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John 8:31-36 – Jesus’ Emancipation Proclamation

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Many Americans would consider January 1st, 1863 to be one of our finest moments as a nation. That was the day President Abraham Lincoln put into effect his emancipation proclamation that freed the slaves in America’s southern states and set us on a course toward more fully realizing the American precept that all men are created equal... or so many think. But that Emancipation Proclamation wasn’t quite the beacon of objective moral progress that many think it was. In fact, the Emancipation Proclamation actually only applied to the states that had seceded from the Union, which left the loyal border states and their slaves unaffected. It also exempted the parts of the Confederacy that had already come under northern control. And finally and most importantly, the freedom promised by the Emancipation Proclamation depended entirely on the Union’s military victory, which was far from a certainty at that point in the Civil War.

A proposed freedom without any real guarantees can’t ever offer any real peace and certainty. And what’s true about physical slavery is just as true about spiritual slavery. See, so many American Christians love to talk about how we have freewill to choose to follow God, to believe his Word, to invite the Holy Spirit into our hearts; they love to say things like, “Jesus died to pay for your sins and open heaven to anyone who believes, and now all you have to do is decide whether you want to follow him or not.” But do we really have that freedom? Is that really what God’s Word says? Is it really within our power to make that decision and make it well? Much as American Christians like to talk that way, that’s not a freedom that can offer any real peace and certainty, either.

But when Jesus spoke in our Gospel lesson for today, all that changed. The freedom he promised to those who believed in him wasn’t shaky or conditional, because it’s not based on who we are and what we have to try to do going forward. It’s based on who he is and what he’s already done perfectly for us. In fact, there’s nothing we have to doubt about it, because Jesus’ Emancipation Proclamation means that you have been freed from slavery to sin and freed for service in love.

Now the story of our slavery began all the way back in Genesis 3 – you heard that story already today. When God first created Adam and Eve, they were perfect and free to do what was good because they wanted to – what better definition of freedom is there than that? But then came the devil questioning whether they were really as free as they thought. Why would God *restrict* you from eating that fruit? Shouldn’t you be able to do whatever you want with *your* life? Shouldn’t you be able to experience good *and* evil if you so choose?

But what was he doing? He was hunting. He was trying to trap Adam and Eve, and a trapper is only as good as the bait he uses to get his prey to fall into his trap. So he used that fruit that was

pleasing to the eye, yes, but what was even more appealing was the idea of total freedom without anyone to tell you what to do. Sounds great, right – almost American!

Well, it wasn’t great. In fact it was about as great as a child saying, “I don’t care what my parents say, if I want to touch that hot stove, then I’m going to touch it!” That freedom that Adam and Eve thought they were going to find only hurt them and in fact only proved itself in the end to be slavery, because once they were caught in Satan’s sinful trap, there was no escaping. He put his bit in their mouths and his choke collar over their necks, and they couldn’t get themselves out.

And if anybody questions what exactly the Bible says about our natural spiritual state, they only need to look at the illustrations the Bible uses to describe it. We were caught in sin like an animal caught in a deadly trap, with no chance to release ourselves. We were slaves to sin and the devil, with no ability to escape by ourselves. We were blind and in the dark, but fumble around as we might, there’s just no way for us to find the light on our own. We were enemies of God who just can’t get over what stands between us on our own. We were spiritual stillborns, born physically alive but spiritually lifeless. We were dead in our transgressions and sins, with no more capacity to help ourselves than the corpse at a funeral.

That’s a pretty blunt truth, isn’t it. We are spiritually powerless, purely passive, and so the freedom to choose is just an illusion. Oh sure, we can use our Reason to choose outward, earthly things like what to wear and where to live and what job to work at. But when it comes to the spiritual things, the matters of the heart and eternity, it’s like Jesus says: “*Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.*”

And if you’re not sure about that, just look at the news every day. What are American politicians at each other’s throats about today? How’d that manhunt in Florida go? How many more people got murdered in American cities this week? Has there ever been a time when the human trafficking and drug trade have been more booming? Or in our own homes, maybe it’s alcohol or porn or illicit sex or our activity calendars or anger over politics or relationships that enslave us. And if you’re not a historian, then just take my word for it: past history isn’t any better. Left to our own power, left to our own freedom, left to our own choice – that’s not a good place for sinful humans to be, because like our Psalm for today said, we are corrupt, our deeds are vile, and there is no one who does good, not even one. The only place our sinful human “freedom” can lead us is away from God and toward hell.

