

Safeguarding Spiritual Freedom

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Date: 01 October 2023

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[0 : 00] Well, again, let me say good morning to you, and if you're joining us for the first time, normally in our church, normally we follow the lectionary, but we've taken a few weeks to focus on something that I think is pretty important for us as a community and something that we need to revisit from time to time in the life of our church, and that is we're taking a few weeks to share our vision for congregational care at Church of the Advent.

And by that, I mean we're asking the question together of how can we be a truly caring community? How can we be a community in which every member, in which every regular attender, if you're someone and you consider this to be your community, how can we be the kind of place where you're going to be known, where you're going to be loved, and when you encounter difficulty, you're going to know how and where to get the care and support that you need?

How are we going to be that kind of community? And so we're taking a few weeks to look at that. We're looking at a few passages in Scripture to guide us in that journey. So we began this series a couple of weeks ago by looking at sort of the first theme of what it means to be a caring church. We said that a caring church is one that lives like a spiritual family. And what that means is that we all share in the work of caring for one another. This isn't just a job for a few licensed professionals that care is the work of the church.

That was week one. And then week two sort of added on to that. We said that a caring church recognizes the value of adversity, that even in the best church under the best circumstances, there is going to be some degree of adversity and how that's actually a good thing.

[1 : 42] That's one of the major ways that God works in our lives, brings us to maturity. This week is going to be maybe a little challenging for some of us because we're going to be asking the question of how does a caring church deal with sin?

How do we deal with conflict? How do we deal with those things that probably most of us would prefer not to talk about or deal with? How do we deal with those things? And so we're going to be considering this theme together.

A caring church is one that safeguards spiritual freedom. Safeguards spiritual freedom. We're going to be looking at John chapter eight and then this passage from Galatians five and six that we've been looking at every week.

And we'll ask two questions. Number one, what is spiritual freedom? And number two, how do we safeguard it together? Let's pray. Our father who is in heaven, we are so grateful that without even having to ask, we know that you are here.

We know that you are listening. We know that you are at work and we know that you promise to work through your word, that whenever you send your word out, it does not return void. It accomplishes all that you intend for it to accomplish.

[2 : 53] And that is what we need here this morning, whether we know it or not. We need our father to speak to our hearts. Lord, may we be open and receptive.

May we be attentive. And may you do what only you can do in us, that we would be able to glorify you here in this city, that your name would be held above all other names.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So this first question we're going to ask together is, what do we mean by spiritual freedom? You know, freedom is something that we talk about quite a lot in our society.

And by freedom, I think what most people probably mean is the freedom to choose. It's freedom of choice, the freedom to do what I want, when I want, the freedom to define myself, the freedom to define reality however I want.

So the focus of our common understanding of freedom tends to be on individual autonomy, means not being bound by legal or religious or even moral constraints.

[4 : 02] It's the freedom to choose. According to Dale Keene, who is a professor of politics, he says, our public life is governed by three taboos designed to maximize this kind of freedom.

Number one, do what you want as long as it's consensual. Number two, do what you want as long as you don't hurt anyone. And number three, don't tell anyone else that their choices are wrong. Most people assume that this is what freedom means, and if we live this way, that we will have a free society. Now, it's one thing to talk about this politically or culturally or socially or even in a religious context, but underneath all of this, there's a problem.

And the problem is this, that we are not actually as free as we like to think. In John chapter 8, Jesus is talking to some Jews. Now, these are people who have heard Him.

They've initially responded. But as Jesus often does, He has a crowd who will become interested in Him, and then His teaching changes from a posture of invitation, of come and see, to I want to make sure you know what you're really buying into.

[5 : 20] And He begins to say things that challenge people. So there's this posture with Jesus' teaching of gathering, and then He'll begin to say things that confuse and challenge, and some of those people will end up going away.

This is one of those moments. He's talking to some Jews who are very interested in Him, and He says, If you abide in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Now, they're very offended by this, and their response indicates that. They say, How dare you suggest that we need to be set free? We are free. How dare you suggest otherwise?

We've never been slaves to anyone. And then Jesus responds by saying, Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.

What He's saying is that sin in our lives is evidence that we are slaves. See, being a slave, by definition, means that you can't say no.

