rationalize our thoughts or “innocent” teasing becomes mute.

Jesus continues in Matthew 5:

Matt 5:23 "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, **24** leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say, *"It's their problem. I don't have anything against them. If they don't like me it's not my responsibility."* But Jesus would say otherwise. He states in these two verses that the ownership for reconciliation falls to the believer. In fact, God feels so strongly about this that He doesn't even want our offerings (*which are an expression of our love for God*) until we make things right with our brother. However, not every attempt at reconciliation ends in success, but the attempt must be made with sincerity.

The rest of chapter 5 continues with similar gut-wrenching challenges. He condemns such topics as lust, adultery, divorce, making oaths, revenge, dealing with enemies, loving the unlovable; and summarizes chapter 5 with, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Where does this leave the reader? God's expectation for His people is perfection, in mind, heart, and actions; an impossible job, as Jesus has just pointed out. So what are we to do; sin boldly and trust that God's grace will cover what we lack? Luther makes this observation concerning Matt. 5:20:

"What now is the better righteousness... We have no high righteousness and yet we hear the judgment that, unless our righteousness is better than that of the scribes and Pharisees, we shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. This is what we are to do: besides all the good we are able to do we are to humble ourselves before God and say, Dear Lord, I am a poor sinner, be gracious to me and judge me not according to my works but according to thy grace and mercy, which thou hast promised and prepared in Christ... This, then, is the true righteousness."

This is not only a good definition of righteousness, but it's also a good start in understanding the source of true liberty. The apostle Paul put it this way:

Rom 6:1 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? **2** May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? **3** Or do you not know that all

of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? **4** Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. **5** For if we have become united with {Him} in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be {in the likeness} of His resurrection, **6** knowing this, that our old self was crucified with {Him,} in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; **7** for he who has died is freed from sin. ... **11** Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Living in the pursuit of self isn't freedom; it's bondage to the death and destruction that comes as a result of sin's endless chase for more. True liberty can only be found when one shakes free from the trap of selfishness, through the power that can only come by faith in Jesus Christ. By faith and through baptism, we literally die to our old task-master (*sin and Satan*), and live a new life for a loving, redemptive Master, Jesus Christ.