

# The worst kind of bondage

*This article is from the "Edifying the Body" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's Web site, churchofgodbigandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of April 3-4, 2010.*

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HAWKINS, Texas—In Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* he observes: "It is hard to have a Southern Overseer. It is worse to have a Northern one; but worst of all is when you are the slave-driver of yourself."

The worst kind of bondage consists of slavery to natural uncontrolled human nature dictated by the whims of pleasure.

Solomon warns us to "keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life" (Proverbs 4:23). Our individual marching orders come to be determined by what we obsess about on a daily basis.

The difference between bondage and freedom has always been subtle and dangerously deceptive. Most of us have yearned to have the privilege of doing whatever we want. But we soon learn that, if this desire for freedom is not accompanied by self-control motivated by God's Spirit (Galatians 5:22), the uncontrolled liberty brings the most hideous form of bondage.

Recently Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) pastor Andre Dukes, who is black, told a group of students, "The most insidious slavery begins on the habit level."

Tragically, some people, already addicted to crack cocaine or marijuana, have forged themselves heavier chains than their ancestors who had endured the whip of the plantation overseer.

## **Freedom needs responsibility**

The reason the apostle Paul becomes so adamant about "bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5) is that these thoughts, if allowed to run their course and do their own thing, so to speak, would take us captive. We have the God-given responsibility to, with the help of God's Holy Spirit, take control of our thoughts (which determine the content of our emotions) before they take control of us.

To allow the mind to remain idle or do its own thing invites bondage and entanglement. Paul in his letter to Timothy warns that in the end times individuals would let their emotions rule their actions, being "without self-control" and "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:2, 4).

We hear people continually grumbling about their “rights” but seldom hear an equal outcry for “responsibilities.” Motivational speaker Dennis Waitley has suggested that, while it is wonderful to have a Statue of Liberty on America’s East Coast, it would be well to erect a statue of responsibility on America’s West Coast—perhaps near Los Angeles or San Francisco. Freedom from responsibility and self-control is actually an invitation to bondage.

### **Ancient distinction**

While many pandering politicians use the preposition “from” in defining liberty in phrases such as “freedom from hunger” and “freedom from poverty,” the proper preposition should be “to,” as in “freedom to work,” “freedom to loaf,” “freedom to indulge oneself” or “freedom to enslave oneself.” The proper preposition focuses back to individual self-responsibility for the ultimate liberty or bondage.

The distinction was understood by our founding fathers, who suggested that people, although having a right to pursue happiness, were not necessarily guaranteed happiness. Our founding fathers appropriated a passage from Leviticus that suggests that during the 50th-year jubilee “you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land.”

This passage is echoed in Isaiah 61, prophesying a time when liberty will abound both physically and spiritually. Verse 1:

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.”

Thomas Jefferson wrote, “I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.”

The real rub occurs when man determines for himself what can exercise tyranny over the mind.

### **Free from the law?**

“Christ has set us free from the law” has been a mantra that many religious organizations have held as a cardinal precept. The law allegedly confines and fetters people, preventing them freedom.

A leading American Puritan leader, John Winthrop, had a totally different take on the law-vs.-liberty issue:

“There is a twofold liberty, natural (I mean as our nature is now corrupt) and civil or federal. The first is common to man with beasts and other creatures. By this, man, as he stands in relation to man simply, hath liberty to do what he lists [wills]; it is a liberty to evil as well as to do good. This liberty is incompatible and inconsistent with authority, and cannot endure the least restraint of the most just authority. The exercise and maintenance of this liberty makes men grow more evil, and in time to be worse than brute beasts:

*omnis sumus licentia deteriores* (Latin: 'All are weakened by excess liberty'—Terence). This is that great enemy of truth and peace, that wild beast, which all the ordinances of God are bent to restrain and subdue it.

"The other kind of liberty I call civil or federal. It may also be termed moral in reference to the covenant between God and man, in the politic covenants and constitutions between men themselves . . . This liberty is the proper end and object of authority, and cannot subsist without it; . . . this liberty is maintained and exercised in a way of subjection to authority; it is of the same kind of liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. The woman's own choice makes such a man her husband; yet being chosen, he is her lord, and she is to be subject to him yet in a way of liberty, not of bondage, and a true wife accounts her subjection her honor and freedom, and would not think her condition safe and free, but in her subjection to her husband's authority. Such is the liberty of the church under the authority of Christ, her King and Husband."

David sees a causal relation between keeping God's laws and precepts and freedom. Psalm 119:45:

"And I will walk at liberty and ease, for I seek Your precepts."

### **Freed from sin**

Jesus' brother James affirms that the proper use of the law actually leads to liberty. James 1:25:

"But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does."

In the very next verse, James points out the fruits of natural freedom or lack of self-control:

"If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless."

Having recently experienced the New Testament Passover, we realize that it was the death penalty and not God's holy and righteous law that was nailed to the cross. Romans 6:6-7:

". . . Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin."

### **Power to obey**

The slavery and bondage Paul referred to was sin, lawlessness, not law. Paul never advocates freedom from the law but instead encourages us to receive the power to keep it (Galatians 5:22).

