

"FREEDOM!"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

In his book, Talking Straight, Lee Iacocca shares some interesting stories about raising funds for the 100th birthday of the Statue of Liberty.

For example, there was a man from Poland who sent two dollars for "this beautiful symbol". He never expected to see the statue himself, but at least he could dream about it.

There was a money order from a refugee camp in Thailand. Seventy-eight homeless Vietnamese had passed the hat and come up with \$114.19 as "our humble share for the rehabilitation of her 100th birthday." Iacocca writes,

"That one floored me". "These were people who had lost everything - everything but hope. And the Lady was the symbol of that hope. They simply were pleading with us to 'keep the torch lit'".

The Statue of Liberty. What a beautiful lady she is...an almost universal symbol of political freedom. There is another symbol of freedom, however, far more important than the Statue of Liberty in the total scheme of things. It is, of course, the cross. The cross on which Christ died.

POLITICAL FREEDOM IMPORTANT

Don't get me wrong. Political freedom is, indeed, important.

Who among us did not watch with almost reverent admiration as a lone student stared down a tank in Tiananmen Square? Or who could help having a tingle of excitement as we watched the destruction of the Berlin Wall? The past eighteen months has been one of the most remarkable periods in the long history of civilization. The Statue of Liberty has never stood taller. Our flag has never waved prouder. And as long as that statue and that flag stand for freedom and justice for all then history is on our side. Freedom is, after all, God's idea.

It has never been God's will for any of His children to be enslaved. When He created us in His own image, He created us for freedom. Whenever this country is on the side of freedom and justice and fair treatment of all people, whether in Nicaragua or South Africa or Eastern Europe or wherever, we can be sure we are on God's side.

Admittedly, we have not always been on God's side. In some places we have sometimes been aligned with the forces of oppression. And when that happens we end up betraying all that the Statue of Liberty and our flag stand for.

After John Wilkes Booth shot President Lincoln, he leaped to the stage of the theater from the president's box. Ironically, he caught his spur in the middle of his jump, and broke his leg. Do you happen to know what he tripped on? He tripped on the American flag!

Whenever we are embarrassed as a nation, it is generally because we have tripped on our own flag.

Political freedom is important and many wonderful young lives have been lost in the cause of political freedom.

Still, political freedom is not the most important kind of freedom. There have been many who have been imprisoned for long periods of time who have been freer in their minds and hearts and spirits than many who walk around enjoying the benefits of political freedom every day.

Regardless of your political inclinations, you have to wonder if Nelson Mandela was ever really a prisoner of the South African government. How does a man maintain such dignity, such grace, such ability to articulate the concerns of his people after being confined for such a long period of time. His body may have been imprisoned, but not his mind, not his heart, not his soul.

And the Apostle Paul in whose steps Lynn and I have walked these past two weeks knew what it was to be imprisoned. Some of his finest letters were written while he was behind bars. We call them the "imprisonment letters". The Apostle Paul knew that there was a freedom far more important than political freedom.

The only kind of freedom that really matters is freedom within. It is the freedom that comes from knowing that regardless of the circumstance, whether in prison or out, we are under the watchful eye of One who knows us and loves us. It is the freedom of knowing that our sins, regardless of how deep their stain upon our soul, have all been washed away. It is the freedom that allows us to stretch our wings and be all who we can be!

ENSLAVED BY OUR OWN WEAKNESSES

weaknesses.

It is so sad to see someone who is enslaved
...especially to or by his or her own

I was reading recently about Raynald III, a 11th century Duke in what is now Belgium. Raynald was grossly overweight. Captured in a revolt by his younger brother, he was imprisoned in a room that was built around him. The room had no bars on the windows..not even a locked door...though the door was slightly smaller than normal. Still, because of his size, he could not squeeze through to freedom. He was too large. Still there was hope. All he had to do to be a free man was to go on a diet. His brother even offered to restore his title and wealth as soon as he was able to leave the room.

His brother knew Raynald's weakness, though. Each day he had sent to Raynald's room a variety of delicious foods. Instead of browning thinner, Raynald grew fatter. He was a prisoner not of locks or bars or iron gates. He was a prisoner of his own appetite.

What a parable of the dilemma faced by many people every day. There are forces within the human personality that can attain an almost demonic grip on our behavior. We must admire the person who wins a permanent victory over nicotine or alcohol or cocaine or even chocolates. It is not easy.

Of course, there are other serious weaknesses of the flesh. Psychologists are now talking about sexual addiction - people who are forced to deal with an enormous drive to abuse the blessed gift of sexuality. Inability or failure to keep this drive under control has broken hearts, families, and lives ever since humanity made its appearance on earth.

