

Freedom to: Firstborn and Family
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
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Exodus 22:29b-30; 19-20

We resume our *Freedom From, Freedom To* sermon series, and today we turn the corner. The first four sermons have all been “Freedom From” sermons. We’ve talked about things that hold us captive and how God sets us free from these things. So, Israel was captive in Egypt, held in slavery by Pharaoh and by the power of death, but God breaks the hold of Egypt, he brings them out of slavery, through the Red Sea, and into a new state of Freedom. That’s the ‘Freedom From’ side of the story. Now comes the ‘Freedom To’ story. Now that the Israelites are free from their captivity in Egypt, are they free to do whatever they want? Does God set them out into the world and say, “OK kids! The world is your playground! Go have fun. You can be whoever you want to be! Go on out there and find your bliss!” No. God brings them out into the wilderness and they enter a long season of discipline and pilgrimage. This is how God does things. Bible quiz: After Jesus went through his Red Sea, after he was baptized in the Jordan River and God declared him his beloved Son, what is the first thing God does to his beloved Son? Remember? He sends him out into the desert for 40 days to be tempted by the devil. And so it is with Israel. Freed from slavery in Egypt, Israel enters a time of discipline where they will learn to live as God’s family.

Central to that discipline is the law. At the end of Exodus God gives his law, and this law gives discipline, shape and structure to every area of their life. So in these ‘Freedom To’ sermons we will study some of these laws. We will hear about the shape these laws gave to Israel’s freedom and the shape they suggest for our freedom. Let’s begin with a little-known law given to Israel by the Lord at Mount Sinai. Exodus 22:29-30 “*Do not hold back offerings from your granaries or your vats. You must give me the firstborn of your sons. Do the same with your cattle and your sheep. Let them stay with their mothers for seven days, but give them to me on the eighth day.*” Wow. Hold on a second. What exactly is God commanding his people to do in this passage? “*You must give me the firstborn of your sons.*” There it is. No qualification. No loophole. Did you know that the Old Testament law had such a command? What is God asking for here? Human sacrifice? I wonder how many of you knew that this law was tucked away in Exodus 22. And it’s not the only place. Let’s go to Exodus 34:19-20. Here’s the law again, slightly modified and expanded.

Exodus 34:19-20 “*The first offspring of every womb belongs to me, including all the firstborn males of your livestock, whether from herd or flock.*”²⁰ *Redeem the firstborn donkey with a lamb, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem all your firstborn sons. No one is to appear before me empty-handed.* Ok, there is good news here. Israelite families didn’t actually have to sacrifice their first born boys; they could substitute a lamb and the death of the lamb redeemed the child. That’s a relief. But it’s still a concern. Because it shows that when God said, give me your firstborn son he really did mean sacrifice. When chapter 22 said, “you must give me the firstborn of your sons,” God was serious about that. And just to prove that seriousness, let’s look at one more reading. This law actually first appears in Exodus 13 as part of the Passover instructions. Listen to what God says there: “*The Lord said to Moses,*”² “*Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal.*” *After the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites and gives*

it to you, as he promised on oath to you and your ancestors, ¹² you are to give over to the Lord the first offspring of every womb. All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the Lord. ¹³ Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.” So this firstborn law appears 3 times. It’s not some weird aside; it’s a repeated command. Why does God want Israel to give him their firstborn male children? What shape does this law give to Israel’s freedom and ours?

Let me start by saying: God does not want us to sacrifice our children. If an Israelite or a modern person actually sacrificed a child, God would not be pleased; he would be horrified. God does not want the blood of children. Let me make that absolutely clear at the start. Nevertheless, these laws do have an important spiritual function. These laws force Israel to ask themselves a question that every human being must ask. They force Israel to ask herself: What is the ultimate commitment in my life? Where is my ultimate allegiance? To whom do I belong? Through these laws, God puts this all-important question at the center of Israel’s attention. Not only that, these laws remind Israel of the answer to this all-important question: Our allegiance, our heart, our lives belong to him.

As I read these laws, I wonder how many of you thought of another Bible story that asked that central question: the story of Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his firstborn son, and Abraham goes so far as to build an altar, to strap Isaac on that altar, and even to raise the knife to kill his son. God stops him and gives Abraham a ram as a substitute. I don’t think God ever intended Isaac to die. God didn’t actually want Isaac’s blood, but he wanted Abraham to prove that he was utterly committed. These Exodus laws effectively cause every Israelite family to re-enact Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, right down to the substitutionary lamb. These laws make every Israelites face the same question that faced Abraham that day: “Where is my ultimate allegiance?”

Maybe you think that’s an Old Testament thing. Talking about children and sacrifice. That’s not Jesus stuff. Well...here’s Jesus in Luke 14: “*Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father, mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple.”* Again, Jesus doesn’t want us to turn on our families, but he does want us to ask that question about our ultimate allegiance. And then there’s this. What do we say here in church every time we recite the Heidelberg Catechism question and answer one, as we did with tears in our eyes this past Tuesday at our sister Petey Faber’s funeral: “*What is your only comfort in life and in death?*” “*That I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.*” The words of the catechism, Jesus’ hard words in Luke 14, the three commands in Exodus, they all point to the same thing: Our lives are to be centered on God; devoted to Him. All the other commitments of our life - country, career, friends, possessions, and yes, family too – are subservient to that absolute commitment.

