

Last week I began a preaching series entitled, *Reasons to Believe*. At the heart of this series lies the conviction that a Christian understanding of reality makes better sense of the world, and our experience of it, than a secular understanding.

Tim Keller writes, "Not long ago, leading scholars in Western society were nearly unanimous in thinking that religion was inevitably declining. They thought the need for religion would go away as science provided [better] explanations...than God ever did. In 1966 John Lennon represented this consensus when he said, 'Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and will be proved right.' However, this hasn't happened as advertised."¹

Those who study world demographics now suggest that the 21st century will be less secular than the 20th. In sub-Saharan Africa, and China, and Latin America there have been massive shifts towards Christianity. Numbers suggests that 4 out of 5 people on planet earth believe in God; that's 80% of the world's population. The question is why?²

Perhaps it's because reason and science cannot explain everything. William Jennings Bryan writes, "Science is a magnificent material force, but it is not a teacher of morals. It can perfect machinery, but

adds no moral restraints to protect society from the misuse of the machine...Science does not [and cannot] teach brotherly love."³ It is disingenuous to suggest that a Christian worldview is based on "blind faith" while a secular worldview is based on evidence. Allow me to explain.

Many secularists hold to what can be termed an "exclusive rationality;" it's the idea that nothing can be held to be "true" unless it can be proven through empirical observation, which is to say, "scientifically." But a commitment to exclusive rationality undercuts much of what most Western people believe. Take for example a number of truths that Westerners believe to be self-evident: the need for justice, human rights, or the dignity and value of all human persons.

None of these so-called "self-evident truths" can be proved in a science lab, and yet many secular people would sacrifice, fight, and perhaps even die, for these truths. Keller writes, "We should, therefore, stop demanding that belief in God meet a standard of universally acknowledged proof when we don't apply that to the other commitments on which we base our lives."⁴

Modern secularism has plundered and plagiarized Christianity, making just enough changes that its ideas have the air of originality.

¹ Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical*, 10.

² Keller, 10-11.

³ As quoted by Keller, 13.

⁴ Keller, 34.

Think about the modern notions of justice, equality, and the dignity of the human person; these ideas have been plundered from Christianity and then stripped of Christ Himself. Nihilist philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, pointed out this error; one cannot discard faith in God but still argue for its ideals and values. It's a package deal. Belief in a personal God, who created humanity in His image, and established right and wrong, is the foundation for such beliefs. Stripped of the Christian foundation, these values become preferences, but not more.

Tim Keller concludes, "To hold that human beings are the product of nothing but the evolutionary process of the strong eating the weak, but then to insist that nonetheless every person has a human dignity to be honoured—is an enormous leap of faith against *all* evidence to the contrary."⁵

Make no mistake, a commitment to a secular worldview requires *faith*. Secularism contains series of beliefs about the way things are, that cannot be proven, and undercuts the material-only reality that it defends. And so rather cheekily, we might say to our secular friends, *who's faith makes better sense—yours, or mine?*

This morning I want to turn our attention to a subject that is deeply personal, and is actively being worked out in homes, businesses, and government. The subject in question is **freedom**. I wonder, is there any other value that is more fiercely held, or cherished, in Western culture?

⁵ Keller, 48-49.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 484.

If we study history, we can trace the gathering of people groups—according to ethnicity or economic status—in order to throw off oppressors, and all of done done in the name of **freedom**. My own ethnic and cultural background, Mennonites, can be seen throughout history, running from one country to the next, one continent to the next, to avoid compulsory military service, and to secure religious and educational **freedoms**.

In the suffrage movements of the early 1900's, women fought for the **freedom** to vote. In the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's, Martin Luther King fought for the rights and **freedoms** of African Americans: freedom to drink from the same water fountains as whites, freedom to eat at the same restaurants, to attend good schools, to vote, and to be treated as equals.

