

True Freedom

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

10 November, 2024

Children's Talk: Letting Go of Control

It is really frustrating when you see someone do something wrong; especially when you know how to do it right. Have you ever seen your brother or sister try to put together a toy, like Lego or K'nex, and you see they are making a mistake? It is tempting to then jump in and try to do it for them.

On the other hand, it is really frustrating when someone tries to do something for you that you want to do. Have you ever been putting together a toy like Lego or K'nex and your brother suddenly jumps in and tries to do it for you? That is so irritating.

This isn't just true in simple things like toys. It's also true of right and wrong, good and evil. When we see someone doing something wrong, we want to step in and stop them and force them to do the right thing. The problem is that often times that makes people even more attached to doing the wrong thing. We need to find a way of encouraging people to do the right thing while also not controlling them.

Joshua from the bible gives us a good example of exactly how to do that. After the Children of Israel had conquered the Land of Canaan they had a choice to make: would they follow the Lord, or would they follow another god? You might think that Joshua, as their leader, would force them to worship the Lord. But that's not exactly what he did:

Now therefore, fear Jehovah, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve Jehovah! And if it seems evil to you to serve Jehovah, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah. (Joshua 24:14-15)

Joshua made it absolutely clear that they should follow the Lord. He made it absolutely clear that he was going to follow the Lord. But he allowed them to make

their own choice. This is the balance that we need when we see people making bad choices. We need to let them know that their choices might get them in trouble. We need to let them know that we don't support their bad choices. But then, and this is the really hard part, we need to let them make their own choices. We cannot make the choice for them.

Sometimes, that means people will do the wrong thing. That's ok! But it also means that sometimes people will surprise you. Sometimes it might actually change their mind and they will choose to make a better choice. That's what happened with the Children of Israel: when given a choice, this is how they answered Joshua:

So the people answered and said: "Far be it from us that we should forsake Jehovah to serve other gods; for Jehovah our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went and among all the people through whom we passed. And Jehovah drove out from before us all the people, including the Amorites who dwelt in the land. We also will serve Jehovah, for He is our God." (Joshua 24:16-18)

We do not have to like or support what people do. In fact, sometimes we have to stand up against what other people are doing. But at the end of the day, we have to let people make their own choices, and trust that given the chance, they will freely choose to do what is right.

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We really value our freedom. Any time a freedom that we enjoy is taken from us we react almost by instinct to snatch it back. It's similar to how we protect our eyes without even thinking about it. I remember one time sitting in a movie theatre as a child as all the previews were being shown. There was one that had some racy scenes in it and so my mom placed her hand over my eyes. Now I had no particular interest in seeing the preview. I couldn't care less about it. But as soon as she put her hand there up went my hands to claw it away, almost with desperation. We do not like it when someone violates our freedom. But is freedom actually good for us? Would we as a society be better or worse off with more freedom? On one hand, it would be great if I had more freedom to make money, to live as I please, to not have regulations tying my hands. On the other hand, it would not be so great if other people had more freedom to abuse us, to violate our rights, to steal with impunity, and so on. More freedom is not always a good thing, as much as we like to think that it is. So today we're going to give some thought to how we regulate our own freedom, and how we can give up certain kinds of freedom but promote others.

There are two passages in the Word that I think do a great job of contrasting two different kinds of freedom. The first is taken from the book of judges, describing the state of Israel at the time:

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25)

I'm not sure what this passage sounds like to you. But I remember when I first heard it as a kid it sounded pretty good: no king bossing everyone around and everyone is doing the right thing as he understands it. That sounds great! But if we look at the context, we find that this passage actually describes a horrific time in Israel's history,

a time when over and over again they turned away from the Lord and ignored the covenant. So in this case, it sounds like too much freedom created anarchy and destruction.

Contrast that with the next passage from the prophet Jeremiah. It uses very different language, but it also seems to describe a state in which everyone leaves everyone else alone and no one person is in charge:

No more shall every man teach his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, "Know Jehovah," for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says Jehovah. (Jeremiah 31:33-34)

Once again, this is a picture of freedom. But unlike the previous passage, this freedom creates order and peace. It is a description of the fulfilment of everything the Lord promised the Children of Israel in a heavenly kingdom.

So if one kind of freedom creates anarchy and destruction and another kind of freedom creates order and peace, it becomes very important to be able to tell the difference between the two kinds of freedom. Hellish freedom can be summed up with the phrase, "I can do whatever I want, regardless of the impact on the people around me." At first this attitude to life feels like real freedom. Imagine the freedom of never having to worry about how you make others feel or what they will think of you. Yet the more someone leans into this freedom, the more his freedom is taken away. This freedom merely opens the path towards anarchy and destruction.

Consider a community based on this principle. At first, everyone minding his own business might work well. But over time, people will begin to bump up against each other. Our own interests do not so perfectly align that we can all get our way all the time. Nor are people designed to remain isolated. We cannot exist without interaction and the give and take of self-sacrifice for the good of the community. The only way for a self-centred person to exert his freedom is by taking it from others.

