

Christian Liberty, Part 1

by Albert N. Martin

Edited transcript of message preached February 15, 2004

May I encourage you to follow as I read three brief portions of God's holy word in your hearing. The first is from the Gospel of Luke. Luke 4:16-19. Recording the activities of the Lord Jesus at this point in his life, Luke writes,

"And He came to Nazareth where He had been brought up. And He entered, as His custom was, into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And there was delivered unto Him the book of the prophet Isaiah. And He opened the book or the scroll or the roll and found the place where it was written, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor. He had sent Me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. He has anointed Me to proclaim release to the captives, to set at liberty them that are bruised.'"

And now the Gospel of John and chapter 8. And in the midst of the discourse in which our Lord is speaking to the religious leaders of His day, He says in John 8:36 these words: "If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed." And then Galatians chapter 5 and verse 1. Paul's letter to the Galatians chapter 5 and verse 1: "For freedom did Christ set us free. Stand fast, therefore, and do not be entangled again in a yoke of bondage."

Now, I trust it was evident to you that the common denominator of the three passages read in your hearing was the theme of freedom or liberty. These verses epitomize the fact that the salvation brought to sinful men and women by the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, if it is anything, is a liberating salvation. He said that the prophecy of Isaiah was being fulfilled in Him, a prophecy that said the Spirit would rest upon Him in order to proclaim liberty. He said to the Jews of His day, "If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed." And the apostle exhorts the Galatian Christians, "Stand fast in the liberty. For freedom did Christ set us free. Stand fast therefore, that is, stand fast in that liberty procured by the Lord Jesus Christ."

Now it is for this very reason that when this salvation is embraced from the heart, that the biblical teaching concerning a believer's liberty in Christ becomes a very treasured commodity. Now while this liberty is many faceted and is a blessed reality in those many facets, there is one aspect of that liberty that is generally associated with the words "Christian liberty". It is that aspect which is highlighted in our own confession of faith in chapter 21 paragraph 2:

"God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it, that is, the conscience free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to His Word or not contained in it. So that to believe such doctrines or obey such commands out of conscience is to betray true liberty of conscience. And the requiring of an implicit faith and absolute and blind obedience is to destroy liberty of conscience and reason also."

Even more narrowly, we usually think of the words "Christian liberty" in relationship to what is called things indifferent (the audiopora), that is, matters of behavior which are neither commanded or forbidden in the Scriptures, things concerning which every child of God must make moral judgments and be persuaded in his own mind as to whether or not he or she should indulge in this or that activity.

And when we hear the words "Christian liberty", for many of us, those words immediately bring to our mind such things as,

"What kind of music am I free or not free to listen to? What kind, if any, movies am I free to watch? What kind of beverages am I free or not free to drink? What kind of places can I or can I not go? What kind of recreations can I engage in? What styles of clothing should I or should I not wear? How much, if any, makeup should I put on my face, etc., etc., etc."

For many of us, the words "Christian liberty" most frequently bring us into that very limited narrow sphere of concern. Now granted, these and similar concerns are a subset of the biblical doctrine of Christian liberty, but they are certainly not the whole of it or even the major part of it, much less the foundation of it.

Now, it was nine years ago that I preached a series of 18 sermons followed by one adult class discussion on the doctrine of Christian liberty. That series was launched as we approached a Christmas season and we had people with differing convictions: "Should I or should I not celebrate Christmas?" And I felt that that occasion was a good launching pad to go into in depth the biblical doctrine of Christian liberty as it relates in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 to the matter of days and diet and celebration of special seasons etc.

Now I have no intention of repeating that series of sermons. Rather, I want us together to take a fresh look at the doctrine of Christian liberty in a much broader and more foundational way. In a way, I am persuaded at this stage of my understanding without which you will never, never be able to make right judgments about the particulars that we generally associate with Christian liberty, music, movies, clothes, etc., etc. And I'm constrained to enter into this series of sermons that at this juncture I think will be somewhere around 10 or 12 messages.

