

TheForum – Straight answers to straight questions

Boring, restrictive: where's the fun in Christianity?

Handout

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[0 : 00] Great, well let's make a start there everybody. Let me welcome you all to the forum where we spend one hour discussing together some of the common objections to the Christian message.

And today we're looking at the question, boring, restrictive, where's the fun in Christianity? For those of you who don't know me, my name is Mark Jackson, I'm Assistant Minister of Grace Church Dulwich, an Anglican church which meets here on Sunday mornings.

If this is your first time at the forum, the way it works is this, we split our time into three parts, each part consisting of some speaking by me and then followed by discussion around our tables.

And if you take up the handouts on your tables and if you turn to the front, you'll see there at the order of play. So in part one, isn't following Jesus restrictive?

Part two, why following Jesus' true freedom? Part three, but isn't that still boring? Obviously this is a forum so we welcome all comments during the discussion times.

[1 : 21] There is a leader on each table to facilitate discussion, but if you've got something to say, do just say it. We like our forums to be as open as possible. Okay, with that said, by way of introduction, let's turn to part one on the inside of the handouts.

Isn't following Jesus restrictive? And I want to start by reading out some lyrics from one of the most popular albums of all time.

I won't sing them to you, don't worry, you'll be pleased to hear. But here they are. Just what is it that you want to do? We want to be free.

We want to be free to do what we want to do. And we want to get loaded. And we want to have a good time. So that's what we're going to do. Yeah, baby, let's go. We're going to have a good time. We're going to have a party. Anyone know who sang those words? Primal scream. Primal scream. Excellent. Well done, Simon Price. Currently being celebrated on the Royal Mail post stamps.

[2 : 33] And these lyrics very much sum up the attitude of people today. We want to be free. Free to do what we want to do. Not what other people tell us to do.

We want to be free. To have a good time. And we don't want anything or anyone, no authority, no religion, no higher power, no Christianity, getting in the way.

Telling me what to do. Restricting my freedom. We want to be free. Well, what does Jesus say about all this? Turn with me to chapter 8 of the Blue John's Gospels.

They're on your tables. And page 26. As you're finding that, let me just say, if you don't know, John was an eyewitness of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

And he wrote down this account so that people could see Jesus for who he really was. The Christ, God's son.

[3 : 34] And in chapter 8, Jesus addresses this issue of freedom. But the answer is unexpected to say the least. So look with me at verses 31 to 36.

See what you make of them. So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples. And you will know the truth.

And the truth will set you free. They answered him, we're offspring of Abraham. I've never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you can say you will become free?

Jesus answered them, truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever. The son remains forever.

So if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed. It's amazing how many times as you read through the gospel, Jesus turns our own thinking on its head.

[4 : 44] We think we're free. Jesus says we're slaves. We think Jesus is restrictive. He says he's actually come to earth to set us free.

Now the people are confused by this. They don't know what Jesus is going on about. And they're like, what do you mean set us free? We're free already. To which Jesus replies, Truly, truly, I say to you, verse 34, showing how important Jesus thinks this is, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.

And what Jesus is saying here is he's saying, we may have freedom of speech today, but we still hurt people with our words. We may have freedom of worship, but we still have religious hypocrisy, as we saw at the last forum.

We may have freedom of expression, but there's still envy and jealousy, pride and covetousness, anger and lust in each of our own hearts.

We think we're free from the outside. Jesus says we're trapped on the inside. We're sinners.

[6 : 06] And we can't stop sinning. Now, we might object to this suggestion from Jesus that we are slaves to sin.

I mean, it's a very strong expression, isn't it? So here's an expression, an experiment for you.

Experiment for us all. Choose something that you don't like about yourself.

It could be your anger. It could be the way you lie to save face. It could be your own envy, your own jealousy. Choose the thing. I'm not going to ask you to say it on the tables.

Choose the thing you most dislike about yourself, something you admit is wrong, and then stop it. Just stop it.

Resolve never to do it again for the rest of your life. Never get angry again in a sinful way. Never lie again. Never get jealous. How do you think you'd get on?

[7 : 06] How long would it last? A year? A month? A week? I think it was C.S. Lewis who said, I doubt many of us would make it through one day.

We think we're free. Jesus says, actually, you're slaves. Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.

And this is really serious. The word sin, it's not used much today. Most people think of sin as something naughty but nice, indulgences that do us little harm, especially if nobody else gets hurt. But in the Bible and in John's Gospel, sin is a terrible thing. Sin is turning our back on God. Sin is turning our back on our Creator.

Sin cuts us off from God. Cuts us off from the source of real life. That's why Jesus says in verse 35, the slave does not remain in the house forever.

