

# John 8:31-36 "Isn't Christianity Restrictive of My Freedom?"

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[ 0 : 00 ] I suspect that all of you have heard or seen or tasted some very American things this weekend.

! Yes, hamburgers. Anybody? Hamburger? Fireworks? Oh, okay. Whether you wanted to or not, didn't you? Flags all over the place. All in celebration of the 250th anniversary of our independence, right?

That, in case you're confused, is why you haven't seen any kings being celebrated. It just hasn't been going on this weekend. It is at the heart of our nation that nobody tells us what to do. Especially if you think you're going to tax us without representation. We will dump all your tea in the ocean. It wasn't even sweet tea. It's no big deal.

If there's anything that we Americans love, it's our freedom, isn't it? We love to make our own decisions with no restrictions.

[ 1 : 15 ] It used to be, when I was a kid, 31 flavors of ice cream was really exciting. Now, we have hundreds of them.

And you can combine them however you would like and just put them all together. You can have all the options you want. It used to be, when I was a kid, if you had a hundred channels to choose from on your TV, your house was the one everybody wanted to go to because that was a lot of options. Some of you remember fewer than a hundred. Now, now we have dozens of streaming services and every single one of them has thousands of options that you can watch whatever you want to, whenever you want to.

You don't even have to wait for it to come on. You just pick it when you want. Young people feel that they have freedom when they can choose what to do, what to watch.

When they start driving and go where they want, when they want, that seems like freedom, right? Sixteen-year-olds. The one thing in our society that you better not touch these days is our freedom.

[ 2 : 31 ] Having autonomous choices to run our own lives, how we want to run them, is such an assumed good for us that we often don't even question its priority.

Nobody can challenge that, right? You do you. That's how we work. And then we hear about Christianity.

Christianity. And there's so many rules in Christianity that we have to group them into lists of ten just to keep track of them. And many people start to feel that these restrictions are what the Bible is all about.

For example, telling me to exercise my sexuality only with my spouse. Telling me not to lie or cheat or steal, but to love my neighbor because everyone else is as valuable as I am, even when that's inconvenient.

Telling me to give money to God and to be generous toward others when I've got so many options and ideas for what to do with it. Isn't Christianity restrictive of my freedom?

[ 3 : 47 ] Many ask that, right? Many feel that way. So many have dismissed Christianity on this account. That it fails the test of freedom.

That it restricts my flexibility to control my life and live it the way I want. That it just generally cramps my style. It's not cool. Who needs it after all?

I'll let Jesus know if I ever need his help. I'll tell him. But not usually. Not seriously. Well, as it turns out, Jesus has a lot to say about freedom.

In fact, when Jesus introduces himself publicly, he reads from the prophet Isaiah about someone coming to proclaim freedom for the captives and liberty for the oppressed.

He's going to set people free. He says. He says. Today, I want to focus on a conversation Jesus has with some religious people in John chapter 8.

[ 4 : 55 ] Where Jesus seeks to clarify some faulty assumptions that they have about freedom. Some misunderstandings that he is quite clear could be disastrous if they are not corrected.

He wants better for them than what they are experiencing. And he wants better for us too. Which is really exciting. As we open his word together.

Let's read some of this back and forth that they have in this conversation. And then we'll discuss what we learn from Jesus about freedom. This is John 8. Starting at verse 31.

God's holy word. God's holy word.

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.

[ 6 : 19 ] You will be free. Indeed. Thus far God's holy word. Let's pray. Jesus, would you indeed this morning set us free.

Would you do it by your truth. You tell us as we know the truth. As we know you will find this freedom.

So set us free by your truth. Your word is truth. Use it to challenge even the most basic assumptions of our hearts and our culture.

And give us hope and joy and purpose this morning. I pray that you would do that by your spirit.

Amen. One of the first things you notice in this passage that I just read is Jesus is offering freedom to people who think they already have it.

Right? He's explaining how to get free to people who think they already are. Jesus, what do you even mean you will become free?

[ 7 : 35 ] We've never been slaves. Interesting comment, isn't it? From Jews presently under the rule of Rome. Whose ancestors have been slaves in Babylon.

Further back than that in Egypt. But see their belief was that as descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. They were royalty.

No matter what they were actually going through. They were never really under the control of anyone else. Just by their own status. Their own way of functioning.

They considered themselves free. But Jesus wants them and us to know that that's not really the case.

That in fact anyone who sins is a slave to sin. In other words he's saying our natural condition.

[ 8 : 35 ] Just being American for example. Just being able to choose without someone restricting our options. Does not make us really free.

It's actually the slavery that you put yourself in. He's showing them when you rely on your own performance to get your free status.