Now I know what some of you are thinking, "Oh yeah, it'll end up twenty." If it does, so what. If I'm opening up the Scriptures, I must confess it may be my carnality--I get a little irritated when people kind of snicker and say, "Hey, pastor...." If I stand up here and just blther, talking from the cuff, and I'm not opening up the Scriptures, then have

reason to make little snitty remarks. But otherwise don't tempt me to get irritated, please. All right? I go before God and say, "Lord, what do Your people need? And how can I responsibly feed them out of the Scriptures?" But I've got enough remaining sin to feel a little irritated when I get tweaked because I start out a series and say I think it'll be 10 or 12 messages and it ends up 20. All right? So, you help me not to sin. All right? And I'll try to help you to understand the Word of God. I'm laying my heart bare to you. I felt it'd be better to do it than to struggle at the door fighting with something that was not Christlike in my spirit.

So I'm addressing this subject afresh for two main reasons. Number one, I believe I've grown in my own understanding of it from the last series nine years ago. And I want to pass on to you what I trust is a richer, fuller, more balanced, comprehensive understanding of the doctrine of Christian liberty. And secondly, I'm doing so out of deep pastoral concerns that there is a growing measure of a misunderstanding and a wretched carnal abuse of the biblical doctrine of Christian liberty in this church. And I understand you struggle with it in the Trinity Christian School as well.

Now, this is no new thing. There is no treatise on this doctrine that I have read. And I reread Calvin's two treatises: his original institutes of 1536 and then his fuller treatment of 1559. And then I've read some 60 pages of John Brown's treatment of it in his commentary on 1 Peter, and further his comments on it on in Galatians material that I've read in the past. I reread it all, seeking to bring my mind afresh into contact with these realities. And not a one of these treatises, including our own confession, treats the doctrine without the recognition that it is often a doctrine that is abused and made a license for sin.

Paragraph two, I read to you: "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and it is free from man-made doctrines and man-made rules of behavior. But paragraph three says this:

"They who upon pretense of Christian liberty do practice any sin or cherish any sinful lust as they thereby pervert the main design of the grace of the gospel to their own destruction, so they wholly destroy the end of Christian liberty, which is that being delivered out of the hands of all of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our lives [quoting from the prophecy concerning our Lord Jesus in Luke 1:74 and 75]."

So they recognize that this doctrine of the Christian's bloodbought liberty in Christ is always vulnerable to misuse and to abuse, and that the issue of its abuse and misuse must be addressed. To state it bluntly, let me throw out a few seeds that I hope will germinate. No Christian man or woman is ever at liberty to dress immodestly. Modesty of dress is a moral obligation 1258 upon every child of God. Now what is modest and what is immodest is a matter that must be wrestled with because the Bible doesn't give us a manual of skirt lengths and cleavage dimensions. But no Christian at any time in any circumstances has liberty to be immodest. Modesty is a moral duty. No Christian at any time in any set of circumstances is to be prodigal and careless and irresponsible in the stewardship of

his money. It is a moral obligation to be a good steward of one's money. How 1349 it is spent for recreations and for luxuries etc etc.

So you see immediately, for some of you, you're digging your heels and saying "My liberty is going to be stepped upon." No, my friend, if it's true Christian liberty, it's not at all fearful to know what are my moral obligations. Because, as we shall see, to be liberated by Christ is to be free to live a life of meticulous, whole soul, universal holiness. All right, I'll rattle the cage a little bit on the front end as we lead into the subject. Now, in the light of these things, I trust your prayer will be, Lord. Where I'm ignorant, teach me. Where I am wrong, correct me. Where I am right, confirm me.

Now, in my broadened, I hope deeper, more accurate understanding of the doctrine, I've come to the persuasion that if we begin to approach an understanding of this doctrine, apart from its two-fold foundation of our real condition of slavery and bondage in Adam, and our real condition of liberty and freedom in Christ, we will never understand the doctrine or apply it as we ought. And so what I want to do this morning and then God willing two sermons next week and the following--I want you to consider with me the foundational realities that undergird the biblical doctrine of Christian liberty.

And the first is our real condition of slavery and bondage in Adam. Now I say our real condition of slavery and bondage in Adam for the simple reason that I want us to think biblically and according to the Scriptures. We are not just individuals before God. But God beholds every one of us seated in this place this morning as either in Adam or in Christ. In a very real sense, there are only two men in the world who count: Adam and Christ. And because of our crass individualism in our western society, we don't want to think in terms of concept of solidarity and community. However, if we read Romans 5:12-21, it becomes abundantly clear that God's dealings with every one of us are reflective of God's dealings with us in Adam.

