

Loyalty

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I think I am on solid ground when I say that we all desire to be free. It is a desire not only for just some, but for all people, for the very reason that it resides and breaks forth from our own human nature. It is a God-given part in each and every one of us to want to be free and was woven into the spirit of man at creation.

You can see it early on in our children as they continually pull against their parents' direction and authority. Emotional, uncontrolled? Most certainly. But it comes from a desire to be free and to choose one's own destiny. A desire for one's own personal liberty certainly resides in each and every one of us.

Try to imagine, if you will, a life without freedom to choose. A life where others extend their will over your choices. And you might think that you would rather be dead than to submit to a life with no freedom to choose your own course, and presumably, your own happiness.

The words of Patrick Henry come to mind when he is quoted to have said, "Give me liberty or give me death." That sounds pretty extreme. But is it? I do not think any of us have gotten to that point in our struggles in pursuing our own goals or else wanting to die. Not yet anyway.

But let us change Mr. Henry's words a bit, and it starts to look like our God-given liberty is certainly of great value to each and every one of us. "Give me Christ or give me death." And things now hit home with each one of us. It is the same thing, is it not? Essentially, it is the same statement as Mr. Henry's. It is just better defined of our need and for our direction and our lives as we apply our God-given freedom to choose.

Without a doubt, we need liberty. But not mankind's one-sided approach that only looks at liberty to elevate the self. But to use the liberty that God

provides that we may build a relationship with Him. Free to choose righteousness. Right doing over unrighteousness. Free to follow God rather than the false idols that surround us. Free to choose truth and seek the will of God, and free to live by it.

We all want liberty to choose how we live a life with our secular pursuits also. Now all of us have our own personal agenda. We desire, we wish to be free to pursue more of, but for various reasons and outside influences we cannot. We have what I refer to as fixed commitments for our time and resources.

Many of us have jobs, and other reasons that we need to set aside what we would *want* to do with what we *need* to do. Many of us find ourselves under economic hardship and have limited choices of what we can do. Some of us lack the physical ability to even consider certain activities. Age, physical ailments can certainly diminish our choices.

Our desires may want one thing or another. But the reality of our existing conditions have removed our choices in the matter. Liberty in this sense certainly is limited, even if it is just a partial constraint for a short period of time.

Many times our current limitations are just temporary. Our physical conditions can improve, and we are free to choose a broader range of activities. Many times people work out of their economic hardships and can easily go about and do more of what they want.

But sadly, so many when they do find this newfound liberty, make it an end unto itself and end up wrecking their health or their prosperity, and find themselves in greater debt, and end up with less freedom to choose than before they had found the monetary success. (I think Ryan hit that pretty hard this morning.) What was to free one has turned on oneself, and the poor choices made can make one less free than they were before they found this wealth.

We have all seen this or maybe we have even lived it. I had an older brother who received a large sum of money, and by large I mean around \$30,000, in 1973 for his suffering from an industrial accident. In a short period of a few

months, he had spent it all, larger parties, a motorcycle, what we call choppers back then, drugs, and who knows what else.

It is a familiar story. How many young people have finally gotten old enough to get out on their own, away from years of parental oversight, only to wreck themselves with bad company, with alcohol or drugs. Or maybe made money choices that put them at or near financial ruin and in desperate need of help from the same place they so desperately wanted to get away from. I have heard it said by parents with children that have moved out on their own, that they always come back at least once, and sometimes more than once. Those parents recommended changing the locks on the house.

But money by itself is basically neutral. It is neither good or bad in a moral sense. It just is what it is. But like so many things we often see, it takes on the traits of whoever is in control of it.

When this happens, what should or could be a blessing and even a tool to increase one's liberty, has become the agent of confinement in one's ability for making good choices. We can see this played out in the life of the rich man we read of in Luke 18 and verse 18. Remember, this is not a parable but an actual event recorded for our benefit.

