

EASY IN THE HARNESS

John 17:6-19

My sophomore year in college I made a new friend named Miles. I came from Bakersfield. No one in Bakersfield was named Miles. I thought Miles was in there with names like Roland, Carter, Kingsley, names that the very upper crust gave to their children. My friends in Bakersfield had names like Ron, John, Davey, Allen, Bill, Ken; good sort of salt of the earth type names.

As it turned out Miles indeed came from a family that lived in rarefied air. I knew from the fact that Miles had a brand new Firebird muscle car that they weren't short on capital. But I was soon to learn just how thin the air was up there where they lived. One weekend Miles invited me to spend the weekend with him at his family's primary residence. I found out they had several houses, including a posh "weekend house" right on the sand in Newport. I was happy to go with him because he had become a friend and a weekend away meant free meals eating something besides cafeteria food. Their home was in a ritzy area of LA not far from Beverly Hills. When we arrived the full time gardeners were working on the yard. We went in to the house and learned his parents weren't home at the moment, but I did meet the nanny, the maid and the cook. That was really my first clue that I wasn't in Kansas anymore, Toto. They had full time servants? I didn't know anyone who had even one full time servant. They had a staff.

Dinner was when it really hit me. We sat at a table that could have handled well over a dozen people seated comfortably. I was in the middle seated directly across from Miles. Way down at the end to my left was Miles' mom, at the far end to my right was his dad. The dining room was large with an enormous chandelier, white tablecloth and a large floral centerpiece on the table. There was silverware set at each of our four places with a panoply of forks, but nothing else on the table and no food in sight. Why were we in the dining room with silverware if there was no food? Weren't we going to eat? Then Miles' dad picked up a little bell and rang it. Immediately the maid entered from the kitchen and began placing bowls of soup in front of each of us. As she did I was thinking, "I do *not* belong here." I wondered if Miles' parents were thinking that they couldn't understand why their son had brought home this uncultured rube from the backwoods of Bakersfield.

It can be awkward and uncomfortable to feel like you don't belong. Most of us hate that feeling. I'd like to ask you, where do you belong? Today we're going to think about that question as we consider the words of the ultimate outsider in this world, the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's look at John 17:6-19.

JESUS' DISCIPLES BELONG TO GOD

The message of this prayer can seem a little confusing, but it actually is fairly simple. In verse 6 Jesus said, "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of this world. **They were yours**; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word." The key idea

here is that the disciples were the Father's and he entrusted them to Jesus for a time. That same message appears in verse 9. "I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for **they are yours.**"

Jesus is telling the Father in prayer that he has done his job. The Father entrusted the disciples to him so he could teach them and prepare them for the role they would play in the kingdom movement. In verse 8 Jesus said, "I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them." They've listened and now they know all that Jesus needed to teach them. What I want you to notice is that Jesus emphasized that the disciples belonged to the Father. They are not the only ones. All those who believe in Jesus belong to the Father.

In Ephesians 1:4-5 Paul wrote, "He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will." Paul says all believers in Jesus were chosen to be adopted as God's children through Jesus Christ. If you are God's child you belong to him. When my kids were little there was a very real sense in which they belonged to me. There were lots of other kids in the world. I liked some of them, even loved them, but they did not belong to me. I coached a number of Toby's hockey teams when he was young. He would be one of 12 or so kids on a team. I coached them all. But only one of them belonged to me. I didn't coach the rest of them because they were so precious to me, I coached them because my son was precious to me, and they were on his team.

Notice that you were chosen to be God's child before the creation of the world. You may have thought that you lived apart from God and that you didn't belong to him until you put your faith in Jesus. But the truth is that even before you knew it, before you ever believed, you belonged to God. If you are a believer in Jesus there has never been a day in your life when you did not belong to God. Even when you didn't know it you were his and he was watching over you. Some of you can attest to that fact because you can look back and see his hand at work.

JESUS ASKED THE FATHER TO PROTECT THE DISCIPLES

Jesus was about to leave this world as he said in verse 11. He was leaving the disciples. So he asked the Father to protect the disciples by "the power of your name." That's an interesting expression. The concept of the name of the Lord loomed large in ancient Israel. Read through the Psalms and you will see that we are to praise his name, give glory to his name, seek his name, fear his name, rejoice in his name, proclaim his name, call on his name, trust in his name, remember his name and love his name. You get an idea about the power of "name" when you recall that in some cases of ancient superstition the ability to invoke some power came from simply being able to call on its secret name. The name stood for all that was embedded in that power. Invoking that name was like pulling the trigger on firing that power.

In Ephesians 1:20-21 Paul was speaking of God's power, "which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given." The New American Standard correctly translates that "every name that can be named." Jesus now is ruling over every power that exists. You see the same idea in Philippians 2:9, "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name."

