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Issues: Free to Choose

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“Father in Heaven, Lord we want to hear from You. We open Your word today with expectations. But I pray that You will exceed them. I pray that Your presence through the teaching of Your word will change our lives for eternity. And I pray this in Jesus name, Amen.” Please be seated.

The last time I spoke here we concluded our series on Joseph. And I told you I was ninety nine percent sure that we would start a series on Elijah. Well that one percent gives me a little bit of room. We will go to Elijah. But I announced several weeks ago that if you had issues or questions that you wanted addressed, please submit them to the church office or give them to me in writing, and we’ll address them. And quite a few of you have responded, and so, we are going to spend some time dealing with issues. And so this is the first one on issues. And our sermon title is, *Issues: Free to Choose*. This was hand written on a prayer request card that was left on the information desk here in the foyer. It was not addressed to anyone in particular, but I received it, and I read it, and it is the introduction to our message today. Here is what was written on the card:

“If you silly Adventists would stop trying to control and manipulate people, they might come back to church. Your academies and colleges are a prime example of this. You...” in capital letters, “...FORCE people to go to church by making them need church credits. You have curfews for college students. These people are...” capital letters, “...ADULTS. Let them decide for themselves if they want to go to church or stay out late. Stop being so controlling.” When I read that I remembered an experience I had in the summer of 1977. In June of that year I began my first quarter at Andrews University. I was 22 years old. I had been away from my parent’s home for five years. I was totally and completely financially independent of them. I received no support from them at all. Four of those five years I had spent in the coastguard.

The last six months that I was in the coastguard, I had been a Seventh-day Adventist and was nearly dishonorably discharged because of my stand for the Sabbath. Prior to that I had been in Japan; I had started the church and I had baptized people. I had been very active. What I am trying to tell you is that I was an independent adult when I went to college. About three weeks after I was there, I received a notice from the financial people there on campus that I was being charged an extra \$25. Now that was a real money to me and I wanted a real answer and I said, “What’s this all about?” They said, “Well, you haven’t been going to the worships in the dorm.” My initial reaction was, “Have you been to one lately? They are not worth the time. I have my own worship. I’m studying to be a minister, come on!”

“No, you have to go to ours. And if you don’t you get charged \$25.” I said, “Is that a season’s pass?” “Oh no, you miss a few more, you get charged another \$25.” Now I want you to know, I didn’t like them before, I hated them now. They told me I had to do it. Dr. Henry Cloud writes in a book that he co-authored with Dr. John Townsend. You may know Cloud and Townsend from their book, *Boundaries*, it’s a very famous book. This book is called, *Twelve Christian Believes That Can Drive You Crazy. It’s relief from false assumptions*. Here is what Dr. Henry Cloud writes, and I quote: “I grew up reading the Bible every day because I loved it. I had my own *Good News Bible*. From the fourth or fright grade on through

high school, I read my Bible every night. When I got to college, I made a deeper commitment to God and joined a discipleship group that enforced a daily quiet time. Every week the group asked, "Are you having your quiet time?" I began to dread that question. Suddenly, when I didn't read the Bible and pray every day, I felt guilty. Reading the Bible was something I had always loved to do. But when it became a requirement with negative consequences, when I felt I had to do it or I would be condemned, I no longer wanted to do it. I moved from a world of 'want to-s' to a world of "should-s."

Friends, the difference between having to do something and wanting to do something is huge. And when it comes to salvation, it is probably the difference between having eternal life or not having eternal life. There is the story of a woman who was married. When she got married, her husband gave her a list of 21 things he expected her to do for him. Over a few years that list became a hated and dreaded thing for her. In fact, not only did she start to hate that list, she started to hate that guy. Six or seven years in the marriage, he died. She didn't shed a tear. "Good bye!" Well a few years later she married another man. She loved him, he loved her. And three years into marriage, she was cleaning out some old drawers, and she came across that list. She read twenty one things expected of her as a wife, that dreaded, hateful list. When she was done reading it, she began to laugh. She was doing every one of them for her new husband, and loving every minute of it. Why? She wanted to. She didn't have to.

