

Spiritual Freedom

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Date: 06 September 2020

[0 : 00] This morning we're talking about one of the most important topics in our culture right now, a topic that means a lot to almost everybody in our society, which is the topic of freedom. And freedom is something that everybody wants, and yet few people actually have.

And we're going to see why as we look together at Psalm 119, which is a lengthy psalm, and it's a psalm entirely devoted to Scripture, to God's Word.

And the psalm is broken up into stanzas according to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. So we're not going to be looking at the whole psalm. We're going to be focusing on the section of verse 33 through verse 48.

And this shows us a couple of things about freedom. It shows us the peril of freedom, why freedom can be dangerous if misunderstood, and then the path into freedom.

What is the way for human beings to actually become free? Let's pray, and then we'll open God's words together. Lord, we thank you for your Word. We thank you for your Spirit.

[1 : 01] We thank you that we're not alone in this endeavor of trying to understand your Word, but your Spirit helps us because you're a God who wants to be known. You want us to know you, to feel your love, and to meet your Son.

And we pray that this would happen as we open your Word together in the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. So first of all, the peril of freedom. Dale Keene is a professor of politics, and he wrote a book called *Sex and the Eye World*.

And he says that our modern ethics revolve around individual freedom, that they're sort of the center, the crux of modern ethics, really revolves around individual freedom in our society.

And he summarizes it in terms of three mandates. He says this is essentially the moral code that most people live by today in our society. Number one, do what you want as long as it's consensual. Number two, do what you want as long as it doesn't hurt anyone. And number three, do what you want, but never, ever, ever tell anyone else that their life choices are wrong.

[2 : 06] And he says this essentially encompasses how most people try to live. So in our culture, when you think of the word freedom, most people define freedom as the ability to do what you want.

In other words, we think of freedom in terms of personal autonomy. And we tend to assume as Americans that more freedom equals more autonomy, and more autonomy equals more happiness. So the more we can have autonomy, we assume the more happy and fulfilled we will be in life. And of course, there are a lot of debates in our society about how to apply this to the government, or how to apply this to our interpretation of the U.S. Constitution, or how to apply this to the market, the free market.

Lots of debates about those things. The question that we want to focus on is, how do we apply this to human beings? How should we think about human freedom? In Psalm 119, verses 33 to 48, this entire section, we see the psalmist praying to God for freedom.

The psalmist is asking God to set him free. And so the first question we need to ask is, why is he not free? What is trapping him? And if you look at verse 37, he says this, Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things, and give me life in your ways.

[3 : 25] And the word that is translated in the ESV Bible, worthless things, can also be translated as false gods. We see it show up a number of times in the Old Testament translated that way.

And so the psalmist is praying for God to help him turn his eyes away from these false gods, these worthless things, because he cannot do it on his own.

He doesn't say, I will turn my eyes away so I can focus on you, God. He's saying, God, help me. Help tear my eyes away. In other words, he's trapped, and he needs God to intervene in his life.

Now, this is very important, because what we need to understand is, the psalmist is held captive, but it's not in a physical prison. The bars aren't physical bars.

He's in a kind of spiritual prison. He's spiritually trapped. David Foster Wallace was a keen observer of culture and human nature, in many ways a genius.

[4 : 24] And in his famous commencement speech called, This is Water, he says this. He says, here's something else that's weird but true. In the day-to-day trenches of life, there is actually no such thing as atheism.

There's no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. Now, this is interesting, because we're not even really sure where David Foster Wallace fell in terms of faith.

He had some interest in Catholicism and various things, but it was always a struggle for him. And yet, on this point, he was very clear, spoke with conviction. He says, there's a kind of danger that we need to recognize here, because most of the things that we worship, in his words, will eat us alive.

They'll eat us alive. And here's what he means by that. He says, if you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough.

You will never feel you have enough. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly. Worship power, and you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear.

[5 : 38] Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, and you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. So this is what the psalmist is talking about, in a sense.

He's saying, God, my eyes and my heart are fixed on something. They're fixed on something. It could be comfort. It could be being smart or the smartest person in the room.

It could be the approval of other people. It could be being in control of everything in your life. But the psalmist is saying, I'm fixed on this, and I can't tear my eyes away, and it's eating me alive.

