

THE WAY OF FAITH, PART 11: FREEDOM

John 8:31-38 (NASB)

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News reports in Wayne and Holmes Counties, Ohio, failed to name the Yoder boy who found the family horse and buggy wandering aimlessly around their Amish farm yard. Fifteen year old sister Rachel had taken it to a Christmas party at a nearby farm. She had been expected back around that time, but the horse had come back on its own with the buggy and was pulling it around the yard in circles.

Rachel's brother grabbed the bridle and tied up the horse. When he looked in the buggy he got a shock of fear when he saw blood on the seat and floor. Family members traced the route Rachel would have taken back from the Christmas party, and there, on the side of the road, they faced their heartbreak. Their sweet young daughter and sister was lying motionless. They could see that she had been bleeding from a terrible head wound. But they were too late. Rachel was already gone, cut down in the bud of life by a buggy accident.

Or was it? Things did not seem to fit. If she fell out of the buggy, why was there blood in the buggy? Questions swirled until an examination at the hospital discovered that this was no buggy accident. There was a bullet in Rachel's head.

Immediately fears of a murderer on the loose began to circulate in this quiet Amish community. The Amish are accustomed to being misunderstood, and some people even seem to hate them for being different--for living according to their faith in Christ and the Amish *ordnung*, or way of life. Investigators found no bullet holes in the buggy, but a careful examination of Rachel's expected route of travel revealed a trail of blood on the road for some three-eighths of a mile through the rolling hills and farms. Police warned the residents to report any suspicious activity and not to travel alone.

And then a man who lived a mile and a half away from the scene of death came forward and confessed. He had been cleaning and servicing his muzzle loading rifle. Maybe he was trying to see if a certain powder load would work, or perhaps he was testing wadding, or the rifle action. But for whatever reason, he touched off a round into the air. After all, it was farm fields all around. What harm could it do?

And when that bullet fell to earth, as it had to do, it intersected with the route Rachel Yoder was taking home from her Christmas party in the family horse-drawn buggy and struck her in the head. Rachel fell over in the buggy, dripping her lifeblood down the road as the horse kept going. And then her lifeless body fell out. It was not a murder, and the owner of the rifle had not intended to hurt anyone--but Rachel was dead.

Technically, according to local law, that man was free to shoot a round into the air. Most communities which are not strictly rural have a law against that, but this one seems not to, since the shooter was not charged. But as I thought about that, it struck me that the law might not restrict that man's freedom, but he was supposed to have done it himself. One of the cardinal rules of gun safety is to know what is behind your target and make sure it is safe. And though it may have taken a moment of

mental gymnastics for the shooter to think this through, when you fire into the air, it is the ground which is behind your target: farm fields, yes, but also barns, houses, churches, workshops, schools, and produce stands.

So this was an unintended shooting. But let's be honest about what that means. He pulled the trigger knowing that the bullet would land in an area with people. How big is a three-mile radius and how many people are in it? Something was defective in his thinking and his moral faculty: *I want to shoot my gun when I feel like it outweighed There are people who might get shot.*

I am reminded of a song my mom used to sing in my direction when I would do something that I knew might have bad consequences: "I didn't know the gun was loaded, and I'm so sorry my friend. I didn't know the gun was loaded, and I'll never ever do it again." Too late! You cannot call back a bullet after you pull the trigger. The time for wise thinking and sound decision-making has already passed.

And so I come to a statistic, which is only an example of a pattern, from the beautiful state of Colorado. Almost half of recorded pregnancies are classified as "unintended." Think about what this means. Nearly half of people who have sex and subsequently conceive claim that the outcome was unintended—a surprise—not their plan. A high percentage of these have used no contraceptive. As I think about that false state of mind I can hear my mom singing her little song. But can anyone honestly say that they didn't know that sex often leads to pregnancy? And we all know what Americans will do to protect their personal freedom when saddled with an unintended pregnancy. Fifty-five million babies have been deliberately killed since 1973 so that people can feel "free." That's about twenty-nine states the size of West Virginia. And tens of millions of people whose spiritual bondage got worse. Now they can no longer be people who have never killed their babies.

