

The Park Road Pulpit  
*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*  
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

*Free to be Bound*  
*Exodus 21.1-6; Philemon*  
Russ Dean, July 13, 2008



It is one of our highest values. Its virtue is proclaimed in the eloquence of “poets, priests, and politicians.”<sup>1</sup> Its worth is defined in this country’s essential documents, in immortal phrases: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” “liberty and justice for all.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps nothing is more sacred in this nation. But do we actually know what it means to “let freedom ring”?<sup>3</sup>

What does it mean to be free? Without question the citizens of this nation enjoy more personal liberty than has been known in any nation in history. Couple this liberty with a standard of living which makes many of the comforts and conveniences of modern life available from the richest to the poorest, and you get a culture in which you can, if you choose, literally, “shop ‘til you drop!” You can waste every ounce of your personal fortune any place and any way you care to, on any purchase, on any pursuit, in any career, in any lifestyle. But does such personal liberty and personal wealth spell freedom? What does it mean to be free?

We are engaged in the costliest war this nation has ever fought, because, our President tells us, “the terrorists” hate us because we are free. I do not agree. I never have. The President’s patriotic rhetoric does make for a popular stump speech, and one of the easiest-of-all sermons to preach, but I do not believe we are hated because we are free. Some may hate us for the way we use our freedom – but the use of freedom and freedom is not the same thing. So anyone who claims to be free owes it to the value of that freedom to ask if their use of freedom may actually be negating that freedom.

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<sup>1</sup>Sting uses this phrase in the old Police hit, “De Do Do Do”!

<sup>2</sup> From the Declaration of Independence, and the Pledge of Allegiance, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> From the hymn, “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.”

I alluded to a simple illustration of this earlier: if freedom gives one the right to use one's personal wealth as one chooses, is the American infatuation with materialism, the fact that many Americans are almost literally shopping themselves to death... is such materialistic excess the manifestation of our freedom (its expression), or is it a subtle indication that we have actually become imprisoned to a commercialism that is beyond our control? You see, freedom may allow personal liberties – but the expression of those liberties may reveal a far deeper bondage.

Are we free?

And what about freedom itself? Is it possible that our practice of freedom, our elevation of freedom as the supreme value, may actually indicate a kind of bondage that we are unaware? Are we enslaved to our love of freedom? Several years ago when Asdrubal Forte was visiting us from Resurrection Baptist Church in Carlos Rojas, Cuba we wanted to give him the flavor of Charlotte, a taste of our life and culture. Several of you entertained our young pastor, pulling out all the stops with favorite menus, fine china, the works. (Asdrubal decided, incidentally, that Mary McGowan would have to be his cook in heaven, because he just couldn't imagine anything any better than that southern meal in Mary's dining room!)

I will never forget a statement Asdrubal made during one of our meals. As we were discussing American and Cuban life, the similarities and differences in our people, our cultures, our governments, Asdrubal spoke poignantly, in an insight mature beyond his years. He did not intend his remark to be critical, but it cut to the quick as I thought of our cultures and our expressions of faith within our very different ways of living. Someone had invoked the word freedom, suggesting if only by implication that we have more of it than Cubans enjoy, to which Asdrubal calmly replied, "Americans seem to have made freedom like your God." Wow. *And you shall have no other gods before me...* (Exodus 20.3). Not even freedom.

When the Apostle Paul proclaimed, *for freedom Christ has set us free...* (Galatians 5.1) he was not speaking of democracy or capitalism or purchasing power or individual political liberties – though many Americans might well choose our kind of liberty, over the freedom of which Paul was speaking. *The freedom for which Christ has set us free* is just as accessible under the thumb of the Castro Regime in Communist Cuba, as it is to those of us who know unlimited personal liberty. Many Americans would be dumbfounded by Asdrubal’s lack of desire for democracy to come to Cuba (even after the Castro regime falls).<sup>4</sup> For while we equate freedom with a particular expression of governance, and the individual liberties that come with a so-called free market system,<sup>5</sup> Asdrubal experiences freedom within a totally different system, and his shrewd remark was a not-so-subtle reminder of the danger that freedom, American style, can impose on the one truly seeking liberation.

A college friend used to say he could do anything he wanted because, “I’m grown. And this is American.” Well, you are grown. And you are American. But are you really free?

This is the question Paul was asking his friend, Philemon. Are you really free, Philemon? You own a slave named Onesimus. It is perfectly lawful. It is completely acceptable within the culture. It is obviously within your means as a successful citizen of the city of Colossae. But are you really free?

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<sup>4</sup> Asdrubal first made this comment to me when I was in Cuba, several years before the transition in the Cuban government that has now seen Raul, the brother of Fidel Castro, take the reigns of government control. Asdrubal’s comment is striking, because many Americans assume that anyone living under communist control would obviously prefer democracy if given that choice. I am confident of Asdrubal’s sincerity, because this is a comment he has repeated, even while visiting the United States, where he would have no reason to fear being honest about his desire for “more freedom.” Asdrubal has made it clear that he has all the freedom he needs, as long as he can feed and provide for his family.

<sup>5</sup> I say “so called ‘free market’ system” to stress the point I have just made – that perhaps our obsession with the market and our own material success indicates a deeper kind of “enslavement.”

