

Come and rest

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[0:00] I don't know where you were last night, but there is truly nothing like the 4th of July in! Washington, D.C. I remember coming here, I don't know, I've lived here 19 years, and I remember our! And I remember I was like, are we celebrating or are we under attack? Are we at war? And the, the, it didn't stop until about two or three o'clock in the morning in our neighborhood. I don't know what it was like where you were. We had aspirations of going down and seeing the big show, and then it got later, it pushed later, and we lost, we lost nerve. So, some of you may have gone. Did anybody go down there? That's incredibly impressive. Well done, you. We didn't make it, but we didn't have to. All the fireworks were, came to us. I think we would have risked life and limb to try to go down there. It is amazing to be here for a 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

I think among other things, and the topic that we're going to be exploring this morning, is this celebration of freedom. And certainly when I reflect on the core ideals that our country was founded on and these ideas that are reflected in the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, this American tradition of liberty, right, we recognize that we are, we have good reason to celebrate these, these true and precious freedoms. Now, one of the reasons I love living here, honestly. This morning, though, I want to ask a deeper question. I want to ask a deeper question, and that is this, what actually makes a person free? What makes a person free? Not just politically, but personally, spiritually. What are the conditions that make freedom possible? We're going to be looking at the lectionary readings this morning, so these are not readings that I've chosen, but I think they speak to this question in a very powerful way, Romans chapter 7 and 8 and Matthew chapter 11. We're going to look at this in two parts, the illusion of freedom and then the path into true freedom. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You for all the good and the true and the beautiful of what we have celebrated this weekend. Lord, chiefly, we thank You for Your Son, and we thank You that because of Your Son, we know that when we gather here, You are here with us. When we open Your Word, it is Your Word that we hear. Lord, and we know that You have, because of Your presence, the power not only to encounter us, but to transform us. And Lord, we're here to receive from You and to be changed by You so that we might glorify You. And we pray that that would happen, Lord, by Your grace, in the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Amen. So, arguably, I would say one of the most influential philosophical voices in our society when it comes to how we think about freedom would be John Stuart Mill.

[3:13] He's drawing on a larger tradition, but he wrote his essay on liberty in 1859, and we have to understand he was looking back into history and responding to years, right, centuries of religious persecution and authoritarianism and a great social pressure to conform. And so, he's looking back and he writes this vision of freedom in this essay, and in it he famously articulates his harm principle. The core idea is this, and for those of you who are more experts in this, we're going to be reductionistic here, but essentially, people should be able to live and believe however they want as long as they don't harm other people. And that idea kind of became enshrined in the American imagination. He summarizes it this way, maybe his most famous quote, over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign. And I would say that's one of the defining slogans of liberalism. Over myself, over my mind and body, the individual is sovereign. And we've all been shaped by it. Even if you've never heard of John Stuart Mill before, even if this is all new to you in terms of names and references, chances are that idea has seeped into the way you imagine freedom, the assumptions we make about it. These ideas were revolutionary, and liberalism produced many great things worth celebrating, resulted in constitutional government, in religious liberty. Some of you work and fight for religious liberty professionally. It resulted in protections against tyranny. It resulted in a deep concern for the dignity and the conscience of the individual, right? All things that we celebrate, all things worth celebrating and protecting. Along with that,

liberalism also gave us a very particular way of imagining freedom. Freedom came to mean, above all, freedom from external constraint or coercion. Freedom from essentially anyone telling me how I should live or what I should think or believe. And over time, this way of thinking about freedom grew and morphed and shifted and developed. And the constraints that we perceive as impinging upon our freedom got... that list of those got longer and longer and longer, right? So, now constraints to freedom include tradition and social norms and religion of any kind, maybe even family expectations, maybe even communal obligations. And so, over time, the list has gotten longer. And so, I would argue that in the modern imagination, freedom often means this. It means any authority, any obligation, any tradition, any moral limit that I have not personally chosen, anything that impinges on my ability to define myself and do what I want is treated as an obstacle to my personal freedom. It's treated as a threat that needs to be eliminated. And so, as this vision of freedom has been pushed further and further and further to its logical end, we have begun to see the strain of that in our society, right? We see fragmentation as the sovereignty of the individual becomes more and more absolute. We see increased isolation. We see increased moral confusion. And the people who are complaining about this aren't just the

religious traditionalists. There's lots of people across the spectrum lamenting that. We see a society where it is harder and harder to name any shared good that binds us together. There's a growing sense that we no longer have any common ground with our neighbors, no longer have any common story that orients us, no longer have any common vision of what human life is even for. Even a basic commitment to the common good can no longer be taken for granted because that entails an obligation that might impinge upon my personal freedom. Now, again, I think some of that is worth noting. The point of this morning is not to debate moral philosophy. The point is to ask this question. If we remove all constraints, if we pull back all obligations of any kind, and we decide to live our lives however we want, does that actually lead to freedom? That's the question. Does it actually produce the conditions where freedom is possible? So, let me ask you this. Do you feel free? Do you feel free? Do you feel free? Not in theory, not on paper, not as a citizen.