Charles Taylor, in his book *A Secular Age*, summarizes the current secular perspective on freedom, "Let each person do their own thing, and... one shouldn't criticize the others' values, because they have a right to live their own life as you do. The [only] sin which is not tolerated is intolerance."⁶

As I said last week, a secular age is one in which the notion of God and the after-life has been dismissed. In light of this reality, a universally held standard of right and wrong has been abandoned. In such an age, "right and wrong" becomes an arbitrary term, at times shaped by the culture at large, but always subject to one's own privately held convictions. In the absence of God, nothing and no one

has any claim on the way you choose to live. The question becomes, *is this kind of freedom helpful or harmful?*

Tim Keller writes, “True—the ideal of individual freedom in Western society has done incalculable good. It has led to a far more just and fair society for minorities and women... But false. Freedom has come to be defined as the absence of any limitations or constraints... By this definition, the fewer boundaries we have on our choices and actions, the freer we feel ourselves to be. Held in this form, I want to argue that the narrative has gone wrong and is doing damage.”⁷

illus: When we define freedom as the ability to do whatever we want, we quickly find ourselves at a dead-end because this isn’t how freedom actually works.

Suppose for a moment that you are a grandmother or grandfather who loves to spend time with your grandchildren. Suppose also that you detest exercise but love to eat unhealthy foods—heavily processed, deep-fried, and sugar-laden foods. When you go to your doctor for your annual checkup, she is alarmed. Your blood pressure is off the charts, your cholesterol levels are frightening; an immediate course of action is prescribed—diet and exercise.

Do you see the dilemma? These two freedoms are in conflict with one another...the freedom to avoid habits of diet and exercise—over time—will make it impossible to enjoy one’s grandchildren. No one is free to exercise all of the freedoms available.

You may be free to regularly ditch school but the exercise of this freedom, makes it unlikely, even impossible, to enjoy good grades and secure entrance into University. We may feel free to run our mouths, directing harsh words at the people around us, but the use of this freedom is at odds with another—the freedom to be in relationship, the freedom to give and receive love.

And so, as Keller suggests, real freedom is found in the strategic choices we make; we give up certain freedoms in order to hold on to what we deem more important. Freedom, then, is not the absence of constraint, but “choosing the right constraints and the right freedoms to lose.”⁸

Let’s leave definitions behind for a few moments and think about the other side of freedom, namely, responsibility. Western secularism prizes absolute individual freedom; many make the claim that they are responsible only to themselves, and that no one has a right to tell them how to live.

But to claim absolute individual freedom is to conveniently ignore the facts—there is no such thing as a self-made-person. Yes, in one regard we are a product of our own choices, but think of the many, many people who have sacrificially invested their lives in us: parents and grandparents, neighbours, teachers, doctors and nurses, friends, coaches, and on the list goes. Do we have *any* responsibility to these people? After all we’ve been given, do we not have a responsibility to invest our life in others?

⁷ Keller, 100-101.

⁸ Keller, 102.

When personal freedom is detached from personal responsibility, what we are left with is little more than a self-centred narcissism. In the not-so-distant past, there was significant consensus around what constituted the “*common good*,” but it seems that what really matters now is only what’s “*good for me*.” It’s alarming.

Let me share one last thought before we get to our Biblical text this morning. Many Western people are, generally speaking, quite happy to be free from the moral boundaries of the recent past. When secular people talk about limiting personal freedom, they do so according to the “harm principle”. *People should be free to do whatever they want, as long as they don’t harm anyone else*. But as Tim Keller notes, this principle only works if we all agree on what harm is—and we don’t.

What’s the harm in gaming 8 hours a day? Or in getting drunk at a weekend party? Or smoking marijuana? What’s the harm in having multiple sexual partners? Or in leaving one’s spouse to find someone who makes you happier? What’s the harm in...you fill in the blank.

In the absence of moral guidelines, we twist the harm principle to our own purposes—if I really want something, it can’t be bad. Our own desires become the only measure of what’s good, and more often than not, we’re primarily concerned with what’s good for me.

