

Truly Free (Willing Slave)
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During the 20-odd years that we were missionaries in Africa, our children were really confused. *Were we rich or poor?* When on home leave in the States, we were poor. Missionary work is not overly lucrative. So we couldn't afford music lessons, or science camp, or a lot of luxuries enjoyed by their friends. Going to McDonald's was a big deal, and we only went once a month. Schools offered our kids free lunches because our income was low.

But when we were in Africa, we were rich. We had a car; a cement house with a tile roof and indoor plumbing; education for our children. There wasn't much to spend money on anyway, so it was easier to save for the odd vacation at a game reserve. In comparison to so many around us, we were rich. So... *Were we rich or poor?*

The Corinthian church had a similar question, except that theirs had nothing to do with wealth. For them the question was this: *are we free or are we slaves?* Paul had told them that in Christ, they were free. But he would also say things like, "I am a slave to all." He said he had given up his rights in order to serve whomever he met. *Slave? Or free? Which is it, Paul? Make sense!*

You and I ask similar questions. *Who is truly free?* I have seen women in jail who are more free than some people on the outside. So, what really makes you free? Is a retired person more free than someone who is employed? Is a child more free than an adult, not weighed down by so many responsibilities? Or is the adult, who can drive his own car and go where he wants, more free than a child? And what about you young people: are you free? Is there anything that makes you feel trapped, like needing to wear a certain style or color of clothing? Behaving/talking like the other kids? Are you a slave to certain expectations of perfection – maybe in school or otherwise? Are you truly free?

So we may not so different from people at Corinth. Let's take a look. Most of you know that this was a very bright, gifted and young congregation, but also a troubled one. They were Christians, but were also un-Christ-like: divided among themselves, some indulging in immoral practices, others bringing lawsuits against one another, all demanding their own rights. Throughout the letter, Paul keeps circling around this one issue: what it means to be free in Christ. You'll find it in chapters 5, 6, 8, 9 and 10 – so it's clearly a big question. And Paul uses many approaches, many analogies to help sort it out. He uses every tool in his tool box to try to communicate clearly just how we are free.

You have to remember that the former Jews in this congregation had experienced a monumental shift in their understanding about their relationship with God. For centuries, they were taught to follow the Law of Moses – not just the 10 commandments, but all 613 laws that were derived from them. Here's how many of them understood the process of salvation:

**** I do good things → I am saved**

I keep the law – circumcision, kosher diet, the Sabbath -- and some 600 more -- and God says, "OK. You're in." But, it's an impossible task.

Now, the coming of Christ, his crucifixion and resurrection, had changed all that. Paul explained that the Law had been acting as a guardian, as a teacher all those years; but now it was completely fulfilled in Christ. Love, you see, fulfills what the law demands. The law actually demands only the most basic of decent behavior. The law says, "Don't kill each other." Pretty basic. But love says, "Take care of your neighbor in every possible way." A much higher bar, don't you think? Jesus set that bar first by teaching it and then by living it out – by dying on the cross for us. Paul now tells the churches, "What you cannot get by following the Law, you can receive simply by faith: forgiveness and the relationship with God we so desperately need." This is what Paul means by saying, "You are free." *Well, wonderful!* you might say. *Now I can do what I want.* At least, that's what some of the Corinthians thought.

So here's where the confusion lies. Paul says, Yes, you are free from the Law, in Christ, *for salvation*. Following all of those 613 laws: doing good things, going to the synagogue, offering sacrifices, praying, helping your neighbor – none of that counts *towards salvation*. Salvation is freely given to you in Christ. Period. Full stop.

Ok. So then what? What does that mean about the way I now live my life? Consider this. You have just been saved from drowning by a passerby who risked his life to pull you back to shore. What's your response? Heartfelt gratitude. Right? You would probably tell that person, "I am so thankful. I can't possibly pay you enough. How can I show my gratitude?" You've been rescued from death. That's what God has done for you in Christ. How do you show your gratitude? Not by saying dismissively, "Oh good, now I can do what I want;" but rather by asking, "Jesus, how can I ever thank you?" And he says, "Follow me. Do what I do. Let your life be governed by my love."

