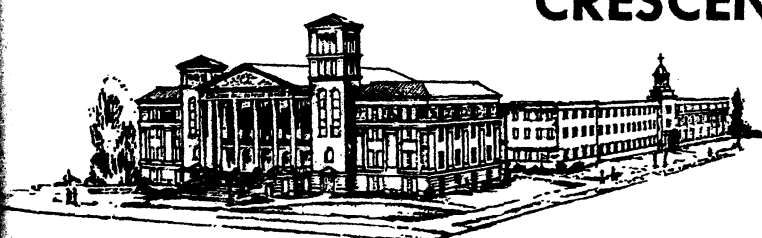


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"OUR FREEDOM IN CHRIST"



Sunday Morning, July 2, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Text - Romans 6:12-18; John 8:36

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of liberation. At the outset of His ministry, Jesus identified Himself with the Servant of Isaiah (61:1-3) whose purpose it was "to preach deliverance to the captives...and set at liberty them that are bruised" (Luke 4:18). Release from tyranny was His constant goal, and it was His promise: "If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). Thus the spirit of His message is closely akin to the spirit of this holiday season. What we are celebrating this week - the independence of our nation - is a political counterpart to what Jesus Christ can do in the spiritual realm. Since this concept is so central to the gospel, let us use this Independence Sunday to consider the meaning of Christian liberation.

There is no better source to which to turn than the writings of St. Paul. He often used this idea to describe his Christian experience, and understood it all the more clearly because of the bondage he had known before. Only when one is sensitive to the shackles can the significance of freedom be seen. Paul appreciated the one because he recognized the other.

He pictures his early religious pilgrimage in rather foreboding tones. He was absolutely serious about life, a devoted follower of the Jewish religion, "a Hebrew of the Hebrews" (Philippians 3:5), and more zealous than all his contemporaries in keeping "the traditions of my fathers" (Galatians 1:14). Yet in the midst of all this he experienced no satisfaction for he was overwhelmed by the power of evil and felt himself under the condemnation of the Law. His famous soliloquy in Romans 7 is a profound yet pathetic picture of inner bondage. Listen to him: "For to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not...For the good that I would, I do not; and the evil that I would not, that I do...When I would do good, evil is present with me" (7:18, 19, 21). Here is "man against himself," the unwilling servant of that which he hates. Paul concludes he is captive "to the law of sin" (7:23) and cries out: "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (7:24).

Not only was Paul a captive; he was also condemned by the Law. All of his efforts were thwarted by the haunting absolutism of the Law's demands. In the Septuagint he read: "Cursed be every man who does not abide in all the words of the law to do them" (Deuteronomy 27:26; Also Galatians 3:10). It was that word "all" that frustrated him. God was not satisfied with a "relative righteousness" or a "partial obedience." To win favor by means of the Law was to be absolutely perfect, and for all his zeal Paul knew this was not the case.

This, then, was his dreary estate before the encounter with Jesus Christ. In a real sense he was a prisoner - ensnared by the force of evil and entombed by disobedience to the Law. But both of these conditions were mere symptoms pointing back

to the underlying malady. At the heart of it all was this problem: life was centered in self and severed from God. Paul became a prisoner by trying to be independent. He sought to live life out of his own resources and according to his own wishes. He exalted self to the dizzy heights of autonomy, and this meant separation from God. And out of this "mind set" came the tragedy of an impotent, divided existence.

The grand mark of creaturehood is dependence. Men were never intended to stand alone. Only God can do that; and it was in the effort "to be like God" and attain an independent existence that mankind made his fatal mistake (Genesis 3). Paul participated in that error, and both facets of his problem are to be explained by this "sin attitude." He was the helpless prey of satanic power because he relied only on his own strength. He sought no alliance with the Almighty; neither did he open his life to a Power beyond himself. He speaks of "the good that I would" and "the evil I would not." In trying to fight his battles all alone, he was exceeding the limits of creatural strength. Like Don Quixote tilting the windmills, or a man fighting a tornado with his bare hands, his willful isolation spelled inevitable defeat.

Paul's dealings with the Law were also corrupted by his egocentricity. God never meant for the Law to be a weapon of condemnation. He set it forth as the positive guide for moral life. If men were to live happily as members of God's family in God's world, this was the pattern to be followed. It was to be approached in the fellowship of God and in the strength that He could give. But sinful man distorted the whole process. He set himself over against God, and took the Law as a means of earning favor from God. He refused to be dependent, but rather chose to establish his own righteousness by his own obedience. This was approaching the Law from an entirely different direction. The motive was selfish through and through. Man would be "beholden" to no one, and would wrest from God a "deserved status."

It is like a father who sets out certain rules for the home life of the family. He means for them to be the basis of unity and fellowship. But the children react in hostility. They say: "We don't want to have anything to do with you. We will keep these rules so we can get what is due us and then we'll go our way." This is certainly a distortion of the original purpose. And so with God's law. When man severed it from unity with God, it was no longer a loving guide to fellowship, but an all-demanding, absolute requirement. To use it selfishly, that is, to try by it to earn favor, is to experience a rude shock. Man cannot on his own fulfill its demands, and therefore cannot establish his righteousness over against God.

