

HIGHLY VALUED - FREEDOM TO SERVE  
A SERMON BASED ON GALATIANS 5:13-26  
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO  
SUNDAY, MAY 26, 2019  
10:00 a.m.

This week I was introduced to Clayton Christensen's work.

I hadn't heard of him before.

He is an American Academic, a business consultant

who had been a professor at the Harvard Business School.

He is famous for his theory of disruptive innovation.

Basically he articulated and named the phenomenon,

where an innovation comes in and rearranges a whole area  
of a particular market.

AirBnB disrupted the hotel and bed and breakfast industry.

Uber disrupted the taxi industry.

Online streaming is in the process of disrupting the cable industry.

Disruptive innovation. He named it.

An intelligent, sought after business leader and now academic,  
Christensen has been successful by most of the world's values  
and criteria, money, fame, recognition, influence.

By virtue of teaching at Harvard,  
he is now influencing and guiding some of the world's smartest  
and most ambitious people.

These are people who will leave school  
and end up in positions of great power and responsibility  
and who quite likely will earn large amounts of money.

They are the same kinds of people Christensen himself graduated with.

But what Christensen is becoming increasingly known for,  
is not his business teaching,  
but rather,  
his life coaching to these Harvard Business students.

In 2010 he gave the commencement address  
to the graduation business class.

They had asked him to speak on succeeding, at life.

It gave rise to his best-selling book

‘How Will You Measure Your Life?’

He noted that in his own life, he had looked forward to class reunions.

He was excited to hear where his contemporaries,

some of the world’s brightest and best

had landed in life,

what they were doing

who they were influencing,

changes they were making, in their industries,

in the world.

He said the five year reunion was fantastic.

People had landed in good jobs and were making good money.

They had gotten married.

They were buying nice homes.

Some had started having children.

The whole world was on the horizon.

He said the ten year reunion was actually less fun.

There were more stories of pain.

Some businesses had gone under.

Industries had changed direction and left them behind.

His contemporaries were smart, and resilient,

but the disappointment was doing some damage.

They worked hard and put in the hours.

But their marriages were suffering.

They weren't sure they were doing a good job with their kids.

They weren't really happy even though the bank account  
had good numbers going into it.

He said the 20 year reunion was outright depressing.

He had contemporaries who were estranged from their kids,

who had lost their homes and much of their wealth

in divorce settlements,

some had even been in jail.

Seeing this, Christensen said to the graduating class,

you need to take the theoretical lenses that we've been putting

over business and industry

how to improve them, how to grow them,

and put those lenses over yourselves.

He said there are three questions you need to ask.

First, how can I be sure that I'll be happy in my career?

Second, how can I be sure that my relationships with my spouse and my family become an enduring source of happiness?

Third, how can I be sure I'll stay out of jail?

In short,

To the first question, he points out that career satisfaction

is found in things other than money;

learning, growing, contributing and being recognized for those contributions.

To the second questions he states that spouse and family

require every bit the intentionality that a business plan does, you let it drift, it will do just that, drift.

To the third, and this is where I wanted to focus a bit,

How can I be sure I'll stay out of jail.

He said it sounds lighthearted,

but 2 of the 32 of the people in his Rhodes scholar class spent time in jail.

He teaches his students how to live a life of integrity.

He explains it with the 'marginal cost doctrine' from business.

Basically, what price would be paid to add 'just this one thing.'

Usually, a company or business  
has already got everything else in place,  
so producing one more, or a few more,  
is considered good practice.

You work on the margins to increase profit  
most dramatically and effectively.

Christensen suggests we use this doctrine in our personal lives,  
and it shows up in the words 'just this once.'

The marginal cost of doing something wrong 'just this once'  
is usually very low, and provides a quick return.  
A binge, a fling, an indulgence, an indiscretion.  
But 'just this once' doesn't consider the big picture,  
or the direction that turns a life.

In his commencement address he said,

"I'd like to share a story

about how I came to understand the potential damage  
of “just this once” in my own life.

I played on the Oxford University varsity basketball team.

(Basketball! Go Raptors!)

We worked our tails off and finished the season undefeated.

