

Eternal Freedom

On the Fourth of July, we celebrate the foundations of our country which were laid by men and women who fled oppression in other countries and sought to establish here a community of free people. The Fourth of July is always a great national festival, but if our celebration of it is to be something more than a commercialized blind sentimentalism, we do well to re-examine the meaning of freedom in the light of the word of God. According to Jesus, true freedom is not merely a matter of national heritage. "If you continue in my word," he says, "you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." Jesus is the truth, and he reminds us that everyone who sins is a slave to sin and we need to be set free from sin into a life of freedom in responsibility.

One of the most common mistaken ideas of freedom is that one is free when he or she can do as he or she pleases. It is when we can do as we please that our troubles begin, for nothing worthwhile is achieved without discipline. Freedom without control is a disaster. This is what prompts Wordsworth to say in his Ode to Duty: "Me these unchartered freedom tires, I feel the weight of chance desires, I supplicate for thy control."

Living a loose life is not freedom. It is slavery to sin. It is the "bondage of corruption." True freedom is self-mastery, but self-mastery means to be mastered by something bigger than self. Free from God we are free to launch out on the ocean of life without a compass, chart or pilot. True freedom is freedom to attain the goal of life, to achieve the purpose for which we have been created. That purpose is fellowship with God. For "in him, we live and move and have our being." We shall declare, "Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free."

There is no liberty without loyalty and subjection to God! God sets us free because He is the one supremely worthy object for our loyalty. In loving Him we are set free from loving the cheap, the petty, the trivial, the foolish, the sinful. We are freed from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

In the life of a nation, as well as in the life of an individual, true freedom is freedom for right living, not freedom from right living. There is timeless wisdom in the ancient proverb, "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" - Proverbs 14:33. So we pray: "America, America, God mend thine every flaw, Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law."

The renowned historian and philosopher Arnold Toynbee in his comprehensive work "The Study of History" lists 19 great civilizations that have collapsed. He points out that only three of them were conquered by enemies from without. The other 16 crumbled because of weaknesses within, idleness, drunkenness, and immorality. The same kind of conclusion was reached by Edward Gibbon in his classic "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." He stated the reasons for the downfall of mighty Rome: the rapid increase of divorce, belittling the sanctity of the home, higher and higher taxes while the public money was wasted, a mad craze for pleasure and sexual perversion was becoming more and more exciting and brutal, gigantic armaments for war, while the nation was destroyed internally, and the decline of religion, with faith fading into mere formality.

If these are signs of impending collapse, we should face the fact that the termites of destruction are eating into the timbers of our proud American way of life. The greatness of America rests upon a faithful and responsible dependence on "the Power that has made and preserved us a nation," upon the acknowledgment that our "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" have been endowed by the Creator, that this nation, under God, must constantly experience a new birth of freedom.

The founders of our nation saw America as the fulfillment and instrument of the mighty purpose of God. They laid the foundations of the American way of life upon Christian homes, Christian churches, Christian schools, and Christian men and women. The good news of the gospel is that this freedom and this power are ours as a gift of the Emancipator who assures us, "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." For, "He breaks the power of canceled sin, He sets the prisoner free." His redeeming death and his victorious resurrection are the basis of true freedom.

To be a Christian is to accept this priceless gift with all its privileges and responsibilities. It is to accept a new life under a new Lord in the service of love. In the words of Luther, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." And in the words of Paul, "But now you have been set free from sin and are the slaves of God; as a result, your life is fully dedicated to him, and at the last you will have eternal life" - Romans 6:22.