

# *The Nature of Things*

## *Part 4 – The Nature of Freedom*

John 8:31-36

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 9, 2016 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

<sup>31</sup> Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples;  
<sup>32</sup> and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” <sup>33</sup> They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’”  
<sup>34</sup> Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup> The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. <sup>36</sup> So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

When I was in college at Davis there was a local band in town that had chosen as a name for themselves Free Beer. They always drew large crowds, not because their music was especially good but because their advertising was exceptionally effective. All they had to do when they played a show was put up signs around campus that day said the name of their band with the time and location of the show and the place would be mobbed. Of course, they constantly ran the risk that when the crowd found out the truth a different sort of mob would form.

We love things that are free, getting something without a cost. We love life to be free, living without restrictions. We are proud to live in a country that claims to be the land of the free. We love freedom itself, and so anything or anyone that promises freedom immediately has our attention.

Jesus promises freedom. In fact, the promise of freedom Jesus makes here in John 8 is one of the most well-known promises he ever made: **“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”**

But what does Jesus mean here? He’s not promising freedom for free, right? There’s a qualification attached, a big “if”. *If* we continue in Jesus’ word, *if* we come to know the truth, *then* we will know freedom. What exactly does Jesus mean?

Well, when Jesus invites us to continue in his word so that we will know the truth, he’s inviting us to learn, and then follow, his way of life. That’s what he means here. Remember, Jesus is God, come to earth as one of us. He is the creator of life and therefore the one who knows all there is to know about life. So part of why he came was to teach us how life was meant to be lived. Read the Gospels and you’ll hear Jesus teaching us how to work and rest, how to handle wealth, how to live with one another in love, how to treat the poor, how to enjoy the gifts of marriage and sex, how to respond to our enemies, how to forgive and bless, and so on. He came to show us this true way of life, both in his words and in his very life itself, and then to invite us to join him in that life. If we do, he promises us that we will then find freedom.

And if you’re paying attention, maybe you become immediately skeptical at this point because you hear that what Jesus is really saying is, “Submit to me, make me your master, and then you will be free.” What? How can we be free if we have a master? If we live in submission to Jesus, where is the freedom in that, because freedom, as we understand freedom, is self-assertion, insisting on my own rights, doing things my way, throwing off all constraints, and creating myself as I best see fit.

And so if the freedom Jesus offers means doing everything his way, making him my master, is that the sort of freedom I really want? Is that even freedom to begin with?

It’s a fair question. To get at the answer let me offer an illustration. It’s one I’ve used here before but I’m using it again because when it comes to trying to understand freedom I can’t think of a better illustration than that of a kite.

This past summer our family spent a week at the beach down in Pajaro Dunes. One day my two younger kids decided to fly a kite. We have this big, colorful kite attached to an extra-large spool of string. Since there was a strong wind coming in off the ocean that afternoon, in no time my kids had this kite hundreds and hundreds of feet up in the air. It's one of those kites which reacts in marvelous ways to every tug and pull on the end of the string and my kids quickly learned that if you pull the string one way the kite would dive straight down towards the ground and then if you pulled it the other way it would shoot back up towards the clouds. They had this kite dancing in the sky as I, along with many others on the beach that afternoon, found great pleasure in just watching that kite do what it was made to do.

At one point, however, the kite flew a bit too low and the string, about half way up, got caught in the very top branches of a cypress tree. Though the kite itself remained high in the sky, we could no longer control it. It just hung there, almost motionless, anchored to this tree. We tried for about an hour to set it loose, but we couldn't manage to do so. In the end there was only one thing we could do. We cut the string on our end and watched as the wind immediately yanked the kite away. For a few moments it soared to even greater heights, but then just as quickly came crashing down on a hillside off in the distance. Thankfully, we were able to recover it so that it could fly another day.

Keep that story in your mind for a few minutes, especially the image of the kite first dancing in the sky, then stuck on the tree, and then finally crashing to the ground. I think there is a great deal we can learn here about the true nature of freedom.

You see, when lots of people in our world look at Christianity, and maybe even all religious faith in general, the image that comes to their mind is a lot like the image of that kite caught in that tree. In fact, I'm certain that many people you know, maybe even some of you, imagine that if a person dedicates her life to following Jesus she is choosing a life that is greatly diminished, tied down in very restrictive ways. After all, isn't religion full of rules that restrict freedom, that keep us from living the sort of life we really want to live? Isn't the only reason people follow religion is because they imagine that by doing so there will be some pay off in the end. If I live a good life now, as narrow, restricted, and stagnant as it might be, some day in the next life God will reward me with his approval and grant me a better, even eternal, life. In the meantime I may be missing out on all the fun but in the end it will be worth it. It better be worth it!

