

Power over Evil

Immediately after the Civil War, the government appointed administrators to assist in reconstruction of the despoiled South. As these men toured their areas of responsibility, one striking and surprising fact made an impression on them. Although signs had been posted and proclamations had been read to those who were illiterate, the ex-slaves were not leaving the plantations. They were not making use of their newly won freedom. Instead of enjoying their liberty and seeking new jobs and a new life, the slaves remained in poverty and misery. There was no noticeable difference in their pre- and post-war lives. They continued to plant tobacco and cotton; they continued to maintain the stables and clean the mansions.

Curiosity finally got the best of one of these administrators. Pledging to get to the bottom of the mystery, he traveled to one of the largest plantations in the area—a place owned by a master who had the reputation of being especially harsh on his workers, beating them and feeding them the most meager of rations. Walking directly to one of the slaves, the administrator asked the burly, young man why he had not left his rundown servant's quarters. "Why are you still working for such a hard taskmaster?" With great simplicity, and not a small amount of fear, the ex-slave replied, "Sir, I don't know anywhere else, other than right here."

A Better Way

The words of that slave sum up the cry of humankind from time immemorial. "I don't know anywhere else, other than right here." The children of Israel, recently freed from Egypt's tyranny, encountered difficulties, looked backwards to their old lives, and grumbled against the Lord and his messenger, Moses. Yet if you examine any of their complaints, you will quickly see they can be boiled down to one thought: "We don't know anywhere else, other than where we were" (Ex 15:24; 16:2; 17:3).

Centuries later, after the people had settled into the land the Lord had promised to give them, their ungrateful hearts led them into every type of terrifying transgression—immorality, idolatry, and infant sacrifice (2 Ki 16:3). In spite of their ingratitude, the Lord continued to send his prophets. Sometimes God's representatives would be men of a king's court; other times, like the herdsman Amos, they would be common fellows. No matter whom the Lord called, the message was similar: "Go, prophesy to my people Israel" (Amos 7:15). And prophesy they did. When the people said, "We don't know anywhere else, other than where we are," God's prophets showed them a better way, a right way, God's way. They showed them that if they followed God, he would give them power over evil. If the people allowed the Holy Spirit to change their hearts, there would be peace and restoration. But when the people hardened their hearts, punishment followed until they saw the errors of their ways.

This cycle of sin and salvation was repeated for centuries, until "when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal 4:4–5). Today's Gospel shows us that long-awaited Son of God sending his closest followers out to tell people that there is another way. There is a better place; it is God's place of freedom and power over evil.

The Lord's Directions

Listen to Jesus' directions. The disciples are to take no bread, no bag, and no money in their pockets. They were to take no traveler's checks or credit cards. As it was to be a long and fast-moving trip, covering many miles, they were allowed to have their sandals strapped to their feet. Where are they to go? It doesn't make much difference. Every place needs to hear the message they are delivering. At what home are they to stay? Any home is all right, because every home needs to know that Jesus has come to conquer the world's evil.

Jesus' instructions are simple: Keep on going; knock on any door. If you are welcomed, great! Stay there and preach. Disciples, forget the pleasantries. You have a message to deliver.

You don't have to sweet-talk the owner of the house by saying, "Oh, what a beautiful mule you have in your living room" or "This a delightful wine. Is it a Chateau d' Capernaum?" Keep going. Keep preaching repentance. Do a miracle. Show my power and cast out the devils. Let my people know, from here on out, it's not business as usual. Let them see that the devil is no longer in control. God wants them to know that there is another place, a better place other than the one where they are.

"After you're done preaching at one location, keep on going. If you are greeted with a cold shoulder, don't worry about it. Leave the place, shake the dust off the soles of your feet. But keep on going. Others are waiting to hear that God has a place for them different from the one they know."

Great Results

Scripture tells us that the disciples went. "They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them" (v 13). By their preaching, the Spirit changed many lives. In the other Gospel accounts of this evangelistic event, we are told the disciples returned bubbling and babbling about the wonderful things that had happened. Christ's power had shown itself victorious over vice—superior to sin. By the power of God, people had been delivered from evil. People had found out that there was another place than the one they had been. It must have been a magnificent moment for the disciples as they saw lost slaves become saved souls.

It would, not be the last time the disciples would experience such euphoria. Years later, on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon them. Three thousand souls were freed. That was a momentous day, but Christ's power did not end with those new believers. Later, Scripture records, multitudes were added to the family of faith (Acts 5:14). The disciples had good news. Because of the perfect life of Jesus, God relieved his people from the weight of sin. Because of Jesus' resurrection, death and the grave would no longer have the final laugh. Because of the power of God's Son, Satan was no longer the taskmaster. Knowing the freeing power of God's message, the disciples kept going. If a town stoned them, they kept going. The message of salvation had to be delivered. If they were thrown into prison, they sang hymns to their fellow captives. The message they carried and the good news they shared was so unique and outstanding that it had to be delivered.

