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Bridgeway Church  
Gospel of John #26  
December 8, 2019

## Sermon Summary #26

### Freedom! John 8:31-36

*Freedom*: the power or right to act, speak, or think freely; the state of not being subject to or affected by something undesirable. So says the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. I suppose everyone has their own definition of the word “freedom” depending on personal circumstances. Just a couple of weeks ago three men in Chicago were released from prison after serving 36 years for a murder they didn’t commit. I imagine freedom for them is something almost indescribably sweet.

For the Christian, freedom may be experienced in any number of ways: freedom from the world and the pressure to conform to its ways; freedom from the fear of being rejected by those whose expectations we don’t meet; freedom from allegiance to anyone other than God; freedom from selfish preoccupation with what others think of us. Freedom! What a wonderful word.

But what does Jesus mean when he speaks of freedom? What is freedom for the Christian as it is found in the Bible? There are several ways of answering this question.

For example, the Bible talks often of *freedom from condemnation*. The Apostle Paul put it this way in Romans 8:1 – “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” To be free in this sense of the word means that those who have put their trust in Christ are free from the prospect of ever being punished or suffering God’s wrath for their sin.

Related to this first meaning of the word is *freedom from the Law*. By this I have in mind the fact that we are not under the Law of Moses. We do not have to abide by the dietary restrictions or the numerous prohibitions and commands of the Old Testament. Paul likely had this concept of freedom in mind when he said to the Christians in Galatia, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1). Evidently there were some Jewish people in Galatia who were insisting that if Gentiles wanted to be saved, they had to obey certain Mosaic commandments and be circumcised. No, says Paul. Christ has set you free from any such obligation.

Then there is what the Bible describes as *freedom from the compulsion of sin*. The Christian, by virtue of having been born again and having the Holy Spirit permanently living inside them, does not *have* to sin. You *may* sin, but you don’t have to. The power of the Holy Spirit enables us to resist the otherwise compelling power of our fallen flesh. Romans 6:14 assures us that “sin will have no dominion” over us since we “are not under law but under grace.”

There is yet one more way the NT speaks of freedom. I have in mind your *freedom, as a Christian, from the conscience of other people*. Some of you who know Jesus as Lord and Savior still have not yet experienced this freedom. I’m talking about being free from the demands of what other people say is right or wrong. When Scripture is silent on a subject, often times our conscience speaks loudly. And when it does, we try to enslave other people to what we think is the right or wrong thing to do.

Jesus may well have all four kinds of “freedom” in mind in what he says in John 8:31-36. Today I want to focus on the fourth one: freedom from the conscience of other Christians. Paul spoke of this kind of freedom when he said, “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13).

*The Threat of Legalism*

There are people, professing Christian people, who are determined to bring you under their religious thumb. They are bent on making you a slave of their conscience. They have built a tidy religious box, without biblical justification, and strive to stuff you inside and make you conform to its dimensions. They are legalists, and their tools are guilt, fear, intimidation, and self-righteousness. They proclaim God's unconditional love for you, but insist on certain conditions before including you among the accepted, among the approved elite, among God's favored few.

I'm not talking about people like those we read about in the book of Galatians who insist that you obey certain laws or moral rules in order to be saved. Such people aren't legalists. They are lost! They are easily identified and rebuffed. I'm talking about Christian legalists whose goal is to enforce conformity among other Christians in accordance with their personal preferences. These are *life-style legalists*. They threaten to rob you of joy and to squeeze the intimacy out of your relationship with Jesus. They may even lead you to doubt your salvation. They heap condemnation and contempt on your head so that your life is controlled and energized by fear rather than freedom and joy and delight in God.

Rarely would these people ever admit to any of this. They don't perceive or portray themselves as legalists. If they are listening to me today they are probably convinced I'm talking about someone else. They'd never introduce themselves: "Hi! My name is Joe/Julie. I'm a legalist and my goal is to steal your joy and keep you in bondage to my religious prejudices. Would you like to go to lunch after church today and let me tell you all the things you're doing wrong?"

I suspect that some of you are either legalists or, more likely, the victims of legalism. You live in fear of doing something that another Christian considers unholy, *even though the Bible is silent on the subject*. That latter phrase is critically important. When the Bible speaks on a matter of good and evil, right and wrong, you are not free to do otherwise. But when the Bible is silent on some matter, there are certain people who insist they have the mind of the Spirit and they know what God's will is for your life.