I want it more than anything, and that desire is eating me alive. It's never enough, and no matter how much I chase it, I can never get it. This is what the psalmist is saying. So it's worth us asking, sort of pausing and asking, as we think about our own lives, what are some examples of this in our lives?

So, for example, are you the kind of person who avoids conflict at all costs? And you do it to a point where you don't set boundaries. You let people take advantage of you.

[6 : 51] You quietly resent them later, but you would never say it to their face. But you avoid conflict at all costs because you cannot bear the idea of anyone being angry at you.

If that's the case, then it's very possible that you have made an idol out of the approval of other people. You've made an idol out of other people liking you. Are you the kind of person who holds on to grudges, and you refuse to forgive even old wounds, even people who have asked you for forgiveness, it's possible then that you've made an idol out of resentment?

Are you the kind of person, if you have kids, who when your kids fail, it crushes you? You feel like you have personally failed, and you can't bear to see that happen.

And so you'll do anything to prevent your kids from failing in any endeavor they take on, because you can't bear it yourself. If that's the case, you may have made an idol out of your children. See, we can take almost anything in life, good things in our lives, and we can turn them into ultimate things.

That's what a false god is. So whatever it is in your life that you look at and you say, I cannot live without this thing.

[8 : 06] I cannot bear the thought of life without this thing. That is a false god in your life, and it's holding you captive, and chances are it's eating you alive.

Nick Kristoff and his wife, Cheryl Wudun, wrote a book called Half the Sky. At one of Pulitzer, it's about sex trafficking. It's a brutal book to read.

It's really, really, really, really horrible when you begin to read these accounts of these women who have been trafficked all around the world. And they say that rescuing these young girls from the external slavery is actually the easy part.

If you want to get these young women out of slavery, actually rescuing them, comparatively speaking, the external rescue is the easy part. But rescuing them from the internal effects of slavery is far more difficult.

And he tells a story about a young Cambodian girl who had been held captive as a sex slave for the better part of five years. And they're able to rescue her.

[9 : 09] She's able to gain her freedom. And Christoph talks about driving her back to her home village. And that as they pull up, she gets out of the car and runs to meet the people in her village.

And everything sort of erupts into celebration. And people are screaming and laughing and weeping and dancing and singing. And her mother hears that she's come home.

And her mother comes running, sprinting, sprinting down the road to see her. And it's this great party and celebration of this freedom. And it was a wonderful night. And then he says, not long after, early one morning, without a single word, she slipped out the door of her house and went back to her pimp.

And you read a story like this and you ask, how in the world could something like this have happened? And of course, as is very common with sexual slavery, she had been given methamphetamine to keep her compliant.

And she had become addicted. And that addiction and that desire to have more overrode her desire for freedom. It was in that moment for her the most important thing and worth any price.

[10 : 20] See, on the outside, she was free. But on the inside, she was still a slave. Still a slave. In the Bible, in the Old Testament, after God frees the Israelites from over 400 years of slavery, they, in a similar way, they erupt into celebration.

And Miriam and all of the women, they dance and they sing about their freedom. But in no time at all, they are doing the unthinkable. They are begging to go back to the chains of Egypt.

And you read this and you think, how in the world could they be begging to go back to Egypt? And the reality is, the chains on the outside had been broken. They had been liberated. But the chains on the inside were still there.

As one commentator put it, It took a day to get Israel out of Egypt, but it would take a lifetime to get Egypt out of Israel. It's far easier to break chains on the outside than it is to break the chains that are wrapped around your heart.

So this is the danger of freedom when we think about it only in terms of personal autonomy.

Because every human being, as David Foster Wallace observes, every human being worships some false god, something that we have turned into a god.

[11 : 41] And when we do that, we have chains wrapped around our hearts. So what happens when you tell such a person that freedom means doing whatever you want?

Well, what that really means is, do whatever your idol wants. Because if your heart is in chains and you're being driven by this idol, then doing whatever you want really means doing whatever that idol wants you to do.

And so if your idol is an addiction, then you will use more and more and more. If your idol is control or money or the approval of other people, then you will chase those things even more.

