

Ephesians 6

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25 October 2009

1 Tim 2¹¹⁻¹⁵/Ephesians 5²⁵⁻²⁸, 6^{1-3, 10-13} / Genesis 2¹⁵⁻¹⁸

The price of our freedom is knowledge of God's creative purpose. Jesus says to us 'If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.' But what is the nature of this freedom? In many ways the last few chapters of Ephesians explore this theme showing how the freedom of Jesus is just as much a freedom **for** something as it is a freedom **from** something else.

The word freedom is, for many reasons, often greatly misunderstood. If I tell you that you are free in this country because it is a generally democratic one what does this really mean? **Does it mean that you are free to do what you like?** [Answer?] No, of course not because we have a thing called the law which defines what things we may not do and, some cases what things we may do in order, precisely, to protect the general freedom of our fellow citizens.

Does it then mean that we are free to believe what we like? [Answer?] Again the answer must be that if we want to stay healthy - no! You can believe that you can stop a bus with your arm but my suspicion is that the bus will win! You can believe that you will fly but when you jump next from a 10 story building I suspect that gravity will win! Perhaps we are free to believe what we want but not without fairly serious consequences.

Freedom does not imply freedom from the consequences of our action. And Christian freedom is no different. Salvation is, in one sense, free in that we can do nothing to earn the good and merciful favour of our loving God. That is offered **free**. But it still does not earn us freedom from the consequences of our actions. If we insist on driving drunk **while saved** God does not step in and save us from the consequences of that action. If we insist on making bad choices **once we are saved** God does not shield us from the eventual consequences of those decisions.

And this is not an anti-miracle statement. God is still in the business of doing miracles – of doing things that defy our explanatory powers. It's just that, for the most part, those miracles are not done **so that we might avoid the consequences of our actions**. Rather they are done in the context of our **freely obeying God**. So salvation leads not so much to a freedom to do anything but to a freedom to live rationally – according to how God's Spirit leads.

What does this mean for us?

Well one thing that Paul seems to suggest in our readings today is that God's creative work has rationality behind it – it has a purpose and the more we understand of that rationality the more

we can live in harmony with that purpose. We are used, aren't we, to living lives in a reasonably rational way? I mean we generally don't jump off 10 story buildings unless we want to cause considerable harm to ourselves. We are used to crossing the road carefully and we are used to eating and drinking to stay alive. Now, granted, some of us, even at this level fail the test – but the principle remains. There are generally rational ways to live in this world. **What we need to hear today is that this rationality extends to the spiritual.** There is, says Paul, also a spiritual rationality which, if we are willing to accept it, will lead us to live much more fruitful and peaceful lives.

Paul in the latter part of Ephesians 5 and now in the whole of Ephesians 6 lays out for us further basic principles of **rational Spiritual living**. And he covers what are probably the three most problematic areas for the Ephesians. And here we must be careful. Paul is dealing with issues which have general applications in all of faith but almost certainly these issues have arisen within the local Ephesian context and we must be aware of that context if we are to understand what he is saying correctly.

The first is familial relationships. The highly sexualised nature of Roman society meant that these were constantly under attack – people lived in irrational ways so that their family life suffered.

The second concerned the issue of slavery. Christian conversion had brought an uneasy relationship between slaves and masters and Paul was clearly trying to bring some harmony to this.

Finally Paul looks at the issues of spiritual powers and he does so, I suspect, because the Ephesian cultural was steeped in a fascination with Spiritual power and especially with witchcraft. Something needed to be said here.

What then are we to make of these three issues?

The first thing that must be said is that these remain issues for us even if they are initially, at least, issues which were most important for the Ephesian church and they do so not so much because of the specific problems addressed but because of the principles involved. It is clear that we've moved on in our understanding of slavery. Does this mean Paul was wrong in what he advised the Ephesians? Does this mean slavery was OK and we've made a big mistake? You can find this opinion on the web without searching too hard and based, as these people will claim, on good hard biblical evidence!!

No we were not wrong to abolish slavery and I don't believe Paul is seeking to support it here. What he is doing is establishing a more basic rule around relationships which will begin to humanise the issue and take, what is clearly some conflict, out of it. The first rule of making peace in wartime situation is... disengagement – getting the sides to simply stop fighting. Only when this happens can you begin to talk and engage in a more reasonable approach to problems. Paul here is simply trying to get the sides to stop fighting and to begin to look at each other through the eyes of Christ. When both masters and slaves can treat each other in a

respectable and honouring fashion there begins to arise the possibility of a better approach to slavery.

But slavery is wrong – you say! The slaves should have risen up and broken free! The Christian masters should have realised this and let them go – you say! Remember the Ephesians Christians grew up in a culture that had accepted slavery for thousands of years. The economy depended on slaves and slaves occupied a position in society that while not a free one certainly demanded respect and a reasonable standard of care. Paul in 1 Cor 7 encourages slaves to get their freedom if at all possible. Even we live in a culture that has only been free of these expectations for only 176 years and even this took the most remarkable commitment of this man – William Wilberforce who basically gave his life and political career to the cause of abolishing the trade. Things we now take for granted we **so hard for people in NT times to see**. So Paul establishes what might be called basic principles of relationship which allow the various parties to treat each other with respect and kindness **so that** a greater cause may be achieved.

And this allows us to see a basic premise in Paul's advice throughout this chapter and this is that in all things God has established fundamental principles of relationship which if adhered allow us to proceed further in our higher level goals in the faith.