As a result, you are terrified of incurring their disapproval, disdain, and ultimate rejection. Worse still, you fear God's rejection for violating religious traditions or cultural norms that have no basis in Scripture but are prized by the legalist. You have been duped into believing that the slightest misstep or mistake will bring down God's disapproval and disgust.

When you first became a Christian, did you feel free? Most of you would answer that by saying, Yes. It was wonderful and exhilarating and joyous. But then you went to church! And there you encountered people who, in effect, said to you: "Oh, we're glad that you've come to see that God loves you. But if you're going to fit in around here, we've got a few rules of our own."

Let me ask you a question. When you are around other Christians, whether in church or a community group or just hanging out, do you feel free? Does your spirit feel relaxed or oppressed? Do you feel like you're floating on air or walking on eggshells? Do you sense their acceptance or condemnation? Do you feel judged, inadequate, inferior, guilty, immature, all because of your perceived failure to conform to what someone else regards as "holy"? Jesus wants to set you free from such bondage! As Paul said, "you were called to freedom"!

We're going to spend two weeks in this paragraph. Although we moved through John 8:12-30 rather quickly, we're going to slow down here. Today, I want us to think about what it means to be free from the conscience of other Christians. Next week we'll explore other dimensions of Christian freedom and look closely at what it means to be a true disciple of Jesus.

So let's begin with a definition of legalism.

### *Defining Legalism*

Legalism has been defined in a number of ways, but here is my attempt. *Legalism is the tendency to regard as divine law things which God has neither required nor forbidden in Scripture and the corresponding inclination to look with suspicion on others for their failure or refusal to conform*. One could also call this a "religious" spirit, insofar as religion and legalism go hand in hand. It all comes down to this: I create rules and expectations not found in the

Bible and then feel good about myself and my relationship with God for having obeyed them all the while I judge others for having failed to live up to this artificial standard of man-made godliness.

***So, how do I know if I'm a legalist?*** Here is a simple test, consisting of five questions.

***(1) Do you place a higher value on church customs than on biblical principles?*** Many of our so-called “rights” and “wrongs” in church life are the product, not of the Bible, but family background, culture, social and economic factors, geographical locale, and a long-standing institutional commitment to doing things the way they’ve always been done. Once again, as long as the Bible doesn’t prohibit such practices, you may well be free to pursue them. But you are not free to insist that others do so as well.

***(2) Do you elevate to the status of moral law something the Bible does not require?*** Let me mention just a few examples.

Whereas the Bible explicitly forbids drunkenness, it nowhere requires total abstinence from alcohol. Make no mistake: total abstinence from alcohol is great. As a Christian you are certainly free to adopt that as a lifestyle. But you are not free to condemn those who choose to drink in moderation. You may discuss with them the wisdom of such a choice and the practical consequences of it, but you cannot condemn them as sub-spiritual or as falling short of God’s best.

The Bible encourages modesty in dress. Both male and female are to be careful not to dress in a way that flaunts their sexuality or is unnecessarily ostentatious and seductive. But we have no right to condemn others for their wearing of colorful clothing or the use of makeup or a particular hairstyle.

The Bible condemns lust in no uncertain terms. But the legalist uses this to condemn as unholy everything from television to the internet to movies (even PG) to mixed swimming. Make no mistake: you may be significantly better off by severely curtailing your use of TV and the internet, and I strongly advise that you be more discerning than ever when it comes to the trash coming out of Hollywood that so often passes for “art”. But these forms of media can also be powerful tools for the expansion and expression of kingdom truths when wisely utilized.

Parents are to raise their kids in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. About that there is no mistake. As a parent, you may believe that all public schools are tools of the devil and cesspools of secular humanism. It is certainly your right to hold that opinion and make your decisions concerning your child’s education accordingly. But you have no biblical right to question the spirituality of those Christian parents who would hold a different view. Whether you educate your children at home or send them to a private school or public school is a matter on which Scripture is silent. Hold your conviction with passion and zeal, but do not seek to enslave the conscience of others who may disagree with you.

The Bible commands weekly gatherings for prayer, Bible study, worship, and celebration of the sacraments. But the legalist condemns as carnal anyone who ever, for any reason, misses a Sunday service or dares to watch a football game in the afternoon or chooses to mow their lawn after church. If you prefer not to work on Sunday or watch athletic events or perform household chores or take a walk at the mall, that’s wonderful. But don’t condemn others who differ. Why? Because God doesn’t condemn them.

Let’s take a moment and explore this particular issue in a bit more detail. Do you recall the incident where Jesus and his disciples were walking through the grain fields on a Sabbath day and “began to pluck heads of grain” (Mark 2:23-28)? The Pharisees went ballistic: “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” (v. 24).

