

Big Questions 5 - Doesn't Christianity Crush Freedom?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 September 2020

Preacher: James Ross

[0:00] Welcome. Once again, this is the last of our Big Question series, which I hope has been helpful for you, maybe helpful in some of the conversation you have with family or friends.

As of next week in our evening series, we're going to do something different. We're going to go to perhaps the most famous sermon that Jesus ever preached, some of the most famous words that are still part of our culture today.

We're going to think about the Sermon on the Mount and especially the Beatitudes at the beginning. Thinking about the kind of lifestyle, the kind of heart, the kind of culture that God is looking for among his people, the church.

But tonight, we're asking the question, doesn't Christianity crush freedom? So as always, I want us to hear the Bible and then we'll think together.

This is from Jesus' words in John chapter 8. The beginning of verse 21. Once more Jesus said to them, I am going away and you will look for me and you will die in your sin.

[1:11] Where I go, you cannot come. This made the Jews ask, will he kill himself? Is that why he says, where I go, you cannot come? But he continued, you are from below, I am from above.

You are of this world, I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins. If you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins.

Who are you, they asked. Just what I have been telling you from the beginning, Jesus replied. I have much to say in judgment of you, but he who sent me is trustworthy and what I have heard from him I tell the world.

They did not understand that he was telling them about his father. So Jesus said, when you have lifted up the son of man, then you will know that I am he. And that I do nothing on my own, but speak just what the father has taught me.

The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, but I always do what pleases him. Even as he spoke, many believed in him. To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, if you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

[2:18] Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. They answered, we are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?

Jesus replied, very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever.

So if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know you are Abraham's descendants, yet you are looking for a way to kill me because you have no room for my word.

I am telling you what I've seen in my father's presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father. Abraham is our father, they answered. If you were Abraham's children, said Jesus, then you would do what Abraham did.

As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me. A man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the works of your own father. We are not illegitimate children, they protested.

[3:17] The only father we have is God himself. Jesus said to them, if God were your father, you would love me. For I have come here from God. I have not come on my own.

God send me. God send me. So there's Jesus' words, and you probably heard the freedom note there. But the objection that we're thinking about this evening is this.

That to believe in absolute truth, some would say, is to undermine freedom and is then to oppress others. To insist that there is one great truth that applies to all people in all places is regarded in some corners as too limiting.

Each person should be free to determine their own truth, whether that's in the realm of morality, sexuality, identity. And Christianity comes along and it says, this is true and this is false.

This is moral. This is immoral. This is orthodox and this is heresy. And so people are asking the question, is the church one of the great threats to freedom?

[4 : 29] Now, of course, behind that question, there is an understanding of what freedom is. And that definition of freedom would imply that there is no overarching purpose to life, no ultimate meaning or no destiny that we are to consider.

So therefore, we should be free to set our own course. And our purpose this evening is to compare that line of thinking with the teaching of Jesus and to see which view appears to make most sense. Let's begin here, thinking about freedom and truth, first of all. As far as many people are concerned, that we speak to today and that we live around, true freedom comes when there is no absolute truth because truth is seen to be restricted.

Now, we need to see that to claim that there is no absolute truth is in itself an exclusive truth claim also, isn't it? And the reality is that no matter how much we protest, there is no community, there is no group that exists without a guiding set of values and rules.

And those values and rules will set limits. They will include some and exclude others. So whether we're thinking about political parties or protest movements or the local golf club or the local church, each community has those guiding sets of values and rules.

[6 : 09] Every community has a set of shared beliefs. This is true, this is false, this is right and this is wrong. And that's important for us to recognise because one of the things that's happening today is there are attempts by some to block Christianity from the public square.

To deny Christianity a seat at the table, as it were. And that in itself is a power play. It's saying that my truth is better than Christian truth and Christian views have no play.

It limits freedom, limits freedom, actually. To answer what is true freedom, we need to assess how we think and how we think about truth, especially here, Jesus, with bold words in verse 32 or verse 31.

If you hold to my teaching, you're really my disciples, then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. Jesus is saying my truth, not just anything, my truth is freedom. What gives Jesus the right to make a claim like that?

Well, it goes straight to Jesus' identity. In verse 12 of this chapter, Jesus has said, I am the light of the world. I am is the personal covenant name of God that we find in the Old Testament.

[7 : 36] Jesus is saying, I am the Lord that you discover in the Old Testament, and I am the light of the world. For so many looking for spiritual enlightenment, Jesus is saying, I'm the goal of your search.

Without him, we are left groping in darkness. Jesus alone, he says, gives light. So his identity gives credence to his claims to truth.

But also, where he is from speaks to that. And again, Jesus is very clear. So he says in verse 23 here, you are from below, I am from above.

You are of this world, I am not of this world. And Jesus said in verse 38, he's talking about things that he has seen in his father's presence.

He can claim to deliver truth because of who he is and where he is from. So he is making striking claims, exclusive claims. He's saying all truths are not equally valid.

[8 : 39] If you want freedom, you need to follow my truth. All teachers, all philosophies, all value systems don't give equal light.