[6 : 25] It means that someone or something else is calling the shots in your life. So if you can't stop overeating, you're a slave to food. You can't say no.

If you can't stop drinking too much, you're a slave to alcohol. If you can't stop losing your temper, then you're a slave to anger. If you can't stop conforming to what other people expect of you, then you're a slave to approval.

If you can't stop working for at least one day a week, then you're a slave to your career. If you can't stop hating the other political party, rooting your identity and your sense of meaning in your party, then you're a slave to politics.

If you can't stop scrolling on your smartphone, you're a slave to dopamine. Right? In Romans chapter 7, the apostle Paul is talking about his life before he encountered Jesus and everything began to change.

And he's talking about himself and he says, at this point in my life, you know, I don't understand my own actions. I do not do what I want.

[7 : 42] Instead, I do the very thing that I hate. I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. Now, I don't know about you, but I so deeply identify with that.

How many of us can identify with that way of feeling about our lives? Are there times in your life when you don't understand yourself? You know, you say something, you blurt something out or you do something, and then 10 seconds later, you're thinking, why did I just say that?

You know, somebody says, oh, did you, you know, have you read that great book that just came out? And you say, oh, yeah, yeah, it's great. And you're like, I haven't read that book. Right?

But in that moment, you just want to conform. You want that person to think that you're the kind of person that reads books like that. Why did I do that? I don't understand why I just said that. Right?

There are times when you desire to do right, but you end up doing what you hate. You know, you desire to be patient with your kids. You know, I'll wake up, go for a run, pray, come back into the house.

[8 : 48] I am feeling so in line with God. My heart and God's heart are one. We have just communed, right, on the sidewalks of D.C. And then I come in the house, and it's time to get the kids ready for school, and I can't wait to just give them a hug.

And within 10 minutes, I'm yelling at them. And then after drop-off, I'm thinking, what? I hated myself just then. That's not who I am.

That's not who I want to be. You know, or you desire contentment, but every single day you compare yourself to other people and resent them for having what you think is a better life. And you're like, I want to be filled with gratitude and contentment. I don't want to be filled with envy. So the question I'm really asking is, why is there always a gap between the person that we are and the person that we desire to be?

Why is there a gap? Right? Does that sound like someone who is free? If we were truly free, we would be able to simply be who we desire to be.

[9 : 55] I would just, I want to be this kind of person. Boom, I'm that kind of person. That's what a free person would be able to do. A person who can say yes and no. A person who doesn't have anyone calling the shots.

If we were truly free, that would be possible, but it's not possible. There's always a gap between who I want to be way over there and who I actually am. And this is why self-help is a \$12 billion industry, because it's always promising that the you that you want to be is just around the corner, just one breakthrough away.

But, you know, the same people keep coming back and buying all those products. The same people that bought the hottest book or hottest video five years ago, they come back for the one that's breaking out right now.

The point is that the main obstacle to freedom is not social, it's not cultural, it's not legal, political. The main obstacle to freedom is spiritual.

It's not an external obstacle, it's an internal obstacle. And the Bible would say the reason that we're not free is because we're all born in spiritual bondage.

[11 : 03] You know, David Foster Wallace was a kind of a tortured soul, keen observer of human nature, and a kind of genius in his own way. And he has this famous commencement speech that some of you have undoubtedly heard called This is Water.

And in it he says this, he says, in the day-to-day trenches of life, there's 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. And what you begin to realize when you either look at Scripture or actually just observe life and the way it works is whatever we worship will end up enslaving us.

Whatever that thing is that becomes the thing, the thing, the ultimate thing, we begin to serve that thing. So Wallace goes on, he says, if you worship money and things, if they're where you tap real meaning in life, then you'll never have enough.

Never feel that you have enough. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly. Worship power, and you'll end up feeling weak and afraid. And you'll need even more power over others to numb you to your own fear.

[12 : 07] Worship your intellect. Being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. So what is spiritual freedom, then?

It's freedom of the heart. It's the kind of freedom that truly sets us free. See, the kind of freedom that most people talk about and care about in our society, individual autonomy, what we were talking about, you know, the kind of freedom that says, I can do what I want and no legal or moral or religious constraints can get in my way.

That kind of freedom is utterly meaningless without spiritual freedom. A spiritually free people wouldn't need constraints.