Do we see an intelligent man with foresight when he asks the Lord what was necessary to inherit eternal life? Certainly a question we have all considered ourselves. What he is asking is what choices do I need to make, how and where should I direct my liberty to gain eternal life? It is a good question.

Jesus responds in verse 20 by listing law keeping as the natural starting place to be approved by God, and this instruction can be easily understood by everyone seeking this direction for themselves. Verse 20 reads, "You know the commandments." Jesus then goes on to list five of the commandments that deal with how we are to conduct our relationship with others. Commandments, I am sure that rich people can easily cross the line on in their opulent lifestyles and in their business dealings to maintain their wealth.

Luke 18:20 "You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Honor your father and your mother.'

What we are seeing here by His response, Jesus is putting structure to the man's question, telling him that, yes, there are actions you can take and things you can do if you want to inherit eternal life. We will get to more on this point as we move along. Verse 21 is the rich man's response. "All these things I have kept from my youth."

Jesus does not argue this point. And it appears He accepted it as being true. And then He tells the rich man that he needed to change his focus, that he had used his life to accumulate wealth in this world, but needed to step away from the direction of accumulation and give to the poor, and as verse 22 says, to have treasure in heaven "follow Me."

What a wonderful offer this man was given. And how true we can see is Solomon's proverb in chapter 18 and verse 11. In the book of Proverbs, of course, where he wrote,

Proverbs 18:11 The rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his own esteem.

Consider that you and I have this same offer and also need structure to help direct our God-given liberty. The rich man turned and walked away, and he went back to a strong city and his high walls had become the prison of his own construction. Jesus our Lord had done for this man exactly what He said He was sent to do,

Luke 4:18 [He was sent] To proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.

All of these issues needed to be dealt with by the rich man. But the blindness was too great and he could not see the forest for the trees. Our worst traps can often be the ones we unknowingly build for ourselves.

We have been given a very sobering lesson in this. We need to be certain the freedom we have is centered with God and that we continually seek God's

counsel to keep clear of what can become our own blindness. Where our trouble comes from is when we fail to see that liberty by itself can end up being very destructive in anyone's life.

Liberty without wisdom, without godly direction, without law, loses its value and it can easily become an agent for someone's personal destructive behavior.

This is true even on a national level. How often had Israel in the wilderness refused God and fell into the sin of complaining. Always testing God and His resolve to bring them into their promised rest. Numbers 14, in verses 19 to 45 is God's strong rebuke to them as they forfeited their opportunity to go into the land.

Please turn over with me to Numbers 14. We are not going to read all 26 verses, but verses 22 and 23 encapsulate this lost opportunity for Israel after the spies who had come back from looking over Canaan give everyone a bad report of the land, with of course the exception of Joshua and Caleb.

Numbers 14:22-23 "Because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times, and have not heeded My voice, they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it."

Case closed. Christ mentioned law keeping to the rich young ruler as a necessary choice to have us using our liberty and making our choices in a moral and godly framework. Choices certainly have consequences. Unfettered liberty is a recipe for creating personal irresponsibility and invites disasters to be invited into our lives.

There must be a balance. Or as I mentioned a bit ago, there must be structure to what we choose to do and how we do it. Law keeping is fundamental in keeping our liberty from going too far in its concern for the self.

From the very beginning of the Book, we see the consequences when personal choice becomes a want or a desire. We need to look no further than Eve, who was beguiled by Satan into using her freedom of choice to follow his lie when he told her she would be like God, knowing good and evil.

She turned away from God's clear instructions concerning the fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden and turned her freedom to choose what she desired into rejection of God and into a choice to sin. I think we have all done this at one time, chose the wrong way in spite of what we were taught or what we knew of God's law.

Liberty can be very misleading at times. Where her trouble came from, and ours can too if we do not realize, is that liberty, our freedom of choice, or as we sometimes say, our free moral agency, was born a twin. And to have one without the other always ends in ruin.

Having rights, having liberty without its corresponding balance of duty or the virtue of loyalty, will more often than not end badly. We have seen it, we have heard it, and may have even lived it.

