

Unchained | Freedom Rising from Confinement

The New Deal (and Why We Keep Returning to the Old)

Colossians 2.15-3.1 and Galatians 5.1

October 1, 2017

Colossians 2.15-3.4 *When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through the Cross.*

¹⁶ *Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day-- ¹⁷ things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸ Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.*

²⁰ *If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ²¹ "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" ²² (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)-- in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? ²³ These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.*

³ *Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. ³ For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.*

Galatians 5.1 *It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.*

We've been looking at the Apostle Paul... in prison.

He's awaiting trial in Rome...and he's under house arrest BUT God has arranged it so that Paul could receive visitors.

There are imperial guards coming and going and THEY'RE apparently conversing with Paul about spiritual things and some of them may have become believers in Paul's message (the Gospel) (Phil 1.13).

And there are Christian friends from the churches in Rome who come to help Paul with his daily needs and THEY are emboldened in the faith. AND there are others who come (maybe like that runaway slave, Onesimus) who want to know about the crucified Man who has risen...and a lot

of people are finding freedom in Christ because of Paul's captivity. AND Paul's writing letters from that house arrest...letters about freedom. The Prison Letters of the New Testament were likely written from this confinement.

Today, we consider this theme of freedom...so very important to the Gospel – in fact it's the "crux" of the Christian message... The British scholar F.F. Bruce wrote a biography of St. Paul and called it, Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free. AND since this month we celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, we hope to show how Martin Luther saw this truth...and led a revolution of freedom...he helped people see that the Gospel is the New Deal... not like any religion...not based on our efforts but on God's initiative to set people FREE!

This is a section from Paul's Prison Letter to the Colossians where Paul shows the radical freedom that the Gospel IS...and then shows that something INSIDE us mysteriously WANTS slavery ("we wanna go back to Egypt!"). Why IS that? Why is freedom and liberation hard to handle and why do we opt for slavery? The Bible writers ask those questions and SO will we. Let's look at:

1. The Attraction of the Old
2. The Association of the New
3. The Outcome On Monday

First, The Attraction of the Old: Paul refers to the OLD as (v. 20) "the elementary principles of the world". He means the way people get on...the usual, universally accepted way we all get by in every culture/time. Another word for that is "karma" – this for that. Another word for it is...law...or slavery.

We don't really call it slavery...mostly we don't call it anything. It goes unnoticed ("elementary"). When we do opt for it, when we leave freedom and return to this slave-mentality we often call it things like: "principles for living" or "rules for success". But what it really is...whatever we call it... is FEAR.

The way of the Gospel and of grace, the way Jesus Christ offers us is liberation from FEAR of punishment and fear of death (Heb 2.14-15) ... And yet something IN US wants to be subject to slavery and fear.

You see it in co-dependent relationships. Maybe the wife is an alcoholic...and the husband "slavishly" covers for her for many years ...And then one day, she gets clean and sober (12 steps...) And almost immediately the marriage comes apart. They have new freedom but they can't handle it.

Or ex-convicts will sometimes mysteriously return to crime (recidivism). Or people who return to abusive or destructive relationships after being liberated.

But the slave mentality Paul is discussing is a special brand...of these “elementary principles”. Stuff the world or society or our upbringing or a religious group or our own misguided selves – any of these requirements/rules/conditions that promise LIFE.

“If you wanna grow...if you wanna become all you were meant to be...if you wanna be a whole person, a significant person with real identity/purpose/value YOU MUST DO THIS...and THEN you will have life!”

And we may THINK that our society is super free and morally loose and that what we really NEED is some standards...some manners...some decorum and...well...some rules! And rules can be good...manners... principles of conduct...but don’t think for a second that our culture isn’t awash in rules. They may be different rules from what you remember from the good ol’ days... but all around us are rules promising life.

Just an example...all those magazines at the checkout at the supermarket. You might conclude, “Ah the way these women are dressed...clearly shows WE HAVE NO RULES...no standards in this society! It’s far too permissive/free!” But don’t you see: these ARE the rules? They’re screaming to our little girls, “Young women, if you want to be significant and valuable and lovable... if you want LIFE...you’d better look like THIS.” (the standard...the LAW)

You know the Natalie Merchant song, “Tell Yourself” – a concerned mother singing to her 13-year-old daughter:

*Tell yourself that you're not pretty
Look at you, you're beautiful.
Tell yourself that no one sees
Plain Jane invisible me, just tell yourself*

*Tell yourself you'll never be
Like the anorexic beauties in the magazines
Just a bargain basement Barbie Doll
No belle du jour, no femme fatale
Just tell yourself*

Our own society is actually loaded with social constraints, WAYS society demands that if YOU want to measure up...have life...YOU’D BETTER DO THIS!

Parents face tremendous pressure (“The Right Baby Gear?”) ...even from sources like Pinterest... men...teenagers ... home improvement shows and commercials (gotta always be improving!! It’s elementary!) ... beer commercials are telling us what the ideal life looks like and subtly telling us that we don’t measure up...but WE CAN...if we go here or there...and have a fire on the beach with a lot of great looking friends...THEN...you’ll have LIFE! It’s based on fear and it’s a form of the elementary principles no one questions and ...it’s slavery.