The story of Paul's relationship to Philemon, and Philemon's slave, Onesimus, is fascinating, and disturbing.<sup>6</sup> It is disturbing, or should be, to modern Christians because Paul does not call into question the ungodly practice of slavery itself. The institution seems to be accepted, if not acceptable, to Paul. Although Paul frequently spoke of the freedom of Christ, liberty was one of his recurring themes (and implications can surely be made from his references), at no point does Paul actually condemn the practice altogether. *For in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, for all are one in Christ...* (Galatians 3.28). The power of Paul's language is undeniable, yet I have heard more than one pastor defend the exclusion of the pulpit to women, even by use of this verse, stressing that Paul's emphasis here is that we are all one, *in Christ*. You see, this is a reference to our "spiritual oneness," not a call to invite women to preach. Surely Paul's words have been similarly interpreted in cultures that practice slavery, even our own. So we moderns have to deal with Paul's acceptance of the fact of slavery, even as we read his liberating words.

The story is also disturbing because of the character of Philemon as indicated by Paul's high praise. *I have... received much joy and encouragement from your love (Philemon), because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you...* What kind of love is it that can be so fully expressed to some – while the person who possesses that love at the same time possesses the flesh of another human being? It is a question the text begs us to ask – though most of you know the answer to that question, for most of you are old enough to have seen it for yourself. It is the self-same kind of love that was expressed throughout the south for almost four centuries by slave-owning Christians. The same kind of love that was expressed by Sunday school teachers

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<sup>6</sup> My wife indicated that I may not have made the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus clear enough during the reading of scripture: Onesimus was a runaway slave who was converted to Christianity by Paul or his colleagues. While Paul was in prison (perhaps in Ephesus), he and Onesimus had grown quite close. It was from this relationship that Paul sought to return the slave to his master, with the request that Philemon receive Onesimus, but as a brother, not a slave.

and deacons and preachers who could sing “Jesus Loves Me” on Sunday, and lynch a man just for being black on Monday. What kind of love is that?

It is the kind of love that should cause us to call into question our own freedom. Am I free – free enough to love the person who is different from me (the black man, the Muslim worshiper, the Hispanic immigrant, the homosexual)... or am I really in bondage to some deep-seated prejudice that I perhaps cannot even name? Am I free – free enough to forgive the person who has wounded me... or am I really in bondage to the power of holding a grudge, the power that comes when I can hold un-forgiveness over the head of one who is undeserving of my grace? Am I free – free enough to give generously of my own financial resources (to the homeless man on the street, to the United Way, to the Church)... or am I really in bondage to the power of the love of my money, and to the illusion that what I have is all just mine? Am I free – free enough to face the future unafraid, to grasp some fundamental trust in God’s tomorrow... or am I really in bondage to the power of the false security we try to buy with the violence of the gun and the weapons of war? Am I really free? We can ask these questions of us as individuals, and we can ask them of our nation. Are we really free?

James Baldwin’s book, *The Fire Next Time*, is a scathing critique of the American religion and the American culture of the 1960s. It is a critique that could perhaps only be known by an African-American pastor in those turbulent times, who could hear the masses proclaim “liberty and justice for all,” while watching hatred and injustice continue to be poured onto Black Americans, all in the name of freedom. So Baldwin knew some of the truth of freedom that has never been mine to claim. He knew in a way that I do not that most people do not really want to be free, for he had seen the chains that bind us to our own indiscretions, our own false truths, our own hatreds – many of which are freely chosen. He knew that “freedom is hard to bear.”

I'm glad we do not know what happened to Onesimus when he returned to his master's home – though I would like to have seen the look on Philemon's face when he read Paul's letter. Did he receive Onesimus as a brother? Or did he claim his rightful place as owner and Lord, executing the law against the runaway slave, perhaps even by punishment of death? It was his right. And I wonder why we don't know? Is the biblical silence an indication of Philemon's less than exemplary response?<sup>7</sup>

Regardless, the open-endedness of the letter seems to me to leave that final response to us. Whom do you have the power to free, this day, by the power of God's love as expressed in the Christ's freedom in your own life? Let me appeal to you in closing, not by the power vested in me by the state of North Carolina as an ordained minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but as a friend and a fellow traveler on the road, and on the basis of love: May you be free enough today to forgive; free enough to laugh; free enough not to fear the future; free enough to love... free enough to live – *for Christ has set us free!*

May it be so!

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

Set us free, O God, but bind us to your truth and your love, for

“There are ties between us, all men and women, living on the earth, ties of hope and love, sister- and brotherhood. And we are bound together in our desire to see the world become a place in which our children can grow free and strong. We are bound together, by the task that stands before us and the road that lies ahead. We are bound, and we are bound.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Not only do we not know how Philemon received Onesimus, we do not actually know if Onesimus actually delivered Paul's letter. Would you? I like to believe that Onesimus returned, and Philemon received him just as Paul had instructed – that the freedom of Christ prevailed in his life, over the individual rights which Philemon was entitled to execute. Stranger things have happened!

<sup>8</sup> Amy and I sang this piece by James Taylor as the Introit, and repeated it here as the pastoral prayer.