And when it comes to this freedom of choosing, God has given us this intrinsic, self-respect and dignity that we know we have a right to choose. In fact, He honors it so much He will say, "If you choose death over life, I'll let you die." When our children are young, we have to make choices for them. When they become teenagers, we have to provide choices for them. God gives us the right to choose. And if we have to do something or there are negative consequences, we may do it, but inside we are rebelling. Now I want to share a principle with you as we begin this sermon today. This is extremely important. Any obedience that you have to give, that is not a want to give because of love, any obedience you have to give ultimately will result in rebellion. You may do it, but still, you will be rebelling. What does the Bible have to say about freedom to choose?

Please turn in your Bibles to Daniel chapter 3. We are going to read three verses that are a part of a long story in the Bible, and yet, it's probably one of the most familiar stories to people in the Bible. Daniel 3 we start with verse 4, "Then a herald cried aloud, 'to you it is commanded o peoples, nations, and languages, that at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, you shall fall down and worship the gold image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.'" There are three men there that will not bow down and they will be thrown into the fiery furnace, and they will live. In fact, the Bible records that "One like the Son of Man will be with them in that fiery furnace." It's an amazing story.

Forced to worship! Look at Revelation chapter 13. In Revelation chapter 13 we come to a section of the Bible that we believe is still yet future. And if we understand it correctly, it will be yet in the future. We come to verse 11 and verse 12: "Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon. And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in his

presence and causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast whose deadly wound was healed.” “...causes people who dwell on the earth to worship...” that is force;” Look what happens in verse 15. “He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast that the image of the beast should both speak and causes many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.” Again, death sentence hanging over them. Force! Forcing people to worship! It is very easy to conclude from the scriptures that forcing people to worship is not a principle that comes from God.

But you are pretty astute. You folks are thinking people, and right now you are probably thinking, “Well Pastor Arnold but those are examples of Satan trying to force worship. Is there anything in Christianity, in the scriptures, where people have tried to force people to worship, and does that get addressed? I am glad you asked that question. Look at Galatians chapter 2. I’ll give you some background. Paul and Barnabas went through the region of Galatia. It’s now Turkey today. It’s that part of the world. And they started churches, they lead people to Christ and baptized people and made elders and they went on. A number of years later, people from Jerusalem who were Jews, who had accepted Christ, came to the region of Galatia where you had all these Gentiles who had embraced Jesus by faith. And now they are saying, “Look! Christ is not enough. You have to be circumcised, and you have to keep the law, and you have to become Jewish.”

And so, their theology is Jesus plus. And Paul is very upset with them. He is so upset with them, he says, “Look, if somebody teaches you something other than what I’ve taught you, I don’t care if they are angel, they ought to be accursed. Don’t listen to them.” Because, the truth is my friends, salvation is either Jesus plus nothing or we are in trouble. Because we have to add to what Jesus has done, then His sacrifice was not adequate. And if we have to add to what He did, how much do we have to add? And when do you quit, and when do you know if you added enough? And what do you have to add? I mean, let’s be honest, we don’t even agree among ourselves and we are all in the same denomination. We don’t all agree on how to eat and how to keep the Sabbath, and how to dress, and how to do worship and all that kind of stuff.

So, who is going to say what’s right and what’s supposed to be added? And it creates a great deal of confusion and force. Because the people who think that are right, want everybody to do it their way. Well Paul takes on Peter which is quite a task. Peter was a leader. He had walked with Jesus. We come to verse 11. Paul says, “But when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face because he was to be blamed. For before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles. But when they came, he withdrew and separated himself.” Why? Notice what it says: “...fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.” Peter was eating with the Gentiles prior to this people coming. And when they came, out of fear he did something un-Christ like in order to get along with them. That is force!

