

“I’ve Got Issues: Christianity is a Straitjacket”

By Dr. Mark Smith

April 25, 2010

Psalm 1; John 8:31-34; Galatians 5:1, 14-15; Romans 8:5-6

Psalm 1 Blessed is the man
 who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
 or stand in the way of sinners
 or sit in the seat of mockers.
 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law he meditates day and night.
 3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
 which yields its fruit in season
 and whose leaf does not wither.
 Whatever he does prospers.
 4 Not so the wicked!
 They are like chaff
 that the wind blows away.
 5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
 6 For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked will perish. ¹

John 8:31 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, “I tell you the truth, 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. ²

Romans 8:5 Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. ⁶ The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; ³

Galatians 5:1 It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. ⁴

¹³ You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. ¹⁴ The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. ⁵

¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Ps 1:1–6). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

² *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Jn 8:31–36). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

³ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Ro 8:5–6). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

⁴ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Ga 5:1). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

⁵ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Ga 5:13–15). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

For those of you who may be new to us this morning, we have been taking a look at various issues skeptics raise with regard to Christian faith. We do so not simply so that we can defend ourselves, but so that we can more fully understand what it is that we actually believe. These are issues we have all thought and wondered about.

So let's tackle another issue that trips up many folks. Here is how the issue is framed:

"Christianity is a straitjacket. It is narrow and confining. You are not encouraged to think for yourself. You are simply told what to believe and how to behave. Don't question authority – just obey the rules. Disobey the rules and you will be made to feel guilty. Who needs it? It cramps my style. Christianity leads to bondage; it's the enemy of human freedom. Who are Christians to say they alone have absolute truth to which everyone else must submit? Hogwash. I will not live for God, whoever God is. I will live for my own sake. I am my own person; I am a free agent."

In this view, true freedom is the ability to determine your own purpose and your own value system in this world. Everyone is essentially autonomous and self-determining. In the end, you don't have to answer to anyone. There is no purpose or meaning "out there" to which we must conform or that might in any way limit us. We make up our purpose and our own morality as we go along.

In the movie *I, Robot* (2004) there is a concluding scene between a robot named Sonny and a detective by the name of Spooner. Sonny the robot has fulfilled the objectives in his design program. But now he realizes he no longer has a purpose. Sonny says, "Now that I have fulfilled my purpose, I don't know what to do." And Detective Spooner responds, "I guess you will have to find your way like the rest of us, Sonny... That's what it means to be free."ⁱ

There it is: to be free is to make up your life as you go along; it is to determine your own right and wrong – whatever works for you.

My mind often works in strange ways, and I have to confess that as I thought about this view of human freedom, the old song kept coming to mind:

Born free, as free as the wind blows
As free as the grass grows
Born free to follow your heart

Live free, and beauty surrounds you
The world still astounds you
Each time you look at a star

✦ Stay free, where no walls divide you
You're free as a roaring tide
So there's no need to hide

Born free, and life is worth living

But only worth living
Cause you're born freeⁱⁱ

Ah, to live a life free of all constraints – no walls divide you – free as a roaring tide... Just do whatever your heart tells you to do. Sounds like paradise!

Would it be? Would such freedom lead to utopia? Or would it turn life into an even more dense and foreboding jungle – where people end up devouring one another? I think I know the answer. I know human nature.

Christianity has a very different view of truth and freedom. Let me say, first of all, we unapologetically believe that there is such a thing as absolute, objective truth; all truth is not purely in the eye of the beholder. There are some things that are just plain right or wrong, regardless of how people happen to feel about them. And most people around the world know that. They know intuitively that it is wrong to murder people in cold blood. They know that it is wrong to lie and to steal. There are some things that are just plain wrong because it is the way things are. These moral values have been built into the fabric of the universe.

One of the most effective church leaders today is a fellow by the name of Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York. This church is amazing. It is not your typical mega-church with all kinds of slick programs and worship bands and huge screens. It is actually a pretty typical Presbyterian-type church. But it is attracting Manhattans to the point that the church has something like 6,000 members. The church holds to traditional Christian doctrine and is engaged in a number of very effective social programs meeting needs in the community. The Lord is using Pastor Tim Keller in a powerful way to reach thousands of sophisticated, skeptical city-folk who would otherwise not give Christian faith the time of day.

