

Please take a piece of paper from one of the ushers & number it 1 to 10.

Number 1: Write down the time of day that it is easiest for you to do something just for yourself.

Number 2: Write down an adjective you use to describe God.

Numbers 3 and 4: Write down for these two of your biggest worries that are constantly on your mind.

Number 5: Write down the name of a person with whom you don't get along or could be considered an enemy.

Number 6, 7, and 8: Write down the three things that you value the most, other than God.

Number 9: Write down something you feel God is calling you to do.

Number 10: Write down another adjective you use to describe God.

Hold on to this and we'll come back to it later.

Today we are going to talk about something that we as Americans just love to talk about this time of year. We are going to talk about freedom. But this isn't about July 4 & patriotic music & fireworks that light up the sky. I am talking about a different type of freedom.

Today I am here to tell you that none of us as Christians are really free. We'd like to think that we are... that we are independent...that we make our own choices about what we are going to do and where we will go on any given day and what we will say. To a degree that is right.

However there is always a motivation that stands behind all these choices that you and I make and it is that that I am wanting us to consider. As Christians, everything we do in life is motivated by one of two possibilities: We do it because we are followers of Jesus and enslaved to God or we do it because we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

Our actions are either motivated by our relationship to God and therefore are good or our actions are not born out of our relationship to God and therefore can only be motivated by sin and selfishness.

Now when I am talking here about making choices I am not talking about what flavor of ice cream you prefer or choosing between the green shirt and the red shirt to wear today.

I am talking about the choices we make in relationships and with how we use time, how we care for our bodies & what we do with money & everything else that God has given us.

In how we go about making decisions in these arenas, I am saying that we make choices either as those enslaved to God or as those enslaved to our own sin. In our lessons today we are given three different examples of how people did or did not follow God.

Example #1: The children of Israel. When we encounter them in this lesson from Jeremiah, King Nebuchadnezzar has invaded Israel and the surrounding region with his armies and has hauled most of Israel off to Babylon into exile. And the God of Israel has allowed it to happen. Why? Because Israel had chosen not to love the Lord their God with all their heart & soul & mind.

Their neighbors had other gods, like Baal, and so they decided to worship him too because he might make their crops more abundant. They chose to not take care of the poor and the widows. Instead, they built big fancy homes for themselves and ate rich food at their banquet tables. And then on the Sabbath they would come to the temple and worship their God declaring,
“This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord...”
The only problem was that it didn’t seem to have any effect on how they lived or the choices they made the rest of the week.

God tried repeatedly to get their attention. He sent them prophets, like Jeremiah, begging Israel to repent and change her ways. But there finally reached a point where Israel would have to face the consequences of their sins.

The only way that their enslavement to sin could be broken would be exile and the change of heart that would come only through suffering and estrangement from their homeland.

Example #2 Hananiah: This is the prophet mentioned in our reading from Jeremiah. He shows up on the scene hardly even a year after the children of Israel had been led away into exile.

And there before the priests and all the people he claims that he has a word from the Lord. Within 2 years the exile will be over.

All the vessels taken from the Lord's house will be returned.

The King of Judah will be seated on his throne again

and all of God's people will come home for God

will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Then God spoke through Jeremiah to Hananiah, "The Lord has not sent you and you made this people trust in a lie.... Therefore I am going to send you off the face of the earth. Within this year you will be dead because you have spoken rebellion against God." Word of the Lord

I don't know about you, but as a preacher, stories like this scare me.

I don't want to step out of the pulpit some Sunday

and feel all the color drain out of my face as a prophet stands up

among you and says that I have made the people trust in a lie.

What happened here? Did Hananiah just mishear the message?

In this dark and dismal time for Israel did he just long to be the bearer of good news? Did he just need attention...did he not like Jeremiah

taking the prophetic limelight? I sort of doubt this since most of

what Jeremiah said about got him killed. If Hananiah was not sent

by God, who did send him? How do we know that it is God

who is sending us to do what we feel called to do?

Example #3: Jesus' disciples. For the last several weeks we have been in the 10th chapter of Matthew listening to Jesus instruct the 12 disciples as he prepares to send them out.

Jesus is very clear on what he tells them to do.

Go proclaim the good news. Cure the sick. Raise the dead.

Cleanse the lepers. Cast out demons. Jesus basically tells them

to do the things that they have seen him do

as they have watched him in his ministry.

He says, "Here is how you are to conduct yourselves.

Here is what to do when you are rejected and things go really wrong. And above all, do not be afraid for I am with you and you will always have life in me.”

So at this point in the story and then even after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, how were the disciples to know if they were on the right track? How were they to know if they were obediently following Jesus? They were to draw from what they had learned from spending time with Jesus. If they could imagine the Lord himself saying or doing something and felt the Holy Spirit guiding them in their actions, then most likely they were living as slaves to God and faithfully proclaiming the good news. Plus, if they were catching a lot of flack and opposition for what they did, that was also a good sign.

If Jesus was reviled and persecuted then there was a good chance that they would receive the same type of treatment.

For us to be faithful followers of Jesus, for us to be enslaved to God and not to the world is tough. For it’s not about instant gratification and quick results. It’s not about us being loved & praised for what we do. It sometimes means having to learn lessons the hard way. Israel did not return home in 2 years as Hananiah prophesied. Instead, they would return seventy years later and interestingly enough, it is in Jeremiah sharing this news with the exiles, that it would be 70 years, that we have the often quoted passage from Jeremiah where God says,
“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

God remembered his promise to his people. He was faithful to them, but because of their disobedience exile had to be part of the plan.

God bestowed blessing on them and the opportunity to come home, but only when **they** were ready to receive it.

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To obey God is a discipline that must be learned and honed over time, for it takes time to learn these following steps:

(1) to learn how to truly listen to Jesus. Make that a regular part of your day whether it's first thing in the morning or in the afternoon or right before bed or all the above. Make listening to Jesus a part of how you approach every conversation, every task, every trial that you may face.

(2) After listening intently to Jesus, actually do what he is asking of you. It takes courage and humility to do this because it's possible to do what Jesus is telling you and to still do it for all the wrong reasons - for recognition and a pat on the back. It's also tough to do what Jesus asks sometimes because it may challenge other people or tick them off. Do not be afraid but know Jesus is with you. In doing what Jesus asks start with the small things. It is in following Jesus with all the little things that add up and teach us how to be a slave to God in everything.

(3) Remember **this** good news - in the good that you do and the good that comes forth from you people will see and hear Jesus. It is through you that people experience the love, the truth, the kindness, the compassion, the forgiveness of this amazing God whom we serve. If they welcome you, they are welcoming God. and it is through you that they can come to know Jesus who can set them free and show them another way to live.

Now I would ask the ushers to hand out the other sheets.

At the beginning of this sermon you all started writing a prayer whether you knew it or not. Now it is time to put these two pieces together and pray it. I invite you to pray this by including your own words. Take this home with you and let it be your prayer this week as you follow Jesus. Let us pray.

#2 and #10 Lord, As your disciple you call me to follow you. Help me to listen. In the **#1** help me to take the time to read your Word. Speak to me through your Word and show me what you are calling me to do today. Help me not get distracted by **#3 and #4** that worry me. Help me not to be tempted to love **#6, #7, or #8** more than I love you but to recognize that you, Lord, are the one who gives me all the good I have. Give me courage to **#9** in your name. As a slave of God, let me reflect Jesus' love to **#5** even though you know that is difficult for me to do. I ask all of this in the name and for the sake of your son, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

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