

Freedom: A Christian Perspective

Galatians 5:1; Matthew 11:28-30

Richard C. Allen

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South Glastonbury

Connecticut

When thinking about freedom from a Christian perspective, the word ‘paradox’ comes to mind. When I think of being a slave to something, to being not free; I picture myself tangled in a harness that has me strapped to something that oppresses me, that robs me of my life or of my worth or of my dignity. It’s a picture of misery.

The Christian perspective, paradoxically, is that I trade in that harness, that harness that robs me of ever discovering the abundance of life Christ intends for me; and I strap on, instead, the harness that binds me to what **LOVE** demands. So, to be free from a Christian perspective is not that image of the school boy leaping off the bus on the last day of school imagining no more authority figures for three months, shouting ‘Free at last, free at last!’ It’s the image of the classroom teacher who understands she has a calling, and says to the struggling child, ‘I’ll stay after school and work with you all summer, if that’s what it takes to get you up to grade level, because that is how I understand what love demands.’

Freedom from a Christian perspective trades one harness for another. It trades the harness that leaves us exhausted for one that leaves us exhilarated. That’s why I say Christian freedom is a paradox.

Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians can be understood as a major treatise on Christian freedom. For him, freedom means being released from the burden of a narrow view of who is acceptable to God, a narrow view of who his neighbor really is.

He had been raised in one of those ethnic neighborhoods where the only good people were the ones who looked like him, spoke his language, cooked food like his mother cooked food, and traced their ancestry through the same family tree as his tree. As Paul reflects on his own encounter with the Risen Christ, he sees that this narrow view has not been life giving, has not led to anything that looks or feels like an abundance of life Christ came to reveal.

By contrast, Paul sees that when he opens himself to the family across town whose name ends with ‘ski,’ and when he opens himself to the family in the next county whose bread is baked with cassava flour, and to the family down in the valley whose women wear face-covering scarves, and to the family on the other side of the mountain who dance at night to the sounds of an accordion, and to the family beyond the river who eat with chop sticks, he finds his life takes on a whole new depth. He finds he has a much greater appreciation for God’s handiwork. He finds he has taken a giant step toward his own wholeness, his own salvation. For Paul, freedom has to do with trading in the harness of narrow-mindedness and donning the harness of inclusiveness. It’s what love demands.

On our middle school mission trip to Boston last week, we were privileged to hear a number of freedom stories. We met Damon, a young man who had succumbed to the harness of drug addiction. Though at first it appeared to be the ‘cool’ thing to do, an expression of his young freedom, prescription drugs turned out to be the oppressive yoke that stole his soul. He told us about meeting a pastor who introduced him to the Christian paradox, to the alternative freedom that comes with submitting one’s self to the harness of love, to accepting Christ’s invitation to find the true freedom. He has a full year of sobriety now, is off the streets, and is alive in a way he had never, ever, imagined.

In the brief text from Matthew's Gospel, we find Jesus looking out upon a crowd of weary men and women, wearied by their devotion to those things that tend to oppress the mind and cripple the heart leaving one disillusioned with life. He sees the fatigue in their eyes, the exhaustion in their faces, the resignation in their body language. And he is overwhelmed by compassion for them. He reaches out to them with a simple invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

When I was younger, I thought the "rest" Jesus offered was an afternoon nap, a fluffy pillow, a warm blanket on a water bed. That was my idea of a holy rest. But as I grew older I realized what he actually means is: come away from those pursuits that leave the soul to bleed; come unto me and I will give you the kind of work that restores the soul, that satisfies the deepest longings, the kind of work that submits to love's demands.

One of the old hymns of the church I learned to sing in the early days is the hymn, "Just As I Am." I'm glad it made it into the New Century Hymnal. It doesn't have a modern rock 'n roll beat. It doesn't have words that appeal to the sophisticated ear. It was written for inclusion in The Invalid's Hymn Book in 1836, the year our own South Church was established. The fourth verse sings,

"Just as I am, thou wilt receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
Because thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come."

"Just as I am..." Those are words for the refrigerator door. They are freedom words. They define freedom from a Christian perspective. In the final analysis, to be truly free is to know that God is throwing a huge 'Come As You Are' party, and we are all on the invitation list! We are all welcome just as we are.

For me, that means I don't have to preach like Billy Graham. I can just be a storytelling minister.

I don't have to be a world-class teacher/scholar like Dr. Phyllis Tribble who happened to be my Hebrew Scripture professor. I can come at the Biblical material by waiting to see how the text grabs a hold of my imagination and won't let go.

I don't have to be a pastor like Jim Kidd at Asylum Hill Church who considered the whole world his parish. I can just focus on nurturing this one community of faith on a passion for mission.

I don't have to be a published theologian like William Sloan Coffin who finds fierce language for being a prophetic voice. I can help Confirmation students to find their own voices.

I don't have to be a televised advocate for world peace like Bishop Tutu. I can glean turnips and ride a bike for brain research and walk against hunger.

To be free in the Christian perspective means I can celebrate being the me God made me to be. It means coming before God just as I am, confident that God can use even me for some reconciling work God has in mind. The Apostle Paul wrote that Epistle to the Galatians, but he really wrote it to Christians in all generations because he wanted us all to be truly free!

As we lift up other freedoms on the Fourth of July weekend, I wanted us to claim also the unique freedom that is ours in Jesus Christ. This I lift up in the greatest of hope. Amen.