And what happens then is, the chains get stronger. The chains around your heart get stronger. And that definition of freedom, do what you want, personal autonomy, will actually rob you of freedom. It will actually rob you of freedom. It will strengthen the chains. True freedom is only possible for human beings if we have spiritual freedom. And spiritual freedom means that we have to break the chains that are wrapped around our hearts.

[12 : 51] So how do we do that? Next point, the path into freedom. If you look at verse 45, the psalmist says, I shall walk in a wide place.

That's an image of freedom. It's a wide expanse. For I have sought your precepts. The psalmist is saying, I'm going to walk in a wide place. I'm going to walk freely.

I'm going to be unencumbered. There's going to be no obstacles in my way. I'm going to have options. I have a life full of possibilities. Why? Because I sought your precepts. In other words, I made God's truth, God's wisdom, God's law the aim of my life.

That's what I made my life about. So he's saying, and this feels counterintuitive, the more I submit to God's truth and God's wisdom and God's law, the more free I become.

So you see how this is almost paradoxical. For human beings who are living in chains, in spiritual chains, to tell a human being like that, that freedom means doing whatever you want, that actually robs them of freedom.

[14 : 01] Right? So they may look free, but they're actually not free. On the other hand, for people who recognize what this psalmist recognizes, the more they submit, the more they seemingly give away their personal autonomy to God, the more they actually gain their freedom back.

See, it's a paradox. So how does this work? Well, coming back to the example of Israel, 400 years of slavery meant that that's all they knew. And so God set them free, and now they're his people. They're in the wilderness following him. They're free of their chains. But God has to teach them how to be free. They have to learn what a free human being looks like and what a free society looks like. So how does God teach his people in the wilderness how to be free people? He gives them the law. He gives them the law at Sinai.

This is what the Ten Commandments represent. You can think of the Ten Commandments as a kind of manual for freedom. This teaches them how to be a free society. So, for example, freedom means being able to take a Sabbath every week where you stop working.

[15:08] See, a slave, by definition, can't ever stop working. That's what it means to be a slave. But if you're free, you can take a weekly Sabbath. A free society is one where people honor their fathers and their mothers.

In other words, a free society is a place where there's a strong social fabric, and there are healthy families and strong institutions. A free society is one where there's no murder, because in a free society, human life is treated as sacred.

Not true if you're a slave. Your life means nothing. But in a free society, your life is sacred, right? A free society is a place where there's no adultery, because in a free society, people have control over their desires instead of their desires controlling them.

So marriages are honored, and those vows are observed. A free society is a place where people don't steal because they respect the property of other people.

Slaves can't own property. They are property. But in a free society, people own property. They respect the right that other people have to have their property, because everybody recognizes that all of our property is ultimately God's property, and we've been made stewards of that which belongs to Him.

[16:20] A free society is one where people do not bear false witness, because, listen to this, you cannot have freedom without truth. And so in a free society, truth is upheld as sacred.

In a free society, people don't covet the possessions of another because they are content with what they have, and they know that covetousness is the root of all human evil.

So this is what freedom means. And all of this, all of this freedom begins with the very first commandment, which is to love and to honor the name of the God who made you instead of the gods who will eat you alive.

To love and to worship and to honor God, to not have any other God before Him, to honor and reverence His name, rather than the false gods that will eat you alive.

That's where freedom begins. So the path to freedom starts by recognizing that certain kinds of freedom, in fact, I would say the most valuable kinds of freedom by far, such as spiritual freedom, the most valuable type of freedom, the path to freedom begins when we recognize that these kinds of freedom can only be found through constraint, by submitting yourself to something greater than yourself.

[17:48] Now, we see this in all kinds of ways if we think about it. Think about sports, submitting yourself to a coach, submitting yourself to a regimen that helps you develop your gifts and talents and abilities.

Think about art. Think about music. The Oxford mathematician John Lennox uses this example. He says, When a great musician wants to play beautiful music, they first have to read the sheet music. The success of their performance depends on their ability to read and play those notes as they are written. It is only when you know the notes, and as he says, submit yourself to their discipline, that you are free to play beautiful music.

When you hear somebody playing beautiful classical music, they sound free. Your heart soars. It's this incredible example of something that just, it feels like, it sounds like what freedom should sound like.

