

What We Believe: Faith and Freedom

Last week we looked at the central point of human history, the most transformative event that could ever happen, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. There is nothing that has impacted human life on this planet more than that single event, nothing that has done more to help slaves or infants or the poor or the outcast more than Jesus' death and resurrection. As we'll see in the weeks ahead, there is also nothing that has done more to advance science and business and the economic growth of nations around the world and nothing more to broaden the scope of education. If I had time, I could develop each of those themes, but I've done something like that in the past and today we are going to build in another direction - the direction of faith and freedom that are particularly rooted in the cross.

What did Jesus ask His disciples for more than anything else during the years he was with them? He wanted them to believe in Him, to trust Him, to show that they had faith in Him. Why do you think this was so important to Jesus?

Everybody believes in something. It's only logical, for example, to believe that things we see, things we feel or hear, were caused by something. That's a law of science, which is why you have some atheist scientists suggesting the idea that life on earth was seeded by aliens - not because it's a reasonable idea, but because they recognize that life had to have a cause and they're having trouble finding a first cause to life on earth. If you believe in naturalism, as many scientists do, you have to make the evidence fit your beliefs; you have to find an explanation for the evidence that won't involve the supernatural. And so you find believers in naturalism thinking and reasoning within their sphere of belief, limiting their explanations to naturalistic ones.

The same principle works for people who believe in socialism. Over and over you can hear or read that true socialism has never been tried, that the socialism of the Soviet Union or Cuba or China or Venezuela is not true socialism. The reason for making those claims is that socialism in each of those examples brought about economic disasters, while free markets have managed to bring a very large percentage of the world's poor out of poverty in just the past 25 years. Another example: people believe that miracles are simply not possible - again, that naturalistic bias at work - but that flies in the face of hundreds of millions of people around the globe who have experienced or witnessed a miraculous event. And, there is still a flat earth society with its website listing numerous books and articles that defend their 'faith'. The point is that we all have beliefs, things we have faith in.

What Jesus tried to drive home to His disciples was the importance of believing in Him, because faith in Him would result in salvation, would result in living according to truth and would bring the fullness of life that God wants for all of us. Jesus said it this way: "I am the way, the truth and the life." 'The way' is the way to restored relationship with God, the truth is the basis for a well-reasoned approach to all of life, and the gift of life in Jesus is the fulfillment of God's intention for the beings He made in His image - life to the full, a rich and fruitful life, a life that follows the example of the Lord of life in

honoring God and loving people. Without faith in Jesus, without that trust that He kept looking for and asking for, we will base our lives on our own best ideas, the thing we feel like at the moment, or the latest 'news' from the producers of the media that surrounds us. Our best ideas, influenced as they are by media and others who offer their opinions, is simply not the way, the truth and the life.

After Jesus' resurrection and His return to the Father, the disciples faced a choice. They could either build the rest of their lives around the miracle they had witnessed - the resurrection of Jesus - or they could return to their old lives and work and live as if nothing had happened. In fact, one of the gospels tells us that Peter, after the resurrection and after Jesus had appeared alive to him again, announced to the rest that he was going back to fishing. He had a family to support and he'd been on the road a long time, so it made sense. But then Jesus appeared again and told them all to wait in Jerusalem until they were clothed with power from heaven. Again, He was asking them to trust Him, to wait for the promise that was still to come. And they did trust Him, they did wait in Jerusalem and the Holy Spirit did come and fill them and under His power they began to change the world.

So the faith that Jesus asked His first disciples for, and the faith that He asks us for, is centered around Jesus Himself - who He was and what He did. If you were to put this "faith" issue into questions, they would include: "Was Jesus really God come to earth?" and "Did He really die for my sins?" and "Was He really resurrected after His crucifixion and death?" There is evidence to consider for each of those questions and there are over 2 billion people in the world who believe that all three can and should be answered "yes".

