

AT THE THRESHOLD OF FREEDOM

BY

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I. INTRODUCTION

A typical convocation address should say something about the educational policies of the nation, the state of tertiary education, the state of the nation's economy, the level of unemployment, social vices in our society, a hint on politics, and the like. I have excused myself from all these and chosen to speak today on something slightly different and fundamental. Some of you may have to forgive me for such deviation from the norm.

At the threshold of every transition, a whole new experience awaits us. Today's graduation exercise is one such transition. One thing that comes to the minds of most people gathered here today is "Freedom". For the graduands, it is freedom from the restrictions of the University authority, freedom from examinations and assignments; for the parents of these graduands, it is freedom from payment of fees, for the University, it is freedom from responsibility over these students. Freedom is an impulse that has a strong appeal to the human mind. The impulse drives people in different directions. The human quest for freedom has become an obsession and many people spend their entire lives in pursuit of it. Although freedom is man's obsession,

it is not his possession because just when you think that you are free then you discover how bound you are.

I have elected to speak at this convocation on the subject of freedom because freedom is crucial to human existence. People are defined by how they use freedom: misuse of freedom makes man a brute while a responsible use of it makes him an angel. To appreciate the value placed on freedom, consider history's treatment of the champions of freedom throughout history the champions of freedom have been justly esteemed among the greatest benefactors of mankind and their memories are radiantly embalmed and will never be forgotten.

The adversaries of freedom on the other hand have been rightly labeled as pests and nuisances of their time by history. Human history then, it appears, is a long record of conflicts between friends and enemies of freedom. In this conflict whenever the friends of freedom win, the world progresses, but the world decays when enemies of freedom gain the upper hand. It is therefore very important to understand the nature of true freedom at this intersection of your transition.

II. THE NATURE OF FREEDOM

There are two kinds of freedom. The first is the negative freedom which is always expressed in terms of freedom from. The second is the positive freedom usually understood as freedom for. Negative freedom is the human desire to be liberated from the things that tyrannize man. One of such things is guilt. Man is tyrannized by guilt. Guilt is a feeling of shame, inferiority and insecurity resulting from sin. To be free from this intimidating guilt we need God's forgiveness. Jesus Christ offers to all people freedom

from this intimidating guilt: “So if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). True freedom begins with forgiveness which removes guilt.

Jesus also offers us freedom from self. Sin, primarily is self-centeredness. Two of God’s greatest commandments are first, that we love God with all our being and second, that we love our neighbours as ourselves. Sin becomes evident when a person puts himself first. Such self-centeredness leads to greed, materialism, exclusivism and chauvinism of any form. Jesus offers freedom from such because he was himself liberated from all these.

People need freedom from fear. Our contemporary world is haunted by malevolent spirits. The lives of modern men and women are encumbered with fears of the occult, sickness, nuclear extinction and death. No one who is afraid is free. Jesus gives freedom from fear because all authority and power over everything have been given to him (Ephesians 1:21-22).

The positive free (freedom for) is freedom to be our true self as God meant us to be. True freedom is freedom to be one’s true self as God created one to be, that is loving. John Stott, the great evangelical scholar once said, “A true human existence is impossible without love. Living is loving, and without love we wither and die.” Stott is right; love is quintessential to being human. Love by its nature places limitations on the one who loves because love is self-giving. Self-giving is to deny one’s self. In order to be free from one’s self, one has to serve. True freedom is freedom from one’s self in order to live responsibly in love for god and for others.

Jesus is the model of true freedom; He was free from the bondage of hatred and revenge. He expressed

this freedom when he was being crucified, he said, “Father forgive them, they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). On the cross Jesus showed that he was so free as to love an enemy. To love an enemy at the point when the enemy is inflicting fatal pain is an expression of ultimate freedom.

Jesus was also liberated from the fear of death. Not that he welcome or courted death, but that he set his face toward Jerusalem steadfastly in spite of looming danger (Luke 9:51). He knew that torture and death awaited him in Jerusalem, he told his disciples so, yet he could not be deterred. Obviously, death did not possess him. He was free from the intimidation of death.

Jesus was free from the oppression of greed and materialism. He did not clutter his own life with possessions but rather opted for a free lifestyle.

Jesus Christ was free from narrow nationalism and fanaticism which required violence and war. He was free enough to prefer peace to the sword. In his sermon on the mount, he offered a way out of the vicious circle of violence (Matthew 5:44). He was also liberated from ethnic chauvinism which excluded other ethnic groups like the Samaritans. He broke free from the prejudices of his fanatical Jewish people. In the same manner, Jesus was liberated from male chauvinism and the stereotypical concepts of man and woman. He exemplified freedom from religious austerity; he feasted freely with religious and non-religious people alike.

