Setting the Captives Free

While in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus, read from Isaiah 61:1, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised"* (Luke 4:18). Our Lord's mission to earth was to die for the sins of mankind, be raised from the dead and redeem all who believe on Him.
In the future we shall reign with Him in the new heaven and new earth. In the present tense, we shall be set free!

Last night we put Brian Stocks, missionary to West Africa on the speaker phone in the deacon's meeting and asked him to share his burden with us. He is leaving for Mali, Africa in two weeks to scout out the mission project they have planned. Throughout the years Mauritania has been crossing the border to Mali and kidnapping citizens and selling them into slavery. When they are able, they escape back to Mali. As a result not only are the slave traders retuning into Mali to steal the runaway slaves but to find new ones. There are approximately 10,000 runaway fugitive slaves in Mali. The slave traders are predominately Muslim. Brian and his team want to introduce the fugitives to Christ, seeing how the people are quite fed up with the Islamic way of ignoring any and all human rights, making them ripe for a Christian harvest. This activity of the missionaries has enraged the slave traders. Therefore, we must pray for their safety and success.

Jesus said, *"The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly"* (John 10:10). Peter said, *"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour"* (I Peter 5:8). What a contrast - the devil enslaves, Christ sets free! Going to the original text of the prophecy, Christ speaking first person said, *"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound"* (Isaiah 61:1).

1. Jesus sets the captives free socially.

In the Old Testament, God was very serious about forbidding the bondage of enforced slavery. He said, *"If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and maketh merchandise of him, or selleth him; then that thief shall die; and thou shalt put evil away from among you"* (Deuteronomy 24:7). The Lord called it evil. If it was evil in 1451 B.C., it is evil now! Malachi 3:6 declares, *"For I am the LORD, I change not...."* In 64 A.D. when the New Testament book of Philemon was written, the penalty for being caught as a runaway slave was death, according to Roman law. Onesimus, the runaway slave of Philemon had encountered Paul in his travels and he (Onesimus) became a Christian. In peril of this slave's life if caught, Paul sent him back to his owner, with this message, *"For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh,*

and in the Lord?" (Philemon, verses 15,16). I emphasize these words: *"...thou shouldest receive him for ever; Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved..."* (Philemon, verse 16).

We cannot escape the fact that Christianity has been the harbinger of freedom in every society in which it dominates. In the late 1700's and the youth of William Wilberforce, English traders raided the African coast on the Gulf of Guinea and captured between 35, 000 and 50,000 Africans a year, shipped them across the Atlantic and sold them into slavery. It was a profitable business that many powerful people had become dependent upon. One publicist for the West Indies trade wrote, "The impossibility of doing without slaves in the West Indies will always prevent this traffic being dropped. The necessity, the absolute necessity, then, of carrying it on, must, since there is no other, be its excuse." William Wilberforce became a born again Christian, becoming deeply committed to Christ and taking his commitment to the street. He despised worldly socializing which left God out and invited vice in. He was a total abstainer of alcoholic beverages, but by far his greatest crusade was against slavery. Listen to his speech before the House of Commons, April 18, 1791, "Let us not despair; it is a blessed cause, and success, ere long, will crown our exertions. Already we have gained one victory; we have obtained, for these poor creatures, the recognition of their human nature, which, for a while was most shamefully denied. This is the first fruits of our efforts; let us persevere and our triumph will be complete. Never, never will we desist till we have wiped away this scandal from the Christian name, released ourselves from the load of guilt, under which we at present labour, and extinguished every trace of this bloody traffic, of which our posterity, looking back to the history of these enlightened times, will scarce believe that it has been suffered to exist so long a disgrace and dishonour to this country." Wilberforce fought slavery the better part of his life and just days before he died, he witnessed Parliament abolish the slave trade. Immediately over 800,000 slaves were freed!

Harriet Beecher Stowe, the daughter of the famous preacher, Lyman Beecher, sister of Pastor Henry Ward Beecher and wife of Calvin Ellis Stowe, a seminary professor and an ardent critic of slavery wrote the most famous novel of her time entitled Uncle Tom's Cabin. In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, prohibiting assistance to fugitives. Stowe was moved to present her objections on paper, and in June 1851, the first installment of Uncle Tom's Cabin appeared in the antislavery journal National Era. The 40-year-old mother of seven children sparked a national debate, after putting this novel of pathos into the hands of well over one million people in the United Sates as well as being made into a play. Abraham Lincoln allegedly remarked, "So you're the little lady who started this great war!" At the end of the American Civil War, 4 million slaves were officially and legally free and we now practiced a more perfect union with the beginning of liberty for all insured. Look into our history, whether it be Rome, England or America – Christianity has always been the catalyst for social freedom. Mark it well! When the unborn are given their freedom for life across the board it will be because Christians have been actively involved.

2. Jesus sets the captives free morally.

God's Word declares, *"For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour"* (I Thessalonians 4:3,4). The command of God is to abstain from sexual activity outside of marriage. God uses the Greek metaphor for the body when He says, *"That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel...,"* which means to keep your body under control. A person who gives himself over to the base desires of the flesh without moral restraints becomes the slave of sin, as the Bible says in John 8: 34, *"Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin."* Show me a society that applauds immorality and I'll show you a people who have rejected God and His Word. Show me a society where right is praised and wrong is denounced and I'll show you a people who love and fear God and keep His commandments. *"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man"* (Ecclesiastes 12:13). *"If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed"* (John 8:36).

3. Jesus sets the captives free spiritually.
God's tells of the benefit of prayer and fasting when He said, *"Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?"* (Isaiah 58:6). Every band of wickedness, every oppressed person is set free and every yoke is broken. Through the years I have met people addicted to dope, alcohol, and sex set free by accepting Jesus into their life and being discipled to the Christian life. The answer to all of life's problems is a spiritual one. Christ conquers sin. Christ gives grace in time of need. And Christ will one day return and give us resurrection deliverance from all that is in the world.
-Pastor Pope-