

John 8:31-36 5-13-12 (The Reason for God #4) **“Christianity is a Straightjacket”**

We'll start off with this one in honor of Mother's Day: A man observed a woman in the grocery store with a three-year-old girl in her shopping cart. As they passed the cookie section, the little girl asked for cookies and her mother told her, "No." The little girl immediately began to whine and fuss, and the mother said quietly, "Now Jane, we just have half of the aisles left to go through - don't be upset. It won't be long now."

Soon, they came to the candy aisle and the little girl began to shout for candy. When told she couldn't have any, she began to cry. The mother said, "There, there, Jane, don't cry - only two more aisles to go and then we'll be checking out."

When they got to the checkout stand, the little girl immediately began to cry for gum and burst into a terrible tantrum upon discovering there'd be no gum purchased. The mother said serenely, "Jane, we'll be through this check out stand in 5 minutes and then you can go home and have a nice nap."

The man followed them out to the parking lot and stopped the woman to compliment her. "I couldn't help noticing how patient you were with little Jane. It's quite commendable," he remarked.

The mother replied, "I'm Jane. My little girl's name is Tammy."

And we could go in a lot of different directions with that one. Anyone who's gone shopping with a three-year old will understand the need to keep yourself in check and to not say or do some of the things that might come to mind. Like the video we introduced earlier (Skit Guys – “Being Mom”) Mom-hood might almost seem to be a prison where you're trapped by the obligations of that office. (But cheer up... every now and then you get a vacuum cleaner.)

And actually that serves well to introduce the topic for the day in this apologetic series: the objection to faith that **“Christianity is a Straightjacket”**. That Christianity cramps your style and keeps you from having fun. In this chapter of Timothy Keller's Book, “The Reason for God”, he quotes early 20th century social activist Emma Goldman, who called Christianity

Slide: “...the leveler of the human race, the breaker of man's will to dare and to do...an iron net, a strait-jacket which does not let him expand or grow.”

And many skeptics of the Christian faith feel the same way today. They don't want to join an organization that they perceive to be narrow and confining, a religion of rules and restrictions. And unfortunately, many churches and church people have lived down to that expectation.

For instance Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian Novelist, attempted to confront the gradual movement away from traditional values, and wrote and spoke of universal values of love and labor. He also made valiant efforts to force himself into perfection. He drafted “Rules for developing the emotional will.” And “Rules for developing lofty feelings and eliminating base ones.” After reading Jesus' command to the rich man to give away everything, Tolstoy proceeded to do just that, to the point where he practically impoverished his large family. He accomplished great good for many, and influenced many other writers and thinkers after him. And yet he failed miserably to meet his own ideals of perfection or to achieve happiness. His wife wrote of him:

Slide: “There is so little genuine warmth about him; his kindness does not come from his heart, but merely from his principles. His biographies will tell of how he helped the laborers to carry buckets of water, but no one will ever know that he never gave his wife a rest and never – in all

these thirty-two years – gave his child a drink of water or spent five minutes by his bedside to give me a chance to rest a little from all my labors.”

Philip Yancey wrote of Tolstoy in “The Jesus I Never Knew”, “Like a spawning salmon, he fought upstream all his life, in the end collapsing from moral exhaustion.”

Although he was a great novelist and thinker, Tolstoy fell short in his own life because he misunderstood the Christian faith. The Truth is that:

I. Strait-jacket Christianity is not Biblical.

Early in his ministry, Martin Luther wrote a little book called “Concerning Christian liberty.” In it, he wrote that without faith...

“If you were nothing but good works from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head you would not be worshipping God, nor fulfilling the First Commandment...”

You’d only be spinning your wheels. You’d only know **about** God, you wouldn’t **know** Him. In fact, the Bible says:

Slide: “...without faith it is impossible to please God.” (Hebrews 11:6 NIV)

Because it isn’t just about the outside, but the inside. Yesterday, Lutheran Hour Ministries had a good devotion where they used the old illustration of the mother and her sick daughter at the doctor’s office.

The doctor looked in the little girl’s nose, and with a smooth medical banter asked, “Who’s in there? Bugs Bunny?” Not feeling the best, the little girl answered with a simple, “no.”