III. FEATURE OF AUTHENTIC FREEDOM

1. Freedom is a Gift.

Freedom is partly mediated to us by our fellow human beings and ultimately by God. The Prior

mediating factor for human freedom is God. God determines human freedom through creation. Freedom is a gift we receive at our creation, a gift that God continues to give as part of his sustaining grace. Outside of this grace the human condition is not of freedom but of slavery.

2. Freedom is Conditional

Absolute freedom does not exist. Freedom always involves limitations. Human freedom is limited by historical, geographical, physical, Psychological, intellectual, cultural and spiritual bounds. Every society delineates the boundaries of an individual's freedom by projecting the public good. Such public good limits the liberty of the individual. Similarly, in the spiritual realm freedom is not absolute Helmut Thielicke has rightly observed that "The power which gives us our freedom for the world is the same power which also limits this freedom" (Theological Ethic, Vol. 1, p. 506) Authentic freedom requires a bondage to the author of freedom. It is in this bondage to God that authentic freedom is realized. Once realized, authentic freedom is soon discovered to have boundaries.

3. Freedom is Moral

Authentic freedom implies freedom to do what is right, in other words, to obey the will and command of God. Christian freedom embraces a commitment to certain values and ideals ordained by God. Freedom therefore is not the right to do whatever one pleases, but the power to do what one ought to do. Only a truly free person can make valid moral decisions. The whole purpose and goal of freedom is so that man can think and act righteously.

4. Freedom is Responsible

“Freedom without responsibility is a loaded gun in the hand of a maniac” (Femi Osofisan, “Freedom Always matters”, The Comet. September 1, 2002 Pg. 10). Whether in a nation or an individual, where there is freedom, there must also be responsibility. Responsibility is a natural part of freedom. The people of Israel were blessed in order that they may be a blessing to other nations. God had set Israel free from bondage so that Israel would function as a light to other nations (Isaiah 42:6). Similarly the New Testament conceives freedom in terms of service. Jesus taught his disciples that greater blessings and opportunities brought heavier duties and more severe accountability. Martin Luther, the reformer, epitomized the essence of Christian freedom when he said “a Christian man is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. “A Christian man is a perfectly dutiful servant to all, subject to all” (A Treatise on Christian Liberty). This paradox rightly implies that Christian freedom is for service. To be free always means to be responsible.

IV. FREEDOM AND THE PILGRIMAGE OF LIFE

It is good that you studied and are knowledgeable in your fields of study, but you need a few more things in your Kitbag as you journey through life. A few practical advice that will guide you toward a responsible life.

1. From today on, you will be more independent from your parents and teachers, use your new found freedom responsibly. In your freedom you will go to more places where the watchful eyes of parents or close friends may not see you, always act right

because you have not yet graduated from the University of God whose watchful eyes are constantly on you. He is proud of you and wants you to be your best.

2. You may make more money than you ever did; be prudent with it. Be a good steward. Buy only those things that are needful. Do not be carried away by the manipulation of the advertising industry.
3. You may become a leader of a follower; lead or follow only worthy causes. Not the causes that bring glory to you but those that leads you to serve God and humanity. Some well intentioned men and women have followed or led movements that ended in shame and destruction.
4. Practice sincerity, straight living, hard work, cultivate friendship and be true to your friends and colleagues.
5. You will eventually raise a family; lead your family towards righteousness, purity and love. Point your family to God in the way you live (Phil. 4:8).
6. Give some roadside help: we all need help at one time or another; when you need help do not be too proud to ask but do not spend your whole life asking for help. When you are up, help those who need help as much as you can.
7. You need a compass: Direction is very important in every journey. Movement is not necessarily progress unless you move in the right direction. The Psalmist says “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Psalm 119: 105). You will get to your destination if the word of God guides your path.

8. Respect the rights of other fellow travellers. Protect your rights but recognize the rights of others.
9. Make the right choices: Mathew 2:1-12 tells a story of the wise men who saw a star and followed it. In a cloudless night, there are millions of stars, how can we identify the right star? Many people have chosen wrong stars and have followed faithfully in their innocence and got to a dead end. Do not start following unless you are sure you have identified the right star.
10. Evaluation: Always examine your life to be sure you are on track. Socrates said an unexamined life is not worth living.

V. CONCLUSION

Finally, I urge the graduands to use their new found freedom to serve others. We serve God through serving our fellow men and women who are the visible image of the invisible God. When you serve, the Lord said, you become the greatest of men. Go and be good ambassadors of Bowen University. May the Lord grant you abundant grace in your future endeavours. Amen.