And this is where the freedom comes in. Because it’s when we get the order of these commitments right that we find freedom. So often when people talk about freedom in our world they talk about it as if freedom is simply having options. Freedom means having the ability to make as many choices as possible. Freedom is keeping your options open. Freedom is no constraints, no commitments, nothing tying you down! That’s not freedom. Of course, in order to be free and to feel free you have to have some options, some power to choose and some room to move. Some freedom of choice is part of freedom. But you only really find joyful freedom when you joyfully commit yourself to a path. True freedom is when you close some doors, when you give up some options, when you forsake all others, and joyfully run the race set before you. This

is the paradox of freedom. You only find true freedom when you are wholeheartedly committed to the right thing. Let's call that a definition: "*True freedom is found when you are wholeheartedly committed to the right thing.*"

You don't even need to be a believer to see this. Think of a musician. A child starts out playing violin and when she starts out she's not fully committed to it. She's not sure if this is her thing. So she's sort of half-hearted when she plays. Trying to find the notes. Making these hesitant little bows. Almost like something is holding her back, holding her captive. It doesn't look like she's having a good time. But she keeps at it and all of a sudden something clicks and she commits. She gives herself to the music. She's wholehearted. She studies. She practices. She gives up time with her friends and time watching TV. And now, what happens to her performance? It's suddenly free! Big bows. Musical dynamics. Passion. Joy. She finds joyful freedom because she's wholeheartedly committed. If you are half-hearted and half-committed to anything, you will not find freedom.

But you also need to be wholeheartedly committed to the right things. I may be wholeheartedly committed to becoming an offensive lineman for the Detroit Lions. It may be my abiding passion, and I may commit myself 110% to this goal. But will I find freedom in that goal? No way! I weigh 165 pounds after a robust thanksgiving dinner. I may want to be a lineman, but God gave me the body of a water boy. So, no matter how wholeheartedly I pursue my football dream I will not be free, I will be frustrated. We find true freedom when we are wholeheartedly committed, to the right thing.

God is the right thing. We find true freedom when we are wholeheartedly committed to him. That shouldn't surprise us. He made us, after all. He made us as a species of course, but he also made you as an individual. *With love and attention, he knit you together in your Mother's womb.* He knows all your quirks, your peculiarities, your odd sense of humor, your love of a minor key music, your romantic streak, your fondness for winter mornings. He knows where you belong. And he created you to be in a wholehearted relationship with him. He knows that you will find freedom and fulfillment when you are rooted in his love, living in His grace, walking with him joyfully down the path of your life. We are all different people, we have different skills, different passions, and different quirks. But we are utterly united in this. We humans will only find true freedom when we are wholeheartedly committed to our God, with his love and grace the center of our lives.

How does that work itself out in the lives of families? We don't sacrifice a lamb to redeem our firstborn anymore, but the question that this practice is meant to put in front of us, that central human question that this law poses is still right there at the center of our life. "*What is your ultimate commitment? To whom do you belong?*" We may not be redeeming our children with a lamb, but it is still our responsibility as parents to keep that central question in front of our children, and to teach them that the answer to that question is Jesus. As parents, we do all sorts of things to help our children find what they love, the things that God made them to do. We get them involved in sports, sometimes heavily committed to sports. We get them involved in music, sometimes heavily committed to music. Theater, forensics, dance, science Olympiads, math Olympiads – the parenting style of our culture is hyper-committed and hyper-involved. We do that so our children can find the things they love, so that they can find the things that make their heart sing. And that's great. So long as they don't lose the root commitment. So long as they don't forget who they are. So long as they understand where their hope comes from. So long as they understand how their sports and their science and their music are in service to God and his kingdom. Because that's our central task as parents. To put the love of God at the center of their

life and learning. Without that, no matter how skilled or talented they are in any of these other areas they will not be free. They will find themselves caught up in that soul-killing struggle for success and stuff and pleasure that holds so much of the world in captivity. Our children, all children need to know that they are creatures of love and grace. They need to wake up every day with that deep-rooted assurance that they are not their own, but that they belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to their faithful savior Jesus Christ. We all need that.

There's a reason we don't sacrifice a lamb anymore to redeem our children. We don't have to make a sacrifice of commitment to prove our loyalty to God anymore, because a lamb has been sacrificed for us. None of us people ever had to give our firstborn to God, but God gave his one and only Son to us. Never mind having to give our firstborn, in the history of God's people, our human commitment flounders over things as ordinary as a tasty looking apple and a sales job from a snake, a bowl of stew, a pretty girl bathing on a roof, 30 pieces of silver, a question from a servant girl. We are so far from whole-hearted. God's heart however is all-in for us. He loves us so much that he gives his one and only son so that even half-hearted folks like us could attain the glorious freedom of the sons and daughters of God. It's an amazing love; one that demands our soul, our life, our all.

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