

# “The Quest for Freedom”

Acts 16:22-34 <sup>1</sup>

While he was attending graduate school in the early ‘80s, Michael Blakely stopped for coffee at a restaurant in Malibu, California. It was a memorable stop. Here’s what happened: “As I was drinking my coffee, a man came into the restaurant and began loudly proclaiming what a mess the United States had become. The man ridiculed our government and our educational, industrial, and banking systems. He was on such a roll that he had everyone on his side except for two people: an old man and me. The activist shied away from me, seeing my Pepperdine hat, my Ronald Reagan tee shirt, and my *Wall Street Journal*. So he went after the old man.

“As the activist approached, the old man turned his back and continued eating his soup. The activist sat down at the old man’s table and offered, ‘Mister, if you can tell me just one thing the United States has ever done for you, just one measly thing, I’ll leave you alone.’

“The old man licked his spoon and set it down on the table. Then he looked up, his red face indicating years of laboring in the sun. With a heavy Russian accent, he replied, ‘**Ve hold zees truz to be self-evident, dat all men created equal, life, liberty, perzuit of happiness.**’ Then he went back to his soup. Defeated, the activist slunk away.”

As the wise immigrant so eloquently stated it, *The Declaration of Independence* boldly affirms that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” This is the American Way. This is the American Dream to which all the world aspires.

In this holiday week that honors those who have given their lives to preserve the freedom that we enjoy, I’m going to be so bold as to ask the question, “What is ‘freedom’?” Do you ever wonder about that? Sometimes we think that freedom means the freedom to make choices, of being able to do whatever we want to do. But freedom is not so simple as this.

I think it was Tom Landry whom I heard tell this story, but it has made the rounds, and you’ve probably heard it somewhere: “A battleship was steaming along in the sea when the lights of another vessel appeared, on a course that would lead to collision. When the other vessel did not alter its course, the Captain was called to the bridge. Radio contact was established, and the Captain asked the contact to alter its course to starboard. The response came back that, to the contrary, the battleship should alter its course to starboard. Several exchanges produced no improvement in the situation. Finally, in exasperation, the Captain said, ‘This is Captain Jones of the U.S. Navy. I am in a battleship. I demand that you alter course.’ The reply came back, ‘I understand, sir. I am Seaman Smith. I am in a lighthouse.’”

While I seriously doubt that this ever actually happened, Coach Landry’s story reminds us that you and I are really *not* free to just do as we like in life. While we do have considerable freedom to make choices, we’re not free to choose and then to escape the consequences of those choices.

Another central component of the American Dream is economic “freedom”—the “rags to riches” thing. Economic freedom has the image these days of “winning the Lottery,” of having the means to satisfy our wants and desires without limit. But does *this* really work?

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at Columbia Baptist Fellowship, Columbia, MD on May 28, 2017, Memorial Day weekend. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the *New Living Translation* (Tyndale, 1996).

The old TV show “The Millionaire” explored the many ways in which receiving huge amounts of money actually made people unhappy—even miserable; and we ourselves can testify to the ways in which material things tend to lead us into slavery rather than into freedom. For example:

- We buy a new car, and then we have to take care of it. We enjoy its beauty and up-to-date wizardry, but we live in fear of theft, scratches, hail storms, and vandalism . . . and we have those dratted monthly payments to face.
- We buy a new house, and then there are troubles with the landscaping, and the plumbing, and the colors are not quite right. We’re afraid of the security system . . . and we’re in shock every month when the mortgage payments come due.
- We buy a new laptop, and the Wi-Fi won’t connect. Microsoft keeps coming out with new operating systems. “Plug and Play” doesn’t plug and play, there’s never enough memory, and the silly thing costs as much as a used car.

Is this really freedom? It doesn’t seem so to me.

Well, if freedom can’t be found in power, in choice, or in money, then what in the world is it? This is going to seem weird, but it seems to me—and this is a goal I move toward, not that I have attained—that real freedom comes from abandon. I hope you’ll hang with me here, but it seems to me that to experience real freedom, you and I have to do at least three things: we have to abandon the world’s values; we have to abandon ownership of our own lives; and we have to abandon the controls and let our Lord Christ run the show. Let’s think about these for a bit.

**1. Abandon the World’s Values.** I submit to you that real freedom comes to us only when we abandon the world’s ideas about success. The most important things in the world are not money, sex, and power. We need to look no further than this morning’s news to see the bold headlines that reveal the slavery that comes from serving such masters.

Over against such goals, God says to us, *“Don’t let the wise boast in their wisdom, or the powerful boast in their power, or the rich boast in their riches. But **those who wish to boast should boast in this alone: that they truly know me** and understand that I am the LORD who demonstrates unfailing love and who brings justice and righteousness to the earth, and that I delight in these things. I, the Lord, have spoken!”* (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

My friends, do you want to really be free? Then allow me to introduce you to the Source of unquenchable joy. As the prophet Isaiah said long ago, *“Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink—even if you have no money! Come, take your choice of wine or milk—it’s all free! Why spend your money on food that does not give you strength? Why pay for food that does you no good? Listen, and I will tell you where to get food that is good for the soul!”* (Isaiah 55:1-2).

In order to discover the Source of this original “soul food,” you and I must abandon our efforts to secure soul satisfaction by following the advice of our culture. According to those values, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are achieved by “getting all we can, canning all we get, and sitting on the can,” as my friend David Garland puts it.