[8 : 17] Because sin not only enslaves us, it also condemns us. When I was a kid, I won a goldfish at the fairground.

I was very proud of that. Took it home, put it in a bowl of water, and I thought the fish seemed happy enough. But then one day, I came home and saw that the goldfish had made a bid for freedom.

Perhaps it didn't like being restricted to the water. Perhaps it thought to itself, I want to be free to do what I want to do. And so out it jumped, out of the bowl, into the freedom of the air.

And you know the rest. It came crashing to the ground, unable to breathe, unable to move, trapped, and dying a slow death. And this is a picture of what sin does to us.

We think that by ignoring God, we will be free. But by ignoring God, we actually become slaves.

Facing a slow death, facing God's condemnation.

[9 : 29] We think we're free. Jesus turns our thinking on our head. Actually, you're slaves. Well, let's pause there for discussion around our tables.

And I'll call us back in 10 minutes. Well, let me break into discussions. And we'll move on to part two of the handouts.

And why following Jesus is true freedom. Two reasons the Bible gives. Because of what Jesus frees us from.

And because of what Jesus frees us for. What Jesus frees us from is what we saw just before in part one.

And this slavery to sin. So let me read out again verse 35. Page 26. The slave does not remain in the house forever.

[10:37] The son remains forever. So if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed. Now in this picture, Jesus saying we're the slaves and he is the son.

Slaves have no rights to be in God's household. As we saw in part one, we stand condemned because of our sin. But Jesus as the son has permanent rights in God's household.

Jesus never sinned. Jesus is perfect in every way. So only he can give us a place in God's household. Only Jesus can set us free from our slavery to sin.

It's why he says in verse 36, so if the son sets you free, he will be free indeed. To go back to the illustration of my goldfish, when I came back home and there it was flapping around on the table, there was nothing that it could do.

It was helpless. It couldn't jump back into the bowl by itself. It was trapped out of the water. Only I could set it free. Only I could pick it up.

[11:56] set him free again by picking him up and putting him back into the water. And it's just the same with Jesus Christ.

Only he can set us free from this slavery to sin. Only he can set us free from God's condemnation at our sin.

And so at one level, that's the first reason why following Jesus is true freedom. Because of what he saves us from.

The second reason is what Jesus frees us for. Now when we think of freedom, we tend to think of freedom from all constraints. So to be free is to be totally free, to choose whatever we want.

Like the lyrics of that song at the start. But if you think about it, that sort of freedom is impossible.

For example, you and I are not free, weren't free, to choose when or where we were born.

[13:09] We weren't free to choose how we were brought up. We're not free now to choose how many years we will live for. It's too simplistic to speak in terms of freedom from all constraints.

A better way would be to think of freedom in terms of what we are made for. So my goldfish is truly free when it's swimming around in water because that's what it's made for.

A high-speed train is truly free when it's running along the railway tracks. Because that's what it's made for. And human beings are truly free when we are living for what we were made for.

Of course, the question is what is that? And the answer the Bible gives is that we were made to live in relationship with God. Prince Charles once spoke of his belief that for all the advances of science there remains deep in the soul a persistent and unconscious anxiety that something is missing some ingredient that makes life worth living.

And the Bible says that ingredient is God. When God first made the world there was nothing wrong with it. God and humankind were together talking together living together we were truly free living in relationship with God.

[14:46] It's what we were made for. The problems only started once we turned our backs on God and tried to go it alone. That's when all the murder the blame shifting the guilt the lust the envy the jealousy the sin the slavery to sin started.

We were not designed to live independent lives independent of God.

That is when disaster strikes just like a fish out of water just like a train off its tracks we were made for relationship with God.

And this is the second reason why following Jesus is true freedom because only he can set us free for this relationship with God we were designed for.

When Jesus speaks in verse 32 and verse 36 of setting us free this is what he's talking about.

Setting us free from sin for relationship with God.

[15:56] Setting us free to be the people God always intended us to be. Free to call the maker of the universe our father in heaven.

Free to know God and to enjoy him forever. It was Augustine who famously said of God our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.

not in money and possessions not in success or fame not in intellectual knowledge or personal achievement but in God.

That's what we were made for. Freddie Mercury was lead singer of the rock group Queen. During his life he amassed a huge fortune possession success fame but shortly before he died he said this you can have everything in the world and still be the loneliest man and that is the most bitter type of loneliness success has brought me world idolization millions of pounds but it's prevented me from having the one thing we all need a loving ongoing relationship.

relationship now he was right to speak of an ongoing relationship as the one thing we all need but no human relationship will ever fit that bill because we were created to live in relationship with God. [17 : 43] So that's why following Jesus is true freedom Jesus sets us free from sin full relationship with God the relationship we were all made for.

