Willing Obedience

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

22 November 2026

Children's Talk:

If someone is travelling to a town that you don't like, would it be right to be unkind to him? To ignore him or refuse to help him if he needed help? Of course not! That is what some people in this story do. But I want to focus more on how two people, James and John, react to that unkindness:

> Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, and sent messengers before His face. And as they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. But they did not receive Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?"
> But He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them." And they went to another village. (Luke 9:51-56)

The Samaritans did not at all get along with the Jews. Since Jesus was Jewish, and was travelling to an important Jewish city, Jerusalem, the Samaritans did not welcome Him and in fact refused to let Him stay there. Again, was that right of them? No, not at all! The Samaritans were doing something wrong.

But what did James and John suggest to Jesus that they should do? They wanted to punish the Samaritans by burning down the entire town! Luckily Jesus did not at all want them to do that. He made it clear that He cared about saving and helping people, not punishing or destroying them. Even though they had done something unkind, they did not deserve to be destroyed.

We are sometimes like James and John: we see someone doing the wrong thing; and we get upset and feel like we need to punish the other person, or force them into doing the right thing:

1. Your brother is using the tablet when he isn't supposed to, so you forcibly grab it from him.

2. A friend said something mean to you at school, so you make everyone else ignore them as a punishment

But just because someone is doing a bad thing does not give us a right to punish them or force them to change. What are some of the things that we can do instead?

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I want to start the sermon today by thinking about freedom and control. These two contrasting concepts are central to spiritual life. The Lord wants us to be free:

> Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:31-32)

And yet we all are trapped in a kind of slavery:

> Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.” (John 8:34)

Before we dive into the specific spiritual meaning of those two quotes I want to spend time on our personal experience of freedom and control in general. These experiences do not necessarily line up nicely and neatly with spiritual ideas of freedom and control. There are times when we feel free in our lives: free to do what we want, free to be ourselves, free of demands from other people and things. And then other times of course we feel controlled: forced to do things we would rather not do, forced into being a kind of person we aren’t happy with, forced to conform to other people’s needs and wants. I invite you to spend a little time talking to the people around you, or just reflecting within yourself, on these times:

1. Can you think of times you have felt free? What did it feel like? What was it that allowed you to feel that way?
2. Can you think of times you have felt controlled? What did it feel like? What was it that made you feel that way?

Freedom (for the most part) feels better than being controlled; and so as people we have a tendency to seek freedom and resist control.

This is a good thing, even spiritually. For all that the Lord’s Word is full of rules and commandments, freedom is essential to spiritual life, while compulsion is

harmful, and we are right to resist it. We see this reflected in the idea of freewill offerings described in the Old Testament:

> The children of Israel brought a freewill offering to Jehovah, all the men and women whose hearts were willing to bring material for all kinds of work which Jehovah, by the hand of Moses, had commanded to be done. (Exodus 35:29)
>
> With a free-will offering will I sacrifice unto You; I will confess to Your name, O Jehovah, for it is good. (Psalm 54:6)

The necessity of freedom in worship (and all spiritual things) is confirmed by the Teachings of the New Church, such as in this passage from *Secrets of Heaven*:

> The Lord never compels anyone; for he who is compelled to think what is true and do what is good is not reformed, but thinks falsity and wills evil all the more. All compulsion has this effect, as we may see from the records and examples of life, for from them we know these two things: that consciences do not suffer themselves to be compelled, and that we strive after what is forbidden. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1947)

If you try to force someone to think a certain way, the tendency is for them to resist by thinking the opposite. If you forbid someone from doing something, they tend to want it all the more. Even if you can force them to say and do what you think is right and good, they themselves will become more entrenched in their ideas and desires. Now there are times that people should be compelled to behave certain ways: a thief should be restrained by the law, a disruptive coworker should be restrained by workplace policies, a toxic friend should be restrained by personal boundaries.