The doctor looked in the child’s mouth and inquired, “Who’s in there? SpongeBob?” Again, he got a concise and cool, “No.”

When he looked into her ears, he posed, “And who’s in here? Do I see Mickey Mouse?” You know her answer.

Later he put his stethoscope over her heart and said, “I know who’s in here. It’s Barney.” The youngster said, “No, Barney is on my jacket. Jesus is in my heart.”

Ken Klaus goes on: “Where did that little girl get that information? How did she know Jesus is in her heart? The answer is a simple one. Long before that girl could walk, before she could talk, long before her first day of Sunday School, her mother had taught her about the love of Jesus.”

Folks, you can’t learn that lesson in a strait-jacket. Rules and regulations will never teach you about love. Love comes from real people and real relationships and real loving things we do for each other. That’s why God was not content to just give us rules. That’s why He sent His Son. God knew that fallen human beings were never going to be able to learn to keep the rules perfectly. So Jesus did it for us. In the incarnation of Jesus, God became a human being, He lived the perfect life that we could not. And He willingly went to the cross to be punished for every wrong thing that we have ever done, said or thought, so that the justice of a Holy God would be satisfied in Him and we would truly be free from the consequences of sin, from Satan, and ultimately from death itself.

In John 8, Jesus was having an ongoing discussion with representatives from the Jews who, not unlike some people in our day, had trouble understanding the kind of freedom he was talking about. When Jesus told them “the truth will set you free”, they got caught up in the pride of their Jewish heritage and responded. “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”

The Apostle Paul, a Hebrew of Hebrews himself, understood their thinking perfectly. He wrote:

Slide: “Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. 4 Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.” (Romans 10:3–4 NIV)

In other words, the Pharisees were wrong when they sought to establish their own righteousness. When they did in their day, set up a strait-jacket faith with 613 rules and regulations for their people to follow to try earn a place with God. That simply can’t be done. We could never be good enough. **But Jesus was.** “Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.” It’s faith in Christ that brings His righteousness to cover our sinfulness – and totally blows away this idea that Christianity is a strait-jacket.

Twice in this text, Jesus tells us that He came to set us free. He says the truth will set us free and that He will set us free. And when He sets you free, “you will be free indeed.” In other words, this whole accusation that Christianity is a Strait-jacket is absolutely backwards. Jesus didn’t come to take away your freedom but to give you true freedom. The implication is that there is something that people might think is freedom but it’s really not. And unfortunately, we see that all around us every day. It’s a freedom that people pursue without restraint. And

II. Freedom Without Restraint is Not True Freedom

We used to have a little Golden Book called Tootle the Train.

Slide: Tootle pic

Tootle’s goal was to be the big Flyer on the New York to Chicago route. But unless he got 100 A+ in “Staying on the rails no matter what”, he wasn’t going to pass his class. And unfortunately tootle found out he like chasing butterflies in the meadow better than staying on the rails. Without going deeper into the story, folks, what happens when a train doesn’t get 100 A+ in “Staying on the rails no matter what”? It crashes, and so do the people who decide to deliberately reject the restraints in their lives.

We see it in something as simple as the super-sizing of America.

Slide: Bizzaro cartoon

The latest Gallup – Healthways Well-being index showed that 63% of all adults in the U.S. were overweight. 26% were classified as obese. Folks, how do we get that way? How do any of us get to be over-weight. I am over the weight I should be at to be healthy because I do not put enough restraint on my appetite. It’s pretty simple. If I want to weigh less then I must eat less, or eat more of the right things and less of the bad things. And I also must exercise responsibly, disciplining my body.

And of course, Americans want that, but they want it without the discipline. It is estimated that over \$60 Billion will be spent on weight loss programs in the United States this year. People want to be free from the consequences of misusing the freedom they have to eat too much in the first place.