Quickly look at Romans chapter 5. I just want to establish this before we come to the particulars. As Paul has been opening up the nature and the grandeur of our salvation in Christ, he now comes to 1656 what many regard as almost a climactic expression of that salvation: that it comes to us through the one man, Christ Jesus, because sin and condemnation have come to us in a similar way through the one man, Adam. Verse 12: "Therefore, as 1713 through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so 1719 death passed unto all men, for all sinned." When did all sin? All sinned in our first father, Adam.

As the old Puritan likened the illustration that Adam has a large belt and hooked onto it is every man, woman, boy or girl in the race of humanity. All of us are hooked onto Adam's belt. I like to use the imagery we were all piggybacked upon Adam. Had Adam stood, we would have stood upon him and in him and with him. But when Adam fell, we fell in him and with him. And as a result of this, we are in the condition we are in by nature. We have inherited depravity. We have representative guilt and culpability before God.

In 1 Corinthians , Paul can say, "As in Adam, all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive." So I'm using the terminology our real condition of slavery and bondage in Adam to highlight this biblical thinking. Contrary to the crass individualism and egalitarianism of our day, God has established moral dealings with humanity in terms of Adam and in terms of Christ.

Now then, what is our real condition of slavery and bondage in Adam? I want you to think with me as time permits as we trace out five dimensions of our slavery and our bondage in Adam. Five massive chains by which every single one of us is bound by nature. And as we work through the biblical description of these chains and you sit there and say, "Well, I don't feel them", that's part of being chained, that you don't feel them.

And furthermore, I want you to see that in the light of these chains, until we are freed from them, no amount of taking a can of spray paint that is gold in color and spraying the chains and taking an etching tool and etching on the links of the chains the doctrine of Christian Liberty breaks them. They're still chains. And I'm convinced that there are people sitting here today who sport their so-called Christian liberty, who are doing nothing but clanking their guilt-colored, etched chains of bondage.

Now then, what is the nature of our real condition of slavery and bondage in Adam? Number one, we are by nature the slaves of sin. When Adam left his place as a freeborn son whose identity was enjoyed in loving obedience to his gracious Father in seeking to be an independent godlike creature, he became a groveling slave of sin. That's the tragedy of sin. He was God's freeborn son. Adam is called in Genesis 5 the son of God. Not the son of God in the sense of our Lord Jesus, but he was God's freeborn son implanted with a nature and disposition that was towards God and towards the will of God and the revealed purposes of God. And in seeking to become an independent god, an independent godlike creature, he became nothing less than a groveling slave of sin.

And his new master, as soon as he takes over in his life, alienates him from God, and drives him to hide from God behind some trees in the garden. And according to the Scriptures, every one of us by nature now shares in that slavery to sin. And I want you to look with me at several passages that make this unmistakably clear.

Romans chapter 6. As Paul is dealing with the question, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" he's opening up his argument in two major categories. Here is the second category. Verse 15 of Romans chapter 6: "What then? Shall we sin because we're not under law but under grace? God forbid. Know you not that to whom you present yourselves as servants to obedience, his servants...." And the Greek word is "bondservant" or "slave". So I'm going to render it "slave". That's what the word should be. "Know you not that to whom you present yourselves as slaves unto obedience, his slaves you are whom you obey, whether of sin unto death or of obedience unto righteousness." Now notice carefully. "But thanks be to God, that whereas you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of

teaching where unto you were delivered, and being made free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness." Verse 20: "For when you were the slaves of sin, you were free men in regard to righteousness."

Now think of the composition of the Roman church. All kinds of people from all classes, all different backgrounds, some pagan, some Jewish. That's why they had problems sorting out some of this subset stuff of Christian liberty: special days, special foods, what to eat, what to drink, what not to eat, what not to drink. And yet Paul can say with all that diversity of cultural, religious, ethnic, social, economic background, here was their common denominator: they were all by nature the slaves of sin. Verse 17: "whereas you were slaves of sin." Verse 20: "when you were slaves of sin."

Now you see Paul had already indicted the entire human race in the earlier chapters with regard to all the human race being under condemnation because of the guilt of sin: "What things the law says, it says to them that are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped and all the world become guilty before God." But you see our problem is not only one of guilt in the courtroom, but is the problem of the clanging of the chains. By nature we are the slaves of sin. Jesus stated it very succinctly in John 8 and verse 34: "Whosoever commits sin [that is, whosoever has a lifestyle in which he practices sin], is the bond servant [or the slave] of sin."

