

You Are Here

“Follow your heart.”

August 27, 2017

Grab a Bible and go to John 8. We're in a series called You Are Here - looking at what cultural ideas and beliefs and values are quintessential to being a modern American. Both the stated and absorbed philosophies that we are all swimming in and being affected by everyday.

Today we're looking at: “follow your heart.” Quite possibly the most popular and deeply-ingrained idea that we'll look at in this series. We hear it said a lot of ways:

- “You’ve gotta listen to the voice inside of you.”
- “Don’t let anyone tell you what you can and can’t do.”
- “You can be anything you want to be... do anything you want to do. If you just believe!”

The “modern-day prophet”, R. Kelly said, “If I can see it, then I can be it. f I just believe it, there's nothing to it. I believe I can fly, I believe I can touch the sky...”

More seriously, Steve Jobs put it like this, “Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma - which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition.”

This is the gospel according to Disney. Essential Disney Doctrine:

In Cinderella we find, “A dream is a wish your heart makes... No matter how your heart is dreaming, if you keep on believing, the dream that you wish will come true.”

Little Mermaid, Mulan, Aladdin: They all have lead characters escaping physical, family, and social constraints to follow their heart, and become who they've always dreamed of being.

One of my favorites is Kung Fu Panda – a large, untrained panda becomes a kung fu master mostly by just believing. His turning point is when he realizes the secret of the dragon scroll is... a mirror. You are the secret! Just follow your heart and you can be anything!

In the newest one, Moana, “I wish I could be the perfect daughter, but I come back to the water, no matter how hard I try. Every turn I take, every trail I track; Every path I make, every road leads back to the place I know, where I cannot go; where I long to be. See the line where the sky meets the sea? It calls me and no one knows, how far it goes. If the wind in my sail on the sea stays behind me...one day I'll know...” I am Moana!!!

In all of these, what we're talking about is restrictions and freedom. How should we think about rules, expectations, and obligations. Should we throw them off and follow our hearts? Biblically...maybe. But we have to rethink what we mean when we talk about freedom. Go to John 8. Jesus has been teaching that He is the light of the world and people are beginning to put their faith in Him. Next, He starts to talk about freedom.

John 8:31-32

As he was saying these things, many believed in him. So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

He says there's an inherent relationship between the truth and freedom. There's no such thing as real freedom without truth. It's a key insight for our culture. Because this is what I think has happened with our culture's "follow your heart" approach to freedom: I think we realized that sometimes people are forced to make decisions that are morally neutral, and often time the wrong decision. Overbearing parents, overly close-minded cultures. People are limited by all kinds of unnecessary restrictions. This is even one of the main reasons people shy away from the church. Isn't Christianity just a bunch of rules-y, judgmental people living by all these crazy restrictions?

So, where we see parents turning a deaf ear on their children saying, "I don't care. You're going to be a lawyer. You're going to be a doctor. Why? Because I said so!" We go... "well, wait a second. Why? Does that kid have to be a lawyer? What if they aren't meant to be a lawyer?"

And we landed on "No. That's wrong. To be yourself, to live your best life, you have to throw off any family or social pressure and... follow your heart."

In many ways, it's a good impulse. We want to eliminate wrong restrictions from fatalistically guiding people's lives. In fact, you actually see Jesus do some of this. He tells Peter, Andrew, James, and John to leave their family fishing business and come follow Him. He calls Levi to leave his career in finance, ripping people off to make a fat paycheck and instead to give himself away for the good of others.

Jesus is in many ways a liberator for those who are crushed under unhelpful, over-bearing restrictions. He brings freedom from fear of man. Galatians 5:1 says, "It is for freedom Christ has set you free." He never felt obliged to follow the rules, bow to the man, or cower to the system.

The problem is and what so often happens in human history, we swung the pendulum too far in the other direction. Our "yeah you can't listen to people's unhelpful restrictions, you've just gotta follow your heart"... in our desire to get rid of wrong and unhelpful restrictions, we ended up landing on "life is best lived outside of any restrictions."

