

ARE YOU TRULY FREE?

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The personal quest for Freedom is important. At least one hundred thousand die each year seeking for freedom itself or dying as a by-product of someone else's quest. It has taken me some fifty years, though, finally to get a glimpse of what freedom is. I have read hundreds of quotations concerning freedom over the years including Jesus' proclamation "The truth will set you free." (John 8:32) Frankly, I admit, I never comprehended that phrase fully until recently.

I have come to learn, for instance, that lack of freedom and slavery are not necessarily synonymous. The term *slavery* is, usually, reserved for physical limits placed on us by forces outside ourselves, and without our permission. The lack of freedom includes control by anything that is an impediment to personal growth and reaching full potential. So, if I am a Christian that includes any impediment to my relationship with God. Full potential only comes when employing one's true talents, when one is open to the flow of God in life, and when one is open to the needs of others and the world. Whatever it is that stifles God's flow and is allowed to impede self-growth, is stifling one's freedom. Society emphasizes physical or bodily slavery, but relegates mental or emotional slavery to an afterthought. Willingness to allow desires for material things and pleasures will stunt personal growth. The result is people become prisoners by their desires. Slavery includes mindsets that will not allow us to be the better persons we desire. Freedom means having the ability to choose for ourselves the actions and articles that are good for our growth as a person.

Slavery is anything that forces individuals to act against their personal will, anything that obviates personal choices or controls actions. Slavery is involuntary servitude. For example, most of us know someone with addiction problems. In the United States, in the freest of countries, millions are in bodily slavery. Addicted, these people are not allowed to be their true selves. Mentally, emotionally and spiritually they are in bondage. They yearn for clarity of mind but just cannot seem to be able to grasp it. They may have a job and be married. Externally free, internally they are in bondage. This point is what Jesus was proclaiming when he said, "The truth will set you free." Again, one can be externally free but without inner freedom to find peace of mind, one cannot find true freedom. Jesus' actions and examples place the priority where freedom belongs, namely inner peace and freedom with God. Jesus did not clamor for bodily, external freedom. Such an action would be putting the cart before the horse, so to speak. Work first on internal liberty.

There are then two types of freedom to which the term alludes: *external* and *internal* freedom. The *external* lack of freedom does not allow people to make physical or bodily choices.

Lacking freedom to explore or decide how one would like use one's talents, and abilities are a lack of *external* freedom. Anything that externally hinders one's full expression impedes freedom.

However, internally there might be a fear or an impetuous desire for the superfluous. Many in the world do not have the *external* freedom to pursue their heart's desire because of political restrictions, but just as many are permitting internal issues to restrict personal freedom. People put themselves in situations where choice, and thereby freedom, is limited. The right choices allow all to flourish using the gifts and talents they have. I use the term *flourish*, in turn, to mean having the capacity to bring joy to self and others. Happiness and joy for each of us, when it could include happiness and joy to many, is a much more efficient use of resources and especially if we consider that we are the resources too.

To understand freedom, I had to discern what actions could best bring long-term good to me. That, of course, means defining for the self what is entailed in long-term good. It certainly is not, bodily or mentally, being forced to do what is not in one's long-term best interest. Can we all then see that the forces restricting us can be internal as well as external? There is external freedom that allows one to explore and learn by trial and error if necessary. However, there is also internal freedom that gives the strength and confidence to make one's personal choices. To my reasoning, what is *good* means having the contentment and satisfaction in long-term, sustained periods and having few regrets. If I have desires for security at all cost, (even when we admit logically there is no such thing as full security in this plane of existence), such desires force me to accumulate material assets and not allow time for other enjoyable and meaningful pursuits like friendships and other activities. Is such an action *freedom*? No, I cannot be free until I do deaden as Scripture says, "the desires of the flesh." (2 Peter 2:18) Desires for security, sensual pleasures, wisdom, and peer approval are all acceptable pursuits but seeking any of these to where they block out possibility of other activities or thoughts is not freedom. Can we see why the Apostle Paul stressed, "You have been set free" from sin? (Romans 6:18) Freedom means being able to make unrestricted personal choices that lead to long-term wellbeing for self and others and is the rubric by which many happy people live. If I am allowed fewer choices in life because of some personal deleterious desires, as well as some government or peer group, are blocking me from experiencing true joy, true good, I am not free.

Jesus stressed freedom, frequently talking about working to be "set free." However, his idea of freedom was much different from what many of us think of today. Freedom to many means No Constraints. That, of course, is logically impossible since we have limitations built into us by our inherited genes and our persistent societal environment. Most all that we believe to be true is based on the language and ideas provided us by society, right or wrong, in that respect we are not really free. To Jesus, however, freedom is the ability to do what one really wishes and do what will bring "good," (what 'good' is, is not the issue here) for self and others. For example, we're instructed to be kind to others with the outcome of happiness to all. But if feeling overly fearful or self-centered within our inner being hinders the capacity to demonstrate kindness, for all practical purposes we are not free.

