

NOT JUST FOR SUNDAYS

TAKEAWAY

Free

August 8, 2010

Part 7 – Free to Yield

Living Inside the Box

Let me begin by saying that I am not a parent. I have no idea what it's like to love unconditionally, yet have to discipline for the betterment of a child. However, I have been a child—a strong-willed, independent, trouble-making child. Submission was not in my vocabulary. Rather, I saw it as a weakness and something to fight against.

I was in the prime of my “I know more about life than you do, Mom and Dad” phase when my aunt and cousin got hold of me. They sat me down during one of our many visits through the years and brought to my attention that I was becoming very mouthy and rebellious. As my cousin put it, “You are really being a brat.” I squirmed, wanting to get away from the criticism, but my respect for my older cousin kept me seated. She went on to draw a rather small box on an empty sheet of crisp, white paper. “This box,” she said, “represents the rules our parents have for us. This box is where they want us to live. This box is where they can protect us and guard us. Even though the box looks tiny, there is a lot of freedom in it.” I did not get it...at all. I explained that by my calculations, my box was even smaller than hers because my parents were evil tyrants who just wanted to see me in a state of misery and despair. She saw past my ranting melodrama and kept right on going. “You see, if we choose to go outside the box, we are choosing to disobey and ignore the will and plans they have for us. Not only that, but punishment only happens when we step outside the box. So, staying in it just makes sense. All the fits and tantrums and running away—is that working for you? No, it's just making your life more miserable. You see—the longer you choose to function inside the box, the better things will be! There is freedom INSIDE the box. And the coolest thing is, the longer you choose to stay inside THAT freedom, the more freedoms you get!”

As a 13-year old looking at that sheet of paper, all I could see were the huge white spaces on the outside of that box. My aunt promised that the longer I lived inside the box, the bigger the box could potentially get. But, all I could think about was ways to sneak out of the box, manipulate the makers of the box, or completely tear down the walls of my box.

It was not until many years later that God Himself would sit me down. “Child, you have been running around in the white spaces—far, far from the box I asked you to live in.” I looked at the spaces that had once been so white, crisp, clean, and appealing. Their allure was now replaced with dirt, grime, filth and stench—marred with years of really bad decisions and sinful paths. “You thought living without My rules and guidelines would bring happiness, and now you are miserable and alone. How is that working for you? Friends who know how to party, but they betray you...a failed marriage because you chose to marry a non-believer even though you know My Word says otherwise...bankrupt...jobless... purposeless... Is it possible that maybe—just maybe—living inside that box—My box—will bring you true freedom and joy? I have come so that you might have life and life abundant! I created you. I know you inside and out. I adore and love you! Come and live! Come, find freedom inside the box.”

That day I made the decision to truly follow Christ and to live by His statutes, denying self. I chose to put myself in His box, obeying and submitting to what the Bible says. Sure, submission has at times been difficult. It has meant loss of and disconnection from things I once held dear. But the freedom that has come from making such a choice is beyond compare!

He who makes himself his own master subjects himself to a fool for a master.
~ St. Bernard of Clairvaux

Few souls understand what God would accomplish in them if they were to abandon themselves unreservedly to Him and if they were to allow His grace to mold them accordingly. ~ Ignatius

Unfair Expectations?

Have you ever been in a place where you felt God telling you to submit to an unfair situation? I'm not talking about an unhealthy place where you let yourself become a doormat or an enabler to someone else's sin. It's those places in life where you want to say, “But God, they aren't following You—why do I have to submit to them?” It could be someone at work, your spouse, or if you are young, your parents. For me, it has been in the often unpopular area of “Wives, submit to your husbands...” (Ephesians 5:22 NIV) that God has been working in my life. My husband made a decision about his job over a year ago that has deeply affected our whole family. He is living apart from us for his job and it is difficult. I was not in favor of the

decision, and I let my voice be heard. But, I quickly became aware that I was trying to control the outcome and that this effort was causing hearts to harden on both sides. I had to come to that place where I submitted to God through submitting to my husband. Even though I believed he was not making this decision in faith, God showed me that this was between Him and my husband. My job was to hold down the fort. To my surprise, the freedom I have found in giving this all to God has relieved me from experiencing any feelings of resentment or bitterness. Indeed, as I stay submitted to the authority God has placed over me, I have seen Him move in my family and in my husband. This has truly been a season of yielding my will to God's. The freedom that is flowing as I lean into fully trusting Him overshadows the momentary discomfort of the situation I find myself in.