If someone said, "praise the name of Rick Myatt," you would understand that person isn't saying, "Rick Myatt, that's a really nice name. It's so euphonic, isn't it? I wish my name was Rick Myatt." No, you would understand them to be saying "give honor to that guy Rick Myatt." Similarly if someone said, "I fear the name of Rick Myatt," they're not saying if someone just utters the syllables "Rick Myatt" it is somehow going to harm them. They are saying, "I know his power and reputation and I'm afraid of what he could do." By the way, I do not believe anyone ever has said either praise the name of Rick Myatt or fear his name. So when Jesus asked the Father to protect us by the power of his name he is asking the Father to use all of his mighty abilities to protect us.

This makes sense. Don't you protect that which belongs to you? We have a little bit of money in a retirement account. It's not a lot. I figure when the time comes to retire with what we have in that account I'm good if I'm retired for as long as 4 or 5 months. But it's not coffee cup change either. I just got a letter from the fund that manages that account and they informed me that they've been hacked. They urged me to go on their site, log in and change my user name, password and security questions. I said, "Ah, who cares? It's just money." Oh, wait. No I didn't. That money belongs to me, and it was now at risk. So I did exactly what they asked and I did it promptly because I want to protect it. The more valuable something is to us, the more effort we will exert and the more measures we will take to protect it.

How precious are you to God? You are his child. Do you recall what it cost for him to adopt you as his child? It cost a trip to the cross. That is the highest price that has ever been paid for anyone or anything in all of creation. Do you hear that? God has paid more for you than anyone else has ever paid for anything. That's how precious you are. In Malachi 3:17 the prophet wrote of those who would be God's people in the future, people like you. "They will be mine, says the Lord Almighty, in the day when I make up my treasured possession." You are part of his treasured possession. We have some possessions we value. Our home, our retirement fund, such as it is, some paintings. But what is most treasured for me is my wife and my children. What is most precious to God is his children. He will take care of them.

Do you think God answers that prayer of Jesus? Of course. The Father protects what is precious to him, and his children are most precious of all. But wait, the disciples were

going to be persecuted. They were going to have trouble and would be killed. How is that being protected? I see some of the terrible things that have happened to people I know who love Jesus. Where's the protection?

Common sense tells us that this cannot mean that God will see to it that nothing bad, unpleasant, difficult, painful, disappointing, or tragic ever will happen to us. That's what I want it to mean. But Jesus told the disciples it didn't mean that because bad things were going to happen to them. And our experience confirms that throughout history disciples of Jesus have not been protected from all that is bad, unpleasant, difficult, painful, or tragic. What then can it mean?

I take it to mean that there's a fate worse than the travails of life or even death. We have an enemy who is doing all he can to destroy us. He wants to destroy our eternal souls. He wants to rip us from God, have us be eternally separated from him, have us live totally without regard for him and experience the horror that results from that. It will produce a lifelong pursuit of illusion, and with that will come frustration, restlessness, emptiness, anger, bitterness, fear, hopelessness, conflict, distance and alienation from other people, and finally total spiritual death. He wants you to be a lost soul. Were it not for the protection of the Father, that would be your fate.

JESUS ASKED THE FATHER TO SANCTIFY THE DISCIPLES

Note that in verses 14 and 16 Jesus twice said, "they are not of this world." He himself was not of this world. We know that. But Jesus also said of his disciples, including us, "they are not of this world any more than I am of this world." Then Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them by the truth." Sanctify is a really religious word. It is one that seems like it ought to be drawn out with a southern accent. When was the last time you used the word "sanctify" or "sanctification" in any context other than a religious one? In fact, you probably can't even remember the last time you used it in a religious context.

There are a number of words that are related because they all come from the same root. The Greek words translated sacred, holy, consecrate, sanctify, sanctuary all stem from this root. The core meaning of it is to set apart for some special use. In his book, *God's Loving Word* (p. 432), Ray Stedman wrote that to sanctify "means to separate or set apart a person or object for a special purpose and to use it for that intended purpose." So purpose plays a central role in sanctifying.

Laurie and I went to a hospital to visit one of our members. We were a little pressed for time and were frustrated by an inability to find parking. But then we spotted someone just pulling out of the perfect parking space. I stepped on the gas and roared to the space to make sure no one snaked me and took it before I could get there. But as I started to pull into the spot I noticed a sign posted at the front of it. It said, "Reserved: Doctor parking only." Disappointed, we went in search of another space. That parking place was sanctified. It was set apart, reserved for a special use, a special purpose. It wasn't like any

old parking space to be used by whoever happened to come along. It was special. I had to keep looking for a space.

Jesus asked that the Father would use the truth, the message of the good news of Jesus, to set us apart for a special purpose. What is that special purpose? Step back and remember that Jesus said we are not of this world just as he is not of this world. Here is a crucial reason why. What did Jesus say he was here to do? In verse 6 he said, “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of this world.” Jesus had a two-fold purpose that actually was one thing.