There are other forms of enslavement, of course.

With the advent of lotteries, addiction to gambling has become institutionalized. No matter how attractive such means of raising funds for the state may be, it is sad to see government profit from human weakness. It is always the person who can least afford it, who will buy the disproportionate number of lottery tickets...for they represent hope.

THE ENSLAVEMENT OF SIN

It is sad to see people who are enslaved by their own weaknesses. Sadder still, in the second place, is the enslavement of sin. But you ask, isn't that the same thing? No, it isn't. Our personal weaknesses and frailties are but symptoms of a far greater problem - namely our estrangement from God.

We were created to live in fellowship and harmony with God, our fellow man and ourselves. We were created to walk in confidence and strength and love and assurance. Because fellowship and harmony have been broken, however, we walk in fearfulness, weakness, resentment and uncertainty. Because of that broken relationship with God, anxiety haunts us. We drown our sorrows, disguise our ambitions, discard the Divine image within. We are slaves to doubt, distrust and despair. And only one person can help us.

Over two centuries ago, a wealthy landowner, Sir Roger Boulter, visited the traveling fair at Colchester. As he went round the stalls and sideshows, he suddenly heard the market-square clock begin to chime. Like a child, he counted, but he could not believe his ears. The clock chimed thirteen! He thought he had miscounted until a small dark man standing next to him turned and verified the happening by saying, "The clock struck thirteen". That night Sir Roger recorded the incident in his diary.

Two months later, Sir Roger woke up and sensed a compelling inward voice that said, "Go to York". He was not a man given to such voices, but the next day he saddled his horse and set off to York. When he arrived he discovered a large crowd gathered outside the courthouse. On hearing that it was the last day of a murder trial, he entered the courthouse and sat in the public gallery, from where he heard the guilty verdict pronounced. When the accused man was asked if he had had anything to say, he replied,

"I am innocent. I was more than one hundred miles from the crime on the day it took place. I was in Colchester. Another man and myself heard a clock strike thirteen. If only I could find him, he could vouch for my innocence."

Immediately Sir Roger stood up and declared, "Now I know why I was to come to York."

He explained who he was and showed the judge his diary which he always carried with him. The accused was declared innocent on the basis of Sir Roger's testimony. As he and Sir Roger walked out of the court, the freed man turned to his benefactor and said, "You are the only man in all the world who could have saved me!"

Here is God's word for today. You and I are in torment and turmoil because of our estrangement from God, and there is only one man who can help us. That one is Jesus of Nazareth. He is the only one who can make us truly free.

Richard de Haan tells the story about a certain Mr. Kline. He was his little town's "Scrooge". No one really seemed to care for Mr. Kline. Even little children had made up rhymes about him which ridiculed his selfish eccentricity. One particular Sunday night he was walking down the street past the local church. It was a very warm summer night, the windows of the church were opened and the singing could be heard up and down the lane. Kline was very discouraged, defeated and convinced that life simply wasn't worth living. He had no family and certainly no friends. He was at the end of hope.

As the congregation sang, he caught the strains of a hymn;

"Saved by grace alone, this is all my plea.

Jesus died for all mankind, and Jesus died for me."

His hearing, however, was not very good so when the congregation came to the words, "Jesus died for all mankind", he thought they were singing, "Jesus died for al' man Kline". "Why, that's me" he exclaimed! And stopping in his tracks, he turned and entered the small auditorium. There he heard the simple message of the Gospel and believed and accepted the gift. It was then that he became convinced that Jesus had died for him - ol' man Kline.

There is only one way to bridge the gulf between the person God created us to be and the fearful, uncertain persons that we are, and that is by faith in Christ. What we need is not a new set of resolutions but a new heart - a heart at one with God. Then we will know what it is to be truly free.

Mark Twain told of the night the Mississippi River cut through a narrow neck of land and changed courses. It was before the Civil War. A black man went to sleep as a slave in Missouri. He awoke to discover that because of the river's change, the land he was now in was Illinois. And he was a free man.

Such a change took place on Calvary 2,000 years ago. Jesus Christ died there. With him died the sins of the world. You and I are free. The brokenness between ourselves and God is no more. We are slaved only because we have not acknowledged and accepted what God has done in our behalf.

Political freedom is grand. Even grander still would be our freedom from our own destructive desires. Neither of these can compare, however, to the importance of the freedom which was given us 2,000 years ago by our Lord, Jesus Christ. And because of what He was done, we are free forever.

PRAYER