That is force in the Christian church, and Paul doesn’t like it. He identifies it as not being of the Lord. He says in verse 16: “...knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. Even we have believed in Christ Jesus that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the

works of the law. For by the works of the law, no flesh shall be justified.” “...no flesh justified by the works of the law!” He will go on to say that if you seek to be saved by adding something to Jesus, you have fallen from grace. Look at chapter 5 verse 1. Paul says, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again by the yoke of bondage.” That “yoke of bondage” he is talking about is religion, and all the trappings that go with it, and all the Law of Moses. That’s what these people were trying to impress upon the Gentiles. He says, “Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing.”

If you believe that you have to accept Christ and you have to be circumcised in order to be saved, he is saying, then Jesus means nothing. And He’ll profit you nothing. He goes on to say in verse 3: “And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law.” Don’t stop there. You are going to keep part of the Mosaic Law; you’ve got to keep it all. Because that’s the way it works. You can’t just pick and choose. And it is fascinating to me. Over the 28 years I have been pastoring, I have met people who are very, very strict. Every time you meet people who are very, very strict, they are only strict in a certain area. And they are way out of balance in the other areas. You got to keep it all or be saved by grace. I choose grace.

Now it goes on. “You have become estranged from Christ. You, who attempt to be justified by law, you have fallen from grace.” We use that phrase, “fallen from grace” to describe somebody who’s gone into sin. Paul describes it as somebody who is gone away from Jesus and Jesus alone for salvation. He says in verse 13: “For you brethren have been called to liberty. Only do not use your liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love, serve one another.” Do you have to, or do you want to? That’s what the whole issue is about. If you have to, you my friends are under the law. Because the law tells you, you have to. And the Bible teaches us, we are not under the law. Look at Romans chapter 6. If we are under the law, then we are debtor to all of the law. Romans 6 verse 14: “For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.”

When we are under law, we have to! When we are under grace, we want to! And Paul says, “So then, do we do away with the law when we are saved by faith? O, no! We establish it because we want to!” Listen! There are Ten Commandments. One of those commandments says not to lie. How many of you don’t lie because it’s the law? If that’s the reason you don’t lie, you’ve got character issues. Those Ten Commandments, one of them says you are not to steal. Do you not steal because you are told not to, because it’s the Law of God? If that’s where you are at, you’ve got character and personality issues. And you work your way through all of them, let me ask you, why are you here today? Are you here today because the fourth commandment says, you have to? If that’s the reason, you are under the law. And that’s not adequate. That means you have not yet fully accepted Christ and Christ alone as your salvation. Because when you do, He will change your heart. And He’ll give you a heart like His heart. His ways will become your ways. You’ll want to do what He wants you to do.

There should be only one reason why you are here today, only one reason. God blesses you when you come here. But no, we take that and say, “It’s either this or the mark of the beast.” You have to! And then we turn around and we ridicule the churches that believe that hell will last for eternity and people

will be tortured throughout the eternity and we say, "Those people are a way off, and they have the wrong motivation of trying to get people into the Kingdom of God." Well ours is no better if we have to. Do you understand what I am saying? We should be here for one reason. We want to! Because this is where God is this morning, and He is with us, and we are learning from Him. And we come week after week to fellowship with other people who are learning from Him. It's not because it's the law, it's because of love. Love for Him, and love for His ways! And so we use our freedom not to satisfy the flesh, but our freedom is used to love; to love God, and to love one another.