What good does it do to tell a man that he is free to do whatever he wants if there are still hooks in his heart and chains still held by some unseen master?

That is only the illusion of freedom. So in John chapter 8, Jesus is saying, if you want to be truly free, you need to be spiritually free.

[13 : 27] And spiritual freedom is something that cannot be gained through your religious heritage. I know that you're born Jewish. I know that your great-grandfather was Abraham. That doesn't guarantee your freedom.

It can't be actually earned through any human effort of any kind. Jesus says, the only way to be free is for the Son to set you free. And of course, he's talking about himself.

He says, if the Son sets you free, then you will be free indeed. And the entire aim of the Christian gospel, by the way, if you're here and you're not a Christian, you're kind of wondering, what is Christianity all about or what makes this different than other religions?

Here's what it is. The entire aim of the Christian gospel, the reason that Jesus came was to give us the gift of freedom. The precious, costly, unimaginably valuable gift of freedom, which can only be received by grace.

And when we talk about this kind of freedom, we mean freedom from condemnation. Jesus' death atoning for all the sin of the world. We mean freedom from the power of death.

[14:35] Jesus was raised from death, and he offers that same promise to us. Death, the sting has been taken out of death. Death is now simply a doorway into eternity.

Freedom from alienation. Through Jesus, God adopts us as sons and daughters as part of this one great spiritual family made up of people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

And then Jesus, in addition to this freedom, gives us another gift, which is the gift of the Holy Spirit. And that is crucial for understanding spiritual freedom. And the reason is this, and this is very important for what we're talking about this morning.

Even though Jesus sets us free when we put our faith in him, we still have to learn how to live as free people. When you are someone who has been raised in captivity your entire life, you cannot just throw open the cage door and expect people to know how to live out their freedom.

We need to retrain our minds. We need to rehabilitate our hearts and desires to live into love as free people. This is why Jesus says, if you abide in my word, then you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

[15:57] See, he's saying, I'm going to set you free, something that only I can do for you. But then the way that you are going to learn how to live out that freedom is by abiding in my word, by following me as my disciples, by obeying all that I've given you.

If you want to know what a truly free person looks like, Jesus Christ. And he's saying, if you want to live in love like I do, like a free human being, you need to follow me.

Right? If you want to learn how to dance, you dance with somebody who knows how to dance, and you follow their movements, and you sink your body with theirs, and you walk in their steps.

And that's exactly what Jesus' invitation entails. Live like I do. Love like I do. Pattern your life after the pattern of my life. That's how you learn to be free.

But this gift of freedom in the church needs to be safeguarded. So the second question we're asking is, how can we safeguard spiritual freedom? There are two major obstacles, major threats to spiritual freedom that Paul focuses on in the letter that he writes to the Galatian church.

[17:12] And these two major threats to freedom sit at opposite ends of the continuum. We have on the one end license, and on the other end legalism. Right?

So the threat of license, right, some people say, well, if Jesus forgives me no matter what, if he's atoned for all the sin of the world, then why can't I just live however I please?

Why does any of this matter? What does obedience have to do with it? Obedience sounds like the opposite of freedom. But here is where we see that the gospel offers us a much richer definition of freedom than you will find in the culture.

Freedom is not just the ability to choose. It's the ability to choose well. It's the ability to choose that for which we were made.

So as Paul says earlier in Galatians chapter 5 verse 13, he says, For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

[18:17] So he's saying that freedom has a purpose to it. And that purpose is love. You have been set free to fulfill the purpose that you were created for.

And that is to love, to love God, to love and serve one another. That's the purpose of your freedom. So safeguarding spiritual freedom means not using it as an opportunity for the flesh.

In other words, an opportunity to go right back into slavery. And Paul gives some examples of things that Christians need to be on guard against. Sensuality, idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy.

He says all of those defeat the purpose of freedom. All of those erodes right back into slavery.

That's like somebody threw open the cage door, you walked out, looked around, and then walked right back into the cage.

He says, be on guard against those things. By contrast, the spiritually free life produces fruit that lines up with this purpose to love and serve.

[19 : 24] Right? The fruit of love, the fruit of joy, the fruit of peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control. All of those are oriented toward loving and serving others in the community.

