

Sermon Series

*Skepticism: Where Faith Engages Doubt*

<sup>22</sup>Be merciful to those who doubt; Jude 22; *NIV*

February 28, 2010

Texts: Ps 118:5; Gen 2:15-18; Luke 4:17-19; John 8:31-38; Romans 6:5-23; 2 Cor 5:14

*Freedom?*

Introduction:

Why would a good and loving God give so many rules and regulations that seem intent on preventing us from enjoying our lives? So many? Compared to human laws and regulations, the Bible actually has very few rules to live by.

Most people do not like being confined, restrained, or restricted. We crave wide open spaces. The Psalmist shares our heart's desire.

**Ps 118:5**

When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord;

he brought me into a spacious place. *TNIV*

Boundaries irritate. Walls inhibit. For some the worst word in the English language is *censor*. People want to be free to think and do whatever they like—life without limits.

Recently I had a MRI. There was no physical pain involved whatsoever. But it was not one of my top ten favorite experiences. The machine gently moved me back into the tunnel. And then I made the mistake of opening my eyes. Whoa! I'd never really thought of myself as being claustrophobic. For the next twenty minutes or so, I kept my eyes closed and imagined myself lying on the beach. We just don't like being closed in.

And that is the way some people view Christianity. The skeptics say that the Christian faith diminishes or inhibits human thought and development. The teachings of the Bible keep people's lives enslaved to outdated morals and values. Scripture stifles thought and imprisons life. It is commonly believed that the Christian way takes all or most of the

intelligence, creativity, spontaneity, fun, and joy out of life.

Some struggle with the exclusive claims of the Way. Others find a Good God to be inconsistent with the presence of evil and suffering. But more, I suppose, reject faith because it seems like a *straightjacket*.

The skeptic argues that Christianity produces arrogant and judgmental people who can't think for themselves but are all too willing to think for others. The faith restrains our minds and our bodies . . . our beliefs and our behaviors. Christianity doesn't set us free. It makes us slaves.

How can we show that faith in Christ does set us free to be all that God created us to be? How can we help doubters see that true freedom is not the absence of limitations and constraints but it is finding the right ones, those that fit our nature and liberate us?

When Christians define their faith primarily in puritanical terms, we feed the misconception of what it means to follow Jesus. Christians can't—smoke, drink, dance, gamble, and play cards—were on the short list. But there were longer lists. At times believers were better known for where they would not go and what they would not do, than for living and loving like Jesus.

But the issue before us today goes deeper than a “prohibition era” approach to faith.

*Keith*, a young artist living in Brooklyn, wrote, “Christians believe that they have the absolute truth that everyone else has to believe—or else. That attitude endangers everyone's freedom.” *Chloe*, another young artist, agreed. “‘A one-Truth-fits all' approach is just too confining. The Christians I know don't seem to have the freedom to think for themselves. I believe each individual must determine truth for him- or herself.” [Keller, *The Reason for God*, 35]

Is that true? Does anyone really believe that each individual should be able to live

however they want?

The late Donald A. Nash used to say that our freedom to swing our fist in the air stops where the other man's face begins! If it is my face, I would suggest it stops far short of where my face begins.

Is absolute freedom really possible or is it a naïve fantasy? Isn't every person limited or confined by certain restrictions regardless of their faith, philosophy, or lifestyle? The question, it seems to me, is not whether we will live with restraints, but whether we will find the boundaries perfectly suited for us.

Don't some boundaries and walls serve positive ends? Boundaries can guide. Walls can protect. Restriction can actually be quite liberating. A fish is restricted to living in water because it absorbs oxygen from water rather than air. Put a fish on land and its freedom is not enlarged its destroyed (Keller, 46).

We need boundaries to be free. We need guideposts which fit who we are as children of God. Rebelling against those boundaries brings death. Embracing God-designed parameters brings life.

Genesis 2:15-17 (Today's New International Version)

<sup>15</sup>The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. <sup>16</sup>And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are *free to eat from any tree in the garden*; <sup>17</sup>but *you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*, for when you eat of it you will certainly die."

Wanna be free? Doesn't everyone? But the question is a bit more complex. From what? From whom? Why? How? What environment frees us like water frees a fish? Freedom is not as simple as some seem to think. Could it be that the "pro-choice" approach to life's priorities and values is a devilish deception?

Thankfully, the Bible has a lot to say about freedom. God's message warns us of

dangers which will enslave us. And Scripture invites us to discover real freedom that fits our nature.

