

Are you free indeed?

Rev. John Belden

Do you like rivers? Imagine yourself sitting on the bank of a peaceful river. The sun is shining. A mild breeze is blowing. The temperature is just right. And the river! It's absolutely beautiful.

About this time you see a man dressed in work clothes with an arm full of surveying equipment walking up to the edge of the water. He sets up a tripod and begins to take measurements. Being the curious person that you are, you ask him what he is doing. He replies, "We're setting this river free."

Not quite satisfied with that answer, you ask, "What exactly do you mean?" He explains, "Well, the way we see it, this river is being restrained by its banks. It's not allowed to flow freely where it wants to, since it's restricted to one course. Our plan is to level the banks so the river will be free to flow in any direction it chooses. Then it will be truly free and beautiful."

Is this what freedom really is? The construction team thinks a river without banks will be free and beautiful. But we all know that a river without banks is a flood. And while there is certainly a sense in which a flood is free, it is anything but beautiful. It is ugly and destructive. And its so-called freedom is the very thing that makes it so. On the other hand, it is most beautiful and useful when it is restricted by its banks.

What do you call a human life without the restrictive banks of God's commandments? The Bible calls it a "flood of dissipation" (1 Peter 4:4). It is ugly and destructive. Many have bought into the lie that restraints on our lives rob us of freedom. This all stems from a distorted view of freedom. Fallen humanity sees freedom as the right to choose to do whatever it wants. But the Bible defines freedom as being able to do what God wants, what He made us to do. And God made us to glorify and enjoy Him as we obey His commands. He gives freedom without chaos.

Jesus Himself equated freedom with obedience and slavery with sin when He said, "whoever commits sin is a slave" (John 8:34). And He alone claimed to be able to give real freedom. "If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). What is involved in being "free indeed"? We are free when the

power of truth narrows our choices just like the banks narrow the river's course, as Jesus said, "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

God's truth exposes sin for what it really is, and He gives the sinner grace not to choose it. This is freedom. It is the power of God to do what is right. This is why the Bible says that God's commands are "not burdensome" (I John 5:3). They are liberating. James can speak about the law as the "perfect law of liberty (freedom)" (James 1:25). Likewise, Peter says that to be a bondservant of God is to be free (I Peter 2:16).

On the other hand, the non-Christian sees God's commands as restraints on his freedom, just as the surveyors saw the banks restraining the river's freedom. This makes him hostile to God's law. As Paul says, "the carnal mind is enmity [hostile] against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Rom. 8:7). But when a person experiences new birth through Christ, he suddenly sees freedom in terms of being what God designed him to be.

The Church must be aware that people will come to her for "help" while in the bondage of their distorted view of freedom. Many will want us to bail them out of the consequences of their "freedom" without addressing the deeper problem. As we help them, it is our responsibility to tell them the truth. True freedom is not merely the right to choose. Freedom is what comes from making the right choices. This freedom is only found in Christ. If He sets you free, you will be free indeed.

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