That's the purpose of freedom. So while some people might object to this and say, you know, it sounds like obedience and freedom are opposites of one another, we would say freedom and morality are not mutually exclusive.

You know, as the Bible scholar N.T. Wright says, to accept appropriate moral constraints is not to curtail true freedom, but to create the conditions for it to flourish.

Having the right constraints. Having the right constraints. Having the right constraints. Having the right constraints. That creates the conditions where freedom can flourish. So this one threat to freedom is something that we have to be vigilantly on guard against, the threat of license.

And yet on the other end of the spectrum, there is an equally dangerous threat that we need to be aware of. And this is actually the one that is Paul's most, his highest concern in the Galatian church.

[20 : 40] It's not license in Corinth, it certainly was. But in Galatians, the big threat that he's arguing against is legalism. Now, legalism happens when people forget that freedom is something that comes by grace.

It's something that comes through faith. Legalism happens when people start to believe that we don't actually need forgiveness, or at least not that much forgiveness.

Not nearly as much as that other person needs. Legalism happens when people start to believe that they are, in fact, morally superior to other people. And they start to show that because they become critical.

They become judgmental. They begin to, if not outwardly, inwardly condemn the people around them who don't seem as devoted as they are.

And the thing that we need to understand is that most individuals in churches tend toward one or the other. Right? Even in this room, you go one person to the next, to the next, to the next, and we all have tendencies that would lead us either more in the direction of license, in a kind of permissive posture, or legalism, in a kind of restrictive and maybe somewhat judgmental posture.

[22 : 00] Right? And from one person to the next, we would probably, if we were feeling honest and vulnerable, would be able to say, yeah, I'm kind of more like that or more like this. And so what that means is that in a church like ours, walking in spiritual freedom is going to look very different from one person to the next.

It is not a one-size-fits-all prescription that we can give everyone. That's why there's no sort of code of conduct. Because one person may need to be encouraged to change their lifestyle, to adopt a different moral framework, to begin to live within the moral constraints that come with following Christ.

And there are some people who that's what you need in order to grow. That's a part of what it means to understand your spiritual freedom. But then the person sitting right next to you, they might need to be confronted over the fact that they are overly moralistic.

They are overly scrupulous. They are overly fixated on the rules. They're overly fixated on the ways they might break the rules. They're harshly critical of themselves.

And maybe they're actually pretty critical of other people. And so those conversations are going to look radically different because you've got different struggles, but both are threats to spiritual freedom and both need to be addressed.

[23 : 17] So what does all of this have to do with our vision for Advent as a community of care? Well, if we look at the reading from Galatians chapters 5 and 6, Paul is calling us as a community to safeguard our spiritual freedom by walking a very careful line between license and legalism.

What this means is that, number one, we have to guard against license by seeking to restore those who sin.

That has to be a part of our shared life. So in a truly caring community that understands spiritual freedom the way we're talking about this morning, we don't just address suffering.

We also have to do the hard work, the awkward work, the painful work of addressing sin. Right? It says Galatians chapter 6 verse 1, If anyone is caught in any transgression, those who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.

You know, in our sort of overly therapeutic culture, many people assume that the only purpose of life is happiness and fulfillment. And so caring for other people often takes the form of uncritically affirming people in their choices and encouraging them to do whatever makes them happy.

[24 : 41] We know better. Because that understanding of freedom is naive, anemic, simplistic, doesn't reflect human nature accurately.

We understand how precious our spiritual freedom is. We understand the unimaginable price that was paid to secure it.

And we recognize that in order to live in that freedom, we all need some measure of accountability from our friends. So this is ideally something that you ask people to do for you.

You say, hey, look, we've known each other for a while. I trust you. I think that you're a mature person. If there's ever anything in my life that you see that you feel like is a threat to my relationship with Jesus and the spiritual freedom that I have, if you see me doing anything that you're concerned about, I just want you to, I want to throw the door wide open and I want to ask you, I want to give you carte blanche permission.

Please tell me. You know, it's sort of like the image of giving somebody a hunting license on the land of your life. You know, if there's anything that looks amiss, fire away.

[25 : 52] Now, you may be wrong, right? Maybe more to it. Maybe we can talk about it. But you may be right. And there may be things that I need to see or hear that I'm not seeing or hearing.