So when so much of American Christianity says that it is up to your power, your freedom, your choice to believe in Jesus, be saved, and do good, I say: that’s not Biblical, it’s not helpful, and it’s not desirable, either. The decision for Christ crowd makes a huge deal about their own conscious choice to follow Jesus – but what about when they fall into sin or their faith gets in a rut? Then all of the sudden they’re *choosing* something other than Jesus, and that can be a terrible

burden to their conscience: is my faith really sincere? That doesn't free them from slavery to sin, it just tricks them into pride on the front end and despair on the back and only makes things worse a lot of times. Or Christians who think that their faith needs to be formed by loving action before it's complete and sufficient, isn't that just works-righteousness by another name? Then you are forced to keep trying to always prove that you're doing enough and your deeds are good enough and your love is genuine enough for your faith to be really satisfactory before God. You're trying to convince yourself that you have the power to do something that only Christ can do for you.

So instead Jesus says to us, "*If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*" Yes, because of our sins, we were caught in the devil's trap – but Jesus broke that trap and released us from it when he rose from the dead for us. Yes, because of our sins, we were slaves to sin under the devil's power – but Jesus *redeemed* us, he bought us out of our slavery at the price of his own holy, precious blood that he spilled for us on the cross. Yes, we were spiritually blind and in the dark, but now we see by the light of faith in our Savior. Yes, we were enemies of God, but then Jesus came to reconcile us and give us the peace that only he can give. Yes, we were first born in sin, but then Jesus gave us new birth in perfection through Water and the Word. And though we were once dead in our transgressions, our God graciously made us alive with Christ.

But the best part is that he didn't just set us free and turn us loose to go on our merry way – what good would that do for people with hearts as bent and broken as ours? No, Jesus did even more: "*Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever.*" When Jesus redeemed us from our spiritual slavery, he set us free from the power of Satan and brought us into the family of God. So we're not the devil's slaves anymore; we're God's own children now, Jesus' true brothers and sisters and heirs of our heavenly Father's kingdom! He took away the fear and uncertainty of being a slave who could be sold or sent away at any time and without any future, and he gave us instead the certainty and security of belonging to God's family and having a home with him forever.

And if having spiritual freedom, freedom of the will, means being on our own away from any of that, well then I don't want it. We were bound as slaves to sin so that we could be bound to salvation in Christ alone so that now we are bound for eternal life in heaven. It's out of our fumbling hands and entirely in Jesus' perfect hands. That's a bondage that I will humbly and cheerfully admit to, if it means I get to be sure and secure about my relationship with my Savior. But it gets even better. Jesus' emancipation proclamation doesn't just mean we are freed from slavery to sin because he lived and died and rose again for us to make it so, as great as that is. It also means we are freed for service in love.

It's just like Jesus said: "*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*" The devil and the world and our own sinful flesh

would have us believe that freedom really means not having anybody telling you what to do, much less the Bible with all its restrictive rules. But if all we follow is whatever we want, whatever we like, whatever feels good at any given time, isn't that really just making us slaves again to our own sinful impulses – to our "stomachs," as the Bible says? No, Jesus says here that following his teaching is the only way to find true freedom, because true freedom means doing something not just because you *have* to, but because you *want* to because it's *good* for you, because it's what you were truly made for and always meant for! The freedom Jesus gives us means freedom from the control of sin that hurts us and the one-way path to hell that condemns us. And so with that kind of freedom, we don't need to pound our chests about our absolute independence from anything or anyone – "Don't need 'em 'cause I'm my own man!" No, we can use that kind of freedom to serve and love *interdependently* with others.

Remember, we are the family of God now, and when a family loves each other, they're not afraid to show it in their words and their actions. And the way we can show love to our heavenly Father and to our brothers and sisters in faith is by holding to Jesus' teaching – continuing in it, clinging to it, persevering in it, not letting any of it go. In fact, there's nothing more loving we can do for God, for others, for ourselves – for now and for eternity – than that, because that's how God gives us a new heart, a new will, that serves and follows him not because we're *forced* to like a slave, but because we *get* to like a child. When we hold to Jesus' teaching, then his Word becomes the guiding force in our lives and the love that he first showed to us begins to shine through us toward others. Then we don't have to worry about just doing things for the selfish reward or recognition or "what's in it for me?" What's in it for me is real purpose and fulfillment and fellowship and blessing, because this is how we can say thank you to our God and Savior, that's how we can live free from Satan's evil clutches, and that's how we can show real help and love and service to our neighbors. And for a believer in Jesus, that's not a heavy, restrictive burden; that's a wonderful, energizing joy!

"*And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.*" If you've been listening to public opinion lately, you know that it's a matter of some uncertainty just how sincere Abraham Lincoln really was when he gave that Emancipation Proclamation to free the American slaves at the beginning of 1863. But there can be no uncertainty about Jesus' sincerity in what he did for us or the gracious favor of Almighty God that made it happen. After all, certainty was the whole point. If we were left to our own power and will, broken and corrupt as it is, we would have nothing but sin and doubt and condemnation. But God's will is what sent Jesus here to make us his children and heirs of heaven, freed from sin forever to willingly serve in love, because it rests on his perfect life, death, and resurrection for us – and that means nothing could be more certain. Yes truly, God be praised for Jesus' emancipation proclamation! Amen.