The guys on the team were the best friends I’ve ever had in my life.

We got to the British equivalent of the NCAA tournament—

and made it to the final four.

It turned out the championship game

was scheduled to be played on a Sunday.

I had made a personal commitment to God at age 16

that I would never play ball on Sunday.

So I went to the coach and explained my problem.

He was incredulous.

My teammates were, too, because I was the starting center.

Every one of the guys on the team came to me and said,

“You’ve got to play. Can’t you break the rule just this one time?”

I’m a deeply religious man,

so I went away and prayed about what I should do.  
I got a very clear feeling that I shouldn't break  
my commitment—so I didn't play in the championship game.

He's another Eric Liddell of Chariots of Fire fame.

He continues,

In many ways that was a small decision -

involving one of several thousand Sundays in my life.

In theory, surely I could have crossed over the line just that one time  
and then not done it again.

But looking back on it,

resisting the temptation whose logic was

“In this extenuating circumstance, just this once, it's OK”

has proven to be one of the most important decisions of my life.

Why?

My life has been one unending stream of extenuating circumstances.

Had I crossed the line that one time,

I would have done it over and over in the years that followed.

The lesson I learned from this is that



it's easier to hold to your principles 100% of the time  
than it is to hold to them 98% of the time.

If you give in to “just this once,”  
based on a marginal cost analysis,  
as some of my former classmates have done,  
you'll regret where you end up.

That basketball story is a very countercultural story.  
Not because of the not playing ball on a Sunday part,  
but because we live in a world that strongly affirms  
making choices based in the circumstances,  
in the relativity of ‘just this once’ or “in this case’

Even most of us in this space would say  
his decision was unnecessarily strict.

When we hear Paul say to the church, to us,  
‘You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free.’  
We would hear that and say, Christensen, go play basketball.  
You are being legalistic.  
You are making faith about rules.

God would want you to play in that championship game.

That is how we understand freedom.

Do what makes sense in the circumstances.

Do what gets you to the best outcome.

Make sure the cost is marginal.

Sticking to rules seems to be against the very idea of freedom.

And Paul says,

‘You my brothers and sisters were called to be free.’

In Timothy Keller’s book ‘The Reason for God’

he has a whole chapter

that deals with people’s belief

that Christianity is a straitjacket,

something that confines us to a bunch of rules,

that limits our freedom,

that tries to tell us how to live our lives.

He quotes a woman named Charlene who says about Christianity,

“There’s no room for me in that. That would be my death!

I don’t want to live for God.

I will not.

I want to live for my own sake.”

We want freedom.

But if Christianity is keeping the rules or towing the line,

it would suggest being a Christian is giving up freedom.

That being a Christian is ‘giving up’.

Living the Christian life; you give up

you give up smoking,

you give up swearing,

you give up weekend nights out til closing,

you give up sleeping around,

you give up sleeping in Sunday morning,

if you find something to be fun, or enjoyable, or pleasurable,

the belief is if you are living the Christian life

you are probably going to have to give that up.

In that world, from that perspective,

Christianity looks like

‘a limit to personal growth and potential

because it constrains our freedom

to choose our own beliefs and our own practices.’

If you define freedom as doing whatever you want,

whoever you want,

whenever you want,

however you want,

as long as the cost is marginal,

then yes,

being a Christian could be seen as limiting freedom.

But Paul says, ‘you were called to be free.’

So something here is unresolved.

Are we free? Or aren’t we?

Paul says, don’t use your freedom to indulge the flesh.

When you read ‘flesh’ in the Bible,

you can think, ‘base desires’ or carnal needs.

You can think of it as reflex or appetite or craving.

Flesh is the part of us that we operate out of instinctively.

Flesh is the part of us that is driven by appetite,

not just physical ones, but emotional and spiritual ones  
as well.

Flesh is the part of us that instinctively flexes with,

‘oh just go with it.’

Because the flesh is rather raw and unfiltered in its form,

many in our world will call it being ‘authentic’ or ‘true’.

If you see the 900 g bag of delicious kettle chips at Costco,

with the practically good for you Himalayan salt,

well, eating as much of that as you can,

that’s authentic,

because it is being true to your appetite.