But of course, that illustration is mild compared to the other restraints that people are throwing off today. People are losing spouses and their families because they refuse to put any restraint on something as innocent as Facebook. Nothing wrong with it in itself, but some

refuse to get off it to the point that the relationships they've made "out there" become more important to them than the people in their own homes. In the same way families are being broken and happiness stolen because of the lack of restraint with alcohol, drugs, video games, chat rooms, and the list goes on. The things that people are pursuing without restraint today are the very things that are trapping them and enslaving them. Please do yourself a favor. If you have a loving spouse or family member who has gently tried to tell you that you are doing too much of something, listen to him...listen to her. And we haven't even begun to talk about real sin – just neutral things that we can become trapped with. When we go further into actual sins the freedom it sucks from our lives is that much greater. Remember Cain, brooding with jealousy over his brother's better sacrifice. God came and warned him:

Slide: "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." (Genesis 4:7 NIV)

It's a word picture that every one of us should understand, because every one of us has been there. Jesus said it very simply: "I tell you the truth. Everyone who sins is a slave to sin." The sin becomes your master when you throw off the restraints. And the farther you throw them off, the uglier it gets.

French philosopher Denis Diderot had this to say about freedom:

Slide: "Man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest."

Denis Diderot 1713 - 1784

Unfortunately, his godless ideas were embraced by a French population which proceeded to try that out in the bloody French Revolution, where the "national razor"

Slide: Guillotine pic

was used to kill and kill and kill in a reign of terror unlike anything we've seen in modern times. People became trapped in a cycle of hate and revenge and true evil...

This week I received an email list about men with similar ideas:

Slides

Voltaire thought religion stood in the way of happiness. He rejected God as a divine killjoy. But at the end of his life he wrote: *"I wish I had never been born."*

Lord Byron lived in mad pursuit of pleasure. He denied himself nothing that might afford him even momentary happiness. In the end he wrote: *"The worm, the canker, and grief are mine alone."*

Jay Gould, devoted himself to amassing millions, and succeeded. His dying lament was: *"I suppose I am the most miserable man on earth."*

Lord Beaconsfield (Benjamin Disraeli) went for fame and prestige. He rose to the highest levels of society. He penetrated the innermost circles of power. His sad conclusion was: *"Youth is a mistake; manhood a struggle; old age a regret."*

"Meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless" wrote Solomon, the wisest man on earth – Meaningless to pursue happiness through pleasure or money or fame or power. So where is true joy to be found? In God. The Psalmist put it this way:

Slide: "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." (Psalms 16:11 ESV)

Folks, I had more to say today in an apologetics response to this attack on the Christian faith, but I just want to cut it short and say simply that

III. True Freedom can Only Come from Christ.

Jesus Christ came into this world to make your life as full, as rich, and as meaningful as it can possibly be. He said, “I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.” One of the earlier readings today we looked at Genesis 2. And we saw the beautiful picture of the great garden that God had made in the midst of the great world He had made and into which he placed the man. And folks, only in the twisted mind of Satan and his followers would this command be seen as a restrictive strait-jacket: “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden;” (Genesis 2:16 NIV) (except one).

C.S. Lewis put it this way:

Slide: “Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

Instead, we should shoot for something much higher. The higher, nobler life that Jesus came into this world to win for us. Folks, we live in a free land. That means (for the most part), the government isn't going to interfere with our hopes and dreams and tell us what to do with our lives. Politically speaking of course, there is always also going to be a tension between our freedoms and our responsibilities, including taxes and government regulations and so forth. In the next six months we're going to see those tensions play out in another presidential election. And there will be strong feelings on both sides. I have some strong opinions myself. Some that I kept in check today (you're welcome...). But folks, I hope that you understand that what you really need in life is not going to be given to you by any politician or political party – or by any effort on your part to make yourself free or good.

What this country needs and what everyone of us in it needs is to be set free from guilt and shame and bitterness and hatred and all the sin that enslaves us, to be set free from it all with the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. And to be set free to share that love in the world in which we live.

The Hymn, "My song is love unknown," carries this line about Jesus: "Who at my need his life did spend." Who at my need, and at great price brought me freedom. God grant that we may truly live and grow in it. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Father, we know that we have been given freedom from sin, death, and the power of the devil freely as your gift to us. Yet at the same time we know the great price you paid for that freedom to be ours. And we thank you. And we pray today that we may never take that freedom for granted. But learn to live in it and grow in it and share it with others. So that this country of freedom that still has so many forms of slavery might be truly freed by Your son and so be free indeed. Amen.