

"Mission Impossible" Series
Sermon 5: "To set the oppressed free"
April 17, 2011

Most of them don't set out to be heroes. Most of them just want to do their jobs, and be there for their buddies, and get home. But from our perspective, what they do is heroic. They go into harms way, intentionally. They do their job in a place where it could get them shot or worse. And occasionally there are images that prove that to some of them it's more than just a job.

I found something kind of cool last week. I've been preaching from the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to proclaim Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4.18-19) I was studying the phrase: "to set the oppressed free," so I googled it. And it was pretty cool. This is what I found: This is the insignia of our army's special forces. Their motto is "de oppresso liber" –to free the oppressed, to set the oppressed free. That's kind of cool, isn't it?

What makes these guys heroes is not that they survived their training – which can be grueling. It's not that they get to wear cool clothes and play with cool toys – which they do. It's that they are willing to go behind enemy lines, to place themselves in harm's way, to set aside their own personal agenda, their own comfort and safety in order to rescue the oppressed. That's pretty cool...

I think that's kind of what God calls us to be – special forces. I think that's part of our job: to go behind enemy lines, to place ourselves in harm's way, to set aside our personal agendas, our own comfort, even our own safety, and rescue the oppressed. That's kind of like what Jesus did; and I think that's what we are supposed to do. We're kind of like God's special forces. We don't have cool uniforms and we don't get to play with cool toys, but our mission is infinitely more important than theirs. Do you buy that? You are sitting in a room full of heroes.

Jesus says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." And if you are a Christian, the Spirit of the Lord is upon you. And that is really, really important. Because you don't have the goodness, or the strength, or the wisdom to go where God is calling you to go or to do what God is calling you to do by yourself. We can't rescue people from the grip of sin and Satan. But the Spirit of the Lord can, through us.

Jesus says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to proclaim Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind..." God has sent us to bring good news to the poor, to the captives, to the blind. If you want, you can read all of that into the future. It's about the good news of heaven, when the poor will be rich, those captive to sin will be free, and our blinders to God's truth will finally be removed.

But this last one is different. It's not just about preaching freedom to the oppressed, it's about setting oppressed people free. It's not just about talking, it's not just about telling, it's about doing. Part of our mission from God is to free those who are oppressed. Now that's not a word most of us think about personally a whole lot. We know there are people who are oppressed, in some parts of our world. But most of us probably don't think it's part of our own life experience. But think about it. Oppression is about someone abusing their position or their power. Oppressed people are pushed around, and put down, and kicked while they are down. There are oppressed people all around us; there are oppressed people in this room. It's about being used and abused, bruised and broken, bullied and beleaguered, chewed up and ground down by people who are mean and cruel. I'm going to start with the most obvious, and kind of work my way to the most personal.

10 Did you know that there are still 30,000,000 people in the world today who are slaves? A lot of them are young girls, kidnapped to be sex slaves. I thank God there are people like Gary Haugen, people who care enough to do something about it. Gary Haugen is a lawyer, a graduate of both Harvard and the University of Chicago. But that's not what makes him a hero. Gary is a Christian. In 1997 he gave up a lucrative career in law to start the International Justice Mission. IJM is a human rights group that works to free slaves, and sex slaves, and others who are oppressed.

Here's a clip about their work. (video clip)

Actually Christians have been freeing the oppressed for 2000 years. In cultures where they throw away their babies, especially girls, Christians have been the ones who take the kids in. We are the warriors in the battle against infanticide, we have got them in this church. We are the warriors in the war against abortion, we've got them in this church... Talk about freeing the oppressed.

In cultures where women have been degraded, Christians have been the ones to lift them up. We have fought against burning widows alive; we have fought against binding their feet to deform them so they will walk daintily; we have been the ones to fight against the cutting of the clitoris of young girls. Where women are treated as property, we are the ones who have given them dignity, and worth, and purpose; we are the ones who have fought to remove their veils. That's freeing the oppressed, isn't it?

We Christians have been the root of most of the movements for social justice. We are the ones who started taking care of orphans; we are the ones who started taking care of seniors who were thrown away. We were the ones to fight for child labor laws. We were the ones who fought for the abolition of slavery. We were the ones who worked for freedom, for personal rights, for fundamental equality. If you have any doubts about where we've been and what we've done, see me after the service and I'll recommend a great book. It's called, "How Christianity Changed the World," by Alvin Schmidt. It's about freeing the oppressed.

But that stuff is ... far away. We have a lot of work to do here at home. Even here at home we are working behind enemy lines. Let me talk about some oppression that hits pretty close to home.

- There is oppression that takes place in some of our marriages. I said that oppression is about someone abusing their position or their power. I said that oppressed people are pushed around, and put down, and kicked while they are down. They are used and abused, bruised and broken, bullied and beleaguered, chewed up and ground down by people who are mean and cruel. Well, that happens in some

of our marriages. We have guys in this room who oppress their wives. We have wives in here who oppress their husbands. They bully them, they threaten them, sometimes verbally, sometimes physically. Our job is to free the oppressed.