This, then, was the root of Paul's problem. By a false assertion of self in which the creature tries to be independent, he fell into the bondage of evil. He was a frustrated, impotent, captive, unable to fulfill either his own desires or eternal purpose.

The encounter with Jesus Christ liberated him from this sense of failure, for it struck at the basic problem. In Christ Paul was reunited with God. The old self-sufficiency that led to defeat was replaced by a dependent partnership. It was no longer "I" ruling life, but "Christ living in me" (Galations 2:20). Paul stopped trying "to go it alone," and through his new relationship could say: "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13). Before, he had cried in desperation: "Who can deliver me from the body of this death?" (Romans 7:24). Now he answers: "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:25). He was liberated from the power of evil by confessing his need and opening his life to God.

After the same fashion, the condemnation of the Law was removed. When he stopped using it in the wrong way and looked on God's favor as a gift to be received and not a wage to be earned, the estrangement was healed. Paul found that in the circle of God's family, God would help him fulfill the law and make possible the achievement of a righteousness he could never have attained on his own. What he could never gain by beating fists was the immediate possession of open hands.

Thus the liberation was in fact a reunion. When Paul met God as He was revealed in Christ and responded to Him in total commitment, the old breach was closed and he was reunited with "the Ground of his Being." I said it was liberation by reunion; it could also be called "liberation by surrender." This is important to note: Paul found freedom from the old shackles by committing himself to a new Power. It was not "deliverance in a vacuum"; having been set free from one loyalty, he accepted another in its place.

Paul labors hard to emphasize this aspect of freedom in Christ. To be delivered from the Law does not mean that a person goes "scot free" to do as he wills. It means he has accepted a new Authority for his life. Having been rescued from the mastery of self that leads to slavery, he puts himself under the mastery of Christ. Paul makes this point in Romans 6 by a reference to the institution of slavery. A bondsman was the absolute property of his owner; every aspect of his life was at the disposal of this one. When a slave was sold from one party to another, this absolute control was shifted. Although it sounds strange to modern ears, Paul likens becoming a Christian to a slave changing owners. He points out that men are servants to the things they obey (Romans 6:16), and that having been "the servants of sin" they have become "the servants of righteousness" (Romans 6:17). The center of life has now shifted; the Ultimate that rules is no longer self but Christ; release from one power comes through surrender to Another.

In every area, what follows the act of liberation is just as important as what went before. If there is no positive recommitment, then the permanent value is lost. Just ninety miles south of our shores is a glaring example of what often comes of "liberation." The Cuban people have not been freed from tyranny. They have only "swapped chains" and moved from one prison cell to another. The whole story involves the new loyalties that are assumed. Jesus' eerie little parable about the demon that was cast out and came back with seven more (Matthew 12:43-45) is a pointed warning to every liberation. Nature abhors a vacuum in any realm, be it physical or moral, and to be set free from one type of tyranny demands some kind of replacement.

Our liberation in Christ involves both. The old tyranny is replaced by a new dynamic, and freedom from sin goes hand in hand with the yoke of Christ. It is often said that one is never so free as when he is subservient to Christ. This is true, and stands to reason, for the way of Christ is the pattern of Reality, and when we follow this we are not inhibited by alien forces but have the peace of fulfilled intention.

Back in 1955, two couples of us toured Western Europe on our own. We bought a little car in Paris, and proceeded to structure our itinerary to suit ourselves. There were advantages but also problems to this independence. We followed this plan all through France and northern Italy, but when we got to Rome with its circular streets and emotional drivers we decided on a different procedure. We would park our car and join an experienced tour group to see the city. I shall never forget that in this decision to submit to others there was a real "freedom." In the confidence that they knew exactly how and where to go, we were "free" to enjoy Rome fully.

Sunday Morning, July 2, 1961

And this illustrates our freedom in Christ. It is not the absolute independence to go our own way. It is the trusting freedom that comes by submission to Him who is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." In the confidence that His way is reality, we are most free at the very moment we are subservient to Him.

Thus Christian liberation includes both negative and positive aspects. We are set free from the impotence and despair that stems from self-centeredness. Yet we bring life under a new Authority; there is a new sphere of obligation. No longer are we motivated by selfishness but by love. The "dynamus" is not what God will do to us but what He has done for us. Christian liberation is not freedom to sin but freedom from sin. By giving ourselves to a new Master, the old shackles are left behind.

I believe Jesus was right: "If the Son shall make you free; ye shall be free indeed!"

"Depart now in the fellowship of God the Father, and as you go, remember: in the goodness of God you were born into this world; by the grace of God you have been kept all the day long, even unto this hour, and by the love of God, fully revealed in the face of Jesus, you are being redeemed. Amen."