

Freedom: What's Love Got to Do With It?

By Tom Ewall

John 8

³² You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.

Dwight purchased a ring and reserved a table at the best restaurant in town. He and Monika had been dating for over a year and he was convinced that she was the right one. At just the right time in the conversation he leaned forward and asked for her hand in marriage. She seemed to hesitate, however, and there was a period of awkward silence. Dwight had considered this possibility beforehand and, because he wanted to ensure that he received a “yes,” he reached into his coat pocket, took out a gun, and pointed at her. The message was clear: “Marry me, or else.” One moment Monika was free to accept or reject Dwight’s offer of marriage; the next, her freedom was taken from her. Did this restriction of freedom increase or diminish her love for Dwight?

This story illustrates a fundamental truth: love and freedom go hand in hand. To the extent that freedom is restricted, love, and the capacity to love, are proportionally diminished.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were absolutely free—free to converse with God, and also free to meet with the enemy at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God’s warning to them was not a restriction of their freedom, but God saying to them,

“You are free to listen to Satan, but please don’t. You can’t possibly imagine the suffering that will result if you do.”

Eve chose to go to the tree, and spoke with the serpent, who diabolically asked,

Genesis 3 [GNB]

¹ Did God really tell you not to eat fruit from any tree in the garden?

These words were calculated to suggest that God was restricting their freedom. When freedom is diminished, love is proportionally lost.

Satan's attack at the tree was based on negative insinuations about God's character, such as:

- God lied when He said they would die if they ate of the fruit;
- He didn't have their best interests in mind;
- He restricted their freedom;
- He threatened to kill them if they disobeyed (*Genesis* 3:3).

Satan essentially painted the picture of a restrictive, selfish god who had a gun on the table, pointed at Adam and Eve. Using these lies about God's character, the enemy deceived Adam and Eve, which led them to distrust God, which in turn led them to disobey. The tempter suggested that their disobedience was the road to freedom, but it actually enslaved our race. Our fundamental problem started with a misrepresentation of God's character, which brought our world under the rule of God's enemy (*John* 12:31) and enslaved us to sin (*Romans* 6:6, 16-22).

The most important aspect of faith is our mental picture of God...Yet our actual picture of God (not our theoretical knowledge about God), most influences how we feel about Him. It's impossible to enjoy a genuinely passionate and loving relationship with God when our mental picture of Him doesn't inspire passionate love. (Greg Boyd, *Is God to Blame?* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003)

From that first lie in Eden, this distorted picture of God has

impacted the entire human race. We have continued to imagine that our freedom is threatened by God, that He is out to burn us or kill us if we disobey. We have no hope of a true love relationship with God if we cannot trust Him. How could our picture of God be repaired?

Since our fundamental problem is based on a distorted picture of God, correcting that false picture must be at the heart of the remedy that sets us free. As believing the serpent's lies about God led to distrust of God, which led to disobedience, believing the truth about God is the remedy that leads us back to trusting God, making true obedience possible once again.

When Moses asked to see God's glory, God proclaimed His character to him (*Exodus* 33:18,19). God's glory is His character. Similarly, the *name* of a person to the Hebrews was a designation of character. Jesus said,

John 17

⁴ I have glorified You on the earth: I have finished the work which You gave me to do.

⁶ I have manifested Your name...

Jesus Christ, in saying He completed the work of glorifying God and manifesting His name, was saying that He fully revealed God's character. This was His mission. Everything He did was for this purpose.

As the opponent to God's kingdom of kindness and love, Satan desired power (*Isaiah* 14:13). In order to achieve this goal, he has led both angels and humans away from God by misrepresenting His character.

In order to refute the enemy's lies, Christ revealed the truth about God. In Christ we see God as He really is: compassionate, flexible, patient, merciful, gentle, kind, interested in others, polite, careful, humble, and willing to serve others. Christ stood out in dramatic contrast to the religious leaders of the time, revealing God to be very different than their rep-

resentations of Him, both by what He taught of God, and how He treated others.

Those who do not understand what true freedom looks like can easily be scared off by demonstrations of power. A good example of how God uses His power is seen in Christ's washing of His disciples' feet.

It is noteworthy that the apostle John relates Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet to a full awareness of His power:

John 13 [GNB]

³ Jesus knew that the Father had given him complete power; he knew that he had come from God and was going to God.

⁴ So he rose from the table, took off his outer garment, and tied a towel around his waist.

Consider also Christ's claim:

John 14 [CEV]

9 If you've seen Me, you've seen the Father.

From this we see that God must be amazingly humble. In Christ's own words, He came "to serve" and "not to be served" (*Matthew 20:28*, NKJV). Suppose we asked the question,

"Are you a servant of God, or is God your servant?"

Some might recoil in horror and say.

"I am God's servant, of course!"