- There are oppressive parents in this room. There are parents who have beaten down their kids physically. There are parents who have kicked around their kids verbally. There are parents who have oppressed their kids with unrealistic demands. We push our kids into athletics or music so they can fulfill our dreams, not theirs. Just watch parents on the sidelines of a little league game — you'll see oppression right close to home. Some parents drive their kids academically to stoke their own egos. That happens a lot in Christian homes. Our job is to free the oppressed.
- How about at school. Do you know people who the oppressed are at school? They are the victims of bullies. They are the kids who are marginalized or mocked or excluded because they are not as pretty as the other girls, or as athletic as the other guys, or as smart as the other kids. They are the socially awkward. They are the girls who are pushed to perform sexually for their stupid little boyfriends. Our job as Christians, even you kids, is to free the oppressed.
- How about at work. Do you know any oppressed at work? The people others make fun of, the people others pick on, the people others exploit and use and walk on. They need someone to stand by them, someone to stand with them. Our job is to free the oppressed.
- How about at church. There are a whole lot of oppressive churches. And I'm not just talking about cults — where the leaders literally try to run their people's lives. I'm talking about a lot of ordinary churches. Some of you have been in churches that demand a dress code, a moral code, a level of giving, a level of service that goes way beyond what the Bible teaches. You have seen people in churches who are bruised, and beaten down, and exploited — by Christians. Our job is to free the oppressed.

Does this stuff grab you? Does it stir you to see someone being oppressed? Guys, if it doesn't something is broken. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon us." God's Spirit is on us! Which means that the stuff that moves God's heart should move us. Christians care about what God cares about, Christians get angry about what makes God mad; our hearts are broken by the things that break God's heart. Bob Pierce — he's the founder of World Vision, kind of an amazing guy. This was his prayer, this is our prayer: "Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God."

Randy, my preaching partner — Randy and I both have a whole lot of regrets as dads. If we could go back and do it over, we'd do a lot of things differently. Randy told me that this was his greatest regret as a dad. He said he stood by one time and watched a coach bully and berate and abuse his kid. Randy told me, "If I could go back in time, I'd take a baseball bat to that coach." He told me that he deserved a dishonorable discharge as a dad for cowardice and desertion. A whole lot of us deserve dishonorable discharges, if we are honest. Are there times you should have stood up with someone, or stood up for someone — and you didn't? You just watched them get pushed around, put down, and kicked around. It's our job to free the oppressed. Are there times when you should have taken a stand with the weak, the bullied? Have you ever sat there and watch as someone was hung out to dry. Our job is to free the oppressed; not just to proclaim that freedom is coming, someday; our job is to set them free.

How? We haven't really gotten to where the rubber hits the road yet. If you are thinking this is about becoming a church full of Gary Haugens, well ... not quite. You see, Jesus came to free the oppressed, but he didn't do it Haugen's way. To our knowledge, Jesus never freed one slave — physically; he never adopted one orphan — physically; he never stopped one bully — physically. Don't get me wrong — I think it's great that Christians get their hands dirty like Gary Haugen, trying to free the oppressed physically. They are heroes. But it goes a whole lot farther than that. Jesus was a freedom fighter, but his strategies cut pretty deep.

Jesus freed the oppressed by changing the heart of the oppressors. I told you before, there are oppressors in this room. Don't look around at the

people sitting around you; I'm talking to you, and to me. Are there people in oppression because of you? Have you ever abused your position, your power? Are there people you push around, you put down, you step on, you use and abuse? What would your wife say? What would your friends say? What would your enemies say?

- There are guys in here who are abusing your wives; there are wives in here who are abusing your husbands. You abuse physically, you abuse verbally, you abuse those you swore to love.
- There are parents in here who beat your kids down; who push your kids with unrealistic demands to stoke your own egos. There are parents in here who are crossing the line — it is no longer discipline to better your child, it is venting your own pent up anger.
- There are people in this room who are marginalizing or mocking or excluding others at school. Maybe you haven't done the bullying; maybe you just stood by and watched and enjoyed it.
- There are people in this room who are exploiting or using others at work.
- There are people in this room who have tried to make demands of God's kids in church that go way beyond God's rules.

Do you know how Jesus sets people free? He changes our hearts. He changes the heart of us oppressors. There is a tiny little letter in the New Testament we call Philemon — because that's the name of the guy who got the letter. One chapter, 25 verses. The whole letter can fit on one page. Philemon was a slave owner who lived in a city called Colossae. The apostle Paul wrote him a letter to intercede for a runaway slave. That was unheard of in their culture. Paul begs Philemon to take his slave back, and to treat him like Christ would, like Christ has treated you. That was hard — in their world. This was not the way slave owners treated runaway slaves.