When we think that we can give ourselves freedom. We don't realize the slavery that we actually face naturally. It's what Paul warns the Galatians about.

He says don't fall back into slavery. By feeling you control even one piece of your lives. One part of being good enough for God.

In the case of the Galatians it was circumcision. Right? He says if you require that. If that's something you bring to the table. You'll have to follow the whole law.

[ 9 : 36 ] If you get bound to your own history. To your own ethnicity. To your own performance. In order to be free.

Then you're stuck fighting that battle forever. To be good enough. To be free enough. Do you see it's actually enslaving. Even our culture's idea of freedom.

That I was discussing earlier. Ends up being counterfeit. This freedom that we think that we have. Is classically referred to as the freedom of contrary choice.

Options. Right? A freedom from any restrictions. To choose whatever our hearts desire. Except that that's where it gets complicated.

Our desires are actually part of the enslavement. The bondage. Rather than the freedom. We get that confused.

[ 10 : 40 ] Because see we so often have conflicting desires. Don't we? And those leave us stuck. When we insist that there are no restrictions on them.

No restrictions on any of our desires. Except that they conflict with one another. Let me give you a couple examples. It's true physically. I have a deep desire to eat sweet things all the time.

Just trust me. It's deep. And I have a desire to live a long and healthy life. And not to have to buy new size of clothes.

Because I hate that. And those are conflicting desires. Right? Right? And we experience it emotionally. We want to be accepted for who we are.

And we want to be thought extraordinary. And worthy by many people. Because of something special we do. Which desire will win?

[ 11 : 45 ] These desires famously conflict relationally. We desire to be promiscuous in love with anyone we want and find ourselves attracted to.

Don't we? We desire to experience love with you.

We desire to experience love that we can count on. Conflicting desires. You can't have them all with no restrictions on any of them. They don't work together. Another example from a different angle maybe.

Kids, have you seen fish kept in an aquarium before? You know, in one of those glass boxes? Like some of you maybe even at your own house?

Yeah, you've seen fish like that. And sometimes you see the fish swimming around in the water in that aquarium. And you wish that that fish could be free to swim in a pond or a lake or the ocean.

[ 12 : 51 ] Right? Just more room to roam. More freedom for the fish. Some of you, I've heard, have even thought it would be great if that fish could come sit on the sofa and watch TV with you.

Does that sound like freedom for the fish? I mean, watching TV on the sofa is a pretty cool thing, right? Huh. Maybe, you know what you enjoy in the summer?

Playing in the sand and building sandcastles. Would that be a free thing for the fish to do? Or maybe lying in the sun and getting a tan. The fish could do that with you, right?

It would be free if the fish had that option. But think about it, kids. If you give the fish freedom from that water that he's trapped in in the aquarium, that freedom's not going to go very well, is it?

He's not going to be able to live very long. He really won't know true freedom because true freedom is not merely the absence of restrictions, but actually finding the right conditions or restrictions where one can thrive.

[ 14 : 04 ] I'll be honest. I'm not a big fan of red lights, personally, when I'm driving. They feel restrictive.

They keep me from where I want to be going in the time I want to get there. But see, it's just one example of a restriction on my life that actually, when I live in that reality, it can be really freeing and life-giving because when the light changes, I can actually relax and drive with confidence when it's my turn.

The freedom of contrary choice sounds appealing to us often, but our desires really complicate that idea.

It's why Galatians 5 says, You were called to freedom, but don't use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, or your translation may say, to indulge the sinful nature, the sinful desires.

You'll find that's not freedom at all. When you try just to live however you want in every moment, to feel free, you'll find you don't. Jesus is telling us our desires are naturally bound by sin.

[ 15 : 26 ] So something needs to be done to us besides just turning us loose with our desires if we are going to be truly free. Otherwise, we will be fish out of water.

Maybe the one who made us will understand how we best function freely. Maybe he can help.

Theologian D.A. Carson writes about Jesus' explanation of freedom here in John 8.

True freedom is not the liberty to do anything we please, no restrictions, but the liberty to do what we ought.

And it is genuine liberty because doing what we ought now pleases us. We'll unpack that last part in a bit as we go. But it's important for all of us to hear Jesus say, don't get confused into thinking you have freedom without me.

No. You may have something, but it's not the real thing. American brothers and sisters, we're not truly free without Jesus.

[ 16 : 40 ] That's what he's saying. Would you look with me at the freedom Jesus offers and why it's so different from just options, choices, directing myself, especially if you've never really given Jesus' message much attention.

I'd urge you to hear what he has to say. Back to verse 34. 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.