And yet, that is only the product of submission. And he says, It's the same with our lives. He says, We want to make music with our lives, and the quality of that music depends on our attention to the score of God's law.

[19:05] So God's law is like the sheet music for a free life. And he says, You also see it when you fall in love with someone. You know, I remember, and this is over 20 years ago now, but I remember falling in love with my wife, Laura, way back when we were in college.

And, you know, the thing about loving somebody is, when you fall in love with somebody, you want to know everything about them. You want to be with them all the time and spend all your time with them. And you want to know what makes them happy because all you care about is doing what makes them happy.

So if you think about it, loving somebody puts a lot of constraints on your life and on your time and your priorities and how you spend your money and what you think about day and night.

And at the same time, you've never felt more free. Right? When you're in love with somebody, it makes you want to dance. It makes you want to dance in the streets.

It makes you want to sing. Right? It lifts your heart up to the heights. And the Bible says that we were made to love God and we were made to love one another.

[20 : 14] The Bible says that's actually the purpose behind our lives and why we're here. And this is actually how Jesus summarizes the entire law. He's asked about the law and he summarizes all of the law in the commandments to love God and to love neighbor.

He says this is what it's all for. The law is a manual for freedom and freedom is about doing what we were put here to do. And what is that? It is to love and be loved by God and one another.

That's what it's all about. And only when our lives are aimed at that end can we be truly free. So let's bring all of this together.

Most people in our culture think of freedom only in terms of personal autonomy. And most people don't realize what David Foster Wallace so astutely observed that in reality, everyone worships something and chances are that thing is eating us alive.

The net result of this is that there are many, many people out there who look like they are free and who believe they are free who are nevertheless slaves to someone or something and they don't even know it.

[21 : 32] True freedom, which is spiritual freedom, freedom of the heart, is only possible if we are able to turn away from those false gods and give ourselves fully to loving and serving the God who made us and the people that he made on the earth.

But that's only possible if we fall in love with him. If we have what Thomas Chalmers once called the expulsive power of a new affection where we are so captivated by God and by God's love that it wrenches our eyes away from the false gods that have captivated us.

And so our final question, how does that happen? Well, the psalmist says in verse 41, let your steadfast love come to me, O Lord, your salvation according to your promise then I shall trust in your word.

He realizes that he can't do it on his own. He can't muster up the power and the desire to love God like that. He says, your love's gonna need to come to me. I can't come to you. I'm gonna need you to come to me.

And this maybe didn't make as much sense to the psalmist. It makes a lot more sense to us as we read places like 1 John 4, verse 19, where John says, we love because God first loved us.

[22 : 51] And of course here, John is talking about Jesus Christ. The gospel says that Jesus is the only one who was ever really and truly free.

He had all power. He had all glory. He had all sovereignty. Everything was under his feet. It says that he was truly free. Jesus is the only one who could do anything that he wants.

Total autonomy. And yet he was willing to give up his freedom, to give up his power, to give up his glory, and to become a human being, which meant he was willing to take on all of the constraints and the limitations and submit himself to being a finite human being.

And then he was willing to go even further and to give his life, to die in our place, to pay the price for all of the ways that we will ever fall short of God's law.

And yet because he did that, because he did that, it makes it possible for God to adopt us as his children, put his Holy Spirit in us, and then begin to work in us to make it possible for us to live out this great calling to love him and to love one another, the reason that we're here.

[24 : 06] And when you recognize this, when you see that Jesus Christ gave everything up for you because he loved you, because he was captivated by you, when you realize that, that begins to melt your heart, and then you begin to fall in love with God.

And that love is the one power in the universe that is strong enough to dislodge our eyes and our hearts from those worthless things and to fix them where they belong, on the God of the universe, the God who loves you, and the God who made you.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this, and we know we are talking about spiritual things. Lord, we would be lost if these were merely ideas to apply cognitively and intellectually to our lives. We need your Holy Spirit to make true in us your power. We know that you desire our hearts, even as you have given us your heart. And we pray that you would inspire in us, kindle in us that great love, that great affection for you because of the gospel that would set us free to be lovers of you and lovers of one another and to be the human beings that you put us here to be. And we pray that all this would be for your glory and your son's name. Amen.