SPIRITUAL BONDAGE AFFECTS THE MIND

Both of these cases are evidence that spiritual bondage affects the mind. Jesus revealed this issue in the Jewish people to whom he preached the gospel during his earthly ministry. Many believed in him, but others were in obvious bondage: **"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.' They answered Him, 'We are Abraham's descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, 'You will become free '?"** (John 8:31-33).

These are some of the most beautiful words ever spoken, but notice what happens when those who were not willing to believe in Christ heard them: **"We...have never yet been enslaved to anyone."** Think about the abject foolishness of that assertion. The history of Israel is the story of repeated enslavement. There were four hundred years of enslavement in Egypt. The Philistines enforced a kind of enslavement. There were many years when they took all of Israel's metal implements, their food, their cattle, their fabric, their women's honor—everything! The Babylonians carried the whole nation off to Mesopotamia for seventy years. Right at the moment when this foolish statement was made the iron-nailed Roman sandal was firmly planted on the neck of the Jewish people. They did not have rule of their own land, were taxed nearly to death, and were enslaved to build Roman roads and edifices. This does not even take into account the spiritual bondage of the Pharisees, who elaborated the laws of Scripture so far that Jesus said they had tied up heavy burdens and laid them on the souls of the people.

No, the story of Israel was replete with bondage and slavery of various sorts. So what kind of freedom were these Jewish leaders bruing? It was the freedom of the pig sty. Jesus told the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. After the son spent his father's inheritance, he ended up in a pig sty caring for swine. He had been free to waste his money on women, strong drink, and gambling. When he was in the pig sty, eating the same filthy, coarse, tasteless pods as the pigs, he had freedom there, too. He could eat anything he wanted, as long as it was pods. He could sit anywhere he wanted, as long as it was in the mud. He could smell any kind of air as long as it smelled like swine. He could do any kind of work he wanted as long as it was shoveling pig manure. He probably thought he was free, too, until the Lord enlightened him.

So we see that spiritual bondage affects the mind. Long before a couple makes a morally bankrupt decision to seek abortion there is already a twisting of the mind. What Paul the Apostle called the futility of their minds in Ephesians 4:17 is revealed by their decisions. *Pulling the trigger makes us feel free and we don't really care where the bullets are going, or, Physical intimacy makes us feel free and we refuse to think about what happens when a pregnancy results.* This is the freedom of the pig sty—a voluntarily chosen bondage which begins in the soul, controls the mind, and is expressed through the will. If you put a genuine Christian in jail he or she will be free anyway. But people who have embraced bondage because they think it is freedom will be slaves no matter what.

OUR ONLY CHANCE FOR REAL FREEDOM

Thank God that he offers our only real chance for freedom through the way of faith, as Jesus already said in our text: **"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.'"** Two qualifications define the true disciples of Christ: they believe Christ and they continue in his word. You really cannot have one without the other. No one follows the words of Christ without trusting him, and no claim to faith stands if the words of Christ are not followed.

And yet how often we see people attempting both of these things. Religious people who reject the true gospel will pull things out of the Bible which they prefer to follow and follow them. They will claim that they are basically good and that those who believe the doctrine of total depravity are foolish and self-harming. On the other hand, people who say that they have made a profession of faith in Christ and yet don't follow him in any discernable way are rampant even in evangelical churches.

How can we tell? They have embraced the freedom of the pig sty. Even the falsely religious have done so in order to maintain their favorite sins. I did a few classes at the divinity school in a major secular university, and of all the graduate and undergraduate schools, the divinity school had the worst statistics for sexually transmitted diseases at that time (I have heard that things are different now). In fact, free sexual expression was part of an explicit theology as a way to experience God. Lukewarm evangelicals seem not to be overcoming sin either. That's the freedom of the pig sty.

Let me ask you a private question in this public forum: Aren't you sick of the freedoms of the pig sty? Aren't you weary of shooting yourself and others by pulling the trigger whenever the mood strikes you? I am. We have a grave tendency to look at the man who shot sweet Rachel Yoder and think: *I would never do that.* We look at the prodigal son and think that his situation does not relate to

us at all. And we think that we would never indulge in physical intimacy without thinking about the consequences.