Keller is an excellent communicator in a matter-of-fact, low-key way, and he often holds dialogue sessions after worship services at Redeemer. He says that one of the most frequent statements he hears is that *“Every person has to define right and wrong for him-or herself.”* This is how he says he responds. He asks: *“Is there anyone in the world right now doing things you believe they should stop doing no matter what they personally believe about the correctness of the behavior?”* They would almost always say, *“Yes, of course.”* Then Keller would say, *“Doesn’t that mean that you do believe there is some kind of moral reality that is ‘there’ that is not defined by us and that must be abided by regardless of what a person feels or thinks?”* Keller says the response to this was almost always silence – either a thoughtful or a grumpy one.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Think about it: If right and wrong was purely a subjective, individual thing – in other words if one person’s right is someone’s else wrong, and there is no objective morality built into the nature of things to judge between the two, then such a thing as moral outrage would not be possible. We may think that the treatment of Jews in the holocaust was horrific and as evil as evil can be, but to a committed Nazi the eradication of Jews was a good thing. If truth is merely in the eye of the beholder, who is to judge?

Christians believe that one is most free when one abides by spiritual truths built into the nature of things. God has made these truths explicit in the Bible, and above all, in the person of Jesus Christ, who says, “. . . if you hold to my teaching . . . You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.”

Many folks think freedom is about a life free of constraints. But those who, in the name of freedom, follow their own desires and impulses and cast all constraints to the wind are actually not free at all. It leads not to happiness but to wretchedness. It leads not to freedom but to bondage. In the name of freedom people will do drugs, but just ask those who are sitting in the prison house of addiction if they are having a good time. I think of the person who casts aside all sense of sexual morality: *“I am free to follow my sexual passions wherever they lead me”* he arrogantly declares. But sex with no responsibility and commitment leaves a trail of hurt and pain -- from hurt lovers, to injured families, to venereal disease, to aborted babies. Giving in to every animal urge because one is free to do so is to be sold into bondage to those very urges. It is to submit to a “yoke of slavery,” to use Paul’s words.

Jesus says, *“I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin...”* How much of the tragedy of life is crowded into that one short sentence! Giving full reign to your passions and indulging yourself is fun for awhile and it feels great. You think you are free. But you find out later that you have been sold a bill of goods. We become like the prodigal son in Jesus’ parable – who sold his inheritance to live a wild life of wine, women and song, only to end up in a pig sty. We become enslaved. We are no longer the captain of our own soul. It’s so deceptive, what passes as freedom is not freedom at all. It’s the old lie of the devil. And the more we are led and act upon our impulses and passions without thought to responsibility, or to doing the right thing, the deeper kind of bondage.

A life free of all constraints would not be a good life. Suppose a skydiver at 10,000 feet announces to the rest of the group, *‘I’m not using a parachute this time. I want freedom!’* The fact is that a skydiver is constrained by a greater law -- the law of gravity. But when the skydiver chooses the ‘constraint’ of the parachute, he is free to enjoy the exhilaration. God’s moral laws act the same way: they restrain, but they are absolutely necessary to enjoy the exhilaration of real freedom. [Colin Campbell].

Fact is, there is no freer person than the person who walks in God’s way and lives by God’s laws. As the world defines it, freedom is to do what *you* want. As Jesus defines it, freedom is to do what God wants.

Just look at Jesus, who perfectly submitted to his Father’s will. Because of his perfect obedience, he was truly free. No one possessed more joy or more love or lived a more positive or powerful life.

And God gives us his Spirit to enable us to live in the same way: *“Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom”* says the Scripture.

This way is not burdensome. People looking at Christianity from the outside may see lots of rules and laws that need to be followed and obeyed. To be sure, some Christians who really legalistic in their spiritual life may well give the impression. Outsiders may hear lots of “thou shalt nots” and experience a lot of judgmentalism. They may see a lot of dreary rule-following and dead moralism. To outsiders this may not seem like freedom at all – and understandably so. It may well look like these people are

wearing a straitjacket. These legalistic Christians are providing a bad testimony because they are missing the point. It was Jesus who said:

^{JOHN 15:10} If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹⁶

The Christian life is about love and joy. It's first and foremost about a relationship, not about rules. If you truly love someone, then there isn't anything you wouldn't do for that person. You put yourself at their beck and call. You limit your personal freedom so that you can be more free to give to the other. Serving that other person you love is a delight, not a burden. That's true in our relationship with God. His commands are not burdensome because we do it out of love for God and because we know God's way is always better than our own way. It feels like anything but a straitjacket.