Life is not lived in a vacuum, but it is lived with goals and with other people affected by what we do, with all heading toward a future of our own making. Liberty is good if the organizing structure of laws is there, and a heartfelt desire to please God exists. If they do, liberty thrives, and we find us a healthy liberty that is essential to our own spiritual growth. But if it is absent, if its only concern is for the self, then we fall victim to the world's influences and happiness, peace, joy are just an illusion.

True happiness and joy can only be reached when it is in alignment with God. It was true in the Garden before sin entered in, and it is true today. Men in the world can catch a glimpse of joy and peace but it will only arrive in its fullness as God intended for us when we build a life on godly principles and our liberty works within the limits of God's godly character and a life devoted to Him. Freedom to choose must be under the control of our reason and guided by sound wisdom from above.

James 1, verse 5 clearly shows us a promise. This is a promise from God, for those who have faith and seek godly wisdom.

James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

It is within the framework of this God-given wisdom we can find the vision to see how we are to live and what God is seeking and where He is leading us with His creative efforts. Proverbs 29, verse 18 tells us what occurs when we live without this vision.

Proverbs 29:18 Where there is no revelation [prophetic vision] the people cast off restraint; but happy is he who keeps the law.

Vision and law keeping are an offspring of godly wisdom and provides a structure to keep our liberty from becoming self-destructive behavior. These gifts of vision and laws, when added to our virtue of loyalty, become fundamental in holding on to our beliefs and maintaining our faithfulness with God.

The classic example in our Bible is of one who cast off restraint. Who set family loyalty aside, whose only vision was to have a good time and paid little or no concern about financial management, and had the philosophy of live for today and let tomorrow take care of itself attitude. This is where I want us to look next.

This is liberty run amok, but what I like about this man's problem is it ends well. So in that fact, it is a good lesson for us, and even when we might wander off the reservation, there is hope for forgiveness and being restored.

If you have not guess where we are headed, Ryan did. It is the parable of our Lord about a lost son, aka, the prodigal son of Luke 15. So we are going to get a little double dose on some things here, and we should ask ourselves, why does God want us focusing on this today? Well, we will answer that to ourselves too.

Luke 15. It is 22 verses and covers more than just one young man's abuse of his liberty, as he chose to squander his inheritance. It deals with his father's love and his brother's rejection. We will just read a few verses. It moves quickly. Within the first three verses, he goes from having money to being broke and in dire need of a rescue.

Please turn with me to Luke chapter 15. We will be starting in verse 11. That is where it starts and we will work our way to verse 18.

Luke 15:11 "A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood.

Notice the word *them* used here. Both brothers at this point received their inheritance. This shows us how one person's decision can affect everyone else around them. One man's choice to divide the family's assets affected all, showing how one who is headed into destructive behavior changes the lives of those around them.

I think the lesson here is simple enough, if viewed as the young son leaving his duty to chase after prodigal, as defined earlier, wasteful living, and how it affected those near to him. Much like as one's sin not only affects a sinner but those who are caught up in the effects that sin brings forth.

Drop down to verse 13.

Luke 15:13 "And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together [I think this means he cashed out his inheritance.], and journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.

The older brother, in verse 30, states that his brother wasted his wealth on harlots and riotous living. It is not said, but I expect a lot of drinking and parties were going on also. Sounds a lot like my older brother.

It is fairly common when a young fool comes into town and wants to spend large sums of money will attract any number of so-called friends. Friends to help them along. Birds of a feather flock together is pretty normal until the cash runs out. Then it always becomes a flock of one.

Luke 15:14 "But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in the land, and he began to be in want.

This famine is a trigger that became the wake up call to the lost son. Triggers can be any number of events that can get someone to start thinking again about what and why they are living as they are. It is a common lesson to see that liberty to do whatever one wishes without the structure of loyalty to a duty will often put one in a state of want.

Luke 15:15-16 "Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into the fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, but no one gave him anything.

