

What Does It Mean To Be Really Free?

Sterling UMC
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Galatians 5:1-15

A family executing their carefully planned escape at midnight, dashing for the border; a man standing outside prison walls, gulping fresh air, basking in the warm sunlight; a young woman with every trace of the ravaging drug gone from her system...they are FREE! With fresh hope and anticipation they can begin life anew.

There are few words that stir human emotion as does the word "freedom." Whether fleeing oppression, stepping out of prison, or breaking a strangling habit, freedom means life. And yet when we try to define freedom, our definitions go in different directions. What does it mean to have freedom?

In our Scripture lessons from Galatians, Paul writes, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

Christ has set us free. So, we ask, "What is it that makes us free?" Just because we live in a free country does not make us free. There are many people in our country who live in one form of bondage or another.

If you are a young person, you may think that becoming an adult means freedom. But most adults will tell you they are not free. They have simply exchanged one set of shackles for another. What is it that truly makes us free?

Paul knew what it was to be free. He lived part of his life in chains and behind prison bars, but he still knew more freedom than most of us will never know. Why? I would like to suggest three reasons: Paul had nothing to hide, nothing to lose and nothing to fear. Let's think about those three elements for a few moments.

Let's begin with NOTHING TO HIDE.

It is terrible to go through life with a secret sin rattling around in your closet. There is no emotion that can enslave us quite like guilt.

In 1977, two young men committed a heinous crime. They unlawfully entered the home of an elderly woman and beat her to death. It was a sick and senseless crime, the work of conscience-less, lowlife thugs. For seventeen years, the crime went unsolved; eventually, it would have become just another forgotten file in the police records. But in 1994, a man named Julian Imperial came forward and

confessed to the crime. Even though he was not a suspect, even though the statute of limitations had not run out on the case, Julian turned himself in. Why would he do that? Here is the story Julian told the police.

Back in 1977, he and a friend had broken into the home of Mary Stein, a woman in her 70s. With no provocation, the two men began beating her with a length of wood. Just before she died, Mary Stein had cried out, "Oh Lord, I'm coming home." Those words echoed in Julian Imperial's head. He couldn't run from his horrible guilt. A year later, Julian gave his life to Christ. For sixteen more years he struggled with the stifling sense of sin and shame. He knew the consequences of admitting his crime. Yet his newfound faith in God wouldn't allow him to run from his sins. After his confession, Julian Imperial was sentenced to prison; he is still there today. But although his body is imprisoned, there is now a freedom in Julian's soul; it no longer carries the burden of guilt and sin.

It's terrible to go through your life looking over your shoulder, wondering if someone is going to discover your dirty little secret. Freedom for some of us would be the knowledge that we have nothing to hide.

That was part of the freedom that Paul enjoyed. No hidden sin weighed him down. This did not mean that he had never sinned. He had sinned. In fact, he participated in one of the saddest crimes in human history--the stoning to death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. But that was in Paul's past and it was in the open. Once it was in the open and once he had repented of it, this sin no longer had power over him. This is one of the reasons that confession of one's sins has such liberating power--once a sin is confessed, it no longer enslaves us. It is out in the open. We never again have to worry about being discovered.

Sin and guilt both enslave. We make a major step toward freedom when we eliminate both of these from our life. Paul writes, "Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other . . ." So part of the freedom that Paul enjoyed was that he had nothing to hide.

HE ALSO HAD NOTHING TO LOSE. His well-being was not tied to a house or a car or a job or the esteem of his peers. All of these had long been left behind. Even as he languished in jail with chains on his wrists and on his ankles, in many ways he was freer than the men who guarded him.

Rock star Janice Joplin sang, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose . . ." Well, there is some truth to that. Many people are captive to their possessions.

The more you have--and the more these things define who you are--the more

you live in fear that these things will one day be taken from you. You become the bird in the gilded cage. And while the cage may be gilded indeed--it remains a cage.

Paul was free because he had nothing to lose. The sooner you and I realize we have nothing to lose, the happier we will be.