It's me or darkness, Jesus says. And so we all need to decide who has the truth. And we need to look at Jesus because his claims are so big and striking that we cannot simply dismiss them out of hand.

Either we contend that there's freedom in everybody making their own rules and living their own way. Or we say there is freedom in Jesus.

And what's the truth that Jesus has come to deliver to the world? His truth stands in line with the great teaching of the Bible that you and I as people, as image bearers, we were made to know and enjoy God.

We were made to enjoy the freedom to love God and to receive his love in that fellowship. Jesus has come down to tear into the sin barrier that separates people from God.

[9 : 41] He has come to show, reveal his truth by self-giving, sacrificial love to offer grace. That where we deserve God's wrath, Jesus has come to give forgiveness and eternal life by giving himself.

So against the accusation that the church uses truth as a power play, we look at how Jesus, who is the truth, lived. The all-powerful Son of God, the all-powerful Son of God, came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for men.

He gave up freedom for anyone who would believe in him, who would turn from sin and trust in him. So that's freedom and truth.

Another aspect of this conversation is we need to think about freedom and limits. Because for so many, the idea of freedom is life without limits.

But Jesus is countercultural in that sense because he connects freedom with limits and with obedience. So again, to go back to verse 31.

[10 : 56] If you hold to my teaching, there's the limit, his teaching, you're my disciples, you'll know the truth and the truth will set you free. Now Jesus' teaching certainly had some radical demands that restrict our personal choices.

Jesus says, you need to die to self. Not be the best version of yourself. Die to yourself in order to live for him. Jesus says, if you love me, you will obey my commands.

Is that really freedom? Again, going back to the argument, freedom is life with no limits. Well, what Jesus says sounds very restrictive and oppressive.

But here's the thing. So often, freedom does come with understanding proper limits. We will often limit our personal freedom for our goals.

So in my house now, I have two boys who are keen on the piano. And for them to develop as piano players, it means they need to say no to doing other things.

[12 : 14] They need to dedicate time and attention to learning notes and scales and all that kind of thing. So they're giving up in order to have the freedom to enjoy music. It's the same with people who are serious about sport.

There needs to be the discipline of diet and a training regime. There is sacrifice that's being made for the sake of greater freedom of enjoying the skill that they have chosen to pursue.

Another example, perhaps the classic example, is marriage. When we think about marriage, it simply cannot work with two people that come together in marriage and say, I will not bend to your schedule.

I will not concern myself with your needs if that involves restricting my freedom to do what I want to do. True love necessarily brings with it restrictions.

And we're happy to do so for someone that we love. So we said already, every group, every community has rules, has standards that place limits on behaviour, action, value.

[13 : 29] The question is, which set of limits tend towards the greatest freedom? It's crucial for us to discover what are the right limits to allow for true human flourishing.

Sometimes, and you've maybe heard this, people go to the analogy of the goldfish in the bowl on the kitchen unit. That goldfish is desperate for freedom.

This bowl is too small. But the moment that the goldfish escapes the bowl and flip-flops around on the kitchen floor, is that fish free?

Oh, because he needs the water so he can breathe, so he can have life. There needs to be the proper limits. So again, the Bible teaches and Jesus teaches that we are made by God and we are made for God.

That true life, true freedom is about right relationship with God, of knowing and being known, of loving and being loved. Jesus is God and he's calling us to himself, to live under his rule, and that is freedom.

[14 : 46] But Jesus is very stark in the way he talks. He will say to his opponents, to reject me is to be a slave to sin.

Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. That's our natural condition. We're not free biblically because we're not free to enjoy the relationship with God that we are made for.

So true freedom, to enjoy life and light and love, only comes when Jesus, by his love and mercy, breaks down that separating wall.

Bridges the gap so that we can return home to our Father. So yes, Christianity has limits, but they are proper limits.

They're the pathway to a life and a love that we were made for and deep down that we long for. There's security in knowing if we walk this way, there is freedom and joy.

[15 : 55] Life without God can be exhausting when we're trying to define ourselves and trying to find our own path.

Life with God is to us what water is to the goldfish. We need God for life and for flourishing.

Now another aspect of the discussion about freedom, and it's maybe one we don't tend to think about too much, is to consider destiny. I think critical to which view of freedom we pursue is this.

What does this person, what does this view of the world, what does this way of life say to us? What hope does it offer us when we think about final destiny?

So I guess many people, thinking or unthinkingly, are pursuing a way of life that says you need to live your best life now.

[17 : 01] This is all there is, so grab what you can. And again, Jesus sounds very different, because Jesus in his teaching gives hope not just for this life, but also gives hope to face death, but also gives hope to face death, and it gives hope of eternal life.

Jesus in verse 21 speaks of his departure. I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. When I go, you cannot come.

He is anticipating the cross, where he will bear the sins of his people, where he will be that sacrifice that gives cleansing, and gives eternal life for all who trust in him.

And then Jesus is thinking also about his resurrection, his return to life, and then his return to glory.

And Jesus is saying, if you don't believe in me, if you don't trust me, then where I go, you won't come.