Notice the differences in the freedom that Jesus offers here. First, his freedom is received rather than achieved.

When the son sets you free, someone gives you a gift. Someone does something for you. Someone tags your hand when you're frozen in the game of freeze tag so that you can move again and play.

[ 17 : 56 ] And this difference is monumental when you talk about freedom because it means it's not all based on you. Your performance doesn't have to keep up. Your desires don't have to sort out.

Your consistency doesn't have to hold up all the time in order to be free. No, he gives you freedom right where you are. Freedom in his performance so that you're actually free from your failures and from relying on your good works to keep up your success.

with just that one new reality, can you feel yourself starting to breathe again? Maybe like a fish thrown back into water.

It's not all on me. I'm now living in an environment where his performance makes me free from the bad stuff and the good stuff. Maybe Jesus knows what you were made for.

Jesus graces you with the gift of life, of freedom. And because it's received rather than achieved, you can know that it's permanent rather than contingent.

[ 19 : 11 ] Jesus is saying here in verse 35, you need to be adopted to become a son in the Father's house because then you're never leaving, right?

No one can kick you out or snatch you away from him or cause you to lose his love. You're his son. If you go on reading the rest of this interaction in chapter eight, it's quite long, but you'll find out that Jesus is warning these religious people that they are just slaves and not sons if he hasn't set them free.

Not the way they were born. Not something they assume about themselves. If Jesus hasn't come to set them free, then they're still slaves. They may do some stuff for God.

They may hang around God's house a lot, especially on Sundays. But they're not sons because they're not trusting Jesus for freedom.

They still don't realize the slavery that they're living in. So this is a warning for them and for us. That's how serious it is for us to miss the bondage that we're born in and our need for Jesus's rescue.

[ 20 : 27 ] You might be enslaved and never realize it. And so how could you be set free? See how this gracious freedom we receive from Jesus is freedom that can never be lost?

Because even if another nation conquers us, even if we get lost in our conflicted desires, even if we realize that we haven't done well enough, we don't even impress ourselves, we're still free.

We're still in the family. Our debts have all been paid. Our eternity has been purchased and secured. We're not punished for our performance. You're free. That kind of freedom resonates with my heart.

I bet it does with yours too. The reason it does is because it's actually freedom in relationship rather than mere independence.

This is huge. I want to try to explain it. See, freedom of contrary choice, that secular freedom from restrictions is only freedom from something.

[ 21 : 44 ] Then, what are you left with? Yourself. You're alone. Jesus' freedom is freedom from something, sin, self, performing to earn your place, and it's freedom for something, towards something, for living in relationship with the God who made you and knows exactly what's the water you were made to live in.

Listen, here's the difference. Jesus didn't come merely to make bad people good by giving us some better restrictions so that we'd follow the right rules. No.

No, Jesus came to make dead people alive because he knows how we were made to live and he doesn't want any of us to miss out on that glorious freedom, being free indeed because he makes us so.

See, Jesus knows what you're made for. Jesus knows you were made to breathe the air of heaven, heaven, of loving relationship with Father, Son, and Spirit in every corner of his glorious relationship.

You're to breathe that air in that relationship. And Jesus knew that our performance, even with the best of our desires, was never going to be enough to get us back into that perfect and joyous place.

[ 23 : 18 ] So what did he do? Jesus invaded our confusion. Jesus, if you listen to his words when he's here, agonized over having us home with him.

He pled with his father that he might have the joy of welcoming us back to the family. He even went so far as to endure our punishment so that we prodigals who left our father's house to chase our own desires could be adopted back into the family, could be sons in the father's house who never leave because he knew that when we got there, we would love the father so much that we would delight in his freedom because following the house rules, so to speak, doing what we ought would finally then be what now pleases us.

We would have true freedom. Did Jesus want us to know the freedom from God? Independence from God?

No way. Friend, that kind of freedom will ultimately leave you alone and isolated and you'll be searching for people whose desires you always affirm and who always affirm your desires, whether you realize that or not, and it won't work.

It'll never last. But this freedom in relationship, it will. It's a gift of grace so you won't lose it and you'll never enjoy it apart from knowing the giver.

[ 25 : 01 ] You're living in dependence upon him. It's entirely different. I'm pretty sure that I have said more than I understand where my mind can grasp.

So let me just back up and look at John 8 again. A slave does not remain in the house forever. That's a problem.

You're not in the relationship with the father forever if that's where you stay. But a son does.

Something needs to change so that you can stay in that relationship.

And when the son Jesus sets you free, when he makes you a son, you will be free indeed.

That's all a version of answering our question today by saying, isn't Christianity restrictive of my freedom? No.