Know well, my friends, that same message needs to be delivered today. There are many in the world who are still enslaved to sin and Satan. Do you remember our Civil War slave at the beginning of the sermon, the one who didn't "know anywhere else, other than right here"? Like that slave, souls are still shackled by Satan. They don't know of anywhere else other than where they are right now. Unbelievers are shackled not by chains but by fear. They are afraid of breaking away from the old life, afraid of what fellow slaves might say, afraid of reaching for something new.

Satan's Slave Plantation

Unbelievers in this world—well over two billion at last count, some of whom live here in our community—are still slaves to Satan. They know of no place other than the one where they are. Where they are, without Jesus, is a dangerous place. On Satan's slave plantation, marriage, family, and life itself are no longer respected. On Satan's slave plantation, getting drunk, using the Lord's name in vain, lust, envy, and hatred are part of the daily work routine. Strangest of all, on Satan's plantation, these slaves of sin believe they have a happy life. That's because they don't know any other place than where they are. Our Civil War ex-slave thought himself happy digging holes for outhouses. He didn't know any better. He considered his life fulfilling as he cleaned out another man's stable and picked cotton without pay. He was happy because he didn't know anything else. Freedom was a word with no real meaning to him.

It's no different for contemporary slaves of sin and Satan. They don't understand that without Christ, they have a freedom that is superficial, while God offers a freedom that is substantial. The

world offers a freedom that is temporary and deceptive, while God holds out one that is powerful and permanent. Satan offers a freedom that appeals to the lower appetites and passions, while God gives a freedom that empowers growth in the abundant life of Jesus. We need to let these slaves of sin know that there is but one kind of freedom worthy of the name. This is the true freedom that was proclaimed, centuries ago, by our Savior: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn 8:36).

A Life of Freedom

In the Civil War, hundreds of thousands of Union soldiers gave up their lives so that slaves could be freed. The freedom of the slave who continued to work a plantation because he didn't know anywhere else was purchased at a high price. Satan's slaves have also been redeemed at a high cost. Not with the lives of thousands of men, but with the life of God's sinless Son. Jesus, alone, waged a great battle for the souls of humankind. It was not a battle fought with guns, muskets, and cannons. It was not a duel between armies clad in blue and gray. It was not a war that called for rationing and months of intensive drilling.

No, the battle for our souls, the battle that won our freedom, was fought between the Son of God and Satan. In this war there was only one casualty, only one body buried: that of Jesus, our Savior. He gave up his life to die as a substitute for all people. They would not have to die but could be liberated from the plantation of Satan. Our Savior died for the cause of humankind's eternal freedom. He willingly sacrificed himself so we might be sons of God and no longer slaves of Satan. He rose again from the dead, defeating Satan's power over death so that his sons and daughters would never die.

In the wars of men, cemeteries are dedicated. In the Normandy area of France, you can see rows of markers in remembrance of those who gave their lives to liberate Europe. At Gettysburg, small granite stones remember the dead, and great bronze statues recall the cause of freedom. Yet on the Christian battlefield, you will not see such markers, graves, or cemeteries. You will not find the body of the hero who fell in battle. Even though he was buried, seemingly in defeat, we as Christians proudly proclaim that he has risen from the dead. Throughout hell and heaven, he has been proclaimed the great Liberator. Because of him, there is freedom for Satan's slaves.

In the name of the living Lord, we have been empowered to do more, to be more, than we have ever dreamed. We can send out the Word and read the message aloud to the spiritually illiterate. That message is that the power of God, as revealed in Jesus, has freed them! It is our privilege, like Amos and like the disciples, to get the Word out. It is our job to tell slaves about true freedom in Christ. If it is received with gladness, give thanks and keep on going, keep on sharing. If it is rejected, don't get discouraged. Keep on going, keep on sharing. Let sin's slaves know they are free because of the blood of God's Son.

And lest you become afraid and think that these slaves have no desire to hear about Christ's freeing power, let me tell one more story. In the last century, when ex-slaves had the liberty to order any good or product for themselves, they often purchased two things: candles and a mirror. These items had been forbidden them as slaves. Now, for the first time, the candles could illuminate their dark homes and they could see themselves as they really were.

My friends, the desire of slaves does not change. Slaves of sin still have a great longing for the light. When you share Jesus, you are sharing the Light of the world. When you share Jesus, you give others a mirror that allows them to see themselves as freed daughters and sons of God. For the first time they have the power of being free and forgiven. Share that light. Give them a new way, a new life. Don't let any of the people you know die in slavery's sin because that was the only place they knew. God grant it.