Now this slavery is not a matter of mere legal status with no real interfacing with our lives. No, it is a real, if I may use the term, it is an existential slavery. It's a real sure enough slavery in which sin is personified as the master. And we, the slaves, present the very members of our body as the instruments to carry out our servitude to sin. Look again at Romans chapter 6 and Paul's graphic description of this in verses 19 and 20:

"I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh. For as you presented your members as slaves to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity, even so now present your members as slaves to righteousness unto sanctification. For when you were the slaves of sin [you were free men and women in respect of righteousness]."

You see what he's saying? This slavery is not just a concept that floats by. It was the real, sure enough, bonafide day-by-day expression of the reality of what they were. He says you presented your members instruments of unrighteousness to sin, your master. When sin said, "Give me your eyes to be the inlet of envy", we say, "Yes master." "Give me your eyes to be the inlet of lust." "Yes, master." And of servile bowing in servile subjection to sin, you presented your eyes the inlet to envy, the inlet to lust. And when sin said, "Give me your ears to receive lies to receive slander. We said, "Yes, master." We gave the ears to receive lies and slander. And when sin said, "Give me your mouth to speak cutting, unkind, untruthful, unclean words", we said, "Here, here's my lips. Here's my tongue. Here's my throat." You presented your members. And when sin said, "Give me your hands to touch forbidden objects", we

said, "Yes, master. Here are my hands." When sin said, "Give me your sexual organs to violate the law of God", we said, "Yes, master. I freely give them to you." When sin said, "Give me your feet to go in forbidden paths", we gave our feet.

This is Paul's graphic description of who and what we are by nature. We are slaves, not in some philosophical concept, but in the real, sure enough, nuts and bolts stuff of everyday life. And he said this is true of every one of us by nature. He said of the Romans, "It was true of every single one of you." And to talk about Christian liberty, without first of all coming to grips with the fact that this is what we are by nature. And when grace comes and liberates us, it liberates us from servitude to sin. Only then can we talk intelligently and realistically and biblically about what we are free to do in Christ. For we are never free to go back and serve in any way our old Master. By nature, we are the slaves of sin.

Secondly, in Adam, our bondage is this: we are by nature the slaves of the world. Now by the term, "the world", I'm referring to the entire system of people and things under the regulating influence of the prince of darkness, the devil. I'm using the term, "world", in that broad biblical sense. In this sense, the devil is called in 2 Corinthians 4 the god of this world. That doesn't mean he rules the world or we have some kind of a dualism in which God and the devil are fighting it out and we're not sure who's going to win, who's in the ascendancy, who's on top. No. But in the sense that God has permitted that foul, evil spirit to have an influence that regulates the thinking, the perspectives, the standards of right and wrong and goodness, that whole world system, the entire system of people and things under the regulating influence of the prince of darkness. The devil is called the god of this world. Three times in the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to him as the prince of this world (John 12, 31, 14, 30, and 16, 11).

And that's why when Paul is describing for the Ephesians what their life was like before they were set free by the power of Christ, he describes their life, all of them, without exception, the moral ones, the immoral ones, the educated, the uneducated, the sophisticated, the unsophisticated, it didn't matter, Jew or Gentile. Notice how he describes it in Ephesians chapter 2, verse 1:

"And you did He make alive when you were dead through your trespasses and sins [spiritually dead, separated from the life of God, but you were walking dead men wherein you once walked. Your spiritual death was manifested in the way you walked]."

Now, what shaped the way they walked? Look at the text: "Wherein you once walked according to the course of this world." In other words, you framed your walk the way you thought about life: what's important, what's unimportant, what's good, what's bad, what's desirable, what's undesirable, what things you ought to look at, what things you ought not to look at, how you should spend your time, how you should spend your money, how you should conduct yourself with those of the opposite sex, what

you should eat, how much you should eat, where you should eat it, with whom you should eat it. Everything that constitutes your life is your walk. Your walk is your life.

He says, "Now you once walked according to the course of this world. It was this world system that dictated your whole lifestyle. It promoted its standards of right and of wrong, of goodness and of virtue. It set forth all that touches upon life." And He says, "You framed your life according to the course of this world [in other words, you were slaves to the world]."