The real slaves are those who bend themselves to their own lusts. Romans 6:16:

"Do you not know that if you continually surrender yourselves to anyone (including our own selves) to do his will, you are the slave of him you obey, whether that be to sin which leads to death, or to obedience which leads to righteousness—right doing and right standing before God?"

Jesus revealed to the Pharisees how bondage and slavery come about and how true liberty is achieved. John 8:32-36:

" 'And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. They answered Him, 'We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, "You will be made free"?' Jesus answered them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.' "

Again, sin (1 John 3:4) is the real enslaver, not God's law. Using one's supposed freedom to transgress God's law automatically leads to enslavement and bondage. Proverbs 5:22:

"His own iniquities shall ensnare the wicked and he shall be held with the *cords of his own sin.*"

### **Realistic struggle**

Freedom to do one's own thing does not equate with liberty. The apostle Paul describes what happens when the pulls of the flesh want to do their own thing. Romans 7:14-15, 18:

"We know that the law is spiritual; but I am a creature of the flesh (carnal), having been sold into slavery under the control of sin. For I do not understand my own actions—I am baffled and bewildered. I do not practice or accomplish what I wish, but I do the very thing I loathe . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot perform it—I have the intention and urge to do what is right, but no power to carry it out."

Several years ago America was deluged by television commercials from the Schick Corp. with the stated purpose of enabling people to "get rid of the cravings." Millions of people deluded themselves into thinking that something they had considered a conscious choice was actually an addiction.

If a person becomes addicted to anything (whether a drug or chemical dependency, a sexual aberration, the siren calls of the Internet or a pet idea) and succumbs to a compulsive habituation, he eventually loses control of the conscious selecting of a behavior. The habit becomes the master, and the person with the habit becomes a bonded slave.

The apostle Paul would describe these enslaving habits as another or a different law, certainly not the law of God. Romans 7:23:

"But I discern in my bodily members, in the sensitive appetites and wills of the flesh a different law [not God's law] at war against the law of my mind

(my reason) and making me a prisoner [a slave] to the law of sin that dwells in my bodily organs—in the appetites and wills of the flesh.”

Doing what comes naturally—responding to the natural pulls of the flesh—imprisons and enslaves us.

### **Beware of idleness**

Many of us in some of our wary moments would like to never have to work again—assuming that work is enslaving. Jokingly we talk about going back to the salt mines. But the real bond master is idleness, not work. Notice Proverbs 6:10-11:

“Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to lie down in sleep; so will your poverty come upon you as robber or one who travels [with slow but surely approaching steps] and your want as an armed man [making you helpless—a prisoner and a slave virtually].”

God Almighty wired into a human being the capacity to feel good—even exhilarated—about having accomplished worthwhile work. There is a transcending truth to the grim sign above Auschwitz ARBEIT MACHT FREI (“Work makes free”). In the right context, the fruits of one’s labor are every bit as satisfying and liberating as eating and drinking. Ecclesiastes 3:13:

“. . . Every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor; it is the gift of God.”

Another German proverb reads:

*“Die Arbeit macht das Leben suess. (Work makes life sweet).”*

The connection between hard, diligent work and freedom becomes clear in several of Solomon’s proverbs. Proverbs 12:24”

“The hand of the diligent will rule, but the slothful will be put to forced labor. [In other words made a bond slave.]”

Several old Yiddish proverbs punctuates this all-important concept.

*“Die schwerste arbet iz arum tzugehen ledig. (The hardest work of all is to do nothing.)”*

The man who looks for easy work always goes to bed tired.

The worst prison and bondage of all is that which we carry around in our inner being. The worst prison and bondage is self-imposed and self-inflicted. Proverbs 15:15:

“All the days of the afflicted are evil, but he who is of a merry heart has a continual feast.”

### **Prerogative of sonship**

God Almighty, through the gift of His Holy Spirit, has promised us not only

freedom from fear but freedom to exercise the prerogative of sonship. Romans 8:15:

"For [the spirit which] you have now received [is] not a spirit of slavery to put you once more in bondage to fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship."

Verse 21:

"Nature [creation] itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and corruption [and gain an entrance] into the glorious freedom of God's children."

There are plenty of "freedom to's" as a member of God's family that could satisfy the desires and appetites of the most ardent libertarian. God's Spirit is the source of self-control that Paul was desperately yearning for in Romans 7. He writes to the Corinthians in 3:17:

"Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty [emancipation from bondage]."

### **Own worst enemy**

Once we have been set free from bondage, we need to guard against the cheap-grace siren song of many religious denominations.

Sadly, the teachers of this perceived freedom bond themselves and their followers to the shackles of the world's traditions and their own fleshly appetites. 2 Peter 2:19:

"While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage."

Jude also warns about those who promise liberty but actually bring about slavery and bondage. Jude 4:

"For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny the Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ."

In Romans 8:31 Paul concludes his exposition of liberty through God's spirit by asking: If God be for us, who can be against us?

The grim and disappointing answer is that we ourselves are perhaps our own worst enemy. Doing our own thing or doing what comes naturally will inevitably enslave us. The holy days picture a liberation from sin and a transformation into members of God's very family. The key to our liberation can be summed up in verse 2 of the hymn "American the Beautiful": "Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law!"