The OT Sabbath law wasn’t all that complicated. Six days were to be set aside for work, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, no work was to be done. The people of Israel were to rest. The OT, however, gave very few details as to what actually constituted the kind of “work” that was forbidden on the Sabbath. So the Jewish rabbis, over the years, took it upon themselves to supply what the biblical text left open ended. They identified thirty-nine different expressions of what they called “work” that were prohibited on the Sabbath day.

As time passed, the various schools of Jewish rabbis added regulation after regulation, law upon law to the original commandment, going far beyond the requirement of Scripture and making the Sabbath and its observance a horrible burden to the people of Israel. God had meant for the Sabbath to be a day of rest. It was the day on which God wanted

his people to be relieved from their burdens and to celebrate his goodness and provision for them. But the religious leaders of Israel had turned it into a day of incredible stress and anguish and of one heavy burden after another. In the years following the life of Jesus, literally hundreds of man-made restrictions had been added to the original command (no, I'm not exaggerating when I say "hundreds"). So many extra rules and regulations had been heaped upon the original commandment that *it actually was harder to "rest" on the Sabbath than it was on the other six days of the week!*

As I said, in the years following Jesus' life, these Sabbath regulations increased exponentially. One law specified that a Jew could not carry a load heavier than a dried fig; but if an object weighed half that amount you could carry it twice! If the Sabbath began as you reached for some food, the food had to be dropped before drawing your arm back lest you be guilty of *carrying a burden!* Nothing could be bought or sold and clothing could not be washed. Baths could not be taken for fear that some of the water might spill onto the floor and "wash" it, something forbidden by these rules. Chairs couldn't be moved lest by dragging it you make a furrow in the ground. A woman could not look in a mirror lest she see a grey hair and be tempted to pluck it out!

It wasn't quite so bad in the first century, but the Sabbath regulations still imposed a heavy religious burden on the Jewish people that God never intended for them. So here we have Jesus and his disciples, on a Sabbath day, engaged in a gentle stroll through the grain fields. Picking the heads of grain and eating was not itself a violation of the law (Deut. 23:25). But the Pharisees argued that it constituted "reaping," one of those thirty-nine types of so-called "work" that they determined was in violation of Jewish tradition.

One unmistakable sign of a legalistic spirit is the tendency always to be looking for what's *wrong* in another person's life, in order that you might *judge* them, instead of looking for what's *right*, in order to *encourage* them. None of us does everything right. We all fall short in many ways. It may be how we respond to the poor or our style of worship or the way we preach or how we try to share Christ with non-Christians. But we never do it perfectly.

Let me use a *quantitative image* to make my point. Let's suppose that by the grace of God you test out at 95%. I'm not talking about your attempt to merit salvation or to earn acceptance with God. I'm talking about an average Christian seeking to obey the will of God as set forth in Scripture. *The person with a religious or legalistic spirit will ignore the 95% you did well and focus almost entirely on the 5% you did poorly.* They love picking away at how you fell short, how you failed to live up to their expectations of perfection. Your failure in the 5% *invalidates and undermines* the 95% you did well. It suddenly counts for nothing. They are blinded to the fruit that was produced and the good results that came from it. They are incapable of understanding your motives.

They *feel good* when they can identify your error. It *reinforces their feelings of superiority.* They actually think themselves *more spiritual, more godly, and more favored and loved by God.*

There's a *flip side* to the religious/legalistic spirit. In addition to being quick and dogmatic in identifying the small and rare failures of others, *the religious spirit never acknowledges its own faults and failures.* To admit and confess to sin or misjudgment is to run the risk of losing power, losing face, or losing prestige.

What drives the religious spirit? It is the belief that their own efforts and achievements gain for them acceptance with God and approval from men. They do not experience rest in Christ's achievements or confidence in what he has done for us, but re-double their own works and take pride in what they do and what others don't.

Look at Mark 2:24 – "And the Pharisees were saying to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?'" Or again, we read in Mark 3:2 that "they were *watching* him closely." That's the religious or legalistic spirit: *always on the look-out for someone else's sin; always on the look-out for someone's failure to measure up to their rules, rules that aren't in the Bible; always spying out the behavior and beliefs of others to root out the slightest deviation from their traditions.* They nitpick and judge.