If we were to ask similar questions of people who believe in naturalism, we should at least ask these: "Do we ever observe something coming out of nothing?", "Do we see evidence of highly complex organisms putting themselves together, sequencing their own DNA and rapidly evolving from simplicity to high degrees of complexity?" and "Does our experience suggest that species adapt quickly and evolve, or are unable to adapt and become extinct?" If we were to ask the same kinds of questions of the person who believes that socialism is the answer to human problems of greed and corruption, we should include at least these: "How can we expect that those who lead a socialist state will be less selfish and more compassionate than Stalin in the Soviet Union or Chavez in Venezuela?", "Can we force people to want to share their wealth and their means of gaining wealth with others?" and, "What will incentivize people to work hard for no reward when others around them are lazy and indifferent to the task at hand?" That was one of the reasons the Soviet economy tanked in the 1980's; people were less productive because there was no incentive to work hard, there was no individual dream to pursue and, without that, they resorted in large numbers to vodka. Socialism depends on a new kind of person, but has no power except force to make that person.

I read a book this summer called, Is Reality Secular? by Mary Poplin, a professor at Claremont Graduate School in California. In it, she raises serious questions about the prevailing world view in the West; the view that a 'neutral' position is a secular or

humanist one and that everything else is religious and therefore to be kept in the private sphere. She points out that the defining belief in secular humanism is the conviction that human reason is sufficiently reliable to guide the course of our lives - in other words, that we can do this without God's help. If God is not necessary, there is no reason to believe in Him, worship Him or obey His commands. Thus the heart of modern secularism is the desire to get rid of God, push Him out of the picture, and they have gone to great lengths to push Him as far as possible out of the public square: out of our courts, our schools, our governments, our public discourse and the values and principles on which we base common decisions.

If you wonder how the nations of Western Europe as well as Canada and the U.S. have gone so far from God so quickly, it has come as a result of this promotion of secular humanism as a neutral common ground that we can all accept. Except that it's not neutral - it is clearly and strongly anti-God and is actively looking for ways to discredit, particularly, the Christian church. And it is now embedded in our schools and universities, in our public discourse, whether politics or media, and in our courts. After 2000 years of discovering that Christian faith is good for society, we are now being told - and some people believe it - that Christian faith is a dangerous menace that threatens people intellectually and morally.

Here's the point in all this discussion of belief in the modern world: to be a follower of Jesus, we have to reject the dominant cultural myth which is secular humanism - that we don't need God and that therefore God doesn't exist. If we try to play both sides of the issue, believing in God and playing by the rules of the secular humanists, our faith will be crushed. We'll be pulled in both directions and something will have to give.

Just as Jesus called His disciples to trust in Him, so He calls us to faith as well. At the end of His parable in Luke 18 about the persistent widow who kept going to the unjust judge to demand justice, even when he had so often refused to help her, Jesus added this comment:

But when I, the Son of Man, return, how many will I find who have faith. (18:8)

And the question is more than just one of some kind of mental assent to the reality that Jesus lived, died and rose again. He is asking for the faith that will take His presence and His promises seriously and will trust Him both for this life and the life to come. He is looking for more than, "Yeah, I believe in Jesus." He is looking for, "I know that My Redeemer lives and that He will stand on the earth at the last. And after my body has decayed, yet in my flesh I will see God." (Job 19:25,26) And those words were written many centuries before Jesus came to this earth, by a man, named Job, who trusted God in every circumstance of his life, including some really horrible ones. Jesus wants us to have that kind of faith, that level of trust, so that when life gets hard, we won't revert back to doing the best we can without God, but will walk close with Him and find His power and His wisdom at work in our lives.

Now, what I really wanted to talk about today is the result of faith, whether in God or in ourselves or in some other object of our belief. And the reason to focus on that is

because of the freedom that faith in Jesus brings to the believer. Let's go to the Scriptures and take a closer look at the relationship between faith and freedom.

First, we'll look at John 8 where Jesus speaks to some Jews who had begun to believe in Him:

If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. (8:31,32)

True freedom doesn't come from denying the truth, from inventing theories that don't hold up to the evidence in order to get what you want. Freedom comes from truth. Being convinced of the truth and allowing your life to be shaped by that truth is key to personal freedom. If you don't have the truth, then you are always hiding from it and that's not freedom. A few verses later Jesus added:

If the Son sets you free, you will indeed be free. (8:36)

Jesus points to Himself as the truth, a statement which He repeats to the disciple Thomas in chapter 14, and adds that He is the source of true freedom. Holding to His teaching leads to knowledge of the truth, the truth produces freedom, and if Jesus sets you free, you've really found freedom. That's a quick summary of that nugget from John 8.

Paul has many things to say about our freedom - including what we are free from:

For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who His children really are. Against its will, everything on earth was subjected to God's curse. All creation anticipates the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. (Rom. 8:19-21)

So, number one, freedom from death and decay.

