

God's Grace Reverses Our Place

3) From the House of Slaves to Serving the Lord

Exodus 20:1-17 • 2021-03-07 • Series for Lent



I've been joining my children in watching a popular animated tv series which came out a few years ago. It follows the adventures of heroes and villains as they battle for control of the galaxy with their lasers and special light-swords. Some episodes are lighthearted and suitable for small children, but some can be really scary and dark. Probably the greatest darkness in the tv series is the most subtle. It has recurring advice from the heroes which says something like, "You have to follow your heart," or "You have to do what your heart is telling you." I say that is probably the darkest aspect because following the heart can lead to a very dark place. It might make our egos feel good to be our own fountain of truth. But I'm sure you've experienced what selfish, sinful desires can lead to in your life. The Scriptures tell us that listening everything our hearts say leads to sin and slavery.

According to Scripture, the best advice is just the opposite of listening to your heart. The Lord tells the people of Israel, "Don't follow your hearts. Follow my commands." How do we follow God's will when hearts want to listen to their own way? Today we look at Exodus 20 and we see how God's grace reverses our place. We go from the house of slaves to serving the Lord.

The book of Exodus begins with the people of Israel stuck in the worst kind of state, slavery. The Egyptians had enslaved them. They treated them harshly and forced them to carry out impossible tasks. It grew so bad that they Egyptians were forcing abortions on the people and killing every newborn male Hebrew. Year after year the people cried out, hopeless to free themselves. It was a horrible, helpless, enslaved life.

But it wasn't altogether hopeless. It all changed when their God acted. He kept his ancient promise of rescue. He sent plagues on the land of Egypt. The nation crumbled until it was nearly ruined and on its knees. The God led his people out of the land to freedom. The army of Egypt tried to stop them. But God let his people cross the sea on dry ground. Then in one final act of deliverance, the Lord caused the sea to crash in on the entire army of Egypt and drown them all. Israel did nothing. They only stood and watched as the Lord their God brought them out of slavery and destroyed their enemy. God, in his great grace, rescued and freed his people.

But God did not free them so that he could tell them, "Follow your heart and you'll be free." He knew what the human heart led to. Following the heart is what the Egyptians had been doing. And it's what the people of Israel wanted to do by nature. The Lord had heard the thoughts of every human heart since the beginning of time. He was aware of all its evils. God did not create the human heart evil, but mankind chose evil in the beginning and lost goodness.

That TV series with heroes who counseled "Listen to your heart" had an episode which was built around the phrase, "Evil is not born, it is taught." But that phrase is a lie. Evil is born. It is born with every son and daughter of Adam and Eve. It comes not by learning but by nature. Jesus said, "out of the heart come evil thoughts." Those evil thoughts don't need to be put there. They come from there. Following that evil heart will lead from evil thoughts to evil actions.

Someone might object, "What about my conscience?" Everyone has a conscience. It is an inborn feeling of what is right and wrong. There isn't any place in the world which doesn't recognize a basic sense of right and wrong. It is wrong to cheat. It is wrong to lie. It is wrong to hurt others. It is wrong to be unfaithful. But even though everyone has a conscience the world remains filled with people doing wrong. We might all have a conscience, but often we refuse to listen to it. Often, we silence it. And we try to instruct it to approve of our own desires until it no longer recognizes right from wrong. Our consciences are clouded by sin and evil. Listening to it will not always help, even if we could.

That is why even though it is known that it is wrong to kill, parents will kill their children with abortion. Their conscience is silenced. Then after it is too late their conscience speaks up and causes grief and trauma. Sometimes we do not feel guilty until it is too late and after we have hurt someone. People have sinful hearts and clouded consciences. That is why so many marriages are broken. They feel guilty about cheating and lying and unfaithfulness. But they silence their conscience until the sinful heart wins. And it is why we convince ourselves it's not so bad when our mouths tell a lie. "Following your heart" is the worst advice you can give a sinner. That is why there are so many are lost in abuse of their bodies through substance abuse or other harms. It is why we languish in guilt over the times we overeat or didn't eat healthy. The conscience is ruined. The sinful heart wins.

And what happens when you only follow a heart born evil and a broken conscience? You are enslaved by that evil. It becomes your master. Far worse than slavery to Egypt is the slavery to the darkness of sin. And behind it all is the devil who seeks to enslave every human being and put them under sin's control. Finally, it all ends in a condition worse than slavery. Those who follow their hearts die enslaved to sin and enemies of God, condemned by him.