So now, here is how it works:

**** In Christ: I am saved → I do good things.**

See, those good things don't count towards salvation, but they still count. When you do those good things, you follow Jesus by helping your neighbor. You show his compassion for all

people. Doing these things also helps you in other ways. Luther says they help subdue your more selfish tendencies, transforming you from the inside, making you more Christ-like. And by the way, you become a happier person. In fact, the more you are a willing slave to Christ, the more free you become. You become more like what God has created you to be. You are less fragmented inside – as Scripture would say, less double-minded. And, God has more hands to do his saving work in this troubled world.

The thing is, when I live only for myself – demanding my rights, seeking my own pleasure -- I actually find myself complaining more, getting depressed or angry. God turns that around in Christ. Now I find myself giving up my rights for the simple pleasure of delighting God my Father – and finding happiness where I least expect it. I find I'm more satisfied, complaining less and more thankful. Again, when you submit to God's will for you, you are truly free. When you are a slave to Christ, you are free indeed, because this is what God has created you *for*. It fulfills something inside of you that nothing else can fulfill. More than that, it creates new relationships, more love, a sense of greater purpose. It transforms you as a person, along with the whole Christian community of Christ.

So, what does *that* look like? Here are a couple of examples. When we were in Tanzania we came to know a fellow Lutheran missionary by the name of Dr Helmut Diefenthal, a German radiologist who had survived antisemitism in the second World War. He then devoted his life in service to the less fortunate. He established the radiology department at Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Center and then lived in the States where he worked in a VA hospital until retirement. In retirement, he and his wife returned to Tanzania to develop a radiology training program for local doctors, and continued in that position for 25 years, until the age of 90. Dr Diefenthal gave up his rights to retirement and an easy life. I was one of his patients, and I can't tell you how grateful I was for his kindness and expertise. He was the epitome of a free servant. He didn't live this kind of life because it was easy, nor to twist God's arm to save him. He chose this life out of deep gratitude for what Jesus had already done for him.

Another example: you've seen it today already, in the testimony of Steve Hill. He told us that earlier in his life he just didn't care; he did what he wanted. But something or Someone was at work in him to turn that around. Jesus, the very person that he didn't care anything about, has become the person that he cares about the most. Now Steve is free from all kinds of things that used to tie him down. ** Today he is a willing slave to Christ, doing everything he can for the sake of the Gospel.

My friends, only God has that kind of power – to flip you like that. Only God can change hearts. And it's the power that is most needed in this troubled world. God empowers you to care, to

love, to serve – willingly, out of gratitude for what he has done. ** God’s purpose for you is to live your life spreading the good news of Jesus in any way possible. So let’s add one more thing to our equation:

**** I am saved → I do good things... for the sake of the Gospel.**

Lose your life and you *will* find it, Jesus said. You *are* free in Christ, says Paul, *and* a slave to all. *This*, my friends, is the best life has to offer. True freedom is found when you are serving others in Christ. (Raise your hands...) True freedom is not found in riches, nor in the easy life, nor in doing what you want. There are times in your life when you may be able to enjoy such things, but the fun goes out of it real quick. I have to tell you that the one activity in my week that I really don’t want to miss, is those few hours I spend behind bars, listening to inmates, giving them some measure of comfort and hope. The best of all is when one of those women finds true freedom, even behind bars, when she believes the Good News that Jesus died for her, and commits her life to following him. Then – even behind bars – she has a purpose: to serve others around her, make them feel welcomed in an unwelcoming place, listening to their woes, sharing commissary items, sharing Christ. Praying with them. There is just nothing better. (What do you say, Church? Do I have an amen to that?)

Lose your life and you will find it. You are free in Christ; but true freedom comes when you willingly set aside your rights to serve others, just as Jesus did. Jesus set aside his rights as the Son of God to die on the cross, thus freeing us from the consequences of sin and death. There is no greater gift.

Rich or poor? Both are true. Slave or free? Both are true, but in different ways. Christ has set you free! Now... what are you going to do with your freedom?