

Perhaps nothing is more American than freedom. If you had to explain all of Americana to a non-native or foreigner in one phrase, “the undying pursuit of individual freedom” would do justice. News stories of American special-ops flying in at night to free a fellow American citizen from terrorist captivity half a world away stir up the greatest emotions we have as a country. A few weeks ago we celebrated the Fourth of July when fireworks exploding and patriotic music blaring evoke the deepest feelings of freedom. On that day we are so thankful for all our freedoms in America. Freedom to choose how to define our life regardless of what anyone else says. Freedom to choose what to study in school, what career to have, whom to marry. Freedom to choose how to defy our past upbringing and work for the American Dream. So it’s no wonder Americans bring this same attitude into religion. **“Give Me Freedom!”**

Christianity sure seems to be the enemy of freedom. Religion requires obedience to rules. Christianity has the Ten Commandments – a list of “do’s” and “don’ts.” Some actions are moral and some immoral. Some beliefs are orthodox and some heretical. If one persistently holds on to immoral and heretical beliefs, they can’t be Christian. They’re banned from the group. These rules are constraining. They force people to fit into a box. They stifle creativity and initiative that make our country great. People want to express their individuality without being limited by an irrelevant religion.

Christianity sure seems to be obsolete. It has all those old-fashioned rules! Rules about living together, marriage, sex and relationships, an ethical business career. Society has progressed far beyond this! It’s laughable to still live by those rules. They take enjoyment out of life. I want to live for myself. Countless people, some of whom I’ve met and I’m sure you have too, want freedom from “organized religion.” Those who boast they’re doing things that would make their grandma blush are the enlightened ones. Times have changed. Get used to it.

Christianity sure seems to promote anti-intellectual followers. Christians have rules for every situation. Christians turn into robots: here is what you must believe and what you must do. Christians don’t have the ability to think for themselves; they just slavishly follow what a holy book tells them to do. Christians can’t create their own meaning, purpose, and joy in life on their own. The Supreme Court has even preserved this view of freedom in our culture with its famous “Sweet Mystery of Life” statement, *“At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning of the universe, and the mystery of human life.”* The bottom line? Christianity is a straightjacket. It’s anti-American freedom.

Jordan Belfort, former entrepreneur and now motivational speaker, has written two books about his life. His life story was recently adapted into a film. He was born in New York City to successful parents, both accountants. Along with a friend, he earned \$20,000 between high school and college selling ice cream on a beach. Not too bad for someone at that age. He started a career as a stockbroker in a New York firm before founding his own. He had it all. Complete freedom. The American Dream. His firm created more than 1000 jobs and sold more than \$1 billion in stocks. He could define his life any way he wanted. Belfort created a lifestyle of lavish partying filled with every indulgence you could want. He owned a luxury yacht, named after his model wife.

What happened with this freedom? What happened with this dream every American wants? Belfort couldn’t get enough. More money, more drugs, more women. His freedom turned into a spiral that dragged him down even more. The allure of freedom and defining his

life the way he wanted turned into bondage. All his passions and self-made freedom started to rule and define his life. Soon there was no way out. Belfort made his living by defrauding investors. In 1998, federal prosecutors indicted him with fraud and shut his firm down. He had to serve time in prison and was ordered to pay back his clients over \$110 million in restitution. His yacht later sank off the coast of Italy, and his first two marriages ended in divorce.

You can't have complete fulfillment in life if you are completely engrossed in your own selfish freedom. Americans cry, "Give me freedom!" only to realize it can disappoint. If we value individualism so much, why is there such a desire to contribute to this cause or that, to improve society? We see our self-absorbed culture only gets us so far. There is still brokenness when individuals cannot think outside themselves. What we consider freedom turns out to be no true freedom at all.

No wonder Jesus said what he did. To those Jews who pridefully but naively pretended they were not under slavery because of their identity as Abraham's descendants, ***"Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."*** To those who still today look to their identity to bring freedom – to the teenager who crafts personal worth based on rejecting the institution of parental authority, to the twenty-something who crafts personal worth based on rejecting the institution of sexual modesty, to the successful adult who crafts personal worth based on rejecting the institution of using a life's savings to serve – ***"everyone who sins is a slave to sin."*** The world's idea of freedom only brings an enslaving devotion to stuff, to created things instead of the Creator. Self-centeredness is the true tyrannical oppressor. It's the insatiable addiction that only brings us further down the cycle of moral collapse. The heart of the irony is that people by nature claim they want freedom but actually prefer the chains of sin. Natural human nature wouldn't leave the shackles of sin, even if it could. The height of hopeless imprisonment is that even in the cry "Give me freedom!" humankind can do nothing but sin.

Do you want true freedom? Freedom that won't disappoint? In steps freedom from the outside. In steps the Son of God, ***"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."*** There's no doubt or wavering in his voice. Only future certainty. "You *will be* free indeed." Jesus sets us free from the shackles of sin and rescues us from its slavery. "Freedom is not free." Just take a look at what is required to set us free. A God who is above the requirements of the law freely comes into this world to subject himself to the laws he made. A God who is free from pain willingly subjects himself to suffering. A God who is eternal subjects himself to death. Christianity seems to be all about how we give up everything to subject ourselves to God. Christianity is really about how God gives up everything to subject himself to us. He gives up his freedom to free us. Now that is true freedom.

Almost all of us have had a front row seat to see a couple fall in love before. Many here have had that experience themselves; others have seen it happen with best friends from high school or college. Love sure seems like constraint. All the time given up on evenings and phone calls. All the money spent on dates. All the focus it takes away from everything else in life. Then the jokes and friendly gibes come flooding in. "She's leading you around on a leash!" "You're enamored with this guy!" But for those two, they see it far differently. For them, nothing could be further from the truth. They *want* to love. They *want* to sacrifice. They *want* to give. They *want* to constrain themselves. They *want* to be bound to each other. That's paradise. That's true love. That's a true relationship. That's true freedom.

The relationship between Christ and the Christian works the same. Christ's love sets us free from our enslaving, engrossing self-centeredness. That love seems to constrain us to serve Christ by serving others. It takes great sacrifice. It takes great time. It takes great energy. But

it's pure bliss, true freedom. Hold on Jesus' every word, just like the couple holds on each other's word. Cling to Jesus' teaching! Grow in his teaching! Remain in his teaching forever! It's the only thing that can bring true freedom in our lives.

Martin Luther once said that before Christ, God's law is a dungeon. I hate it. I can't stand it. I want out ASAP. But after Christ, the law transforms into a beautiful mansion. I love it. I embrace it. I never want to leave. Christianity seems like a giant list of constricting "do's" and "don'ts." But after Christ, I want to do nothing but serve. I want to give up my free time to be with my friend hurting under a load of emotional pain. I want to do even more listening than telling someone what I think. I want to give up my hard-earned money to support the church and help the poor. I want to make meals for others. I want to clean the house and do the dishes when it's not my turn. I want to bear each other's burdens. Give me that kind of freedom. Amen.