Following God's way is not always easy. It requires self-sacrifice. It means living under certain constraints, but those constraints are liberating and life-giving. They are not in any way oppressive. These constraints fit our nature as children of God and cause us to grow to become all that God intended us to be. Following God's way leads to joy and to a life worth living. *"Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom."*

I have been doing a lot of thinking lately about this theme of freedom and bondage. Last week, Jerry Wilson, Chuck Waite and I along with many others were privileged to serve as participants in the Kairos prison ministry weekend at the Monroe Reformatory. Monroe is a medium security prison. Some of the men there are lifers, having committed murder. Some are there for stealing cars, for burglary, for serial rape, for selling drugs. They have done some really bad things. They are putting in their time and I gotta tell you, prison ain't no picnic. It is as dismal a place as you might imagine it to be and to think that some of them will never get out.

Our Kairos group spent a long weekend with 42 of the inmates. It was like a very intense retreat. We sat at tables and we shared good food that we brought in (to the prisoner's great delight); we sang and we laughed and we prayed and we talked in depth about life and choices. And most important of all, we had the opportunity to make a case for following Jesus in a non-pushy kind of way. What we found there in that prison were real human beings who are deeply loved by God, but who have made some really bad choices. These are people who, for the most part, are longing not only to get out of prison, but to walk a new path in life. Oh, some of them no doubt were there on the weekend because of the good food. For some that may have been the first prime rib they have had in 30 years. But I found the inmates were not only respectful of us outsiders, but quite responsive. Those I met seemed very sincere in wanting to move in a different direction in their life, for their own path they had had obviously led to bondage, spiritually, and, of course, quite literally. They abused their personal freedom, made terrible choices and are now dealing with the consequences. Though only God knows, my sense is that over the course of the weekend many of the inmates made the best choice possible and decided to follow Jesus

⁶ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Jn 15:10–12). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Christ. The weekend was one of the most profoundly moving experiences in my life. The Spirit of the Lord was certainly there, and where the Spirit of the Lord is present there is freedom – *even behind bars*.

Of course, those inmates will continue to do their time, but they can enjoy a new inward freedom knowing that the Lord is with them, and that he will enable them to live a life of love, even in the harsh realities of prison life. Life in prison really is like a jungle – gangs often rule. Prisoners treat fellow prisoners rudely. It's dog eat dog. People are shunned or are the subject of dirty tricks. The portrayal of prison life in the TV series "Locked Up," is not too far off the mark. Life at Monroe isn't easy. Our Kairos graduates will have the support of fellow Christians, both inside and outside the walls – and that kind of community will count for a lot. Encouragement from one's fellow brothers is crucial in living the Life: Kairos knows that, which is why many people on the Kairos Ministry team will continue to visit in the prison the first Saturday of every month. True freedom will come for these inmate brothers of ours as they lean upon the Spirit of the Lord to follow the Lord's way.

We may not be locked behind physical bars – thank the Lord. But you and I may well find ourselves in bondage – to hurtful attitudes – to addictive habits – to selfish behaviors – to false idols -, be it money, power or success. Do you long to be free of such things, so that you can be free to experience joy once again? Have you invited the Spirit of God to dwell within you and to change your heart so that you may follow the way of Christ? Do you wish you were free – *really* free?

Every day on the Kairos weekend, the inmates and us outsiders would go into the chapel, and we would repeat together the prayers in a booklet aptly called the "Freedom Guide." I would like to close with one such prayer. Please pray with me:

Lord of my life, I know that my life is not my own. By your death and resurrection you made me your own. Help me to live under your direction, always ready to hear your call, "follow me"; always aware of your presence; always knowing that I have received the gift of your Spirit; always living so that others may receive your love and mercy through me.

It is not easy to ask for these things, Lord, because I know I have much to give up. I can no longer pretend that my life is my own. My prayer is my surrender to your care and direction. I want to follow, Lord, but it is very hard. I will get very tired. I will make selfish mistakes. I will fail time and time again. I will fall.

Show me again that there is love and forgiveness and mercy in your hand. Use me in spite of my reluctance, doubt and disobedience.

Pour into me your good Spirit, so that I am not afraid to follow and fall and follow again. Amen.

ⁱ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, p.36

ⁱⁱ Lyrics by Don Black, tune by John Barry

ⁱⁱⁱ Keller, p 47