[ 26 : 07 ] No, Christianity is not restrictive of your freedom but actually offers you true and full and lasting freedom.

The kind of freedom you're actually longing for. But as we close, I want to offer a different answer and a different angle on this question.

Isn't Christianity restrictive of my freedom? I think some of you are saying, you're kidding yourself. I've experienced it. It is restrictive of my freedom and let me tell you how and maybe you can come afterwards and tell me how you've experienced that.

But I want to give you an answer that agrees with you at some level. An answer that says, yes, it does restrict your freedom of contrary choice. but in the most beautiful, life-giving, purpose-filled way.

This requires us to understand that Christianity is not merely or primarily a list of rules which, friends, if you read the Bible with any intellectual honesty, you'll realize very soon.

[ 27 : 26 ] It contains rules but it's primarily a story about God. About a God that I just described as being perfectly free, perfectly happy, perfectly fulfilled, who had every right to live for himself in uninterrupted peace and unlimited prosperity.

That God who nonetheless gave up his freedom. His freedom to live just for himself with no restrictions.

He gave that up in order to sacrifice himself for us. And this is, as you start to read that in this story, you realize you're reading a love story rather than a mere rule book.

In fact, it's the greatest kind of love story where the strong hero fights his way to cross heaven and earth to rescue the undeserving one that he loves even when the beloved is unsure she wants anything to do with him.

His love eventually overwhelms her. In time, it earns her love. It inspires her love in return. See, friends, listen to the good news of Jesus.

[ 28 : 55 ] It's not merely that he was willing to sacrifice his freedom to come live and die in our place because of the great love with which he loved us, although that is wonderful enough. Amen?

He did do that. But actually, the good news of Jesus is he knew that kind of love was the water that we needed to live in. See, for people being put in a relationship of love like that is like finding a fish stuck on the sand and quickly pushing it back into the water.

You can breathe again. You can live again there. See, God's love for us in Jesus sets us free, sets us free to live, sets us free to live for him.

Free, in fact, then, if you're living for him, to give up our freedom of contrary choice. You see, I've found the one thing that is truly worth living for.

In fact, the one person truly worth living for. I'll sell everything else to have this treasure. I'll deny myself, Jesus. I'll take up my cross daily.

[ 30 : 12 ] I will surrender. All to live with you. That's where I start to breathe. That's such good news. Christian, listen, you have been set free not merely to watch fireworks and eat ice cream and dream of a job and a white picket fence and two and a half kids and early retirement.

Oh, it's so much better. Let me lift your eyes. You've been set free to love, to love, even to give yourselves then to others to reflect the glory of the one who gave himself for you.

Remember the true freedom that Jesus gives us? Don't use your freedom, God says, to indulge sinful desires. Jesus died to kill those so they don't please us anymore.

Rather, what? What pleases us? Through love, serve one another. Love your neighbor as yourself. As your neighbor, Jesus loves you. He said, there's a purpose worth living your entire life for. The Christian dream of love, unbounded, unbroken, and unending, and y'all, you just get to go crazy there.

[ 31 : 46 ] That's the freedom you get with Jesus. His laws don't restrict your freedom, they give you life. So find a friend to astonish with the pursuing, generous, forgiving, listening, laughing, persistent nature of your love.

Cry with a grieving neighbor. Throw a party for a lonely widow. Adopt an orphan. Rearrange your life and your schedule for 50 years for a spouse.

Pay your employee better than you pay yourself. Watch as you do these things and a bunch of others your marriage or your family or your neighborhood or your city transform because of love.

Restrict our freedom? Are you kidding me? Go crazy with this, Jesus says. You're free in my love to do all of these things.

Oh, Jesus, please restrict me from living only for myself. I need that because that's not the dream. the real dream that you were made for.

[ 32 : 59 ] The real story you were made to live in is of living in this love with all your kids, with everyone else you can love into this family from every tribe, tongue, language, and nation starting today, lasting forever with the God who made you and set you free to enjoy such wonderful and life-giving love with Him.

That's what you're free for. Let's pray. Jesus, praise you for making us free indeed and would you protect us from giving back into a yoke of slavery in order to feel good about ourselves or impress you or make others think we're something.

Forgive us for that. Forgive us for failing to use your freedom to love the way you've loved us.

Would you set our hearts free, our minds dreaming, our lives as an offering to you. Show us what it will look like for each of us.

Give us joy in your freedom. freedom. It's true freedom you promise us. May we know it more fully even today. Take our lives, Lord.

[ 34 : 28 ] They are yours and we wouldn't want to live them for or with anyone else. We ask that in your name. Amen. Amen. Amen.