However, we cannot deny that God, through Jesus Christ, has shown us that He is our Servant. When we remember His words, "If you've seen Me, you've seen the Father," we come to the astonishing realization that God, the Creator of all things, the Master of the universe, the King of kings and Lord of lords, came as a Servant, even to the point of washing feet which was thought to be beneath the dignity of anyone but a lowly servant to perform. The picture of God revealed by Jesus stands in dramatic contrast to the claims Satan made

about Him in the Garden.

The washing of the disciples' feet was only one of many remarkable actions revealed in the life of Jesus. We would do well to consider all the acts and teachings of Jesus Christ as a representation of God's character. God has often been portrayed along the lines that the enemy has presented Him—as one who is unforgiving, severe, harsh, inflexible, just waiting to punish those who act contrary to His wishes. This is not the picture of God that Jesus revealed! The God we see in Christ is completely selfless. We can perceive through reading the gospels that God's desire is 100% for the well-being of His creatures; this is the nature of agape love. Thus God would have His children do good, not as an arbitrary requirement of some law, but because other-centered love is the only way to happiness, well-being and freedom.

God created us to love and to be loved, but what does other-centered love have to do with freedom? Have you ever known someone who was forced against their will to love? God created us with the ability to love, and to reject love because He knows that freedom is a prerequisite to love.

Satan lied about God, accusing Him of being unloving and restricting freedom (*Genesis* 3:1). When Adam and Eve believed the lie, they voluntarily surrendered their freedom. If we do not know God, we cannot freely choose Him, for we would be choosing the false picture of Him we have in our minds rather than the true God. Hence, the first step in regaining our original freedom is to correct our false picture of God. Only when we are confronted with the reality of God's true character, can we be truly free to choose. To reveal His character, it was necessary for God to give His all. When we learn this truth, that God is love itself, we can once again be free.

God must view freedom of choice as supremely important. How else can we explain that a Being so good and so power-

ful would allow the suffering and injustice we see? The very fact that Satan was allowed to spread his lies to Adam and Eve is proof that God is a God of freedom.

In order for there to be love, there must be the possibility of love rejected. Love cannot be forced, as love forced is not love at all. Love must be freely given. Given that God is love, and has created us in His image, it is not surprising that God would view love, and hence freedom, so highly.

An alternative possibility as to why suffering and injustice exist is that God wills these things to happen. However, the Bible informs us that God is frustrated by these things.

Jeremiah 5 [CEV]

²⁷ You are evil, and you lie and cheat to make yourselves rich.

²⁸ You are powerful and prosperous, but you refuse to help the poor get the justice they deserve...

³⁰ Look at the terrible things going on in this country. I am shocked!

It is difficult to imagine how things which frustrate and upset God could be in accordance with His will.

We also note that Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” which implies that God’s will is not being done. The idea that God’s will *is* being done on earth paints a disturbing picture of God. When we see the frustrations and injustice of this world, and the pain of loss and separation that disease, death and divorce bring (just to name a couple examples), one wonders what sort of God would desire such a world as this. A more satisfying explanation is that this world does *not* demonstrate God’s will.

We most clearly see God’s will revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ. One may question why injustice and evil exist, given God’s opposition to them. The incongruity between a just, powerful and loving God, and an unjust, cruel, and painful world, is in part explained by the high respect God gives to our free will. God prefers that we have the freedom to

reject His love over the alternative of being mere robots who could neither love nor appreciate Him.

A common way of dealing with the existence of suffering is to suggest that God brings it upon us for some purpose, unknown to us. For example, it is often suggested that God brings suffering on us as a means to remove the "warts" from our character, so to speak. This way of thinking impacts how we understand God's responsibility for the evil that comes upon us. We may rationalize God's plans as being a good thing for us, but if we believe that the death and cruelty which personally touches us is divinely orchestrated by God for our benefit, this must damage our relationship with God.

How can we passionately love someone whom we secretly believe is, for example, responsible for taking the one we love? I say "secretly" because our conscious minds do not allow us to give voice, even internally, to what our hearts really believe, namely, "How could God do such a thing to me if He loves me?" To say that He does so for our betterment rings hollow.

The suffering that exists in our world is not due to some design on the part of God; it is due to the disruptive element called "sin." When people choose to live contrary to the principles of God's love, they reap the results of these harmful choices. Many imagine that God is inflicting terrible things upon us while, in reality, God is working in and through our own choices. The cross reveals the ultimate example of God's interaction with our choices. It reminds me of the following story:

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. "Where is God? Where is he?" someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, "Where is God now?" And I heard a voice in myself answer: "Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the

gallows.” (*Night*, by E. Wiesel. Hill & Wang, 1960)

What a beautiful way of expressing the thought! God, far from causing the suffering that comes to us, suffers with us, more than we can imagine. God accepts the hatred and abuse ignorantly cast upon Him with grace. He has revealed the truth about Himself through Jesus Christ. How would God respond when tortured, reviled, mocked? In Jesus Christ, we see the answer to this question. Jesus blessed His persecutors and looked for any glimmer of hope in those treating Him so atrociously. While being put through so much suffering, His concern was not for Himself but for others, including those causing His pain. How quickly Jesus responded to the thief who opened His heart!