And in our slavery and bondage to the world, we swear our allegiance to the world's trinity. You know who the world's trinity is? 1 John 2, verse 15: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the vain glory of life is of the world." That's what the world is. It has its trinity. And that which is worshipped is the trinity of the lust of the eyes, the desire to have things, the lust of the flesh, the desire to enjoy things, the vain glory of life, the desire to be somebody. And he says to Christians, "You're not to love that."

As we'll see, because in Jesus Christ we've been delivered out of slavery to the world. So that when the world which sets the standard for dress, the standards for entertainment, the standard for the use and non-use of our money, the world which has something to say about everything and every relationship, when we are in union with Christ, as we will see, we are delivered from our slavery to the world now to be the bond slaves of the true triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

No matter what the world may tell us is acceptable behavior, we don't worship it. We don't bow at its shrine to take our moral dictates from the world. We take them from our changeless God and Father as He has spoken in His Holy Word and who says, "Be holy as I am holy." You see, if we don't understand this, that by nature we're slaves to the world, and unless by grace that slavery has been broken, you're in no position to talk about Christian liberty.

I get sick and tired of people wedded to the world saying, "Oh, Christian liberty, Christian liberty?" No, what you mean is, "Worldly slavery, worldly slavery. So fearful that the world might frown on what I do or don't do, not because what I do or don't do is not mandated in the Scriptures, but because it's not part of the world's standard." You follow? It's slavery. It's a wretched, horrible slavery to let this world system control me and dictate to me.

And Paul recognized that even though we may be delivered from it fundamentally and powerfully by the gospel, the world doesn't let us go and say, "Okay, I've lost you. You're no longer my slave. Well, I'll let bygones be bygones." No. What does Romans 12 say? "Be not fashioned according to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God." That world system that once claimed us as its rightful slave, and we bowed to its every wish and whim, in Christ we are delivered. But that world does not say, "Oh, now that you belong to Christ, you are no longer fair game. I will leave you alone." No. It can't stand the presence and the exposing light of those delivered from

its slavery. And it's constantly seeking to bring it back, bring it back, bring it back, bring it back, bring it back. And one of the ways it does it is by drawing you back by degrees and naming the chains "Christian liberty".

Thirdly, what are we? In our slavery and bondage in Adam, we are not only by nature slaves of sin, slaves of the world, but we are by nature the slaves of the devil. We're the slaves of the devil. When Adam and Eve sinned, they aligned themselves with the devil in opposition to God. That's why when God speaks to Satan in Genesis 3.15, He says, "I'm going to break up that alignment. I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed." Why does enmity have to be put? Because there was now enmity. When Adam and Eve sinned, they aligned themselves with the devil. They said, we'll let you interpret reality. We'll let you interpret right and wrong. We'll let you determine our ethical norms. God, up to now, has determined them. He has said, "Of all the trees of the garden you may freely eat, but of the tree that is in the midst of the garden you shall not eat it. In eating, you will die." The devil comes along and says, "You shall not surely die." And they align themselves with the devil's interpretation of reality. They align themselves with the devil's standard of how to come to their fullest self-actualization, not in the way of obedience to God, but in the way of disobedience. And when they sinned, they aligned themselves with the devil and became his slave. And so the Scriptures teach us that you and I in Adam are by nature slaves of the devil.

I want you to look at four passages with me that state this in unequivocal language. John chapter 8. In this discourse where the Lord is speaking about His power to free captives to sin (verse 44), Jesus says to these religious people, these people knowledgeable in the Scriptures, "You are of your father, the devil. And the lusts or desires of your father [now notice] it is your will to do [what the devil desires, you do]." Now when someone unquestionably fulfills the desires of another, I think there's a description for that person. He's called a slave. The slaves of the devil. "It is his will that you do this. You comply. And the lust or desires of your father, it is your will to do. You are of your father, the devil. You have made yourselves his sons. You are his willing lackeys. You are his slaves."