It's what's called absolute negative freedom. Freedom from all negative restrictions. Freedom from all weights, rules, restrictions and responsibilities. Let me give you some stats:

- Delayed marriage. In over the last 45 years, the percentage of US adults who are married has dropped about 20% to 50%. Record low. Currently 20% of adults age 25+ have never been married. 25% of millennials are predicted to never marry. All records.
- Cohabitation. Continues to rise. Up 23% from 2007.
- Delayed age of having first child. The average age for women having their first child is 26. Record high. Shifted up about 4 years in past 40 years. Children are a responsibility. Sure, I want kids... someday, but first I want plenty of time to follow my heart without being tied down.
- Delayed adolescence. Failure to launch syndrome starting to get called an epidemic. 56% of millennials aged 18-24 live with their parents. Aged 18-30, more are living with parents than with a spouse. Complete reversal from 40 years ago.
- A guy Allen was counseling wants to give up on his marriage because it is burdensome. All he can think is how much freer he'd be if wasn't married anymore. It's not even that his marriage is all that bad, it's just he feels too much restriction and weight on his life and that feels wrong.

And honestly, it can actually get kinda crazy. If you take "just follow your heart" all the way out to its logical conclusion...you get people rejecting reality. You've got people claiming to be trans-abled; a disabled person stuck in a abled body. You've got people who are saying they're not even a human; they're a cat or a lizard. Stanley Horton is a 36-year-old man who has convinced his roommate Sandra Diaz to care for him and treat him like he's a baby. It started with "day wetting".

Followed all the way out, we end up seeking freedom with no view of the truth. Which has some real problems. Because as Jesus puts it, the truth is what sets people free.

In my opinion, one of the worst parts of the “just listen to your heart” philosophy is it leaves us with nothing to say to Stanley. If we really believe life is best lived by throwing off restrictions and “just following your heart”, then he’s doing exactly what we told him to do.

At some point our quest for freedom has to reconcile with reality. I mean, you know what happens to Moana in real life, right? Pause and actually think about it. What happens if a 15-year-old girl who doesn’t know how to sail, jumps in a canoe with a mentally-challenged chicken and heads out into the great wide ocean? That girl dies. And quickly. And badly.

See, as a culture, we’re pretty dialed into how life crumbles in the presence of the wrong restrictions. It’s just that we aren’t as dialed in on how life also crumbles in the absence of the right restrictions. We’re missing a key insight of Jesus’ here: True freedom isn’t found in the absence of restrictions. True freedom is found in the presence of the right restrictions.

That’s part of what Jesus is saying when He says you’ve gotta know the truth to be free.

My favorite illustration of this is a youth pastor I know who was speaking to a group of middle and high school students. He walked on stage with a goldfish in a little baggie like you’d win at the fair. He’d been talking about freedom and he asked them, is this fish free? Of course, the students said, “NO!” So he opened the bag and poured it into a glass fish bowl and asked the same question. Again, the students responded with more excited, “NO! It’s not free!” So, he moved it to a third larger tank. Picture a good sized aquarium. Nicely decorated with coral and such. Same question. And now the students are shouting, “No! He’s still not free!” So, the youth pastor scoops the fish out, and throws him on the ground. And watches the fish flop around dying.

And then he said, “How about now? Is it free now?” to a room full of terrified children. Pretty sure he should have run that idea past some adults first...but the point is strong.

In order for the fish to be free, it must honor its design. It’s designed for water, not land. That’s a restriction, but it’s a life-giving, liberating restriction. Outside the environment it was designed for, it dies. Within the restrictions, it’s free to do all it was designed to do!

Or consider a bird. A bird is only free when it obeys the laws of aerodynamics. A bird soars when it follows the right restrictions. It drowns if it tries to follow the restrictions made for a fish.

So, what were we designed for?

1) We are designed to love.

If we take it to its ultimate, “follow your heart” is antithetical to love. Because true love requires commitment and commitment means sticking it out even when it’s hard and our heart doesn’t feel like sticking it out.