Let's pause there again for discussion around our tables. Let me break into discussions and we'll move on now to part three of the handouts on the back there.

Part three but isn't it still boring? I suppose when people think of Christianity they can think of cold damp eerie buildings wooden pews they can think of rules regulations guilt trips can think of vicars acting like undertakers Robert Lewis Stevenson once wrote in his diary I've been to church today and amazingly I'm not depressed but I hope we can see from these verses in John chapter 8 that this is not what Christianity is about at all following Jesus is about being set free from sin and that is great news sin leads to death death leads to God's judgment God's judgment leads to hell that is bad news but the good news of

Christianity is that Jesus has come to earth to set us free from it all to set us free from sin to set us free from God's condemnation to set us free from hell that's not boring that's wonderful that is great news but not just that we've also seen that Jesus sets us free for relationship with God the very relationship we were designed for we all long for meaning to life we all long for purpose direction we want to know why we're here where we're heading well here it is Jesus sets us free to know this and to have this and to experience meaning purpose direction to our lives in relationship with God and really the issue of boring doesn't really come into the equation here can I say just personally speaking from ten years of following Jesus Christ that there really is nothing better there's no greater adventure than being a Christian to know Jesus is to know God your maker to know Jesus is to know God's daily forgiveness if you muck up to know Jesus is to experience God's love of you God's daily presence with you God's resurrection power in you to know Jesus is to be certain of your future it's to be certain of heaven to know

[21 : 22] Jesus is to know that everything happening in your life today right now is working out for your good your spiritual good in two chapters time Jesus himself says I have come so that you may have life and have it to the full I look back now to before I was Christian and that is what seems boring if you want to choose a word life without Jesus it's like playing football without the ball there's always something missing but to know Jesus is to have life to the full we're set free from slavery to sin we're set free for this relationship with God you and I were made for it is great it is wonderful now don't mishear me that doesn't mean that the

Christian life is perfect here on earth Christians still get ill just like everyone else bad things happen to Christians just like everyone else people might take the mick out of you at school for following Jesus you may even lose friends for following Jesus but it does mean life will be perfect one day in heaven and even now God promises to always love you to always forgive you to never leave you or forsake you to hear you when you talk to him to speak to you as you read the Bible to tell you the best way to live to secure your place in heaven to use everything in this life even suffering tough times to make you more Christ like God does not want you to endure life God wants you to enjoy life with him in his world so please please don't hold back from becoming a

Christian because you think following him will be restrictive or boring following Jesus is what life is all about following Jesus is to have life to the full not just in heaven but also now and Jesus invites us to turn to him to trust in the truth of his word this promise here in verse 31 is for all people Jesus says if you abide in my word you will know the truth the truth about him setting us free from sin setting us free for relationship with God and the truth will set you free well let's pause there again one final time for discussion around our tables let me break into discussions one final time so the aim this afternoon has been to discuss the

Christian response to this question boring restrictive where's the fun in Christianity and hopefully you've seen or we've seen three things one we think we're free actually Jesus says we're slaves two following Jesus true freedom because Jesus sets us free from the slavery to sin full relationship with God and then three this is not boring this is what life's about it's having life to the full people you might want to discuss this some more please do stay around more biscuits conversation around tables do feel free to speak to me as well if you'd like if you've missed any of the previous forums this is now our sixth one we have actually put all the talk parts on our website and you can see the website address just on the front of the handouts at the bottom so far we've looked at suffering Jesus being the only way to

God hell the Bible hypocrisy in the church so if you'd like to listen to those do go onto that website download them from the talks tab couple of notices just before I finish and that is to say that we we're not going to meet in April as a forum and that's because the church I belong to Grace Church Dulwich is putting on a whole week of talks looking in to the message of Easter reconnecting with the message of Easter and it's actually a similar theme to what we've looked at today real truth real life what Jesus offers the world there flyers at the back there to take but let me just quickly tell you we've got a music evening looking at Jesus costly offer a wine tasting on life beyond death and then another

[26 : 52] Sunday service on real life life at its best so let me commend that to you might be something you want to come along to and do chat to people around at the tables your table leaders if you want to find out more and finally the other thing to say is the new flyers have arrived for next term the summer term and you can see that we'll be restarting on Sunday the 9th of May as we look at the opening chapters of Genesis and that first one is hasn't science disproved Christianity my brother-in-law will be speaking at that one something I'm very excited about so do get that date in your diaries and all of those three dates as well until then as ever thanks very much for taking part in discussions and thanks very much for coming we'll see you all next time