Losing your temper. Authentic. Pure emotion. Truth.

Pursuing physical pleasure. Instinctive. Genuine.

People even give themselves identities and labels based on their desires  
and appetites.

Paul says, “The acts of the flesh are obvious:

sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft;  
hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition,  
dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.

I have to confess, my curiosity was piqued by the phrase

‘and the like’. What else is there?

That’s a pretty comprehensive list.

But you get the idea,

it’s those things that you immediately reach for.

Quick return, little immediate cost.

And while we would never say we are striving for

these things of the flesh,

people aren’t typically working to become more jealous

or more addicted or selfish people,

but we will give ourselves the freedom and the out of

‘just this once’

and, I’m just being ‘authentic’.

But in the way that telling you to not think about a pink elephant,

only brings to mind a pink elephant and isn't helpful,  
trying to gain freedom from the flesh,  
freedom from indulgence of the flesh  
but deeply considering the flesh.

Paul says, live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

Live by the Spirit resounds with Christensen's overall point.

You have strategies in your business context.

What is your strategy in your personal life?

What is your strategy in your life of faith?

Do you have one?

Live by the Spirit of God, be led by the Spirit of God.

Do this, and you are not under the law.

Do this, live according to the Spirit,

and there is freedom.

How will you know if you are living by the Spirit?

You can tell by the fruit your life is producing.

Jesus said, you tell a plant by the fruit it produces.

Is it a pear tree or an apple tree. Look at the fruit.

The fruit of the Spirit is

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,  
faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Against these, there is no law.

Exercise these, you don't need limits.

Use these,

you don't end up imprisoned, or in spiritual jail  
of hatred, addiction, jealousy and division.

It is an answer to Christensen's question

How can I be sure I'll stay out of jail?

You were called to be free.

Living by the Spirit of God, in step  
with the Spirit of God.

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free.

But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh;

rather, serve one another humbly in love.

For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command:

'Love your neighbour as yourself.



Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Live by the Spirit.

Keep in step with the Spirit

It's easier to hold to your principles 100% of the time

than it is to hold to them 98% of the time.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Against these there is no law.

These are how you can measure your life.

These are what will keep you out of spiritual jail.

They will take all the same resolve and discipline it takes

to get to the gym, or to practice your lessons.

It will take discipline and hard work and intention.

Living by the Spirit doesn't just happen without intention.

Without intention, we drift. It is true in our personal lives.

It is true in faith.

Which is not what the modern ear finds appealing.

We want our faith, to be a nice God supplement to an already full life.

We are called however,

to a faith that reveals Christ.

To a faith that shines Christ in our context,

in our family, in our workplace, in our friendships.

We are called to a faith that can say no

to ungodliness and worldly passions,

and yes to the life of service and self-sacrifice

of Christ.

We are called to be free.

You are God's very own.

God has planted the Holy Spirit in your life,

and fruit of the Holy Spirit includes self-control

self-control that reaches well beyond

your goals of losing weight, or saving money,

or getting fit,

important as those goals may be.

It is self-control that will bring freedom and life.

Some might consider that limiting, the opposite of freedom.

I'd like you to consider the limits upon the humble fish.

Fish are very constrained by water.

They don't get to do whatever they want,

whenever they want,

however they want.

They don't have the freedom to be up on the beach,

enjoying the sunset,

or to go for a run in the park,

or maybe a hike through the forest.

Fish are very constrained by water.

A fish should have freedom,

to do whatever it wants,

whenever it wants,

however it wants.

But a fish out of water will die.

But a fish has an entire ocean to swim in.

Can I ask you?

When you think of a time when you, or someone you know

lived to do whatever they wanted,  
whenever they wanted,  
however they wanted,  
how did that work out for them?  
How did it work out for the people around them?

The fruit of the Spirit teaches us and disciplines us  
to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions,  
by saying yes to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,  
faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.  
It makes us able to swim and breathe in this ocean of life  
God has given us

‘How Will You Measure Your Life?’

You were called to be free.

Living by the Spirit,

saying no to the flesh

means being free

freed for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

free to become and to be  
who God has made you to be.

Amen.