This is a very, very common way of understanding Christianity, even among some people in the church. There's a reason for this. All the way back to Jesus' day and beyond religious people have been sending this message loud and clear – following the law of God will eventually set you free. Sometimes this is called the way of moral conformity; conform your life to God's morality and you will be rewarded.

Fact is, some of the religious people Jesus is speaking to here in John 8 see things this way. Understand, they *believe* they are free. In fact, they object to Jesus' offer of freedom, saying, **“We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’”**

But they weren't free! No, they were slaves to the law. That made them slaves to a master they could never obey and satisfy because they could never keep the law fully. So eventually their lives turned inward, and become bitter, and lifeless, and self-righteous, and narrow. And maybe you know what this is like? Some of us try so hard to live up to what we think God wants us to be and do, but since we are forever falling short of these standards the burden of guilt and shame when we fail, or the poison of pride and self-righteousness when we imagine we have succeeded, leaves us feeling anything but free. We are kites flying in the air, it's true, but like that kite of ours that got its string caught by the tree, we are greatly restricted by a law which has ensnared us and from which we cannot escape.

In response to this, some people, lots of people, run the other way. They are the kite that begins to imagine that the worst thing that ever happened to me was the day I got tied to this wretched string. If only I could cut loose, not just from the branches of the tree below but from the clutches of the string itself, then I would truly fly. As opposed to the way of moral conformity, these people then choose the way of self-discovery.<sup>1</sup> I will not be a slave to anybody! Instead, as I will go wherever I want to go and do whatever I want to do I will finally be set free.

But it's all an illusion. Can you see that if you decide that freedom is simply insisting on doing things your way and following your ambitions and appetites, then you have not been cut loose from all masters but have only chosen yourself as master. You've become a slave to your own ideas, your own desires, your own version of the truth, your own

---

<sup>1</sup> I'm stealing these two terms from Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God* (New York: Riverhead, 2008).

instincts, and as Socrates once wrote, “How can you call a man free when his pleasures rule over him?” You cannot. That person has simply chosen another master, and the question which naturally follows is whether or not he or she has chosen wisely.

Now admittedly, this way of self-discovery does, at first, feel like freedom. When the kite is cut from the string there is a moment initially when it must believe it is finally free. But let’s not confuse falling with flying. And life will teach us the difference if we would only pay attention. We see or know people who make themselves their own master, listening first and foremost to their own appetites and ambitions. All through life they go where they want to go, eat what they want to eat, say what they want to say, buy what they want to buy, live for the moment, follow every impulse, deny no urge or passion. But if we pay close enough attention for a long enough time, what first may look like freedom never lasts. Eventually, such a person comes a point in life at which the growing and gnawing sense of dissatisfaction and joylessness deep within cannot be denied.

Madonna is symbolic of this way of self-discovery. As much as anybody we could point to, she is a person who has thrown off the constraints and lived life by her own terms. And at first glance, it seems to have paid off as she has amassed the sort of fame, wealth and influence most other people only dream about. She seems to have been able to fly as high as anybody. And yet, listen to her describe in her own words her life. In a moment of admirable self-awareness and stunning candor she said this in an interview with *Vogue* magazine,

My drive in life comes from a fear of being mediocre. That is always pushing me. I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being but then I feel I am still mediocre and uninteresting unless I do something else. Because even though I have become somebody, I still have to prove that I am somebody. My struggle has never ended and I guess it never will.<sup>2</sup>

Don’t be fooled. Madonna has a master. At some point we all must acknowledge we each have a master. We are all living life according to somebody’s leading, if not somebody else then ourselves. And so again the question comes before us, have we chosen rightly? Is cutting the string and choosing myself as my own master the best way for me to go or is there, perhaps, a better, wiser master out there I might choose instead?

I think of the six-year old child who, given over to his own desires and instincts, would choose a diet of Lucky Charms for breakfast, corn dogs and Cheetos for lunch, and Chicken McNuggets and a Pepsi for dinner. Had I been given the choice as a six year old that would have been my menu, every single day! However, most of us would agree this diet would not be such a good idea, that to allow a child to be a slave to their own appetites and ambitions would not turn out well. Furthermore, most of us agree that parents, at least wise and loving parents, are far better suited as ‘masters.’ Which begs the question that if Jesus is truly God, if he really is the one who not only created us and the world around us but also loves us enough to come into the world to die for us and save us, than is it possible that he might just be better qualified than we are for the position of master?

This is, in fact, the very invitation Jesus is making to us here. Don’t make the law your master because the law is a tyrant and you’ll never find freedom that way. Jesus never tells you to make the law our master. But neither should you make yourself master. Do you really want to put ultimate trust in your own instincts and desires? Instead, make me your master, Jesus says. Put the string of your life in my hands and let me show you how to really fly.