For the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death. (Rom.8:2)

Number two - freedom from the power of sin.

So then, dear friends, the point is this: The law no longer holds you in its power, because you died to its power when you died with Christ on the cross ... we have been released from the law, for we died with Christ, and we are no longer captive to its power. Now we can really serve God, not in the old way by obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way, by the Spirit. (7:4,6)

Number three - freedom from the law, in the sense of being free to serve God without condemnation for our failures to perfectly keep the law. We aren't justified by our law-keeping, but by our faith in Christ - another connection between faith and freedom.

Even today, whenever the old covenant is being read, a veil covers their minds so they cannot understand the truth. And this veil can be removed only by believing in Christ. Yes, even today when they read Moses' writings, their hearts are covered with that veil, and they do not understand. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, then the veil is taken away. Now, the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, He gives freedom. (2 Cor. 3:14-17)

Number four - freedom from spiritual bondage, from the spiritual blindness caused by Satan and the evil forces at his disposal. The veil of spiritual blindness, the veil that hides the truth of who God is and what His plans for us are, is taken away by faith and we receive the Spirit who leads us in freedom.

For you, dear friends, have been called to live in freedom -- not freedom to satisfy your sinful nature, but freedom to serve one another in love. (Gal. 5:13)

Number five - freedom from our old sinful nature and from the control it once exercised over the choices we faced, freedom to resist temptation to selfishness and rivalry and to instead choose love.

Those are a lot of important freedoms, but they are not the kinds of freedoms that are found in the faiths of the secular humanists. The freedoms they wanted, and the freedoms they argued for, were the freedoms to submit to their old sinful nature, to have intimate relationships with anyone of their choosing, to get the church off their backs for the kinds of self-centered, hedonistic living that they preferred. And Paul says that that is bondage. It's not freedom at all. "You were slaves of sin", he writes in Romans and here we see people choosing the exact kind of slavery that God freed us from when Jesus died for us on the cross of Calvary. The freedom Jesus talked about was the freedom that came from faith in Him, the freedom to live to the full the life that God intended for us from the beginning. And Peter echoes the kind of call that Paul makes in Galatians 5 when he writes:

You are not slaves; you are free! But your freedom is not an excuse to do evil.
(1 Pet. 2:16)

The freedom that God wants for us, has given to us, is the freedom to live the full life. That can't be lived in selfishness, but only in a life that is committed to God, and to loving and serving others. In the next verse Peter writes:

Show respect for everyone. Love your Christian brothers and sisters. Fear God.
(2:17)

You can't just live this way because it seems like a good idea. You need the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to love people who rub you the wrong way and who think differently from you on almost every issue. You have to have the power of the Spirit to change your own heart from self-interest to doing good to others and seeking to build God's kingdom. "Wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, He gives freedom", we just read from Paul's second letter to Corinth. Wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, He comes invited by people who want to be renewed and who recognize their need for Him. He comes in response to faith, and He brings freedom with Him.

Let's do a quick review and make some applications:

1. We who trust in Jesus have been made free from
 - a. death and decay
 - b. the power of sin
 - c. the restrictive nature of the law
 - d. spiritual bondage

e. our old sinful nature

These are the freedoms of God's grace, they are part of the victory of the cross, and they lead to fullness of life.

2. Part two, what do we do with these freedoms?

- a.** Being free from the law, from sin and from the fear of death, we are enabled by God's Spirit to love people - that's what we see in these texts. "Show respect for everyone. Love your Christian brothers and sisters." When we get to issues like different views on human sexuality and opposing political stances, remember this instruction on how truly free people deal with others who disagree with us: show respect for everyone! It's the people who are important to God and it's the people who should be important to us as well - we won't win hearts if we don't show respect for people who are God's image.
- b.** The second aspect of living freely is to live in response to the cross, fully aware of the grace of God at work in our lives. We are not to be weighed down with guilt and shame, but are to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, knowing that He loves us, knowing that He has paid the penalty for our sin, knowing that His desire is for us to grow in this grace, to stand firm and more firm against the attacks of the enemy as we press on in our faith. This is the emotional heart of the freedom that comes from faith in Christ, the freedom to know forgiveness, the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from every sin, every failure, and to keep going, keep pressing on, because our King and Savior is waiting to spend eternity with us.