At this time, I want to turn our attention to a Christian understanding of freedom. When we look to the Scriptures for guidance on this subject, paradoxically, we find that freedom does not come from the absence of restraint; freedom comes through submission to God.

Let’s begin by looking at John 8:31-36.

“31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” 33 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?” 34 Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

Many years ago now, I walked into the Chicago Tribune building and I saw the following words etched in stone: “Then you will know the truth, and *the truth will set you free*.” By and large, these words have been lifted from their original context and used to express the idea that truth has an innate power—all its own—to free people.

The sad reality is that truth doesn’t automatically lead to freedom. Think for a moment about all of the things that we know, things that are good for us and others, that we haven’t put into practice. We all know that responding to people in anger isn’t a good idea; when we’re angry, we often say and do the wrong thing—we make matters worse, not better. But *knowing* this truth is not enough, freedom comes when we *abide* by the truth.

What Jesus offered to the crowd was an **if/then** promise. 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.” The truth of which Jesus speaks is bound up in knowing, listening, and following Him. There’s no wiggle room in what Jesus says; the degree to which we hold on to Jesus’ teaching is the degree to which we will walk in freedom.

And Christian freedom consists of two parts: we are freed *from* sin, and we are freed *for* God and others.

(1) Freedom from sin: In our contemporary culture, the word “sin” is now seen as old-fashioned, and perhaps even dangerous. The word “sin” reinforces the idea of universal right and wrong, a standard of behaviour to which all people are called. In rejecting the notion of God, a secular age rejects a universal standard of right and wrong. As long as we don’t hurt anyone, we should free to say, do, and pursue what seems “right” to us.

It’s remarkable, when you think about it, how quickly “up” has become “down” and “down” has become “up”. In the recent past, sin was understood to be a turning away from God, towards self; this was understood to be dangerous, leading to slavery/bondage. Today, the turning from God towards self is seen to be the ultimate good, and, the only path to true freedom.

If this actually worked, I should think it would be working a lot better than it is. We would be hurting each other less, enjoying life more, things would be simple, easy, and straight-forward. There would be few complaints, arguments, and conflicts. But this isn’t what we find. *When will we realize that the pursuit of self-rule isn’t working, and won’t ever work?*

Jesus said, “*Everyone who sins is a slave to sin.*” When we make our own desires the measure of all things, we become enslaved by our desires. In fact, whichever pursuit we make ultimate, becomes our Master. And so, if absolute freedom is an illusion, then we need to

choose our Master carefully—which will lead to a life of greater freedom and satisfaction?

Let’s think for a few moments now about the freedom that comes with a responsibility to God and others.

(2) Freedom for God and others: As we get older we get to stay up later, we get our own phone, or bank card, our parents give us the keys to the car—with age comes increasing freedom. As Westerners, we tend to associate growth and maturity with an increasing freedom to do what we want. But when it comes to relationships, this way of thinking cuts against the grain of the way things are.

Think about the experience of love—from a family member, a friend, or spouse. In so many respects, the experience of love sets us free. When we know we are loved, we are free to be ourselves, free to try things and fail, without the fear of rejection. The experience of love is the most freeing thing in the world! But the deeper the relationship, Keller writes, “the more you also have to give up your independence... You can be in love or you can be free and autonomous—but never both at the same time.”⁹

For the Christian, the freedom that comes from love is found in submission to Jesus. As we limit our personal freedom—to do *what* we want, *when* we want—and instead choose to follow Jesus, we find a peace, joy, and love that truly frees us.

In Matthew 10:39, Jesus expressed a truth that many people—the world over—have experienced personally. When we look at our own

⁹ Keller, 107, 108.

life and label it “*Mine*,” living for ourselves, pursuing our own desires without constraint, we end up with a life we don’t actually want. When we live with this kind of unrestrained “freedom,” we don’t actually feel free; we feel bound. But when we hand our life over to the One who made us, the One who knows how life works—how we work—we find a life worth living.