Martin Luther in the year 1517 saw that he had been sold a bill of goods... the Medieval Church had been ushered into the adventure of freedom. The gospel, the doing and dying of Jesus Christ meant that God had come to give us life. God would fulfill the rules FOR us and we could receive a new standing before the holy God NOT based on our efforts but based on the spotless life of a morally perfect Substitute.

And yet... we find this freedom...difficult to manage. We keep saying "I don't want to TRUST in what Jesus Christ did...I want to do it myself! JUST TELL ME WHAT TO DO TO HAVE LIFE!"

And there's always someone standing by with the answer: *decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) -- in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence."*

See they're of no value...they don't change you...and they don't lead to life!

When Luther looked at the Gospel taught by the Apostles...and then compared it to what the corrupt church was teaching...he had to laugh. He saw that it was ridiculous. If you really want to earn life in the sight of God, you can't do it by purchasing the right stroller or having the right body or the right diet or wearing rough clothes or buying your way out of purgatory... IF you want to earn life from God, you have to keep the whole Law of God spotlessly...and only one Person ever did.

And that's what Paul says ...in the final words of the reading, "Christ who is our life!" It's because of Jesus Christ that we are counted significant, glorious, good and valuable. He lived and died and rose again to satisfy all the demands. HE fulfilled the real requirement: HE DID THE LAW OF GOD FOR ME! And if He did the Big Stuff for me – it sort of neutralizes the small stuff like "Have super white teeth or avoid binary language when discussing gender...and NEVER eat fast-food or donuts."

Jesus Christ lived the life I was required to live and died under the penalty I deserved...and rose again as the author of LIFE (death couldn't hold Him!) AND HE IS MY LIFE. I can't achieve it - I can only receive it!

My bad karma fell on Him – my just deserts, the consequences of my disobedience against the True Jury, against God Himself...when Jesus Christ died, my record died too. He associated with me...stood in my place...and I receive it by faith...as a gift.

Now how does this freedom look in the believer on Monday? When Paul says, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." What exactly does he mean?

Well to start...the way the freedom is gained or received and then maintained is faith. That's how we receive God's gifts – by faith.

There will always be people ready to tell you about "DIY Spirituality" – that is, "just do it yourself – God helps those who help themselves!" It can be the modern nutritional machine (who, today, says coffee and red wine are bad for you and tomorrow say NO these are the way to LIFE!) OR in the church, people who want to urge some super-spirituality on you, (vv.18) "delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen."

But the imperatives in this passage are all basically "Just Say NO!" "No one is to act as your judge...let no one defraud you...avoid those who are NOT holding to the Head (Jesus Christ the only source!)...do NOT submit yourself to decrees like do not handle, taste or touch..."

See the Christian is commanded to be free. We are not saying, "Just tell me what to do!" We are instead insisting, "Everything has been DONE!"

But Monday is NOT simply negative as if we're just telling everyone to back away – quit telling me what I should and shouldn't do (Although that IS a part of it – we're not only allowed to have freedom from the precepts of men – we're COMMANNDED to say, "No!")

But there is a positive side – "keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God."

See the Christian on Monday (and every other day!) is to see himself as already "risen with Christ."

"I died when Jesus Christ died... (I was associated with HIM – I was IN Christ!) and when He rose and ascended into heaven, I was IN Christ!"

And THAT IS MY LIFE – not based on how well I'm doing on the kale diet or the sales numbers at work – all based on Jesus Christ associating with me and representing me!

This is my life and this is MY DESTINY – I'm already there! In some very real sense I'm in HEAVEN...and now I'm excited about depending on God to shape me in the now...I'm becoming in practice what God has declared and destined me to be.

AND in this journey to my true home (where I already AM in some sense) I am with YOU...in the Body of Christ... We aren't living in fear of one another in a state of peer-pressure and spiritual one-upmanship ...not bitter "co-dependency" but sweet interdependency, "the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God."

We're getting God's grace and help and wisdom from Christ and in the context of true community – like organs in a Body...organic growth based on love not fear.

We're learning to love...not based on fear or based on the desire to be rewarded or appreciated by people...but because it's our destiny. We're not trying to earn life...we're instead learning to express life. We love...we fail (there's freedom to fail – isn't that great!) ...we repent and believe and sort of remind ourselves that my destiny, my LIFE is not dependent on how well I love BUT ON HOW WELL I HAVE BEEN LOVED.

Freedom – what a wonderful gift! What a scary alternative to the way things are normally done (the "elementary principles" of life in South Florida – it all depends on YOU!)...a gift to be guarded at all costs...(sometimes we just say "NO!") but also a gift to be enjoyed and celebrated...

We can relax.

We're NOT slaves...but if you live by dependency...by trust...by faith in Jesus Christ... then you are not a slave but a beloved son or daughter. Rest. Relax. Be free.