For me, the key to acquiring a balanced perspective on freedom was realizing there are those two types of freedom, and this is a critical point. One type is illusory, the other a source of lasting freedom. As I mentioned before, I refer to the two branches as internal and external. Jesus made the distinction clear in one of his directives. I knew that, but I still didn't comprehend the point fully. Remember He directed His listeners, "If someone forces you to go one mile (in servitude), go with him two miles." (Matthew 5:41) Jesus could not be clearer where he emphasizes the priority. Externally and bodily, one might not be free. Slavery was a way of life in Jesus' time and has been long before and long after. Jesus was in effect saying that physical freedom was not the most prized. Of the people in Jesus time probably, 95% were bound in some form of physical slavery. He was wise enough to realize that even after thousands of years the masses would still be questing for freedom and still have not gotten it right. Jesus stressed the value of immediate inner freedom. He asserted one could be truly free with inner freedom with God's spirit and help. External freedom is quite illusory. Many think they are free but are not. Let me clarify. One of the greatest proponents of freedom was imprisoned for years, the Apostle Paul. Externally, he was incarcerated; yet, he claimed to be totally free. Mentally, emotionally, spiritually St. Paul was free and wrote a number of letters to friends. Asking to be set free from prison was an afterthought to him. In letter after letter, St. Paul encouraged his friends to realize they could be as free as he felt. Considering he was in prison, his words of encouragement carried extra meaning, "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Corinthians 3:17)

Throughout history, thousands of martyrs have been in the same state; that is, chained and imprisoned, but free to think, have communion with God, and be happy. More free than many of us today. A good example in modern times could be seen in the life of Nelson Mandella in South Africa. While imprisoned for years, the authorities could stop him from roaming over the country evangelizing for racial freedom; yet, they couldn't stop him from dreaming, planning, praying and finally seeing his dreams come to pass. That inner freedom is what counts most. One more set of examples; and this is where I had a hard time understanding myself. Unfortunately, it's not stressed enough in Western Christianity. To start with, let's take any virtue like patience, a virtue by all religious standards. I submit, you can't be free without patience! I learned that lesson while I was trying to start a small business. Other friends I never knew could; without patience they didn't have the freedom necessary. I worked on being patient, and did indeed start a very successful small business. My friends could very well have, but they kept giving up. They were free in one sense but not the other. Persistence with patience was necessary. They had the outer freedom but not the inner. I can categorically state here, but reserve for another time the proof, that every virtue, recommended by most every religious group, is necessary for true freedom. To the extent you lack any virtue, to that extent your freedom to pursuit your personal goals are hindered.

Work through this simple example, using selflessness. I know many people personally and have read numerous accounts in the media of individuals with cases of extreme selfishness; they

were forced emotionally to keep acquiring more stuff. One cannot be truly happy unless selfishness is tempered. Until we learn the lesson, that there is an abundance for everyone on this planet, something is missing in our thinking. One of those “somethings” is freedom. One can not come to true happiness till he has the tools and the outlook that is at the basis of liberty.

I will be a little more graphic here to illustrate the point again. I have a friend that does want a wonderful happy marriage. Unfortunately, he is in bondage now. He doesn't have freedom yet. His obstacle is pornography. Till he can overcome that issue he will never have a full, open marriage. His marriage may not break up, but his spouse will always sense that something is missing. Let's call that missing virtue “purity.” One of the reasons I am a Christian is that I have seen individuals come to freedom by simply knowing and working toward purity with the help of God's spirit, while for many it is an endless struggle. I know purity is not a virtue that is high on most people's list in our day and age, but remember purity is not prudishness. It is necessary for unhindered emotional freedom.

I debated whether to present this one last example, but I feel I must. And please, it has nothing to do with politics. I have lived for the last 50 years seeing with gratitude the quest for racial freedom being realized for many millions. However, I see in my backyard, as in any major city, people living in inner slavery. I remember when most all my friends had a happy family lives like I had. I do not see that any longer. I'm not just talking about marriage here; it is something much bigger. I feel we have set up a system that forces people into slavery (I use that word only to make a point). When we force people into a situation that they are dependent on hand-outs to exist, that is not freedom. Many lives are irreparably hurt by being forced to live under government dependence. I do not think anyone's definition of freedom includes that kind of bondage. There are so many ways to make financial help dignified, but those in power are too short sighted to realize it. Again, it is outer freedom without inner freedom. Only those who can break the mold personally come to true freedom, and fortunately many do.

I hope you can now see why Jesus, and for that matter, all the great sages, have stressed the notion of pursuing inner freedom. You can't be truly free without pursuing that emotional, mental and spiritual freedom. An individual is only free to become the person he or she wants to become when that is realized. I'd go so far as to say this, a person, an individual, truly wants to become deep down, is also the person he or she was meant it be. That person optimally uses talents and abilities to find self and help others at the same time, spreading happiness to others and simultaneously finding happiness for self.

This is the most valuable truth to take to heart. Trying to attain this inner peace and inner freedom can be difficult. However, one of the first assurances all Christians are given is that any seeker can have assistance in attaining this tranquility. All know the Bible teaches (among other sacred books) that supernatural help is all-powerful in transforming one's thinking so he or she can start the quest for the necessary tools, traits and valuable virtuous inner attitudes that lead to freedom. The spirit of God is a force that over time will help transform one's thinking to an

optimal and optimistic level where one won't be hindered in his pursuit of his dreams. Remember what scripture says, "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2Corinthians 3:17) To the extent we are free to grow and attain, without hindrance, we come to be our true selves. Yes," the truth will set you free." This one aspect of that truth, inner freedom, is a gift of God, given to each of us impartially in our seeking for true and full freedom.

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