Do you feel free in your mind? Do you feel free in your desires? Do you feel free in the habits that make up much of your waking life? Do you feel free in the quiet places that no one else sees? Are you free to decide that starting today, you will no longer need the approval of other people? You'll no longer be inflated by their praise. You'll no longer be crushed by their criticism.

From this day forward, I'm deciding, I'm choosing. It's not going to matter to me anymore. Are you free to decide that from this day forward, you will never again lose your temper at your kids? From this moment forward, I'm always going to be patient. I'm always going to be present. I'm always going to respond with gentleness rather than irritation. And if you did decide that, how long would that freedom last? How many times have you said, this is the last time?

[9:44] This is the last time I'm going to look at pornography. This is the last time I'm going to spend money on something I know I don't need. This is the last time I'm going to eat more than I need to eat to make me full. This is the last time I'm going to distort the truth to make myself look a little better in a group. Or think about resentment. Can you simply decide right now to stop rehearsing the thing that person said or did that hurt you? Can you stop replaying that conversation when you're standing in the shower or laying in bed at night or sitting in traffic? Can you stop right now from this day forward imagining what you would have said or what they should finally admit and how good that would feel? You know, the question is, why not? Even though you're carrying that resentment and you hate carrying it, you can't seem to put it down. You put it down and then you walk away and then here it is. And then you put it down and you walk... and here it is. And you just... you keep trying to put it down and it stays with you. What about anxiety? Can you simply decide starting right now, I'm never again going to be anxious about my kids. I'm never going to be anxious about my future.

I'm never going to worry about money again. I'm never going to worry about my health. I'm never going to stress about my marriage. I'm never going to worry about my work. I'm never going to worry about my reputation. I'm never going to worry about the state of the world. Even at night when I'm swiping through the news at 11 o'clock and I'm reading about all the horrible things, I'm not going to worry about it. Can you simply decide right now to stop comparing yourself to other people? Can you decide to be perfectly content with the life that God has given you from this day forward?

I know it's a lot of examples. Here's the strange truth. We can be surrounded by freedom and still be inwardly held captive.

We can have more choices than almost any people in the history of our planet and still feel completely unable to choose what is good. We can be free to do what we want, and yet we can discover that we can't always be free to want what is right. Here's the point. We are not as free as we pretend to be, and there's a reason for that. In Romans chapter 7, the Apostle Paul says something we can all, I think, identify with. Verse 15, he says, I don't understand what I do. I don't understand myself.

For what I want to do, I do not do. But what I hate, I do. You know that feeling. You know, I want to love, I want to forgive, I want to be more patient, I want to be more generous, but then I keep returning to the same sins again and again and again. I keep saying the phrase, never again, again. And Paul exposes the great illusion of human autonomy. Starting in verse 21, he says, although I want to do good, nobody here, nobody here, we all want to do good. Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

[13:33] For in my inner being, I delight in God's law. But I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. You know that feeling, that inner conflict. There's the you that you want to be and sometimes think you are, and there's the you that you actually are, and there's that tension. So, the whole idea that we are free to do whatever we want with all due respect is a fiction, because it's based on a fairy tale view of human nature.

Back in my 20s, I was with friends from grad school. We were on the beach up in...on the north shore of Boston, and somebody had bought this super cheap inflatable raft. And, you know, a bunch of guys on the beach with an inflatable raft. Doesn't take long for really intelligent, well-thought ideas to start percolating to the surface. And one of these incredibly good ideas was to...we saw this island way out in the water. And we said, how many people could we fit in this raft? We can make it, right? So, we blow up the raft, and we get our paddles, these plastic paddles, and we start paddling out into the water, right? And we're like, we can do it, we can do it, you know, and we're chanting and cheering. And we make it out past the breakers, which is already further than we thought we would go. And then we start realizing that as we're paddling toward this island, we're actually not getting any closer to the island. And then we start realizing as we're looking back, we're actually moving in a completely different direction. We realize that we're actually moving not toward the shore, not toward the island, but out to sea.

And it turns out there was an invisible current. We couldn't see it when you just looked at the water. It looked nice and calm, but there was a current, and it was powerful, and it was big.