If you stop to think about it, submission to the omnipotent God is the most logical choice a finite human being can make. If God is God, if He is who He says He is, "the Alpha and the Omega" (Revelation 1:8), then why would a mere mortal ever choose his own will over God's? What—besides ignorance of, or blindness to, reality—could induce someone to not wholeheartedly offer themselves, their lives, their everything to the God who created and loves them? Of course, sin and unbelief are what gets in the way here. Read 1 Peter 2:18-25. Can you think of any situations that are more unfair than that of a slave with a harsh master? According to verse 19, why does God tell us to submit to such unfair authority? Who is held up as our example in verse 21? What was the profound effect of Christ's submission in verse 25?

Read Hebrews 12:9-11. What can a Christ-follower expect as a result of submitting to God? Yielding our entire lives is surely worked out over a lifetime. There will always be room for improvement, but where can you start today? What in your life have you been sensing that God wants you to submit to Him, perhaps through submitting to others? Pray and talk to God about it, remembering that He is the "Overseer of our souls" (1 Peter 2:25).

Doing it His Way

I admit it. I'm a control freak. I want everyone, including myself, to follow my version of the rules. And when I notice people not following the rules—especially my interpretation of them—I get stressed out. Kind of like Martha's concern with the law of hospitality when Jesus came for dinner (Luke 10:38-42). A few years ago, this kind of anxiety led me into an experience with stomach ulcers—not fun at all. Since then, I've grown a lot in my relationship with God. Lately, the Holy Spirit convicted me about this issue. A new co-worker often asks me for feedback, and I'm always happy to be of assistance with my knowledge and experience. Then one day I realized that—without an invitation—I had started giving him pointers about his process. He graciously accepted my feedback, but kept on doing it his way, which started to bug me. One day during a conversation about standard operating procedures and ways we could improve them, I had an epiphany. My eyes were opened to the realization that I was being stiff-necked, proud, and blind. There was nothing wrong with the way he was doing things. My way was one way, but it wasn't the only way. I had to confess this to him and ask him to forgive me. It was difficult, but in that choice I experienced surprising freedom.

One of my favorite scenes from the film, *Mona Lisa Smile*, is where Julia Stiles' character confronts her liberated art professor's misunderstanding of the traditional role of wife and mother. She makes the argument that if you have a choice, you are not a slave or a doormat. An intelligent, strong woman's choice to have a family rather than a career outside of the home does not make her weak or any less intelligent. That picture helps me understand what Christ did for me in yielding His position of power and humbling Himself to empower me to yield my will for God's better will. His choice to give up His power and become a servant was not a sign of weakness but of greatness. Sometimes we have to let go before we can find freedom, like a tree bending in a storm.

Read Philippians 2:1-18. How does letting go of control and power, and humbling yourself, lead to freedom? Can you think of any areas in your life where you are being "stiff-necked" or where your willingness to "bend" might benefit others? Are there places in your life where you don't seem to sense any freedom? Could any of those issues be related to control? Ask God to help you begin to identify those places and be ready to deny yourself and follow Him (Matthew 16:24). Freedom awaits!

To wait open-endedly is an enormously radical attitude toward life. So is to trust that something will happen to us that is far beyond our imaginings. So, too, is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life, trusting that God moulds us according to God's love and not according to our fear. The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction. That, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control.
~ Henri J. M. Nouwen

The greatness of man's power is the measure of his surrender. It is not a question of who you are, or of what you are, but whether God controls you.
~ Henrietta Mears

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Ephesians 5:21 (NIV)