

Freedom through Commitment

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Day One

When you first read that phrase—freedom through commitment—it sounds like a contradiction, because we think commitment takes away our freedom. If I make a commitment to marry, I lose my freedom. If I agree to head up that project, I'll be tied down. If I accept this invitation for Saturday night, something better may come along. If I sign up for that event at church, I may change my mind. How can commitment bring freedom?

Commitment is all about making a choice, and when we choose in one direction, we lose the option to choose in another direction. But what we fail to realize is choosing not to choose is still a choice we make. Deciding not to make a commitment is a decision—and that reluctance to make a commitment takes us down a certain path with its own consequences.

Jesus said, *whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it* (Matthew 10:39). Jesus was teaching us that if you focus on your freedom and you're very reluctant to make commitments to anything or anyone because you want to be free, you're going to lose your life. That means you're going to lose the real meaning of life; you're going to lose the real joy of life; you're going to miss the purpose for which God put you here on earth. But if you're willing to commit your life to God's plan—if you lose your life, as Jesus put it—then you will find it. You will find that meaningful, purposeful life that fills you with satisfaction and contentment.

Ephesians 2:10 says, *for we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*. God intends for each of us who are born from above, to do the good works he planned for us to do, and that means we have to make a commitment. We have to choose one path in life, which precludes us from choosing another. We have to make one decision about what we'll do this weekend, which means we can't do something else. We have to say yes to being involved in a ministry, which means we can't go to the beach that day.

The path of less commitment takes you into a less structured life. While that may sound like freedom, it is explicitly true that people who have structure and thereby commitments as part of their lifestyle have much greater satisfaction and less frustration than those who refuse to make a commitment for fear of losing their freedom. Jesus knew what he was talking about.

Commitment is at low levels these days, and yet it has not brought great joy or abundant life.

Day Two

As a leader in ministry for many years, I'm aware people are less and less willing to make a commitment. Many wait until the last minute to sign up or agree to help. It can be frustrating, but what is the reason for it?

I had a conversation with a young woman in her 20s who was working on her master's in theology, and she explained her generation doesn't want to feel chained—her word—to some commitment because

they want to feel free to do whatever they want to do at the moment. They want to live without structure and keep their options open.

I think her analysis was pretty accurate. It's an attitude that is prevalent among the younger generation, but believe me, it has crept into the minds of us older people, too. It's a result of a very egocentric mindset—and we've encouraged this kind of thinking with our emphasis on individual rights, individual freedom, individual fulfillment. In other words, we've developed a cultural mindset that convinces us it's all about me, and no doubt that is a key reason for this unwillingness to make commitments to things that might cost us some time or money or work.

It is a destructive illusion to believe you are most free when you have fewer commitments. Jesus said truth will set you free, and if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. All of us long for freedom; it's in our genes. But so often we just bark up the wrong tree to try to find it. The freedom that will bring satisfaction, contentment, and joy to your life is found in Jesus alone. But that freedom he gives us brings commitment with it, for to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to relinquish our rights to him and decide we'll be committed to doing his will.

Now, that should affect our everyday lives. When we're faced with choices, when we're asked to make commitments, our first thought should be, "What would Jesus want me to do?" We should ask ourselves, "Am I choosing my way or God's way?"

When you took the job you now have, you made a commitment to that organization. Making that commitment gives you a paycheck, which affords you the freedom to pay your bills, buy some food and clothes, and keep yourself from being homeless! In the same way, we make a commitment to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior and enjoy all the incredible benefits he brings into our lives, but it also brings a responsibility to be committed—to give our lives to others, to lose our life in order to find it.

Day Three

Freedom through commitment—can that actually be true? We find freedom by making commitments. Think about it: You found freedom from the bondage of sin and the prospect of hell by making a commitment to accept Jesus Christ as your Savior. You found freedom to prepare yourself for the future by committing yourself to get an education. You found freedom to have an income and support yourself when you made a commitment to take a job. Freedom truly comes through commitment.

Yet many people find it very difficult to make any kind of a commitment. Why is it so hard? One reason is fear of failure. Someone has said, "Fear of failure and humiliation go a long way in limiting how much someone is willing to risk committing to a course of action." It's true that commitment brings with it the possibility of failing, but lack of commitment means you never have a chance to succeed! Of course there will be failures, but the road to success is always lined with some failures. Like all fears, this fear is a tool of the enemy, which he uses very effectively to cripple us and keep us from the good things God wants to do for us and through us.