There was once a twelve-year-old boy who had been given an assignment by his father to work in the yard. The boy hired his six-year-old brother to do the work for him. He told the six-year-old that his daddy had paid him a dollar to do the work, and if the six-year-old would do the job, he would let him hold the dollar until suppertime. The little kid worked hard all afternoon and got the job done. The big brother, true to the bargain, gave him the dollar.

"You can hold this until suppertime; then you have to give it back."

The father, a wealthy businessman who worked seven days a week, came home late that afternoon. He spotted his youngest son with the dollar.

"Where did you get that?" he asked.

"My brother let me hold it since I did his work in the yard."

"You're holding it?"

"Yes, he said I have to give it back at suppertime."

"That's crazy," the dad said. "That's the most stupid thing I've ever heard. You worked hard all afternoon and just get to hold your money?"

The little kid looked at his dad and said, "But, Daddy, isn't that what you're doing too?"

The child was right. All we get to do is hold it for a while. There is nothing on this earth that is permanently ours. And yet many of us spend our lives worrying about what would happen if we lost our money, lost our jobs, lost our looks. Friends, accept it now that one day it will all be taken from you. You better quit worrying and begin living. Paul had nothing to hide, nothing to lose.

And one thing more: HE HAD NOTHING TO FEAR. The world is filled with people who are in bondage to fear--fear about losing their jobs, fear about their health, fear about old age, fear about family members and a host of other troubling fears. But Christ can help us with our fear.

One of my favorite golfers on the PGA Tour is Tom Lehman. Lehman is a strong Christian who is not afraid to bear witness to his faith. Lehman claims a verse

from the book of Joshua has gotten him through many scary or discouraging times. Some years ago when Lehman was diagnosed with a precancerous condition, he and his wife claimed Joshua 1:9 as their verse to guide them. It reads, "Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." That verse carried Lehman through a successful surgery. He also quotes Joshua 1:9 when he's hit a tricky spot in a golf tournament. It keeps him calm and focused in whatever situation he's in.

The Apostle Paul was a man devoid of fear. He so trusted God that there was nothing with which his captors could threaten him. He had no property for them to take away. He had already experienced the lashes of the whip. Death? In Philippians 1:21, Paul writes: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." What do you do with someone like that? Even death held no fears for him.

You can't enslave a person if they are so committed to an idea or a cause that fear has become inconsequential.

Senator John McCain spent five-and-one-half years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. He tells of one man with whom he was imprisoned, Lt. Commander Mike Christian. Mike had collected scraps of white and red cloth, and had sewed the scraps together into an American flag. He then sewed this makeshift flag to the inside of his blue pajama top. The men would hang Mike's pajama top on a wall each night and say the pledge of allegiance to it. It was a ritual that brought them all together and reminded them of their purpose. One day, the guards happened to catch the men saying the pledge. They dragged Mike away and beat him brutally. But that very night when Mike returned to his cell, he began gathering pieces of cloth again. He was already starting on another flag.

What do you do with people who will not be intimidated? What do you do with people who are so committed to a cause that fear becomes inconsequential? That was the kind of man Paul was. He was a man who had nothing to hide. What he preached, he lived. He was a man who had nothing to lose. He was a man of great intellect, a fine education and many talents, but everything he had was committed to Christ. He had nothing to fear. For Paul, to live was Christ, to die was gain.

What about you today? Are you truly free? You can be. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." If you allow Him to He will come into your heart and life and set you free from the bondage of all those things that enslave you.

Are you a slave to sin? "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) You can live in freedom with nothing to hide.

Are you a slave to your possessions? “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and thieves do not break in and steal.” (Matthew 6:19-20) You can live in freedom with nothing to lose.

Are you a slave to fear? For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." (Romans 8:15) You can live in freedom with nothing to fear.

My friends, hear the good news: “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36) Nothing to hide. Nothing to lose. Nothing to fear. That’s what it means to be really free.