And the life of Christ reflects this. Jesus spends two thirds of the Gospel healing people, releasing them from evil spirits and teaching them about God's love for them. He regarded and respected these fundamental principles of relationship; He worked through these in order to bring the truths about the kingdom of God; in order to prepare the way for those truths in the life of both the people and His own disciples.

When it comes to the family Paul follows a similar strategy. Establish basic rules of relationship so that the foundation may be prepared for a much greater maturity in familial relationships. So is the whole task of a wife to be submissive and to submit to her husband? Does this describe even the essence of a wifely duty? Well I simply don't think so. Rather what we have here is a specific answer to a specific problem.

The Ephesian church has become the locus of perhaps the most confusing passages of teaching about both marriage and the place of women. These verses [Eph 5v22,23] and their corollary in 1 Timothy 2^{11,12} have given some cause down through the years to relegate women's place in the Church to a very submissive and minor one.

Let me begin by stating two things clearly:

1.The idea that Paul does not permit women to teach in any circumstance is simply not consistent with the rest of the NT. Strangely enough this very church was founded by himself in concert with a husband and wife pairing of Aquila and Priscilla. Priscilla seems likely to have been the leader of the two and was instrumental in leading Apollo that fine NT teacher to the truth later on. In other Pauline writings both prophecy and pastoring are proper functions for women.

2. Secondly the idea that this passage in Ephesians teaches exclusively female submission is also clearly false. The beginning of the passage is not verse 22 but 21 which means that the base note of the passage is **mutual submission**.

No passage such as this can be read without understanding the context and there were several significant issues against which Paul writes these two pieces. The first is Priscilla and Aquila's leadership of the church in Ephesus. Paul founded it with these two and left them in charge meeting at their own home. There is even some a possibility that she was in Ephesus when Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy so this would make it unlikely that the apparent injunction against a woman ever teaching was, in fact in Paul's mind.

Furthermore Paul seems to have been addressing a specific problem of heresy which has been spread amongst the most vulnerable – widows in the community and Paul was concerned that this not be taught or spread further. Add to this the cultural background of Diana worship and the emphasis given to her as a god who ruled and one can easily see that the possibility that this emphasis had found its way into the church in some form and you have the recipe for a specific correction for a specific situation.

There are also some exegetical niceties which I don't have time to go into this morning but which clearly cast doubt on the meaning of the Timothy passage. What is clear, however, is that Paul was not wanting to limit women's role in the Church but separate it from heresy which was circulating amongst some women in the church at that time.

Finally let me say a little about the issue of spiritual power. This is an oft quoted passage in the NT. It appears to make the Christian life into a battle between the powers of darkness and the powers of God. But my understanding is that God in Christ has already disarmed those powers and they are conquered. My understanding is that Christ's work is finished. Why do we have to bother, then, about spiritual powers of darkness? And clearly Paul says we do have to take notice of the fact that there are spiritual powers in the heavens. So what's going on here?

1. In the first place the Ephesians were a people used to witchcraft. In other words, they were used to conceiving of spiritual power as something one used to manipulate **other people**. This was the whole aim of witchcraft – to destroy or curse or manipulate one's enemy through the use of spells and sorcery. Paul wants to establish two things in addressing this mindset. The first is that the nature and aim of truly dark spiritual powers is fundamentally anti-human. Spiritual powers are not things to be manipulated but have their own agenda which is certainly anti-Christ and anti-human.

2. Secondly Paul wants to implicate the culture of the world in the problems humans face.

¹²**For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.**

The world with its systems, its assumptions, its desires and its passions is also a spiritual power. And in as much as we fail to question the assumptions of the world and act in cooperation with it we become unwitting collaborators with it. Yes, there are evil heavenly forces involved. The Devil exists to rule his world and we clearly need to understand something of how he works. But the issue here isn't about learning a new spiritual art which is parallel to the art of witchcraft except that it's a good art. Rather the issue is coming to understand how I have assumed the world's culture and how I might stand apart from that. Paul rates 6 things very highly in this battle and these are represented in the armour of the soldier of Christ. They are,

1 Truth: knowing and speaking the truth becomes a major issue for Christians. Almost always on human relationship problems inside and outside the Church there is at the heart of the problem an issue of truth. Learning to speak the truth and to hear the truth to and from one another would create conditions ripe for the culmination of the kingdom of God on earth.

2. Righteousness: Doing what is right clearly guards against many of the attacks of the enemy. I said at Shane's baptism that sometimes the only thing left for Christians is obedience to what we know is right. Sometimes faith has deserted us and hope seems dead and the only thing we have left is obedience. It's at these times that God speaks, I think, most clearly to the whole world.

3. Speaking the Gospel of Peace: Sharing the Goodnews of Christ set us apart from the world so quickly it's not funny. Even standing for the Gospel does. [Rugby room silence]

4. Faith: Faith seems to be able to protect us from the weapons of the devil. Faith in a God who never forgets us and who loves us at our worst keeps us safe at the height of the battle.

5. Salvation: Have we said 'Yes' to Jesus. Have we asked Jesus to be our Lord. Have we done that today? Salvation is the humble acceptance of Christ into our life – day by day.

6. The Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God: Why is the Spirit related so closely to God's Word? Because **the price of our freedom is knowledge of God's creative purpose** and we gain that knowledge by reading and understanding God's Word. It is there that we gain an understanding of who we are and what we were created for.