Look at Romans 3 verse 28. Paul says this: "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. That law can never save." But boy, can it condemn. And it weighs heavy upon the heart. Jesus had a lot to say about freedom. You turn to John chapter 8. He is in a conversation with religious leaders. He just had a confrontation with them. He was teaching and they brought a woman caught in adultery, threw her down at His feet and said, "The law says she is supposed to be stoned, what are You going to do? What do You say?" He didn't say anything. He just wrote in the sand. When he looked up, He asked her, "Where are your accusers?" She said, "They are gone." And then Jesus began to talk to the people that were there, the religious leaders that were there. And He comes to the verse 32 and He says: "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Now politicians quote that, public speakers quote that phrase, "The truth shall set you free." But they miss the point. Unfortunately, many people in the realm of religion miss the point too. They assume truth is a body of beliefs, a box if you will, a set of creeds. "That will set you free." "If we can just get you to believe this way, if we can just get you to understand this, if we can just straighten you out over here, you'll be free." "Now you can come join us in our box," is what we are saying. What Jesus is talking about is Himself! Later in this Book of John He will say, "I am the truth." When Jesus is talking about truth, He is talking about Himself. He says, "I will set you free!" What will He set us free from? He will set us free from the condemnation of sin, and free from guilt. But He will also, in the context in which this is written, set us free from religion, and from the expectations of people who are religious, and from force! "You have to do it this way, or you can't be one of us." Jesus will set us free!

He told the woman that had been there in adultery, you go to verse 11. "He asked, 'has no one condemned you?' She said, 'no one Lord.' And Jesus said to her, 'neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.'" In the NIV it says, "Leave your life of sin." "I don't condemn you. Now go, leave your life of sin." What do you think she did? Do you think she left saying, "No, I love my life of sin. I am going right back to it. I want to be embarrassed like this in public again." No way! She is thinking, "Wow! I want to leave a life of sin." That's how God changes the human heart. We go from have to, to want to. Now Jesus is into freedom. You go to John chapter 6. He's been preaching and many people will leave. There is a fascination in the scriptures with the number 666. I'll teach you today what it means. We're go to John 6:66. John chapter 6 verse 66.

You want to know what 666 means? Here it is: "From that time many of his disciples went back and walked with Him no more." It's the number of apostasy. They turned away and walked away from Him, and went back with Him no more. Now Jesus sees all the people leaving. And He says in verse 67: "Do

you also want to go away?" He is giving the twelve an opportunity! "Do you want to stay with Me? It's your choice." Peter basically says, "Well, we don't understand You, but we are hanging in with You." And they chose to stay. Look, the freedom to choose is such an inherent part of God's kingdom that when He created man, and placed him in the Garden of Eden, men who had no choice in being created had a choice in whether he would serve God, had a choice in whether he would live or had a choice in whether he would choose death. There were two trees there. You cannot love somebody unless you have a choice to. And God wants us to love Him. That's a choice that comes in our experience as we learn of Him. Free to choose!

Now I want you to listen very carefully to what I am going to say. This is important! This is kind of, application time. If you belong to any organization, whether it's religious, political, or just a group of friends; if uniformity is required and efforts are made that everyone must think the same, believe the same and act the same, that organization is not from God. That is not a Godly principle. God does not work that way. God does not impress uniformity upon His people. He allows freedom. He allows individuality! He allows differences of opinion, and He allows opportunity for people to ask questions. If you belong to organization that won't let you ask questions, get out of it, or keep asking your questions until they force you out.

Your very person demands that you be able to ask questions. You should never belong to a group that says you can't ask question. You have to be like us; you have to believe like us. How do I know that? I'd like to prove that to you scripturally. Turn to Romans 14. Fascinating chapter in the Bible! I told the class that I have on Tuesday nights for non-members and new members; this may be one of my favorite chapters in all of the Bible. It's certainly up there in the top 5. Paul is writing. There is a problem in Rome at the church there and he says this: "Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to dispute over doubtful things; for one believes that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat. And let not him who does not eat judge him who eats. For God has received him."