I continue to be challenged by the life and ministry of Arthur Blessitt. Arthur is a modern-day prophet who began his ministry among the hippies of San Francisco in the 60s. Arthur had an experience with God at Christmas, 1969 in which he was told to carry a large wooden cross into every country in the world, walking from place to place and giving testimony to Jesus. Now,

forty-eight years later, he has literally carried the cross on every continent and into every country in the world: 324 nations, 41,879 miles . . . and he's still walking!<sup>2</sup>

Arthur Blessitt is the man who led George W. Bush to Christ (you can read that story at [www.blessitt.com](http://www.blessitt.com)), and every time I've heard him speak, I've had the deep feeling that this is a man who is genuinely, thoroughly, amazingly FREE. Arthur Blessitt is a man who is abandoned to Jesus. His prayer is my prayer, and it can be your prayer, too:

“Whatever there is in my life that doesn't look like you, *take it out*, O Lord Jesus! Put into me all that looks like you! Cleanse my heart and mind, my thoughts and soul in the blood of the Cross. I welcome you as my Savior. I want to follow you.”

These values, my friends, not the world's values, are the values that lead to freedom.

**2. Abandon Ownership of Your Life.** Abandoning the world's values is pretty radical, but abandoning ownership of our lives, the logical sequel to that first abandonment, is more radical still. Ownership, after all, is the American Way.

There's an old story that Abraham Lincoln went down to the slave block to buy a slave girl. As she looked at the man bidding on her, she figured that he was another white man who was going to buy her and then abuse her. Lincoln persisted until he won the bid, and as the two of them walked away from the auction, Lincoln said, “Young lady, you are free.”

She responded, “What does that mean?”

“It means you are free.”

“Does that mean,” she said, “that I can say whatever I want to say?”

Lincoln said, “Yes, my dear, you can say whatever you want to say.”

“Does that mean,” she said, “That I can be whatever I want to be?”

Lincoln said, “Yes, you can be whatever you want to be.”

“Does that mean I can go wherever I want to go?”

He said, “Yes, you can go wherever you want to go.”

And then, the young woman, with tears streaming down her face, said, “Then I'll go with you.”<sup>3</sup>

Now I don't know whether Lincoln ever actually did that or not, but the story does give an accurate picture of our situation with Jesus. We don't have to follow Him; He gives us the genuine freedom to walk away. But the first step in finding True Freedom is to abandon ownership of our lives to Jesus. As Paul wrote, “*You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your body*” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

It seems to me that our discussions about freedom generally begin with a mistaken premise. We begin with the idea that our choice in life is between being free and being enslaved. The truth is, though, that we don't have that choice. Like it or not, you and I will always serve something or someone. The freedom God gives us is the freedom to choose our Master.

The message of the Bible, in a mighty crescendo from Genesis to Revelation, is that **the person who is most free is that person who is the most completely abandoned to Jesus**

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur\\_Blessitt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Blessitt)

<sup>3</sup> Steve Brown, *Preaching Today*, No. 58.

**Christ.** The person who is the most free is that person who has most completely given up claim to her life, who has chosen to yield his life to the control of Jesus.

Do you remember the story of Paul as he and Silas were “singing in the stocks” in the Philippian jail (Acts 16:16-34)? They had been falsely accused, severely flogged, were bound in the innermost, dankest, darkest dungeon . . . and they were singing—*singing!*—hymns to God. They looked bound, but they were really free. They were so free that after the earthquake the jailer fell on his knees before them and asked, “What can I do to get what you’ve got?”

So I remind myself again that freedom comes only from abandon. I ask myself whether Jesus has access to every area of my life: my family, my job, my house, my cars, my bank account, my heart, my free time, my hopes, and my dreams. **To follow Jesus, to be really free, means giving him all the keys.**

**3. Yield the Controls of Your Life.** A number of years ago, I happened to be in Knoxville, Tennessee for a Promise Keepers rally at the same time that Knoxville hosted its annual “Honda Hoot.” This event draws thousands of motorcyclists every year, and many of them were in our hotel. We had a number of conversations with bikers, most of whom seemed like pretty normal folks.

I still remember that one fellow said, “There’s no ride on earth like the back seat of a motorcycle. Having no control of the bike takes some getting used to, but once you settle into that, it’s the best seat in the world.” That fellow’s words are pretty close to the mark in the spiritual journey, too. Freedom comes from taking our hands off the controls.

Or take this guitar string in my hand. There’s a sense in which this guitar string is absolutely free. It’s free to flip and flop around with no constraint. It’s free to do many things, but in its present condition it is not free to make music. In order for this string to make music, it must be properly fitted to the instrument for which it was made, and it must be put under the proper amount of the right sort of tension.

My friend, the freedom your heart yearns for only comes from letting go of—abandoning—the freedom you’ve been chasing in order to receive a higher freedom *that really does exist*. And experiencing that freedom requires being properly fitted for the task at hand. It also requires being put under the proper amount of the right sort of tension.

The world is full of many competing voices about “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” There are false promises of freedom all about us in the world that will trap us into addiction, into depression, into disease, into all sorts of outcomes that are not God’s purpose for our lives. And we frequently can’t see the danger from the beginning, except by trusting God’s Word.

The psalmist wrote, “I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free” (Psalm 119:32). Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

My friends, God’s desire is that you and I experience soul freedom in its grandest and most glorious form. But in order to experience this freedom for which your heart longs, you’ll have to abandon the world’s values. You’ll have to abandon ownership of your life. You’ll have to give Jesus both the keys and the controls of your life. But oh, what a ride it will be! Wear your helmet.