“When a man takes one step toward God, God takes more steps toward that man than there are sands in the worlds of time.” (*The Work of the Chariot*) (see also *James* 4:8)

How liberating to catch a glimpse of God’s true character in Jesus Christ! When we realize that God has been misunderstood and falsely blamed for the wrong in our world and lives, our life’s purpose changes completely. The world needs to know the truth about God!

“God is not the kind of Person His enemies have made Him out to be.” (Paul C. Heubach)

God’s tremendous respect for freedom can be awfully frustrating for us too. Who among us hasn’t longed for the ability to converse with God face to face? Sometimes it seems so difficult to discern His answer to prayer. Why does God’s presence seem to be so elusive at times?

Psalm 103

¹⁴ He knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.

God is very careful in dealing with us, so as not to overwhelm us. We can see the impact of meeting God by considering Isaiah’s response when he encountered the glory of God,

Isaiah 6

⁵ Woe is me, I am undone!

God is so gentle with us because of His great respect for free will. It is not His way to twist arms into doing His will. God could scare us out of our wits, and our response would be to do or say anything, from fear of death, but such a response is of no value and has no moral content. So God faces a quandary. If He approaches us, we may fear Him, leading to a response based on fear, which is not what He wants. But He must approach us to communicate with us, to make known His character and will. How did God get around the quandary? God veiled His glory in human flesh. In Christ we see God in a way that does not frighten us, so that His character and will may be plainly seen. In Christ, God can present His will to us in such a way that we can voluntarily respond.

In order to hold us in bondage, the enemy misrepresents God, making us believe He is one looking to punish any wrong move, ready to destroy. Unfortunately, this is a very common view of God, one which Christ Himself faced from His disciples:

Luke 9 [GNB]

⁵¹ As the time drew near when Jesus would be taken up to heaven, he made up his mind and set out on his way to Jerusalem.

⁵² He sent messengers ahead of him, who went into a village in Samaria to get everything ready for him.

⁵³ But the people there would not receive him, because it was clear that he was on his way to Jerusalem.

⁵⁴ When the disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"

⁵⁵ Jesus turned and rebuked them.

⁵⁶ Then Jesus and his disciples went on to another village.

In this account, we see that Jesus Christ was urged to destroy those who would dare oppose Him, but so far from tak-

ing His disciples up on their suggestion, He revealed that this very impulse is contrary to God's way. In other words, Jesus was saying, "You don't know what God is like." He went on to explain that God does not destroy, but saves.

I love how this story ends: "And they went to another village." This story speaks volumes about God's character. When God is slighted, He is not violent with those who would dare cross Him. He simply goes away.

In Jesus Christ we see a Being who did nothing to harm others. The only time we see His indignation raised was to protect those who were being victimized. At every opportunity, Jesus warned against the use of force.

Yet despite this central thread that runs throughout His teachings, many expected and desired for Jesus to use force to set up His kingdom. Consider His remark,

Luke 17

²¹ The kingdom of God is within you,

It seems apparent that He would not be relying on force to set up His kingdom. And anyway, how would one use force to set up an internal kingdom?

Although Jesus said, "If you've seen Me, you've seen the Father," we often perceive Jesus to be much different than the Father. When we think of Jesus, what adjectives come to mind? Probably words like:

- Compassionate
- Kind
- Loving
- Gentle
- Patient
- Forgiving, and
- Generous.

When we think of God, it is more likely words such as:

- Holy

- Righteous
- Powerful
- Omnipotent
- Omniscient, and
- Omnipresent.

I recall hearing that Jesus Christ never referred to God as “Judge,” but referred to Him as “Father” well over a hundred times. Yet if one is asked to describe God, “Judge” is a more likely response than “Father.”

Think of Jesus Christ girding Himself with a towel and washing the feet of His disciples. Can we imagine the president of the U. S., or some other head of state, performing a similar act? Is it possible that God is as humble as Jesus?

Think of Jesus Christ attending Lazarus’ funeral, or at the procession to Jerusalem. Jesus wept. Does God weep? Is it possible that God is as tender-hearted as Jesus?

Think of Jesus Christ and the woman caught in adultery. “Neither do I condemn you.” Is it possible that God is as forgiving and kind as Jesus Christ?

The Good News is that God the Father *is* like Jesus Christ. When we have seen Jesus Christ, we have seen the Father. The truth about God’s character sets us free! It is the key to freedom and freedom is the key to love.