Now you come to verse 5 and it says, "One person esteems one day above another, another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind..." In his own mind, with his own conscience! "...everything being done by faith between him and God." Nowhere in this chapter, or the following chapter, or anywhere else in the Bible will you find the Apostle Paul or any divinely inspired author saying, "Look, can't we all just get on the same page? Can't we all eat the same? Can't we all respect the same days? Can't we all do the things together in the same way, same fashion, and so forth and so on? It is not Biblical! What is Biblical is that Paul is saying, "Look! When somebody eats differently than you do, and somebody respects a day differently than you do, don't make it your purpose to try to change him, but make it your purpose to love them, and to accept them, and to appreciate them. You are not supposed to be all alike! But you are all supposed to love people who differ from you.

The freedom to choose is so important that having to do something verses wanting to do something is the difference between life eternal and life abysmal. I want to share a story with you, it's not long and

we just have a couple of verses to go. And they are all found in Second Kings chapter 5. It's an amazing story, and it won't take long. But the point will remain with you for many years to come. And the story is about a man named Naaman. He is the commander of the army of Syria. He gets leprosy. He goes to Israel looking for healing. He comes to the house of Elijah the prophet and Elijah tells him to go dip in the Jordan River seven times - which he does. And when he is done the leprosy is gone. So he goes back to Elijah's house and he offers him some money. Elijah says, "No, I don't want it." But then in that conversation with the glow of eternal life dawning in his soul, Naaman speaks to a prophet of God. Verse 17: "Naaman said, 'then if not, please let your servant be given two mule loads of earth. For your servant will no longer offer either burnt offering of sacrifice to other gods but to the Lord.'"

What's he saying? He is saying, "You know, your God is my God now. He is the only true God. He is the God of Israel, He is the God of the land here, so can I take two mule loads of dirt with me back to Syria? And I am going to dump them down and I am going to make a little garden, and that's where I am going to worship God of this land, because I'll have His land there." And in his mind it's associated together. Golden opportunity for the prophet to clean this guys' theology up, right? Great opportunity to say, "Ah, we don't do it that way in Israel!" He doesn't. He doesn't say a word to him. He just listens. And Naaman goes on. And then he says in verse 18: "Yet in this thing may the Lord pardon your servant." In other words, Naaman is thinking, "Hum, this next question isn't going to go over so good," but he asks it. "May the Lord pardon your servant. When my master goes in to the temple of Rimmon to worship there, and he leans on my hand, and I bow down in the temple of Rimmon; when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord please pardon your servant in this thing."

What's he saying? He is saying, "Elijah, you know, as the commander of all the armies of Syria, I am second to the king. And when he goes in to worship his god Rimmon, I go with him. He is an old man. He has a hard time getting up and down. He leans on me. I go down with him, I bow with him and I bring him back up. And I am respectful of his worship. I am respectful of his concepts, and what's God going to say to me? Because I need to do that; my station in life requires it. And it seems to be what I should do, but what is God going to do?" That's a great question! Now, there are many churches that I know, if that question came up, we would say: "Well body, you have to make a decision one way or the other. It's black, it's white. You've got to be willing to die." And we'd throw the Daniel complex on them. You know the lions' den and the fiery furnace for his friends, and the last day events.

And those churches often times turn people into Christian commandoes where they are almost looking for something to die for. They get all hopped up because they have to. What's this prophet say? Verse 19: "Elijah said to him, 'go in peace.'" What's he saying? He is saying, "Look man, you just got salvation from the Creator of the Universe, go enjoy it. Don't let every little issue overwhelm you. Go and enjoy your salvation. You are free now!" And you know at some point, the story is never told, but you know at some point as he would grow in his faith and understanding, and the relationship would develop between him and the king. Probably at some point he would say, "King, I really need to talk to you. You see that God that healed me healed my soul too. And I serve Him and Him alone. Is there something we can work out here?" It's amazing to me the freedom we have in Christ.

Friends, you are free to serve God the way your conscience dictates. That is what the Scriptures say. “If you silly Adventists would stop trying to control and manipulate people, they might come back to the church.” It is true. Let us by God’s grace, be lovers of and messengers of freedom in Christ. I invite you to stand as we have our closing song today.