Another reason some find it hard to make commitments is the fear of boredom. We've been conditioned to being entertained a lot in our technological society, so the idea that we might have to endure something which is not as much fun or as exciting as something else can paralyze us and prevent our involvement in things that really could be meaningful. And then there's the reality that we refuse to be committed because we're lazy and we just don't want to put out the effort!

I think one of the most common reasons people refuse to be committed is we've cluttered our lives with so much stuff that we just "don't have time" to do things that are perhaps much more important. But it's important to stop and ask yourself why you are so busy that you can't take on other commitments. Is it because you allowed yourself to be pushed into things that really weren't what God wanted you to do? Maybe we need to de-commit to some things that really aren't so important.

Is commitment really that necessary, you may ask? Isn't there something else, something less scary? No, there is no way to be what God intended you to be and do what God intended you to do except by personally committing yourself to something or someone. Sitting on the fence, waiting for something better to come along, and fearing the responsibilities of commitment will not bring you contentment or fulfillment.

Day Four

You remember the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him he needed to make a commitment: He needed to sell everything he had and give it to the poor, and then come follow Jesus. This young man became very sad when Jesus told him this, and he didn't follow-through because the commitment was too costly for him.

He made a decision not to make a commitment, but notice it made him very sad, not happy. No doubt this was a huge commitment Jesus was asking of him, because Jesus knew money was his god. He couldn't follow Jesus until he loved Jesus more than money. But Jesus was not asking him to do the impossible, nor was he trying to make his life miserable. Just the opposite. Jesus wanted him to have an abundant life, a life that cannot be bought with money. But he wasn't willing to make that commitment, and he went away sad.

Commitment comes with a price tag, whether it's a commitment to marry someone, or to take a job, or to work on a committee at church. And we should consider the cost of any commitment we make. But we should not fear commitment just because it has a cost, because commitments are the doorway to finding the freedom we're looking for.

For example, suppose you decide to be committed to reading and studying your Bible more. To make that happen, you commit to some structure you impose on yourself to read the Bible systematically and regularly and to keep a journal of what God says to you as you read. Then you start to reap the benefits of this commitment as you see how God uses his Word to teach you, change you, comfort you and guide you.

Maybe you decide it's finally time to do something about your eating habits, and you make a commitment to eat a healthier diet with fewer calories. Then you have to pay the price of that commitment by not buying junk food, not going to fast-food restaurants, not overeating, and putting veggies and fruits on your menu. When you pay that price, you start to reap the benefits—like, you look better and feel better, you have more energy, you sleep better. Then you realize that commitment is worth the price tag.

Perhaps you decide it's time for you to get more involved in your church, so you sign up for a small group study, and you spend time there weekly. Eventually you offer your home for a study, and that takes a little time and effort, even a little money. But what do you benefit? New friends, a support group, good information poured into your mind, wholesome relationships. It's a commitment worth the price.

There truly is wonderful freedom through being committed.

Day Five

You've heard it said there's no such thing as a free lunch. That sentiment is pretty much on target, except of course for the free salvation which Jesus offers us because he paid the price for our sins. It is free for those of us who accept his offer, but he paid a big price. He made a huge commitment when he said to God, as he prayed in Gethsemane, "Not my will but thine be done."

I've been talking all week about finding freedom through commitment. Instead of running away from being committed to something or someone, we need to walk toward those commitments that God wants from us. That's because committing ourselves to do God's will is the pathway to real freedom, the freedom of our spirits, the freedom of knowing what we do matters to God.

For ten years I decided to run my own show and go for what I wanted. In spite of knowing better, I truly turned my back on following Jesus because I thought that would mean I could never have my way. But let me tell you what my pursuit of freedom led to. It caused me to abandon many Christian principles, which had been faithfully taught to me by my parents, teachers and pastors. It led me to live a very selfish life that was totally focused on what I thought was good for me.

Deciding not to be committed to what God wanted for my life caused me to make many poor and sinful choices—choices about relationships, about jobs, about where I lived and who were my friends. It led me to behaviors that were anything but Christ-like, to a lifestyle that blended in with the world around me. It would have been hard to distinguish me as a true believer in Jesus Christ during those years.

What I've learned—now over 40 years later—is that to refuse to be committed to Christ and his principles for my life is to choose disaster and chaos and total frustration. I thought I was choosing what would make me happy by choosing not to be committed to a Christian lifestyle and living my life for others. But I was so wrong.

Now, with all these years under my belt since then, I can tell you a commitment to Jesus Christ is indeed the way to freedom. And that means you commit your weeks and your days and your hours to his control. It means saying yes to what he wants you to do and no to yourself. Yes, there is a price to discipleship and Jesus asks us to count the cost, but the return on your investment is abundant and joyful and fulfilling.