Without that belief and without that forgiveness, glory will not be the final destiny of those who reject Jesus then, and indeed of those who reject Jesus today.

[18 : 21] He's talking to Pharisees here. A group of people who were incredibly sincere in their beliefs, who were devoted to moral excellence, who were respected in their community.

But Jesus is saying, you are wrong, and you are in danger when you reject me. It's another loving warning from Jesus.

To reject me, Jesus says, is to reject true life. Their path will not give them freedom from their ultimate fear that overshadows us all, the ultimate fear, death.

There is no hope for them beyond death, because their relationship with God is not right, because their relationship with Jesus is not right.

Let's use another image. Imagine a skydiver who's jumped out of a plane and is free-falling at incredible speeds, and he's enjoying the rush, enjoying the ride, and he's feeling great.

[19 : 37] That skydiver has no parachute. Is that freedom, or is that the ultimate act of folly?

To have freedom is to be able to face death with hope. And to do that, we must believe in Jesus.

He does again what he says to his opponents in verse 24. I told you that you would die in your sins. If you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins.

A person must believe that Jesus is I am. That he is the Lord. That he has rights over my life. That I must submit in obedience to him.

That I have disobeyed and rebelled against him. So actually what I justly deserve is judgment and condemnation. And my only hope is that Jesus, by his love and his grace and his sacrifice, would forgive me by dying on the cross for me.

[20 : 48] So we must believe Jesus is I am. He's the Lord and that he gives forgiveness of sins. Jesus said he'll be lifted up. Lifted up on the cross.

He is the Lord, our creator. The Lord, our judge. Who takes the place of the condemned. In order to raise us to life with God.

He gives himself to die in our place. The ultimate limit that you and I will face. At some point.

Is our own mortality. And we have no freedom. To say no. To that. And so what we need is a view of life.

That prepares us to face death with real hope. What we need. Is to hear Jesus. We need Jesus. As he is the saviour who takes death for us. He conquers it as our head.

[21 : 54] He rises in victory. And he promises that freedom and that life to us. One of Jesus' followers. The apostle Paul.

Who wrote so many of the letters of the New Testament. Could write while in prison. For me. To live as Christ. To die.

As gain. Because he knew. Glory. In the presence of Jesus. Was his hope. So he had freedom to face death with hope.

And that can be true of us as well. When we love. When we trust. Jesus the death defeating saviour. Let me finish fourthly.

By drawing our thoughts to a close. By thinking about freedom. And Jesus. Which in a sense we've been doing. All along. Maybe we've all heard.

[22 : 49] The idea. Just be true to yourself. Be your authentic self. Is that where freedom.

Is found. Well not according to Jesus. Jesus would say something quite different. He has been saying all along. That our self.

Is sinful. And that makes us slaves. So we are not free. And we are heading to death. The key is not to be true to our self. But to be ready to die to self.

To embrace. To live for Jesus. And Jesus says. If we lose ourselves. In him. There is ultimate gain. There is true freedom. Listen to this. A slave. Has no permanent place in the family. But a son. Belongs to it forever.

[23 : 48] To trust in Jesus. Is to become a child. A child of God. To belong to his family. So if the son. Sets you free.

You will be free. Indeed. There is freedom. To belong forever. To God. And to his family.

To enjoy life. And love. Whether we accept. The truth. And the limits. That Jesus sets. Will depend on. Do I trust. Who Jesus is.

Do I trust. Who he says here. Jesus said. He is light. And any other claim of truth. Is dark. He said. In verse 32. He is truth. And that any other. Path. Is a road. To nowhere. Is slavery. Not freedom. And in verse 36.

[24 : 46] He said. He is the rescuer. He is the liberator. He is the redeemer. He's the only way. To enjoy the life. That we were. Made for. So in a world. In a world. Of competing.

Claims. About where freedom lies. Christianity. Believes. Christians. Believe. Jesus. As son of God. Is the right person.

To set the limits. For our life. His. Is the right. Truth. To hold. And his love. Gives us freedom. Freedom.

To enjoy. The gift. Of eternal life. The gift. Of eternal love. To enjoy. That relationship. With God. That we were made for. And when we know that.

Then we can gladly. Submit to him. Now let's. Pray. Together. Briefly. And then. We'll sing. As we close.

[25 : 41] So let's pray. Dear God. Thank you. That Jesus. Was so clear. As he taught. About. True freedom.

Thank you. That he. Ultimately. Centered it on. Knowing him. Believing him. And trusting. In the truth. That he came to reveal.

Thank you. That in his. Self-giving. Love. That his. Dying. In our place. Facing. The just. Anger. Of God.

Against. Sin. That in trusting. That message. That is. That is. Freedom. Freedom from guilt. And fear.

And shame. And condemnation. Freedom to know. Life with God. Pray for anybody. Who is. Wrestling. With questions.

[26 : 38] Of. Christianity. And faith. And belief. And wondering. And looking. For freedom. And may you help. Each one of us.

To consider Jesus. To discover more. About him. That we would know. His truth. That the truth. Would set us free. Amen.