

Independence Day
July 4, 2010

Let Freedom Ring!

Pastor Michael Ewart
John 8:31-36

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today is Independence Day. This holiday is essentially a celebration of the birthday of America. On July 4, 1776, our Founding Fathers signed a document declaring our independence from the tyranny of those who would enslave the minds, souls and lives of men. Because they perceived that Great Britain was robbing them of their freedom, they were willing to rebel and fight to get what they considered a God-given right.

I'm just going to say it up front. I love Independence Day. I love the 4th of July holiday. Growing up I liked it because my Dad would buy us blackjack firecrackers and other things that were designed to explode. But I honestly didn't give much thought to the reason for the holiday. But after spending time overseas in Russia, I gained an entirely new and different appreciation for the holiday. In Russia I lived in a culture with a history of restricting freedom. ... a country where its own citizens are required to have an internal passport as they travel around their own country... where elections were always rigged, and some believe still are ... where the mass media is in the government's back pocket and typically only reports what the government wants ... where business regulations, taxes, restrictions and reporting are so stringent, there is literally not a single business that operates within the law ... where only recently freedom of religion has become a reality (although even now not to the degree as in America.) Having lived where freedom is not given or valued as it is in America, I now have a much greater appreciation for our country.

I still vividly remember the first 4th of July we celebrated after having lived in Russia for a year or two. We were back in the States on furlough. We were in Eagle River, Alaska where Jenny's dad was a pastor. So we went to the Eagle River parade, and then a park where there were fireworks. I had a lump in my throat much of the day. Several times during the parade tears welled up in my eyes as I thought about how amazing this country is and how richly God has blessed it. And still when I hear Lee Greenwood's, "God Bless the U.S.A.," America the Beautiful, My Country Tis of Thee, and others... the tears well up. I think any of you who have left our country especially know what I'm talking about. You especially appreciate what we have here.

And we know that the freedoms we enjoy here came at a high price. Men and women throughout our country's history have fought in our armed forces to preserve and protect the freedoms we cherish so highly. We are a very diverse nation. Differences of opinion can be freely expressed. Sometimes it looks like there is a great deal of infighting as you look at the political scene in America. Sometimes we also see tensions between the diverse ethnic backgrounds of America. But as soon as America is under attack and our freedoms are threatened, you see an incredible patriotic roar, and incredible pulling together, and a world force that is unequalled. Think of Pearl Harbor... or 9/11. America has historically pulled together and worked together in ways that have astounded our enemies. We *love* our freedom.

And so, it might surprise a lot of people to know that many Americans... even most Americans... live without freedom. They live their lives as slaves. What an uproar this suggestion would cause at a Fourth of July gathering, wouldn't it? But the slavery I'm talking

about is spiritual slavery. You know people that live in slavery. You yourself once lived in slavery. But Christ has set you free.

Listen to the real freedom that Jesus gives, recorded in our Gospel lesson:

John 8:31-36 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?” Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

When Jesus suggested to the Jewish crowd around them that they were slaves, they were offended. They were very patriotic. “We are Abraham’s descendants. We are not slaves to anyone!” I wonder if many Americans would react the same way if I were to suggest to them that they are actually not free at all.

But Jesus is very clear about this, isn’t he? He says, **“I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”** Satan is a master salesman. A true master salesman can cause you to look at something the exact opposite of what it really is. Remember how Huckleberry Fin was able to sell whitewashing a fence as fun instead of work? That’s what Satan does to us when it comes to sin. He sells us on the idea that disobeying God and living the way we want instead of the way he wants is freedom.

- Live together with your boyfriend or girlfriend outside of marriage! Don’t live according to the old, restrictive way of marriage. Be free! (Satan says.)
- Don’t listen to you parents. Do what *you* want. Be free!
- Give a smaller offering to church and spend that money on yourself. Have fun with it! Be free!
- Witnessing about Jesus will put a damper on your relationship with your friend or relative.

Keep quiet and when you’re around them, you’ll feel more free! Satan is selling freedom. But what he’s really passing off is slavery. You see *every* single time you’re disobeying God, you’re doing the will of Satan. You are enslaving yourself to him and his will. You’re giving up freedom when every time you listen to him and disobey God.

“Everyone who sins is a slave to sin.” It feels terrible to live in sin, doesn’t it? Maybe you can think of a time in your life when you were especially living in direct disobedience to God. How did you feel? Didn’t you feel trapped? Constricted? Didn’t you feel like getting out of that situation was impossible? Satan sells freedom, but the actual product you get from him is slavery. He’s the ultimate bait and switch salesman.