And we got caught in it, and it just started taking us. And so, we're paddling and paddling and paddling, and no matter how hard we paddle, no matter how much effort we put into it, we can't make any progress in the direction we want to go. And instead, we are getting taken very powerfully and forcefully in the direction, the very direction that we do not want to go, a direction that we know leads probably to our own death. And to make matters worse, it's getting dark, and there's storm clouds on the horizon. I survived, but by the end, the raft had deflated. We were all in the water holding onto it like a buoy and swimming for our lives. And we finally made it to shore, I don't know, probably two-thirds of a mile down the shore and had to hike back, but we survived.

[16:18] Everybody's okay. The point is not to set an example for the youth. The point is we were free to choose where we wanted to go. We made that choice, and nobody forced us to make that choice.

We made it on our own, and we were free to try as hard as we could try to go in that direction. What we didn't figure on, what we didn't reckon into our plan was that there was an invisible force that was going to pull us in a very different direction. And that was a force against which we had no power. As hard as we tried, our efforts were useless. That's the reality that we face as human beings. Whether or not you consider yourself a religious person or traditional person is completely beside the point. It does not matter at all for this conversation. Here's the only difference that matters. There are people who continue to believe in the illusion of freedom. There are people who continue to believe in the illusion of personal and spiritual freedom. And there are people who know that they are in spiritual bondage. There are people who recognize the power of that invisible force. People who know that the biggest obstacle to freedom is not out there, it's not political, it's not social, it is in here. It is spiritual. It's sin. It's what the Bible calls it.

It's the current that pulls us where it wants us to go, not where we want to go. So, the question that raises for us is, if that is the case, then where do we find true freedom? How can we find true freedom? And in Matthew chapter 11, so we're shifting now from Romans chapter 7 and 8. Now we're going to look at Matthew, then we're going to go back to Romans. But I want to look at Matthew 11 for a second, because here we see that when it comes to freedom, religion only makes things worse. Going back to the boat image, imagine trying to paddle out to an island, and imagine it's hard enough, and then imagine somebody comes along, and imagine they take away your paddles, they put a bunch of weight and rocks in your boat, and then they punch holes in it, right? That's how the first century Jews felt about the religious leaders. They're like, this is hard enough. But then later in Matthew, Jesus critiques them. He says, you're adding all kinds of stuff. You're making it harder.

You're making it more confusing. You're making it less attainable. And He says, you're adding stuff to them that you won't even do yourself. Religion as a means to personal and spiritual freedom is exhausting, right? So, Jesus turns to the crowd, and Jesus says to the crowd, these exhausted people, He says, come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. And we can't imagine what that would have sounded like to these first century hearers. And we need to understand that when Jesus offers rest, what He's really talking about is spiritual freedom. Rest is spiritual freedom.

[19:29] It's freedom from bondage to sin and death. It's freedom from the futility of fighting against the current. See, the religion of the day said, you just got to paddle harder. And Jesus says, no, come to Me, I'm going to give you rest. How does He do it? This is what Paul is describing as he moves from Romans chapter 7 to Romans chapter 8. He laments, who will rescue Me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, He says, who delivers Me through Jesus Christ our Lord. And then those great words that are worth memorizing in chapter 8 verse 1, therefore there is now no condemnation for those who were in Christ Jesus. Now listen to why. What has happened? Because through Christ Jesus, the law of the Spirit is a different law, a different principle at work. The law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law, the principle or rule of sin and death. For what the law, here He's talking about religion, the Mosaic law, what the law, what religion was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending His own Son. There's another solution. There's another answer to this that comes through Jesus Christ. What does this mean? Once again, let's go back to the boat image.

The law of sin and death is like that current that is pulling you toward your own death. It's pulling you in the direction you don't want to go. That's the law of sin and death. And no matter what we do, right, no matter how hard we push, religion is powerless to help. What Paul is saying is, God sent His own Son, Jesus Christ, and when Jesus Christ died on the cross, He defeated the powers of sin and death, right? The power of that current was defeated. Through faith in Jesus, He says, a different current begins to flood into our lives. So imagine you're being pulled in this direction, and all of a sudden, there's this great upheaval, and all of a sudden, you begin to feel water coming from the other direction, and there's this current that sweeps you up and begins to move you in a different direction.

So a different current floods into our life what He calls the law of the Spirit who gives life and sets us free. The Holy Spirit is like a current that moves us in the other direction, right? So imagine you're trying to move into the presence of God, and that current of sin and death is just pulling you further and further away from the presence of God, and no matter what you do, you just feel further and further away from the presence of God, and then imagine there's this great upheaval, and the current changes direction, and all of a sudden, you feel this water flood in, and it begins to carry you where? Further up and further into the presence of God. And no matter what you do, no matter if you're struggling, no matter if you're still paddling in the wrong direction, that current is carrying you further up and further up and further into the presence of God. This is the law of the Spirit who gives life and sets us free, and that, I would argue, is true spiritual freedom. That is where we find rest for our souls, right? You can collapse into the bottom of the boat exhausted, and the current carries you further up and further in. And here Jesus goes on to say something that might be a bit unexpected until we understand it. He then says, take my yoke upon you. So He's not saying, I got it from here.