How often does it take some type of physical stress like hunger, pain, or any ailment that can afflict us, and we start to put our thinking hats on to figure out why is this happening and how to resolve it. How often do we find it is a result of our own behavior and choices that afflicted us?

Certainly, God will test His people. We are all aware of that. But we can also inflict our own problems with our bad choices. This is another lesson that the parable is showing to us. Had this young man chosen not to leave home, he never would have been, as he himself said in verse 17, I perish with hunger.

Luke 15:17-18 . . . and I perish with hunger. I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you."

The key here is the young man decided to take action rather than wallow with the swine. Repentance, we know, is more than telling our father we are sorry for actions. It is also a turning away from the wrong direction we were caught up in—or put ourselves in.

"I will arise." There is the action plan, what he told himself to do. This tells us he had reasoned out what had needed to be done to get his life back on track. He changed his direction and he went back home.

He saw it was a problem of his own making, and he stood up and went home in his humility to regain the structure and the family loyalty he had rejected.

Loyalty is faithfulness in action. It is how we express back to God what we believe and must be rooted in our faith. It helps us create a habit of faithfulness, giving us the proper direction to live a life that is pleasing to God.

Unfettered or unstructured liberty is loyal to no one and left to itself can create habits that draw someone away from God. And over time, these habits grow strong and change can become nearly impossible to recover from.

Those in the world who would not give God the time of day, resent any moral constraints that religion or the culture would impose. They have created the habit of self-reliance on and in themselves and cannot turn back due to their own psychological slavery. Kind of their own walls, like the rich man had built. It is like the old saying of an alcoholic's choices. There was a time he could stop if he would, but now, he would stop if he could.

Liberty mixed with a weak or nonexistent moral code is not liberty at all. Not in the real biblical meaning of the word for us, God's people.

As society over the years has dropped its moral standards of decent behavior, many that live around us have followed suit. Any voices that call for traditional moral code is rejected outright. People have become intoxicated with liberty and personal rights, and left serving others and duty before God

far behind. Unlike our prodigal son, his conscience was awakened by his living condition on his near starvation, they want no part of it. They have built up the habit of rejecting truth and calls for decent behavior.

Lately we hear people say that this country is divided. America is divided. It is true, we are. Liberty without loyalty is disruptive and it separates. Until people get back to a standard or structure, as Philippians teaches on humility, it is not going to improve.

Philippians verses 3 and 4 of chapter 2 sets the goal for every one of us *and* them in the world. It would be nice if they did this.

Philippians 2:3-4 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind [that is, thinking less of the self] let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

God has given each of us the liberty we need to strive towards Him. We do need this liberty for that and the help we need to put on Christ. To be made in Their image requires that we have a well-structured liberty.

In Corinthians 3, verse 21, Paul tells us all things are yours. Boy, that would release liberty. It is all yours. Go take what you want.

I Corinthians 3:21 For all things are yours.

But then he draws us back and in verse 23 says,

I Corinthians 3:23 And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

This is the family structure we are all now in. Christ has paid the cost and has broken the yoke of bondage we all had upon us by our sins. We can now use our liberty to grow into the image of Christ by following Him with a faithful heart. Or we choose to slip back to our old natures that shun any loyalty and duty to our God. The choice is ours to make each and every day.

Just as faith by itself without works is declared by the apostle James in chapter 2 and verse 17 to be a dead faith, so liberty without the binding ties of loyalty and faith and with our duty to God is also pointless. Said in a different way, "To whom much is given, much shall be required." We have all been given very much. Let us use our given liberty to grow and inherit eternal life, just as our Father and our Savior want us to do.

Liberty alone stresses only one direction, independence and the self. Liberty with loyalty teaches not only independence, but a coupling of dependence on God for all things. Both are necessary for the building up of godly character in each one of us.

So it is a simple question. Teacher, what must I do to have eternal life? It was a simple answer when He said to the rich young ruler,

Luke 18:22 "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

Let us all use our liberty with loyalty and continue to follow Christ.