The Ephesians 2 passage, some of you may have read on a little bit. You will understand now why I stopped where I did. In this walk that is framed by the world, there is something at work behind the world. Look at the text again: "You did he make alive when you were dead through your trespasses and sins wherein you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the powers of the air, the spirit that now works in the sons of disobedience among whom we also once lived." See what he's saying? Behind this world system which sets the standards of your life, which dictates your perspectives on what's important, what's unimportant, how to dress, how not to dress, what to listen to, what to watch, where to go, with whom to associate. Behind that world system there is a personal, evil, malevolent spirit, one that is called here the prince of the power of the air, a spirit who now, (and this Greek word "works" is the same Greek word that is found in Philippians 2: "For God is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good

pleasure." That imminent personal operation of God by the Spirit upon the renewed heart of a believer, inclining him to will and giving him the power to work what is pleasing to God). Paul says there is this malevolent spirit. He is not implying everyone's demon possessed, not at all. But he said that spirit is now energetically, powerfully, effectively at work in the sons of disobedience.

You say, well, I didn't hear the devil talk to me. No, it's not by some immediate registration upon your consciousness. When your life is framed by this world system, the devil's got you as his slave. The devil's got you as his slave when he's got you cowering and bowing to the world. "You haven't lived if you don't see this movie", says the world. And when you say, "Oh, I dare not appear among my peers, and when they say, have you seen this movie? And I can't say..." Oh, the devil's got you, my friend. The world has dictated. You don't care, really, at the end of the day, whether or not you could take Christ by the hand and say, "Lord Jesus, sit with me and watch." At that point, what Jesus would do or say is irrelevant! All that matters is, "I can't have the frown of my peers of the world!" And behind that, the devil laughs with fiendish glee and says, "I gotcha! I gotcha! I gotcha!" That's how he works in the sons of disobedience.

And Paul said, "In spite of all my religiosity, in spite of all my external morality, in spite of all of my zeal as a Pharisee, I was one of them, among whom we all once lived." And then he comes back, you see, to slavery to sin: "among whom we all lived in the lust of our flesh, doing the desires of the flesh, and of the mind." You see, it is all woven together. It is this many-faceted bondage, the clinking chains of bondage to sin, the clinking chains of bondage to the world, the clinking chains of bondage to the devil.

Two other texts quickly. 2 Timothy chapter 2, simply demonstrating that by nature we are the slaves of the devil. Paul is giving directions to Timothy with respect to his ministry there at Ephesus. And he was encountering people that were opposing him, and Paul wants him to know how to deal with them. And he says in verse 24 of 2 Timothy 2,

"And the Lord's servant must not strive [that means not be argumentative and combative], but be gentle to all, apt to teach, forbearing, in meekness correcting them that oppose themselves, if, per adventure, God may give them repentance unto the knowledge of the truth, that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him unto his will."

That's not a very flattering picture, that the devil's ensnared you and encompassed you in His net, and is dragging you off to make you a slave to his will. Not a flattering picture.

In the final text, very quickly, 1 John 5:9, where John, the great apostle of love, is also the great apostle of realism, and he writes to these believers, Verse 18: "We know that whoever is begotten of God does not make a practice of sin, but he that was begotten of God keeps himself, and the evil one touches him not." The evil one

cannot claim him as his own anymore. "We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the evil one." The whole world is lying in the lap of the evil one. The whole world is like poor Samson asleep on Delilah's lap. That's the picture. That's reality. That's who you are by nature. That's who I am by nature. The devil who came to Adam and Eve in the form of a talking serpent came with the promise of a greater liberty than that which God had promised and given. All the while he held a chain behind his back, seeking to take God's free son and make him his slave.

But then, fourthly, not a pretty picture, is it? But until you face that picture, looked in the mirror and said, "That's me", and as we shall see, God willing, in the next two weeks, looked in the mirror and seeing the liberty that Christ gives whenever and wherever He comes in His saving power, "whom the Son sets free is free indeed", not some specious, notional freedom that leaves the heart wedded to the world and then covers up the world with the title of Christian liberty, covers up the love of sin with the words "Christian liberty". No, no. "Whom the Son sets free is free indeed." He is liberated. The chains are broken. He is free to be God's man, God's woman in radical discipleship, committed to universal holiness in a path of cross-bearing self-denial, not flaunting His liberties, but looking for every opportunity to serve his God and his fellow men in sacrificial love. That's the picture of a real Christian.