The only kind of order that can keep this kind of situation under control is fear and punishment. Not that the Lord imposes the punishments, although that is certainly what it will feel like. The simple truth of the matter is that evil brings its own punishments, and it is these innate punishments that maintain order when all else has failed. This is in fact the order that exists in hell:

Evil spirits are severely punished in the world of spirits in order that by means of punishments they may be deterred from doing evil. This also appears to be from the Lord; and yet nothing of punishment there is from the Lord, but is from the evil itself; since evil is so joined with its own punishment that the two cannot be separated. For the infernal crew desire and love nothing so much as doing evil, especially inflicting punishments and torment upon others; and they maltreat and inflict punishments upon everyone who is not protected by the Lord. When, therefore, evil is done from an evil heart, because it thereby discards all protection from the Lord, infernal spirits rush upon the one who does the evil, and inflict punishment. (Heaven and Hell §550)

And so, in spite of the fact that every devil strives to claim his freedom by ignoring the needs of others, that very act locks him into a cycle of being controlled by fear and punishment.

If we are to avoid the same fate we need to be on the lookout for the attitude that says, "It's all about me." Be especially wary of situations that make it seem like you are entitled to ignore the needs of others. That's not to say that you should never take care of your own needs: sometimes that is exactly what you need to focus on. But that is a decision that should be taken only after having honestly considered the situation and the needs of others. Yes, sometimes your own needs are the most important in the moment; but that is never because the needs of other people don't matter or are significant. So take other people into account, even when it is really hard. Even when it would be so easy to dismiss them. Ultimately, this will feel like being trapped, like being in a cage that you know you can escape with only a little effort, and yet voluntarily choosing to remain trapped. Resist the urge to go that route; on the other side of the momentary freedom is a world of slavery.

If hellish freedom is acting with no thought for others, then heavenly freedom is the attitude that says, "I freely choose to do the Lord's will, and I trust those around me to do the same." At first glance, doing what the Lord commands us to do might not sound like freedom. But the teachings of the New Church point out that God compels no one to follow His commandments: it must be a free choice on our part. It does take a certain amount of compulsion to follow through on this, but \neg self-compulsion is the epitome of freedom: it is the act of forcefully making a choice for ourselves against outside pressures (Divine Providence §148).

The Lord invites us to make this free choice not only for ourselves but to also respect it in those around us. Joshua presents an excellent example of this attitude when he laid out options for the Children of Israel:

And if it seems evil to you to serve Jehovah, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah. (Joshua 24:15)

Although Joshua made clear to the people the dire consequences that would follow if they turned from the Lord, he did not force them to choose. They had the option to worship whoever they wanted. Given this kind of freedom we might think that they people would make the easier choice by worshipping gods that were less morally demanding than Jehovah. But the exact opposite happened: with Joshua giving a powerful example of what it means to freely choose the Lord, they did made the same free choice. It was a choice that came with commands, and restrictions, and an apparent loss of freedom; yet still it was a choice that they freely made.

Once again, if we picture a community of people exercising this kind of freedom, we will be able to see just why it works so well and leads to order and peace, in spite of the lack of compulsion. If every individual is choosing to be guided by the Lord, he will always consider what is best for others. What's more, if everyone

has this attitude, no one would even need to consider what is best for themselves, because they would be surrounded by people who are also considering what is best for others. The fear of putting others first is of course that then we will not be taken care of; and in some communities, sadly, that might be the case. But in a heavenly community, in which everyone is choosing to be led by the Lord that fear would evaporate. This is how peace and order can arise out of heavenly freedom. No one needs to bend others to their will, because everyone else is already freely serving. Even people in apparent positions of power and governance would not take freedom away. Consider what the leaders of heavenly communities are like:

From all this it can be seen what the governors there are, namely, that they are such as are preeminent in love and wisdom, and therefore desire the good of all, and from wisdom know how to provide for the realization of that good. Such governors do not domineer or dictate, but they minister and serve (to serve meaning to do good to others from a love of the good, and to minister meaning to see to it that the good is done); nor do they make themselves greater than others, but less, for they put the good of society and of the neighbour in the first place, and put their own good last... (Heaven and Hell §218)

How amazing would it be if all our leaders, from the family level to the community to the nation, saw themselves as nothing but servants, whose job it was to improve the lives of others?

So how do we recognize and embrace this kind of heavenly freedom? One point to keep in mind is that we must start with ourselves. To force freedom on others is a contradiction. But we can be like Joshua: to firmly and openly declare our free allegiance to the Lord, and to encourage others to make that same choice for themselves. When we feel the fear that other people are going to make a mistake if we don't control them, we should be cautious. Yes, do encourage them to make good choices; but let go of the need to control. Again, order and peace can and do arise when people are free, provided they are striving to follow the Lord.

Another area where this principle proves useful is when we resent having to do the right thing. When you feel that resentment, remember that no one, not even the Lord, can force you to do the right thing. It certainly feels like they do; but ultimately it is our decision to follow the Lord. From time to time, renew that free covenant. Remind yourself why you are choosing to do the right thing. Consider how things have gone when you haven't chosen to do the right thing. Focus on the long term blessings that you know await you. The more being good feels like a chore, the more we will resent it. The more it feels like a free choice, the more empowering, and even joyful, it can become.

Freedom is a topic that we could talk about for hours, so I'll leave it there. Hopefully there are one or two simple ideas that you can put into practice over the next week as you become more aware of what kind of freedom you are exercising. Remember that avoid the attitude of "whatever I want goes," and to embrace the attitude of "I freely choose to serve." As the former attitude fades and the latter grows stronger, we will see our lives move from harm and destruction towards the peaceful order of heaven.