But of course we would, and we have all done these sorts of things. We may be contemplating such a sin right now. The Bible teaches us from Genesis to Revelation that **"All have sinned"** and **"There is none righteous, no, not one."** And we can read our own hearts to know that this is a true description of us. Earlier in his conversation with Jewish leaders Jesus told us all the end result: **"...Unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins"** (John 8:24). Earthly, spiritual, and eternal death are the output of pig-sty freedom.

But what a great hope we have in his promise: **"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 have genuine trust in Christ and continue in his word are granted real freedom. We gain the ability to choose something besides mud, stink, and pig fodder. We gain the freedom of mind which delivers us from thinking that bondage is actually freedom.

But let us not import a magical component. Faith is not faith unless there is a continuance—an abiding—in the word of God. God has appointed this means of spiritual feeding for his children. If we do not eat, we do not thrive, just like a baby who will not nurse. When I sign my name at the bottom of a letter, I often append the Biblical reference John 6:63, which says: **"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life."** Without the determined taking in of the word we do not experience the freedom the Lord wants to give us.

There is a man in our congregation who has had radical surgery for cancer of the esophagus. He has been living on a feeding tube directly into his abdomen for two years. For some time, that tube has been his only source of nutrition and hydration. Last week it stopped working. The system was set up as usual, but nothing whatsoever was entering his system. He grew weaker and more desperate over the better part of a day until they figured out that he was experiencing a personal famine and drought.

We all have some area of our spiritual lives where we are stuck, where we are failing to advance in holiness. We may find ourselves experiencing the death-dealing impact of sin on our minds and spirits. If so, let us run to the word of God, every single day, and take in our nutrition and hydration. Let us make sure that we are not failing to use this means to life and freedom which the Lord has already provided and ordained for our good.

FREEDOM THROUGH ADOPTION

Jesus' collision with the Jewish leaders continued on: **"Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed'"** (Jn. 8:34-36). Continuing in the word of God is the appointed means for experiencing freedom in Christ, but Jesus wants us to understand that the foundation of that freedom is adoption into the family of God.

Slaves and sons have a different status. A first century Near Eastern slave was a temporary component of a household. He or she had no rights, no family connection to the head of the house. The

status of the slave could be revoked at any time. It was impermanent. By contrast, the adopted son had the full connection to the family and enjoyed the full benefits of inheritance. Gender is not the point of comparison here since women are "**fellow heirs of the grace of life**" in Christ. The family member is not judged daily for performance. His or her status is assured. There is ultimate peace and freedom to know that our place in God's family cannot be revoked by a bad mood of our householder. We are free indeed!

So I ask you: Are you free indeed? You may have aborted one or more children in your past. You may have killed someone, abused someone, robbed someone, or ruined someone. You may have done things of which you are ashamed even speak the name.

I ask you again. Do you have freedom from that past? Or is it working death in your life every single day? Your only hope is coming to the decision point of faith in Christ and then following that up by relentlessly drinking in life through the word of God. The Devil has lied to you and may be lying to you right now by saying in your mind: *You can never be free of what you have done.*

To whose voice will you listen? Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty for those sins, and rose from the dead to give you a new life. He has already given the necessary sacrifice so that you can be released from the futility of your mind, the poison in your soul, and every vestige of false pig sty "freedom."

You may already be a believer, but the confusion of your mind and your choice to continue sinning in some ways has left you wondering if you can ever really be free from the power of sin. Jesus is crying out to you to say: Yes you can, yes you can, yes you can! The life we receive through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a holy power to defeat sin. Make sure you have genuinely trusted Christ for salvation, drink in the power of God's cleansing word every day, and ask God for the deliverance you need to break the stronghold of sin. The power of sin has already been broken by Christ's victory on the cross. It is available to you if you are willing to walk the way of faith.

As we face a nation which seems to be more disrespectful of human life every day, let us realize that we can never talk people out of their confused thoughts and sinful desires. Jesus is their only hope. We will never succeed at legislating them out of bad behavior. Let us give every good argument and make every good law, but know that the only hope of every person is freedom in Christ Jesus, *Christus Victor*, Lord of All. "**...If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.**"

True freedom is only available by the way of faith.