

Why Three Types Of Freedom?

A Sermon by Rev. Andrew M. T. Dibb

I am often asked why things happen: why are there husbands who abuse their wives, and parents who abuse their children? Why are there wars in which millions are killed, hurt, maimed, starved, and deprived of essential human rights? Why are animals hurt, abandoned and abused? Why do people inflict terrible things on others?

And why, in counterpoint to the horrors of the world, are there people like Mother Theresa and countless other people who dedicate their lives so that others may prosper--people to bind the wounds of others and bring order from disorder?

In order to fully answer these questions, let's look at three different scenarios:

1. The first is the well known story of King David, who, seeing Bathsheba, lusted for her. First he seduced her, and then, when she found herself pregnant, he engineered to have her husband, Uriah the Hittite, slain in battle.
2. In the second scenario we are shown two men who went into the temple to pray; one was a Pharisee, the other a tax-collector. When the Pharisee began to pray, he lifted his eyes up to heaven and said: "God, I thank You that I am not like other men-- extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector" (Luke 18: 11). "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess" (Luke 18:12).
3. In the third scenario we see the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane, also praying. As He prayed, He was in agony, and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. The words of His prayer are poignant: "Father, if it is Your will, remove this cup from Me; nevertheless not My will but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

These three scenarios contain a vital key to understanding why people react differently and as a result either inflict terrible harm on others or do good. It also helps us to see the vast middle ground between the two. As we examine these teachings more closely, it is useful for us to see where we personally fit into this scale of things, for each one of us impacts the world in one way or another, either good or evil.

Human behavior is regulated by many things: in this world we have constitutions, laws, police and courts to keep us in order. On a far greater scale, however, we find the laws of the Lord's Divine Providence governing our lives. These laws were made by the Lord Himself, and they regulate human behavior on an inner level.

The first and most important of these laws is that all people should act in freedom according to their reason. Civil governments may restrict our freedom to act in certain ways, but they can never restrict our desire to act, nor can civil governments ever cause us to think or feel in specific ways, even though they may try.

The Lord created each one of us to be in full control over our thoughts and feelings. Sometimes we surrender that control to another, but if we do, still we do so of our own free will and accord. We could resist if we wanted to.

Freedom in spiritual things is the most precious gift the Lord has given us; no matter what our circumstances are, we are still free to establish a relationship with the Lord. Either we can turn to Him and invite Him into our lives, or we can reject Him. No matter what we do, our relationship with the Lord is determined by freedom.

Spiritual freedom is what makes us people; animals have no such freedom. They cannot turn against their instinct. Their lives are pre-determined for them. Thus we could say that their relationship with the Lord is pre-determined by the Lord Himself.

Because we have freedom in spiritual things, we can, within the constraints of the world around us, behave in any way we see fit. Thus we see three distinct types of behavior in our three scenarios:

1. King David exercised his freedom when he decided to act on the lowest things with a person: he saw Bathsheba, lusted after her, committed adultery and murder. No one forced him to do these things; he chose, in his own freedom, to follow the lusts of his heart along whatever paths they would lead. In the story there is no evidence that he ever applied spiritual brakes, saying: "This is wrong; I shouldn't do this.'

The kind of freedom David exercised is called natural freedom, and this is the lowest kind of spiritual freedom. We act according

to natural freedom when we simply do what we want and forget the pain we cause other people.

Left to themselves, people who never apply spiritual brakes will always rush into evil. Think of the evils that exist in the world, and let us ask ourselves: "Would these evils exist if people stopped to think of what they are doing? if they submitted themselves to a higher authority than just their feelings?" The answer is no; evil would not exist in its open form. We see the terrible abuses in the world around us, on both a grand and a pathetically small scale. An abused child is the result of an adult who never checks him- or herself. Wars are caused by leaders consumed by greed, or ideology, or fear, and who give in to their instinct.

In many ways we share this lowest freedom with animals--and truly a person who always only does what he or she wants to do is little better than an animal.

2. The example of David contrasts sharply with the example of the Pharisee in the temple. His prayer was one of thanks that he was not like other men. He did not do bad things, and certainly did good things.

This example illustrates the second level of our spiritual freedom: the freedom to put on an external facade of goodness, not actually being good inside. Exercising this freedom is both useful and dangerous.

It is useful as far as maintaining order is concerned. The Pharisee did not lie, cheat and steal. He lived an ostensibly good and useful life, and so contributed to society. But his behavior was dangerous in that while giving the impression of being good, he still was not actually good. He had not learned spiritual qualities or values, like charity and humility. His baser instincts boiled just below the surface; they erupted into pride and arrogance.

The Writings call this second kind of freedom rational freedom, because it arises in our intellect and is carried into practice. A person like this Pharisee who exercises this freedom deliberately chooses to behave in socially approved ways for the sake of his own advantage. We could say that a person like this has a veneer of civility, but that veneer gets awfully thin sometimes.

3. The third example of spiritual freedom is the Lord Himself: He exercised a spiritual freedom when He was willing to suffer and undergo torment for other people. There was a part of the Lord that really wanted to give up, to do what came naturally. He could so easily have avoided the cross. The thief crucified next to Him actually tempted Him to save Himself from the cross. But that would not have been good for the human race--it would have removed our freedom, and so He resisted it.

At the same time the Lord could have exercised a rational freedom: He could have organized it that His pain and suffering on the cross were merely a stage effect. But that would have been wrong as well. When He prayed in Gethsemane His agony was real--His sweat was like great drops of blood. And when He was on the cross and cried out, His pain was real. It was no stage effect.

The Lord chose to exercise the most important type of freedom available to the human race: spiritual freedom. This is the freedom to act against our basic instincts; it is the freedom to act against a mere sham of a life. It is the freedom to control our negative thoughts and feelings and bring them into spiritual order.

If only all people did this, the horrors of this world would cease to exist. Think of what would have happened if David had chosen to exercise true spiritual freedom rather than just indulging his lusts; he would not have corrupted Bathsheba by committing adultery with her. He would not have murdered Uriah the Hittite, and implicated his general, Joab, in the crime. There would have been no baby born out of adultery, who suffered a lingering illness that finally killed him. David's life and the life of those around him would have been so different.

And what would have happened if the Pharisee had chosen to extend his good acts from merely a form of behavior into actually cleaning the inside of his cup? Surely his prayer in the temple would have been different. He could have offered up his attempts at a spiritual life as a gift to God rather than as a boast. He could have extended his hand in love and friendship to the tax collector praying with him. But instead he chose to put his faith in external things and to close the doors of his mind to the Lord. In the next

world his good deeds would not have done him any good, because his selfish loves would continue to dominate him.

Each of us has the freedom to will, think and act as we wish--that is how the Lord made us. But the consequences of our actions often extend far beyond our immediate environment. It is our own choice if we want to give in to our basest desires, but others will get hurt because of it. Do we really want that? At the same time, we can just maintain a facade of goodness. But that takes a great deal of energy to live a double life. Is it not easier, then, to actually exercise true spiritual freedom--to turn to the Lord, asking His guidance in any situation, and then acting according to our best understanding of what should be done?

As we exercise true spiritual freedom, we will notice a change in our lives: we will stop worrying about getting caught for our actions; we will stop worrying about what others think of us. Instead we will feel the peace of mind knowing that by choosing to follow the Lord, our lives are in His hands.

There is no need for the abuses of this world. There is, on the other hand, a great need for those who do good to reach out to others to help, those who do good and stand up for spiritual values. Let us be these people. Amen.

Lesson: 1 Kings 11, selections; Luke 18:10-14; Luke 22:39-46