As I said earlier, true freedom is found in the strategic choices we make; we give up certain freedoms in order to hold on to what we deem more important. Freedom, then, is not the absence of constraint, but “choosing the right constraints and the right freedoms to lose.” In life, choosing to follow Jesus is the constraint that leads to the greatest freedom.

We are not self-made, nor are we meant to live a self-directed life. Jesus invites us to give Him full access to the priorities, pursuits, and loves of our lives. Hear me when I say this—the degree to which we align ourselves with Jesus, will determine the degree to which we experience peace, joy, and freedom.

Joy, in knowing that we are living out God’s purposes in the world, and freedom to be ourselves instead of wishing we were someone else. The joy God gives makes it possible to see people around us who have been given “**more**”—more money, time, gifts, or influence—and to still live free from a spirit of jealousy. We can know this joy and freedom. It’s entirely possible to have both *less* and *more*. Less jealousy, pride, and competition; more joy, freedom, and peace.

¹⁰ Matthew 26:26-28

¹¹ John 6:35.

The Lord’s Supper: This morning we come to the Lord’s Table, to partake in a Holy Meal that has nourished Christians for 2000 years. This meal is part remembrance, part celebration, and part encounter, for we come to this meal to meet Jesus Himself.

On the night Jesus was betrayed, He took bread, He broke it, and gave it to His disciples saying, “*Take and eat; this is my body.*” In the same way, after supper, “*he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”*¹⁰

Our culture regularly tells us that there is no God, that we are purely material beings, and that this life is all that there is. But in spite of this narrative, we are—all of us—incurably spiritual creatures: we hunger for meaning, we thirst for significance, we long for the transcendent. And the pursuit of the material cannot satisfy these longings.

Jesus is the solution to our soul’s hunger. Jesus said, “*I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*”¹¹

Forever is a long time. We can wait in traffic for 20 minutes and complain that it’s “taking forever!” We can be hunting for a new job, or waiting for Mrs. or Mr. Right and lament that it’s “taking forever!” We can live for years with chronic pain and it feels like forever.

It isn't. Forever is a really, really, long time. In fact, it's difficult to talk about "forever" and "time" in the same sentence because "time" has a beginning and an end, "forever" doesn't.

In John 6:40, Jesus said, "*My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.*" God's desire is that **everyone** who looks to Jesus and put their trust in Him will have a forever life with God.

Your gender, your ethnicity, and your age—none of these disqualify you. Your parents, the place you grew up, your past failures don't disqualify you. Your present troubles, your questions, and even your excuses don't disqualify you; Jesus came to give you life.

Jesus carried our sin and shame to the cross; He died in our place, for our sake. The Bible regularly describes "sin" as breaking relationship with God. In ignoring God, rejecting God, or seeking satisfaction apart from God, we cut ourselves off from the Giver of Life.

The Bible describes "becoming a Christian" in many different ways, but here, Jesus describes it simply as *a coming to Him and a believing in Him*. When we *come to Jesus* we leave certain things behind—we leave behind our self-reliance, our pride, our achievements.

Becoming a Christian means *coming to Jesus and believing in Jesus*. We give up the notion that we can live without God. We give up the notion that we can make ourselves right before God and come to celebrate the truth that Jesus's perfect life, His perfect sacrifice on the

cross is what makes us right with God—it doesn't depend on **our** effort but on **His** mercy.

We cannot **save**, **sustain**, or **satisfy** our own lives; we need Jesus. And so we come to this Meal to feed on Christ, in our hearts, by faith.

At this time I would like to invite those who are serving to come and take their place. We will have three serving station up front, and one/two in the balcony. As the band begins to play, please make your way to those serving the bread and cup; please come forward, row by row, beginning with the back row.

Worship

Invitation to Prayer

Benediction