But today the focus isn't on other people: it is on ourselves, and our relationship to that feeling of being controlled. There is a paradox in the fact that the Lord never compels us, and yet we sometimes feel incredibly constrained by the Lord's rules. If you think back to those times when you feel controlled, I would imagine that for some of you it was when you were doing good and right things, things that the Lord wants you to be doing! A parent can feel trapped by the needs and wants of all their children. A friend can feel trapped by their obligation to care

when their friend is really struggling and needs help. A conscientious Christian can feel trapped by their feelings of guilt when they don't want to go to church or feel little motivation to serve those in need. We are compelled to do good things all the time!

We shouldn't be surprised when we then feel resistance or resentment towards doing those good things. We yearn for freedom, and again, that is to be expected. The Lord Himself wants us to be free. But sometimes that freedom might be found in unexpected ways, in ways in fact that feel like giving up a certain amount of freedom. There is a story in the Old Testament of a woman named Hagar. Hagar was the maidservant of Sarai, Abram's wife. This position was more akin to slavery than employment. Hagar eventually got fed up with her lot (for reasons we won't go into here) and fled into the wilderness seeking freedom. There she was met by an angel of the Lord:

> Now the Angel of Jehovah found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. And He said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?"
> She said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai."
> The Angel of Jehovah said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand." Then the Angel of Jehovah said to her, "I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude." (Genesis 16:7-10)

Hagar is basically saying here, "I want to be free!" And the Lord's solution is, "submit to your mistress!" In the literal sense, this is contradictory, and even abusive. But in the spiritual sense, Hagar and Sarai do not stand for two people, one enslaved to the other, but two parts of an individual, one of which needs to submit to the other. It is only in that submission that freedom can flourish.

If we want to understand freedom then we need understand these two parts of ourselves: one of them will always control the other. If we always identify with the controlled part of ourselves than we won't be able to experience freedom. So what are these two parts? The Teachings of the New Church describe them as the inner

or internal person and the outer or external person. These two parts vie for control within us:

> There is a combat against the things that are in the person himself and that he feels to be his own, and as one can fight against himself only from an interior self and from freedom there, it follows that the internal person then fights against the external, and fights from freedom, and compels the external to obedience. This, therefore, is compelling one's self; and this, evidently, is not contrary to freedom and rationality, but in accordance with them. (*Divine Providence* §147)

Part of the reason we can feel resentful and controlled even when we are doing good and right things, things that we want to be doing, is because that lower self is pushing back against the inner self. Take just one example: being resentful that a friend has asked for help just when I was hoping to have some free time. If I identify with the outer self, I may feel, "*I* want to just relax, but *the Lord* is making me serve my neighbour," and I'll feel compelled and resentful. But if I can try to adopt the mindset of, "*my lower self* just wants to relax, but *I* want to be the kind of person who serves his neighbour," then I am no longer being compelled; it isn't that the Lord is controlling me, it's that I am in charge of another part of myself. That's true freedom.

This can be a really useful shift in perspective. Any time we are feeling resentful for having to do something or be a certain way, it is worth doing an honest self-assessment: is this thing I am doing, or way I am being, good and what I want for myself? And if the answer is yes, what can we do to appreciate the opportunity to freely choose it, rather than subconsciously resent being forced into it? Now those are not at all simple or easy questions. It's challenging to tease apart what is resistance from our lower self and what is a more heartfelt desire for things to be different.

In many cases we have limited options and so our choices are constrained. The freedom that the Lord protects within each of us is a spiritual one, not a natural

one. But still, there is power in finding freedom even within those circumstances. Would I choose to _____? No, absolutely not; but given that those are my current circumstances, do I want to choose to _____? Yes, absolutely.

It takes a lifetime of work to feel truly free in compelling our lower self to serve our higher self. In the moment it will often feel more like slavery than freedom. But this is the power that the Lord strives to grant us, and can lead us to through the practice of repentance over and over again. We will not be slaves forever but can find freedom in choosing obedience to the Lord:

> Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. (John 8:34-36)

Closing reflection:

1. What are some of the hard things you know you will have to force yourself to do to become the kind of person you want to be?
2. Can you think of an area in your life in which you feel resentful and controlled? What free choices for the better *could* you make in this area? (knowing that there will be things you *don’t* have control over)