Well, fourth area. We are by nature not only the slaves of sin, slaves of the world, slaves of the devil, but we are by nature the slaves, and I wrestled with how to express this, and this is the best I could come up with, the idol of self-serving. We are by nature the slaves of the idol of self-serving. Now think with me. When God made Adam and Eve, put them in the garden, He made them, among other things, to find their true joy outside themselves in communion with and in the service of their God. He made them with large souls, the capacity being such that only God and His will and His communion could fill them. But when they pushed God out, into that void rushed selfhood, the idol of self.

And when Adam sinned, the result was a horrific inversion of the dominant focus of the entire being from God to himself, from others and God's world to himself, so that his faculties and capacities and appetites and energies turn from being outward and upward to being inward and downward. And this tragic defection from God to self is clearly stated as the baseline interpretation of what we're all about until Christ sets us free.

For example, when the great prophet Isaiah is giving us that beautiful, distilled statement of the gospel with the bad news and the good news, very familiar verse, Isaiah 53, verse 6, look at it: "All we like sheep have gone astray." There's the macrocosm. All humanity is like a vast flock of sheep that has gone astray from its God, His communion, His fellowship, His word, His will, His ways. But now He turns to the microcosm: "All we like sheep have gone astray." That's the big picture.

Now the zoom lens on every one of us. Look, it's going to talk about everyone, everyone, everyone, everyone. That's you. That's me. And what characterizes us as

part of that flock of sheep that's gone astray? Look at the language. "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to His own way." And to my own thing, my own way, to my own ends, to my own pleasure. That's what we are. We are enslaved to this idol of self-serving. Turned to our own way.

If it pleases me, it's irrelevant whether God has anything to say about it. If I want it, it's irrelevant whether God has said I should have it. And you see, if that idolatrous attachment to self-serving is not radically broken, the doctrine of Christian liberty becomes a devil's blanket under which to hide a host of wickedness that is nothing but self-serving.

The New Testament counterpart of this is 2 Corinthians chapter 5, where Paul is dealing with the logic of the cross and how it has transformed his own life to where his great passion is not serving himself, but serving the Lord Jesus. And he says in verse 14, "For the love of Christ constrains us, because we thus judge, that one died for all, therefore all died." All for whom Christ died, they died in Him. And He died for all, to what end? Now notice, "that they that live [those who have life from his death] should no longer live unto themselves, but unto Him who for their sake died and rose again." In other words, the purpose of the death of Christ was not simply to add a little bit of God and of Jesus and of Christ and of moral decency and religious thought and practice to self-centered lives, still self-centered, justifying the strands of their selfishness under the guise that it is my liberty in Christ. Christ died to radically shift the whole fundamental structure of the soul from the idol of self to attachment to Jesus Christ. He died for all that they who live should no longer live unto themselves. All of them do by nature. They are by nature slaves of the idol of self-service, self-gratification, self-assertion, self-justification, self-pity, self-indulgence, self-esteem. You go on. Complete the list. That's what you and I are all about by nature.

And you see, it's very interesting. When we come into the particulars of the New Testament treatment of Christian liberty, when it touches the things we normally associate, days and places and drink and not drink, it's amazing how it is so other-centered. It's so other-centered. It is so foreign to the idea, "Well, it's my liberty." That's the beginning, middle, and end of everything. What is that? That's nothing but the vicious idolatry of me-ism. If I have the liberty, it's my liberty. Who are you to question it?

You see, you'll never understand or rightly embrace and apply the doctrine of Christian liberty while you still worship at the idol of self. Until that idol is smashed by Christ's cross in your soul, you'll never, never, never understand or rightly apply the biblical doctrine of Christian liberty. It's impossible. It's impossible. It's impossible.

It's when living unto Christ, pleasing Christ, becomes a passion as it was with Paul: "The love of Christ constrains me." This is what holds me in its grip. It's a vice-like grip. I can't escape it. When I come to this issue, that issue, the other issue, whether I stand before my wardrobe asking, "What shall I wear that is modest, God-honoring, God-glorifying clothes? What shall I take off when I go to the beach or to the pool?"

Until Christ is there and His cross is there, slaying the interest of self and putting the interest of holiness and righteousness, and the conscience of my brethren, and the commending of the gospel, and the light and salt of radical discipleship, Christian liberty?