That is why the Lord didn't leave his people to just follow their hearts. He got their attention. And he had them listen as he spoke directly to them. Fire and smoke filled the mountain near their camp. The sound of the trumpet filled the air. The mountain shook. Then out of the silence, God spoke. Exodus 20 doesn't begin with "Listen to your heart." Just

the opposite. It begins with the voice of the one we must listen to. *"God spoke all these words."* When we begin to think the revealed word of God is less important than the thoughts of our hearts we need to look to this scene. The people trembling as the voice of God spoke directly to them.

God has given us his Word. Though the ten commandments were given to the people of Israel, God has revealed his Word to us. Each of these ten commandments is repeated for all people in the New Testament. All but the third commandment are repeated in the New Testament nearly word-for-word. The third commandment had special application for Israel as they observed the Sabbath day. But even though we are free to worship on any day, the will of God remains. We are told to take the time to rest and honor God's Word. These commands are the will of God for us.

So, have you listened to the revealed will of God, or have you at times listened to your own desires? We might look at the people of Israel and see how quickly they ignored these commands. But shouldn't our consciences point out the times in which we have failed to keep these commandments? Shouldn't we tremble at the Word of God given to us which tells us his holy will – a holy will we have at times been guilty of breaking?

But although these words ought to bring trembling, they don't bring slavery. They bring freedom. Listen to the Words the Lord gives his people at Mount Sinai. *"I am the Lord your God."* Notice he didn't say they had to keep these commandments in order to have him as their God. They already were his people. He already was their God. He identified himself as theirs as he called himself *"your God."* The Lord remained their God even though they had lived helpless in slavery. And the Lord would continue to remain their God even though they at times would turn back into the slavery of sin. He was the one, *"Who brought you up out of the land of Egypt where you were slaves."* The Lord begins by reminding them of their relationship with him. He was their Savior. He had brought them out of their slavery. They now belonged to him because of what he had done for them in rescuing them. This was a beautiful reminder of their rescue and his great love for them.

He tells us the very same. As we look at the will of God, we will realize how we do not deserve to call him our God. But in grace he does. He takes the sinner who is enslaved to sin and is serving sin as their master and he rescues them. He sets us free. All of us were at one time enslaved to sin. We were doomed to die enemies of God serving darkness and the devil. But our God fulfilled his promise to rescue us and brought us out.

He did this by much more than the blood of the lamb which was used when the people left Egypt. He did it with the blood of his own son, the Lamb of God. His rescue plan involved his own hand working out our salvation. He did not force us to carry out an impossible task. Instead, he did it all in our place. He became a servant of all and carried out the law on our behalf. And then he set us free from the prison of sin. The Son of God came to free those who all their lives were held in bondage by the fear of death. He destroyed our enemies who seek to keep us in slavery to sin. He came to destroy the work of the devil. Jesus brought us out of slavery to sin and led us to see the promised victory he won for us. He fought our enemy. And by his death on the cross, he won our freedom from sin, death, and hell.

We can be sure that Jesus defeated all our enemies and brought us safely into his kingdom. He did this by rising to life and defeating sin, death, and the devil. With Thomas we feel the weight of sin and its chains fall off and we acclaim him *"My Lord, and My God!"* We are free! He didn't drown our enemies in the sea, but in the waters of baptism. He washed away our sin. He made us his own. The devil doesn't own us. Jesus does. He did it all for us and rescued us! Our freedom lasts forever with him. Our enemies are forever defeated.

This is all because of God's grace for us all. We did nothing. We can only marvel at all his work as our enemies lay defeated. It is this same Lord God who tells us, *"I am the Lord, your God who brought you out of slavery to sin."* Listen to Jesus. You'll hear the truth. And it will set you free from sin.

We were freed from slavery to sin for a purpose. It is so that we might live to serve our God. But don't misunderstand. Just as Israel was already saved from slavery and death, so are we. We don't follow our God's commands in order to become his people. We follow his commands because he has freed us to be his own.

The animated tv show which I mentioned earlier doesn't get everything wrong. They might give a lot of bad advice. But they also include some good words of wisdom. For example, one show begins with the phrase *"When in doubt, go to the source."* That is true regarding the will of God. If you are wondering what is good and pleasing to God turn to his revealed Word. Don't follow your heart, the source of evil, which leads to slavery and death and hell. Follow the Words of God, the source of goodness and life. Go to the source as you look at his rescue for you. You will find power for freedom and to live anew serving him.

That animated series begins an episode with the reminder, *"The popular belief isn't always the correct one."* We know that's true because the popular belief follows the human heart. But the correct belief listens to God's heart. It won't always be popular keeping God's commands. But it will always be good and right. Listen to the Lord. It is good advice every time. We know that because he is the Lord, our God. And he loves us and has made us his own. He has rescued and freed us. He brought us out of our slavery to freedom serving him. In grace he reverses our place.