But here's the deal: Philemon claimed to be a Christian. Philemon had promised to love God with all his heart, all his mind, and all his strength, and he had promised to love his neighbor as himself. Well ... you can't be an oppressor and an obedient Christian. If you are a Christian, and you are misusing your position or your power and pushing people around, putting them down, kicking them around, using them or abusing them —then God

is not in charge of that part of your life. Jesus came to free the oppressed, and he starts by changing our hearts. If you are oppressing your husband, or your wife, or your kids, or a friend, or an enemy — you have some surrendering to do to God. We've got to let him in, we've got to let him take over that part of our life.

But it still goes a little deeper than that. Jesus said, "I have come to free the oppressed." And he does, by changing the heart of the oppressed. I told you that there are oppressors in this room. And there are. But a lot of you have tasted the other side. You have been or you are right now oppressed. You are the one put down, pushed around, kicked on, used, abused, exploited and broken. Guys, Jesus came to set you free. Do you believe that? Jesus came to set you free.

- There are wives in here who are abused — physically or emotionally. Guys too.
- There are kids in here who are being beaten down physically, or emotionally, as you struggle to fulfill the stupid demands of your parents.
- There are people in here who are the target of bullies at school, or at work.
- There are people in here who are suffering injustice at the hands of those who should be protecting you.

Jesus came to set you free. Do you know how? Sometimes physically, sometimes not. Jesus will set you free by changing your heart. Philemon was the slave owner, Onesimus was the slave. The apostle Paul asked Philemon, the slave owner, to take Onesimus back, and to treat him as a Christian. Paul challenged Philemon to let God change his heart.

But there was another heart being changed. You see, after Onesimus ran away he came face to face with Jesus. He became a Christian. So when Paul, a Christian, wrote a letter to Philemon, a Christian, to intercede for Philemon, a Christian, do you know who carried the letter? It wasn't the CPS (the Colossae Postal Service); it wasn't the RPS (the Roman Parcel Service); it was Onesimus, the runaway slave.

That was a remarkable thing to do. What if his master behaved badly?

What if his master treated him like all masters treated their runaway slaves. Going home could cost him his health; it could cost him his life. But you see, when Onesimus met Jesus, Jesus set him free. Physically he was still a slave; but inside he was a free man. He was no longer defined by his human status; he was God's kid — forever; he was graced — forever. What happened to him physically paled in comparison to what God was giving him.

- As far as we know Jesus never freed a slave physically, but he filled up his church with slaves who were free.
- As far as we know Jesus never broke up a bad marriage, but he gave strength, and courage, and purpose, and peace to those who were struggling. Still does. Don't misinterpret what I am saying. There are times when Jesus says a Christian can walk away from a broken marriage. But even if you stay in it, he can set you free.
- As far as we know Jesus never broke anyone out of jail. But thousands have found Christ there, and have been set free.
- There are Christians who are oppressed financially, there are Christians who have been bullied, Christians who have been pushed around, and put down, and walked on who have found victory in Jesus.

Guys, what people think of us doesn't define us; how people treat us doesn't define us — what defines us is what God thinks of us, how God treats us. We are Christians, and that trumps everything else.

- Ladies, you don't get your identity from your husbands — you get it from your dad (God).
- Guys, you don't get your identity by how you are treated at work you get it from your dad.

In the end it doesn't matter what they do to us; in the end what will matter is what God does to us. Do you buy that? He came to set us free. And he did.

The apostle Paul got it. Listen to what he says. He says, "Don't worry about anything (and I think he means it); instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will

experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand (no matter what you are facing). His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4.6-7) Guys, that's freedom. That's freedom from any oppression.

Then he says, a few verses later, "Actually, I don't have a sense of needing anything personally. I've learned by now to be quite content whatever my circumstances. I'm just as happy with little as with much, with much as with little. I've found the recipe for being happy whether full or hungry, hands full or hands empty. Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am." (Philippians 4.11-13) Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything through Christ who gives me strength. Do you buy that? Guys, that's freedom. That's freedom from any oppression. The secret of freedom is to find your identity in Jesus. I am not defined by my prosperity, my health, my reputation, or my rights. All of that is temporary. None of that is worthy of me. I am defined by my relationship to God in Christ.

I need to wrap this up. Everyone in this room has a decision to make. No one is exempt.

- Some of you need to step up to the challenge. As you heard about various groups of people who are oppressed it stirred something in you. You hurt for them, you are angered about what is happening in their lives. And you know God is calling you to get involved. You know to do nothing but feel sorry for them does them no good and violates God's call on your life. We need some more Gary Haugens.
- Some here recognize yourself as an oppressor. There are those who need to be heartbroken with a godly sorrow that leads to a life change. The Bible calls it repentance. You need to face the hurt you're causing; you need to admit that you are dishonoring your God. For you, this is a come to Jesus moment.
- And some here are hurting. There are those in this room that desperately need to find the freedom that only Christ can bring. You need a breath of fresh air, a hope to hold to, a Savior... not just to rescue you from your sin, but from the sin against you. Will you, can you, turn it over, let it go, allow Jesus to set you free.