Frankly, I'm sick at all the sin that gets blamed on Christian liberty. I've got far more respect for the person that says, "I am an unconverted, self-centered rebel against God, and the only thing that matters with me is what pleases me. Stop it." At least I can say I admire your honesty. But I do not admire the sophistry of someone clanging with the chains of being wedded to the idol of self-serving, saying, "This is my Christian liberty." And the interest of holiness and modesty and chastity and purity of mind, and the stewardship of time, and the stewardship of money, and all of these biblical ethical issues are shoved to one side as though they didn't exist.

Well then, fifthly, we are all slaves to the fear of death. Hebrews chapter 2, very quickly. Verse 14: "Since then the children are sharers in flesh and blood, He [Christ] took the same, that through death He might bring to naught him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject literally to slavery." It's in that family of words, "doulos", "doulea", "douleo", all in the same family, He said, "all our lifetime subject to slavery through the fear of death."

As one has so pungently stated the issue, "The lives enslaved by Satan, instead of being filled with joy of living here and hereafter, are dominated and doomed by the fear of death." And this enslavement is lifelong. It blights the whole of existence. And while many seek to stop their ears, to try, to try, to try to dull themselves to the thundering of their own awareness that they are stamped for something more than the grave, the fear of death is like a haunting specter over the shoulder, a ghost that follows and haunts. And that's horrible slavery. I know. I lived with it until I was 17 years of age. Horrible slavery. The fear of death, knowing the finality, the irreversibility of death, and the consciousness that after death comes judgment. What a horrible slavery.

Christ has come so to set us free that when He sets us free, He says, "If you believe that I am He, you will never see death." Isn't that an amazing statement? You'll never see it. Death as the naked avenger upon sin Christ has borne. And though I will experience the experience of dying, I will not see death as the armed executioner for my sin. Christ bore that upon the cross. And death will be for me but the rough door setting me loose to look upon my Savior.

Now, my friend, that's not a pretty picture of what you and I are by nature. That's what we are: slaves of sin, slaves of the world, slaves of the devil, slaves of self, slaves of the fear of death. And there's only one who can set us free. He said in John 8 in verse 36, "Whom the Son sets free is free indeed." Anything else that says it will set you free is bogus. It's fake. It won't do it. It may give you some sense of freedom, like the person that sticks the needle in his arm and floats off into la-la land under his

drug-impulsed dreams, thinks he's free, but he comes down from his high and he's back in reality. Whether it's his boots, whatever it is, there's only one who can set you free and really free you. "Whom the Son sets free is free indeed."

And God willing, next week and the following, we're going to look at nine ways in which Jesus sets us free. And then when we are Christ's free men in those nine ways, we can talk about Christian liberty as it relates to what I eat and don't eat, and what I drink and don't drink, and whether I go to the movies.

Until these realities have been confronted in your soul, my friend, don't you dare talk about your Christian liberty. No good if detached. Because remember this simple fact: Paul treats Christian liberty in Romans 14-15, after Romans 1-13. You got me? It's only until he's opened up all of the truths of the reality of men's sin, and the reality of God's grace, and the reality of the liberation of Romans 6-8, only then, and only after he has said, "I beseech you by the mercies of God, present your bodies a living sacrifice, wholly acceptable to God. Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed", only then does he take up the specifics of what they should eat, what days they should keep and not keep, etc., etc. No good if detached. No good if misplaced. That's where they belong. It's only when we can say, and I was thinking of the words this morning:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound by sin and nature's night [that's what it was];
Thine eye diffused the quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off; my heart was free;
I rose, went forth [and found how many ways I can exercise my liberty. No] and
followed Thee.

I thought of another hymn:

Make me thy captive, Lord,
And then I shall be free;
Force me to render up my sword,
And I shall conquerer be.

Ah, my friend, until you've yielded up your sword and been made its captive, you'll never know Christian liberty. You'll never know it. You'll never know it. But in Christ, you can know it. He's the Anointed One who came to set at liberty the captives. He came to give us freedom indeed.

"Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise! The glories of His grace! The triumphs of His grace!" What is one of the things that we praise Him for? He breaks the power of canceled sin, sets the prisoner free. See, until that's true, as long as you're the devil's slave, slave of your sins, slave of the world, slave of self and slave of the fear of death, my friend, you cannot get to the ABCs of Christian liberty.

May God grant that you'll run to Christ if you've never gone there. And if you are His child, then I trust God will warm your heart afresh with wonder and praise, and with love to the Redeemer who has done such a gracious work.

www.eternallifeministries.org