So I want to give you permission. Please do that for me. I want you to help me safeguard the freedom that I have in Christ. I don't want to go back into slavery. And by the way, if you're a member of our church, that's actually written into the membership covenant, that we sort of agree as a part of being members in this church.

You're like, wait, I need to read that covenant again. But it's in there. It's in the fine print. That we agree to hold one another accountable. We agree to practice godly admonition in one another's lives.

Right? So this is something that we need in order to safeguard our freedom. We've got to guard against license. But on the other hand, we also guard against legalism. By addressing sin with maturity and with humility, any time you bring up sin in someone else's life, you are on incredibly dangerous territory.

You were on thin ice. You were standing in a minefield. And you need to be very, very careful. The danger, any time you're bringing up something like this in somebody else's life, pride is right there waiting to devour you.

[27 : 09] Right? That kind of prideful legalism that can very easily lead to judgmentalism if left unchecked. So Paul is very specific.

He says this needs to be done by people who are spiritual, meaning spiritually mature people. So what does that mean? Well, he says, you know, people who know how to keep an eye on themselves and guard against pride.

People who know that they are also every bit as vulnerable to temptation. People who know that no one is better than anyone else. Who know that they're the ones on this end of the conversation, but tomorrow they might be the ones on the other end of the conversation.

They're doing the confronting today. Tomorrow they're going to need to be confronted. People who have no illusions about their standing or their hearts. People who know how to be gentle.

Because restoring someone who has sinned is delicate work. And it requires love, it requires compassion, it requires kindness, patience. You know, the word restore originally meant to set a broken or dislocated bone or joint.

[28 : 17] So imagine a dislocated arm, shoulder, and the work of setting it back in its place or setting a fracture so that the bones line up again.

Right? That causes pain. Right? That's painful either way. And yet in order to bring healing, you have to cause some amount of pain in the short term. It can be very painful.

But once you set that break or that dislocation, then the healing can happen. And that's the goal of these confrontations. John Stott puts it well in his commentary on this passage in Galatians.

He says, notice how positive Paul's instruction is. If we detect somebody doing something wrong, we are not to stand by doing nothing on the pretext that it's none of our business and we have no wish to be involved.

He says, you can't just say, well, that's, you know, that's their life. I'm, you know, especially if it's somebody who you're close to, who you're friends with. Nor are we to despise or condemn him in our hearts.

[29 : 25] And if he suffers for his misdemeanor, say, serves him right or let him stew in his own juice. That's the legalistic response. Right? So you have the license response. Oh, do what you want.

Legalism says, oh, you're getting what you deserve. Stott says, no, no, no, no. Neither one of those will do. Nor are we to report him to the minister. Right?

99% of the time these conversations need to be happening within the congregation. You know, if somebody comes to me and says, did you know that this person is doing this? Did you know that they haven't done this? Blah, blah, blah. My first question is, well, have you talked to them yet about that?

Nor are we to gossip about him to our friends in the congregation. Rather than talking to the person directly, we say, hey, did you hear about this? Hey, can I talk to you about this?

Now, that does as much damage as anything we talked about this morning. That kind of triangulation, indirect, talking around the person does massive damage.

[30 : 26] I cannot overemphasize that. So, Stott says, we're not to do any of these things. No, we are to restore him. To set him back on the right path. So, the vision is not, the vision this morning is not about a bunch of Bible thumping and finger wagging.

We are, friends, we are a community of former spiritual slaves who have been given this great and precious gift of freedom.

And we are committed to guarding it vigilantly in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. That's what this is about.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you this morning and recognize that the kinds of things that we are discussing this morning require an enormous amount of discernment, an enormous amount of wisdom, an enormous amount of humility and courage.

And these are things that come through the Holy Spirit. And so, Lord, we recognize that what Paul is really talking about here is what it means to walk with and keep in step with the Holy Spirit.

[31 : 40] And so, we ask that your Holy Spirit would lead and guide us as we seek to safeguard this precious gift of freedom that we have been given. We pray that this would be a community of spiritual rehabilitation where we learn together collectively how to pattern our lives after Jesus and how to live and love as free men and women.

That we might put the freedom that we might put the freedom that is only available through the gospel on display for this world in desperate need of the hope of true freedom.

And not the illusions that are so often passed off as such. We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen. Amen.