"Ah! You actually drink alcohol! You attend movies! You mow your lawn on Sunday! You don't wear a coat and tie to church on Sunday! I've got my eye on you. I noticed that you read a different version of the Bible rather than the one we approve! You don't believe everything the same way that I do! Oh, my! You have a tattoo! I also noticed that you don't always close your eyes when you pray! You tithe out of your net income rather than your gross income.

Ah! God'll get you for that! And you call yourself a Christian!" Such is the energy that drives the spirit of legalism and religion.

***(3) Do you tend to look down your spiritual nose at those who don't follow God's will for your life?***

I remember hearing Chuck Swindoll on the radio tell the story of a missionary family that served in a place where peanut butter was hard to obtain. This family arranged for friends in the U.S. to send them peanut butter so they could enjoy it with their meals. They soon discovered that other missionaries in the same country considered it a mark of spirituality that one abstained from peanut butter. It was their "cross to bear"! This family didn't flaunt their enjoyment of peanut butter, but they did continue to thank God for it and enjoyed it in the privacy of their own home. But the pressure and condemnation from their fellow missionaries intensified to such a degree that the family eventually returned home, disillusioned and cynical.

Someone might argue that the couple should have yielded and agreed not to eat peanut butter out of deference to the beliefs of their associates and for the sake of the gospel in that country. Perhaps. But to do so would also serve only to reinforce error in the minds of the legalists who insisted that peanut butter was "off limits". You are not doing anyone a favor by behaving in such a way that you encourage or embolden them in their legalistic ways.

Part of being a Christian is the freedom not to eat peanut butter. But it is not part of being a Christian that you condemn others if they do. *You are free to exercise your freedom, but you are not free to insist that others not exercise theirs!*

***(4) Are you uncomfortable with the fact that the Bible does not explicitly address every ethical decision or answer every theological question?*** Legalists tend to fear ambiguity. The legalist's favorite colors are black and white. They are uncomfortable with biblical silence and insist on speaking when the Word of God does not. They feel something of a "calling" to fill in the gaps left by Scriptural silence or to make specific and often detailed applications that God, in the Bible, chose not to make.

***(5) Are you more comfortable with rules than with relationships?*** I'm not talking about explicit biblical rules. In Psalm 119 we see the proper Christian response to biblical laws and commandments and precepts and rules. We are to rejoice and celebrate in the laws of God and to happily and joyfully obey them. I'm talking about rules of your own making, rules you feel "led" to make as what you perceive to be the only legitimate application of what the Bible does say. God-given rules are good and righteous, but they are designed to enhance and develop Christian relationships, not stifle, crush, and kill them.

*Why would anyone want to be a Legalist?*

What is the appeal of legalism? Let me mention five things that draw people to embrace legalism.

First, legalism provides us with a sense of security in that it enables us always to know precisely what to do in every conceivable moral dilemma. There is a certain sort of psychological safety in being stiff morally.

Second, legalism nurtures pride. "Look at what I'm willing to forego that others embrace! Others may indulge themselves, but I have a discipline and a moral standard they lack. I possess a will power that really loves God. Therefore, God really loves me" (with the implication that God doesn't really love those who choose another path, or at least doesn't love them as much as he loves me!).

Third, it provides an excuse to maintain control. One need never fear the unknown because there is always a rule or law (of my own making, of course) to govern every situation. After all, without rules things will get out control (or so legalists think).

Fourth, there is comfort in conformity. It is always reassuring when other people live like we do, even if there is no explicit biblical warrant for it.

Fifth, some embrace legalism out of a genuine, heart-felt concern for other believers. They are actually motivated by love and compassion, worried that the spiritual welfare of others is at risk. They fear that others will assuredly "fall"

if they walk down a certain path, even though that path is nowhere prescribed in Scripture (see especially Romans 14:4).

### *Conclusion*

I have three concluding comments.

First, the Christian is not free to do what the Bible forbids. Christian freedom does not entail the right to fornicate or to steal or to lie or to persist in an unforgiving attitude or to do anything else the Scriptures explicitly prohibit. And a person who lovingly points this out to you is not a legalist for having done so!

Second, God does not want your Christian life to be characterized or dominated by fear and guilt and intimidation. He wants you to experience optimum joy, freedom, intimacy, and delight in him. He wants you to enjoy your freedom and to use it in the service of love for others. This leads directly to the third, and final, conclusion.

Third, there is something more important than the mere exercise of freedom, namely, *love*. We read in Galatians 5:13, "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but ***through love serve one another***." No one's freedom is more important than the spiritual welfare of a weaker and less knowledgeable brother or sister. By all means celebrate your freedom, but do not become enslaved to it!