And here’s the kicker. When you’re enslaved in sin, not only do you ultimately live a pretty miserable, guilt-ridden life here on earth. But you spend an eternity separated from the perfect and holy God, and the source of all that is good, joyful, fulfilling and true.

Friends, we as Americans especially treasure freedom. Don’t live your life in spiritual slavery. You can be free! Don’t let your friends and relatives live out their lives in slavery. They can be free! Now understand, this spiritual freedom can’t be obtained through a fierce battle that *we* wage. Our enemy is too powerful. We can never escape his grasp. So here’s the key to the freedom we so desperately want and need: **“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”**

Jesus can and does set us free! When the enemy enslaves a person, it is necessary to pay a ransom to free him. If the Son is to set us free, then he must pay a ransom. Jesus did just that. In Isaiah [53:5] we read, **“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”** For our doubts, distrust, disobedience and every other sin, Jesus was punished. The penalty for sin was taken by him. By his payment for sin, we are set free. Ephesians 1:7 says, **“In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.”** In Jesus, our sin is forgiven. Since Jesus takes sin away, death is no longer a punishment that awaits us. Jesus gives us eternal life in heaven. Without sin and death, Satan has no power over us. We are no longer slaves, but we are children of God! The Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians [4:7]: **“So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.”** Jesus has snatched us from sin, death and the devil to give us forgiveness, righteousness, eternal life and peace with God! When the Son sets us free, we are truly free indeed!

On Independence Day, Veteran’s Day and Memorial Day, we remember and honor those men and women who have served in our armed forces and who have sacrificed to preserve our freedom. Some of them gave the ultimate sacrifice... their very lives. We ought to honor them and respect them. We ought to be thankful to them. And when we hear the national anthem, or another patriotic song, it is good and right that we have tears well up in our eyes because of the freedoms God has given us in this country and the sacrifices that have been necessary to establish and preserve it.

But doesn’t it just make sense that we will feel the same way... except much more so... when it comes to the freedom God has given us? He has set us free from sin, from the power of the devil, and from death itself! He has set us free to live and serve him now and eternity! Amazing freedom! Shouldn’t a tear well up in our eyes as we think about it?

And what about the sacrifice that was necessary to establish this freedom? God’s one and only Son gave up divine authority, power and majesty to live among us. To live for us. How humiliating! How inspiring! He gave the ultimate price... his life... and really more. He endured the rage of a holy God for the disobedience and rebellion of billions of people! How unimaginably difficult that was. A supreme sacrifice given by our Lord Jesus Christ that freedom may ring! True, spiritual, eternal freedom! Ought not a tear well up in our eyes every time we think about it? And every time we sing a hymn remembering Christ’s sacrifice and praising God for the freedom he gives?

If the Fourth of July gets you fired up about your country and your freedom like it does me, let every worship service get you even more fired up about your God and the freedom he gives you through the Lord Jesus Christ! You know it:

“The truth will set you free.” Satan desperately wants to *silence* this truth so people can’t hear it. He will occupy your time and distract you and cause you to lose focus on things eternal so that your relative or friend don’t here this truth that can set them free. Don’t let him silence you! Let freedom ring!

Satan desperately wants to *distort* the truth so that people don’t properly understand the Gospel. He will attempt to confuse the church and skew its message so it doesn’t focus on and preach Christ crucified. He’ll work in false teaching and wrong emphases whenever he can! Watch your teaching and our churches teaching closely! Let freedom ring!

Satan desperately wants to *turn people off* to the truth. He does that by leading us to live lives that don't reflect our faith in God and his Word. If our lives aren't any different from those of the people in the world around them, people will stop listening to what we say about Christ's truth. They won't have a reason to think that the powerful Gospel changes lives and gives freedom. Don't turn people off to the truth by living a life that is unworthy of our high and holy calling as people of God! Let freedom ring!

A happy Independence Day to all. Enjoy yourself. Thank God for the many blessings we enjoy here the United States. Celebrate our nations birthday. Thank God for our freedom.

But don't limit your celebration of freedom. Celebrate the freedom we have in Christ Jesus through his ultimate sacrifice. Celebrate your independence from Satan, sin and death; and your eternal and happy *dependence* on you gracious God. Celebrate by being vocal about the truth of Christ, live a holy life in service to God, and remain in Christ's truth. Let freedom ring! Amen.