Here’s how he puts it in his words, **“Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup>The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. <sup>36</sup>So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.**

St. Augustine once said that true freedom is finally becoming what you were made to be. You go to the zoo and you see a beautiful red-tailed hawk locked up in a cage. And there’s something marvelous about it because you have this rare opportunity to get right up close to this stunning bird, close enough to be awed by its nobility, its beauty, its power. It’s wonderful but it’s also tragic. Because red-tailed hawks weren’t created to sit in cages. And if you’re somebody who has any love for that bird, you would easily trade the opportunity to see that magnificent creature up close in a cage for the opportunity to see it from a distance soaring on the wind high up among the clouds. That’s what a hawk was created to do. That’s when a hawk is truly free.

---

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009),72.

We are no different. We were created to live in perfect companionship with our Creator, to walk with God through a life free of sin, guilt, shame, worry, stress, and fear. We were created to know God as we are known by God. We were also created to live at peace with one another, to enjoy a world where nothing ever comes between people. True freedom, then, is when we live as we were created to live and what Jesus is saying to us here is that the only way to find this freedom is to become his slave. If you submit to me, he says, this life will ultimately be yours.

At one point in his teaching Jesus made this claim: **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”**<sup>3</sup> The law is good. It’s given to us for our own benefit. But we cannot keep the law. And when we try to do so on our own it ends us restricting us, either in guilt and shame or in self-righteousness and pride. The law as a master always restricts us, like a kite whose string is caught in the tree.

That doesn’t mean, however, that Jesus came to cut the string. No, he didn’t come to abolish the law. He came to fulfill the law, to take the string in his own hands and help us to soar as we were meant to soar. Because, you see, Christ not only forgives us by the cross for failing to keep the law but, by his resurrected life made real to us by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus begins to *enable to us keep the law as we never could before*. And if you are somebody who has come to trust your life to Jesus, to place the string of your life in his hands, you know this to be true. You have watched as he has begun to help you love and serve and give and heal and grow as you never before, on your own, were able to do any of these things.

You see, Jesus is trying to help us redefine our understanding of freedom. Freedom is not the absence of a master. As humans, that is an impossibility anyway. Everybody has a master. Freedom, instead, is simply *choosing the right master*. And true freedom only comes when we make ourselves slaves to Christ. Best of all, when we submit to Jesus we submit to the one who is the very Son of his Heavenly Father, the one who, by his grace, not only welcomes us as slaves but ultimately as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters that same Father.

There is a little known poem by a man named Bruce Barton Bailey called, simply, “I Am the Kite”. As you’ll see, it’s as good a place as any to end this message about the freedom we are offered in Christ through faith.

I am the kite:  
 Red and orange,  
 Fire in the sky,  
 Stunt Kite,  
 Cutting loops  
 And gashes in the blue,  
 My skin vibrates  
 On my frame with power.

I cut the cord  
 To fly yet higher still,  
 To show the rest  
 What freedom's all about.  
 I turn and twist  
 My fanciest curl  
 And set my course  
 For distance.

But, my mistake  
 Was not  
 To take the wind for granted,  
 But the cord  
 That tensioned me  
 To one I did not see  
 So far below.

---

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:17, NRSV

The flyer is not me.

Lord, give me the anchor. Give me pause.  
Let me know in freedom's limited flight,  
The kite's first cause.<sup>4</sup>

Amen.



## The Next Step

### A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read John 8:31-36 again. What do you notice here?
2. Jesus says that if we know the truth then the truth will set us free? What do you think he means by this? How does the truth set us free? Does the truth *always* set us free?
3. How do you define freedom?
4. How does the illustration of the kite help you understand the sort of freedom which Christ came to bring to us?
5. Is it true that the person who imagines she is free because she lives life according to her ambitions and appetites alone is really not free but only a slave to her own appetites and ambitions?
6. Martin Luther once wrote, "A Christian is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone." What do you think he means by this? Have you experienced this?
7. In Romans 6:17-18 Paul writes, "But thanks be to God that, though you once were slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were committed. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness." What does this add to our understanding of the freedom Christ came to offer us?
8. How have you personally experienced freedom in Christ?



#### Table to Table Question

##### *A question for kids and adults to answer together*

Jesus said he came to set us free. What did he need to free us from?  
Jesus said the truth sets us free. How does this happen?

<sup>4</sup> Earl Palmer was the longtime pastor at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle. Some years ago he was preaching a sermon about this freedom we gain as slaves of Christ and he used the image of a kite to help make his point. As he spoke, a member of the church, Bruce Barton Bailey, was so inspired by the imagery that right there in the pew he sketched out a poem on his bulletin.