Christianity is often misunderstood and misrepresented. The same could be said with regard to freedom. But the Word removes the fog surrounding true freedom.

### John 8:31-38 (Today's New International Version)

31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. **32 *Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.***"

33 They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

34 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, *everyone who sins is a slave to sin.* 35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. **36 *So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*** 37 I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word. 38 I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father. "

Jesus came to set us free.

### [Luke 4:17-19 (Today's New International Version)]

17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."]

How does Jesus free us? Why does he free us?

He frees us from sin.

Where does sin rank among all the things from which you would like to be free?

Debt? Crime? Violence? A bad marriage? Single? Illness? A rotten job? No job? An

addiction? Taxes? Poverty? Death? Guilt? What enslaves you? What keeps you from experiencing a more abundant life? Where is God in this picture? What is really at the core of your unhappiness . . . your lack of joy.

Like Jesus, Paul had a lot to teach with regard to freedom.

### Romans 3:23-25 (Today's New International Version)

*23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25* God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—

### Romans 6:5-23 (Today's New International Version)

5 If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that *we should no longer be slaves to sin— 7 because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.*

8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

11 In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. 13 Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. *14 For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.*

### Slaves to Righteousness

15 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! *16 Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?* 17 But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. *18 You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*

19 I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. 20 When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. 21 What benefit did you reap at that

time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! *22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Jesus frees us from sin, both its guilt and its power. But it is more than being freed from.

Now we are freed to become slaves of God, life, and righteousness. This is true freedom.

This kind of freedom was envisioned and hoped for as evidenced by the Hebrew songbook.

Psalm 25:16-18 (Today's New International Version)

16 Turn to me and be gracious to me,  
for I am lonely and afflicted.

17 Relieve the troubles of my heart  
and free me from my anguish.

18 Look on my affliction and my distress  
and take away all my sins.

The Psalmist knew that the source of all our trouble, anguish, affliction, and distress was sin!

But beyond setting us free from our sin, he . . .

He shows us true freedom.

And as always, we find the living Word to be a perfect teacher and model!

7 Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. 9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. *They will come in and go out, and find pasture.* 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

11 "I am the good shepherd. *The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.* 12 The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. 13 The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

14 "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and *I lay down my life for the sheep.*

John 10:7-15; *TNIV*

He did not come with his own message. He spoke the message he heard in heaven. He did not come to do his own thing. He did his Father's will not his own. He did not come to find self-fulfillment, he came to fulfill his Father's desire to redeem his children. *And Jesus was the freest man who ever lived.* He was not bound by human rulers, the love of money, lust, or any other sin. He was free—to talk with his Father, obey his Father, love his Father, and love his Father's children. Yet, he laid down his life for the sheep. He protected, saved, and fed the sheep so they could come in and go out and find pasture. What a beautiful description of what it means to free—secure nurturing wide open spaces. But it seems odd to picture a man carrying a cross as free. Yet, that is a Biblical picture of what it means to be fully set free!

We are now free to love others. And love involves personal sacrifice!

2 Corinthians 5:14 (Today's New International Version)

14 *For Christ's love compels us*, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. 15 *And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*

This was the kind of freedom pictured and forecast in the OT scriptures.

Deuteronomy 15:11-13 (Today's New International Version)

11 There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be *openhanded toward those of your people who are poor and needy in your land.*

Freeing Servants

12 If any of your people, men or women, sell themselves to you and serve you six years, in *the seventh year you must let them go free.* 13 *And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed.*

We have been set free to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and genuinely fulfill God's law.

God confronted the people through the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 58:5-7 (Today's New International Version)

5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,  
only a day for people to humble themselves?  
Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed  
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?  
Is that what you call a fast,  
a day acceptable to the LORD?

*6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?*

*7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

Galatians 5:12-14 (Today's New International Version)

12 As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!

Life by the Spirit

*13 You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature ; rather, serve one another humbly in love. 14 For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

True freedom is not the absence of limitations and constraints but it is finding the right ones, those fit for our nature . . . those which liberate us.

*Ps 119:32*

*32 I run in the path of your commands,  
for you have set my heart free.*

Conclusion:

Everyone is a slave.

The question is, "Who's your master?"

1 Peter 2:15-17 (Today's New International Version)

15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of the foolish. **16 Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves.** 17 Show proper respect to everyone, love your fellow believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

2 Peter 2:18-20 (Today's New International Version)

18 For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. **19 They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for "people are slaves to whatever has mastered them."** 20 If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning.

The price of our freedom hung on a cross! Now there is a master worth serving!