John Stott

True freedom is to be one’s true self, but my true self is made for loving, and loving is self-giving. So, in order to be myself, I have to deny myself and give myself. In order, then, to be free, I have to give up my freedom. In order, then, to live, I have to die to my self-centeredness. In order to find myself, I’ve got to lose it.

All committed love relationships come with restrictions. Marriage, friendship, family, children. So, at some point if you throw off any restriction that doesn't allow you absolute negative freedom, you're going to end up throwing off every helpful, insightful, loving relationship in your life. Every person who gets to know you well enough to see your blind spots and push you to grow, you're gonna bail on. You'll end up cutting yourself off from the beauty of long-lasting loving relationship.

My wife and kiddos bring some good restrictions on my life. Good responsibility. Erica got sick Friday morning and all weekend became taking care of 5 kiddos and taking care of Erica. That's good for me. It reminds me life isn't all about me.

Pastoring our church is a good thing. It comes with certain restrictions but I find them gladly worth it because I love y'all. I love being part of what Jesus is doing here.

2) We are designed to grow under weight/carry weight.

You were made to grow strong. You were made to be able to carry weight.

And to do so requires restrictions. If you wanna get strong you gotta pick up something heavy. And the opposite is true as well; if you never pick up anything of weight, you'll shrivel. You atrophy. You actually see this happen at a physical level with astronauts in zero-gravity. Their muscles, skin, and bones become weaker in the absence of any resistance. If we put ourselves in a zero-gravity situation, the same thing happens in our lives. We don't grow any real strength.

People who speak multiple languages are free to do more than I am. They can go to foreign places without being a blatant tourist or being chained to a translation dictionary. They have doors opened and opportunities that I don't have. And those opportunities, those freedoms are the direct result of picking up the weight and the restriction to learn something new and uncomfortable. They restricted themselves from other things in order to gain access to freedom.

These musicians who lead us on Sundays have the freedom to do so...I don't...because they made the choice to discipline themselves to learning their craft.

Residents. It's good to for them to be stretched and pushed. You find out what you were capable of that you might not have ever realized otherwise.

3) We are designed for God.

John 8:33

They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free?'"

Which, pause real quick... It's a very weird response from them because if you're at all familiar with the history of the Jewish people, they've spent a lot of time enslaved to a lot of different people: the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians... At this particular moment they're pretty much enslaved to the Romans... But Jesus doesn't confront them on their blatant lack of historical clarity. Instead he points to a different kind of slavery.

John 8:34

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.

One of the most dangerous aspects of "just following your heart" is that sin is present in our hearts, and sin desires to enslave us. To deceive us as we saw in Jeremiah 17:9 last week. To think of sin as simply doing bad

things is a miss. Sin's ultimate goal is to enslave us and distract us from what we were ultimately made for; a beautiful life submitted to God.

John 8:35

The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

True freedom isn't found by running away from God, but by running to Him. Every one of us were born enslaved to sin. Jesus only was born outside of this sinful world. And He entered into it so that we could be set free. The light has entered the darkness to shine light and give us life. To help us see our enslavement and draw us to the freedom that can only be found in Him.

God's restrictions aren't to kill our joy, but for our good:

When the Bible says, "you shouldn't lie", it's not trying to prevent you from getting ahead in life. God is instead trying to give you open and honest relationships, where you fully know and are fully known by Him and others.

When He tells you to live generously, to in fact sacrifice in order to give - it's not because He's trying to take your money away from you, but because He's trying to give you something that money can't buy.

So, when the Bible says things like, "you shall not commit adultery", and sex is designed inside of marriage, it's not because God is trying to ruin or withhold sexual pleasure from you... it's because he's trying to rescue you from slavery to sexual brokenness; whether overactive sexual gluttony or a prudish rejection of joyful sex in marriage.

When He tells us to live connected lives with others, it's not because He doesn't understand you're an introvert and wants to drain your energy, but because He wants to give you the blessing of being fully loved and fully known.

God's not trying to take from you. Not arbitrary rules. He's giving us good rules for our freedom and purpose to be established. Where is it hardest for you to believe that?