You're good. What's He saying? Take my yoke upon you. Learn from Me, for I'm gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.

Now, Jesus sets us free. A new current floods into our life, but then what happens? We have to learn how to live as free people. We've only ever known bondage. And some of you work in trafficking. Some of you work in areas of justice ministry or justice mission where you're... and you know that if somebody grows up in bondage, you can't just open the cage door and they immediately know how to... they only know slavery, and they have to learn a new way to live, new habits.

[23:57] Right? New patterns, a new imagination. And so, Jesus says, you need to learn how to live as free people. And this is the paradox of true freedom. We can only find true freedom through submission.

Through submission. So, freedom is not just freedom from all constraint. Nobody can tell me what to do. It's not freedom from all authority. Freedom can only be found by coming under the right authority.

We have to learn how to rest in Christ. So, going back to all of those places in our lives where we feel powerless, you say, okay, from now on, I'm going to take the yoke of Jesus on to me. So, instead of seeking approval from other people, right, the next time somebody says something that either inflates me or crushes me, I'm learning how to rest in the approval and love of Christ. And the more I do that, the less that matters. And over time, it loses its power over me. Instead of nursing a grudge and holding on to resentment, the next time I replay that conversation in my mind when I'm standing in the shower, laying in bed, the next time that starts to happen, that doom loop starts to scroll, I'm going to rest in Christ's forgiveness. I'm going to remember how much I was forgiven. And for the sake of Christ, I'm going to decide and I'm going to choose and commit to forgiving instead of nursing resentment, right? Instead of being controlled by anxiety, I'm taking the yoke. I'm going to start learning how to rest in the sovereignty of Christ and to trust His character, right? So, we learn how to be free by learning how to rest in Christ.

And this is a battle that we fight the rest of our days as Christians, friends. Paul says in Galatians chapter 5, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery. Now, there he could either be talking about going back to the old way of religion or going into the idea of freedom that we simply cast off all constraints whatsoever. He says Christ has set you free. It's only going to be found by taking that yoke upon yourself and learning how to live in step with that freedom. And I love how Eugene Peterson translates Matthew 11 in the message. Here's what he says, are you tired, worn out, burned out on religion?

[26:21] Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me. Work with me. Watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.

Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. This is what it's about, friends, learning the unforced rhythms of grace. You have to learn how to move and swim with the current of the Holy Spirit.

That's what it means. So, instead of resisting the Holy Spirit, we pray and we ask, what is the Spirit doing in me? What is the Spirit calling me to? What work is He accomplishing in me? And we learn how to align our lives with that. That's so much of what we do here. It's so much of what pastoral ministry is all about. It's just asking, what is God doing and how do we get behind it?

This is why we need Scripture. This is why we need the daily rhythms of prayer. This is why you need a church community. This is why we need the sacraments. One of the best ways to talk about the church is this. I think the church is essentially a community of people who have been set free from spiritual bondage, who are learning how to live as free people, and who are actively inviting other people to do the same. That's what we're all about. So, on this 4th of July weekend, friends, as we celebrate this 250th anniversary, as we celebrate freedom, let's be clear on what we mean. Political freedom is a precious gift. We should thank God for it. We should protect it. Some of you do. Thank you for that. We should never take it for granted. But political freedom has limits. Political freedom cannot save souls, cannot set souls free. So, true 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. And you and I, friends, were made for God. We were made to find rest in God's presence alone. And the good news of the gospel is that Jesus

Christ came to set us free. He plunged into the current of sin and death. He allowed Himself to be pulled under by the weight of our sin at the cross. And then in His resurrection, He rose in victory, and He sent His Spirit to carry us home to God, to ride that current. So, the invitation is this, come all who are weary, come to Jesus and find rest. Let's pray.

[29 : 06] Lord, in Your mercy, we cry out on behalf of anyone here who is experiencing any form of bondage. Lord, that in the power of Your Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus Christ, set those people free. We pray that there would be release. We pray that there would be... that You would demolish anything that is in any way restricting or robbing those here of the kind of freedom that You created us for. Lord, and we pray for more of that. We pray that in Your grace, as we come in Your name into a time of prayer, as we gather around Your table, Lord, we pray that You would... that by coming to You, we would experience greater and greater and greater degrees of freedom. Lord, and we pray this in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Amen.