We saw earlier in John 10:10 that he said he came that we might have life and have it to the fullest. That was his purpose. He was sanctified, set apart, to accomplish that task. Here he said that his job was to reveal the Father. How is this connected to that fullness of life? In verse 3 he said that eternal life, kingdom life, the fullness of life we long for, is knowing God. This is it. Jesus revealed the Father so that we could know him, thus giving us fullness of life.

Jesus had a lot of power. He could have done any number of things. He could have been a political Messiah like his fellow Jews wanted Messiah to be. He could have taken control of Israel and led them on a rebellion against Rome. He could have used divine power to defeat the Roman legions and he could have ruled the world. Jesus could have done anything he wanted. He could have chosen not to come to this planet 2000 years ago but today and could have become an athlete, maybe the best football player the world has ever seen, or a singer, the new American idol. He could have become famous. But his kingdom is not of this world. He had a purpose, to reveal the glory of the Father by demonstrating his grace, love and power through the cross and the resurrection, thus providing rescue for all humans so that we might have real life. He was sanctified, set apart for that purpose and he never wavered from it for a moment.

Now in verse 18 Jesus says, “As you have sent me into the world I have sent them into the world.” In other words, we have been sent with the same job. We are here to reveal the Father to people and to bring them fullness of life. That is our purpose. We are set apart, reserved for that task.

That makes us very different from the world. The world is all about this life. They are focused on making their lives here as comfortable, as safe, as pleasurable as they possibly could be. They are sanctified in a sense, set apart for the purpose of taking care of themselves in this life however they think is best. We are sanctified, set apart for an utterly different mission. We are here to bring life to other people by revealing the Father to them. We are to do that whatever it takes. This is important to know. We do not belong here. We are outsiders. We should expect that we will be misunderstood, shunned, ostracized and rejected.

IMPLICATIONS

CHOOSE REAL FREEDOM

We human beings are pulled by two powerful longings. One of those is *the need to belong*. We want to be included, accepted, valued, loved, needed. We long for intimacy, to be totally connected to another. Being excluded, being, being unwanted or rejected feels like death to our souls. In Genesis 1-2 God creates one thing after another saying, “And it was good.” He creates the man, Adam, then says it is not good that the man is alone. This is a profound statement from God himself about the nature of human beings. He says we were not created to live in isolation. We have an inbuilt need to belong. That is as much a part of us as the need to breathe air and drink water to survive. In his book, *Renovation of the Heart*, the late philosopher Dallas Willard said, “The natural condition of life for human beings is reciprocal rootedness in others.”

In his book, *The Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis talked about how every human group appears to have an inner circle. He calls it the Inner Ring. We know what he is talking about. In school there was the in crowd. But we have this sense everywhere we go that there are those who are specially wanted and always included, and there are those who are not. Lewis wrote, “I believe that in all men’s lives...one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside.” This desire dominates us.

But there is another powerful human longing. It is the need for **freedom**. Erich Fromm wrote, “Modern European and American history is centered around the effort to gain freedom from the political, economic and spiritual shackles that have bound men.” Robert Ingersoll said, “What light is to the eyes, what air is to the lungs, what love is to the heart, liberty is to the soul of man.” The human heart is made to be free. Paul wrote in Romans 8 that God has not given us a spirit of slavery. In 2 Corinthians 3:17 he wrote that where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. How delicious that sounds to us. The dream of freedom is strong in us.

These two realities present us, unfortunately, with two big problems. The first is that these two human longings have become distorted. The fall of the human nature has caused a deadly skewing of both desires.

The desire for belonging ultimately was given by God to turn us to himself. We were created to belong to him, to be connected to him and to revel in close relationship with him, nourished and fulfilled by his love for us. Our intimacy with him was not exclusive of belonging to other people. That was a part of his gift of love. It was to be all a package. As we were connected to him and lived in oneness with him we would experience true connection to other humans. That was a gift from him to us to enrich our sense of belonging and our love for him.

But when we turned away from God we cut ourselves off from that true belonging that we were created for. We feel that void desperately. It never goes away. We try to fill it with belonging to other people. That becomes an ever present almost pathetic need as we are ever trying to please people, ever dominated by the fear of what they will think of us. That desire is a terrible, devastating tyrant. We can never actually please all the people, but more important we can never get from them what we're seeking. To try to satisfy our need to belong to God with belonging to other people is like putting water in the gas tank of your car. It fills it with a liquid, to be sure, but instead of powering your engine it will actually destroy it.

There is another important idea here. Satan has created a system in this world where it appears there is an "inner ring" in every human group. But this is the lie. It doesn't exist. Everyone feels kind of like they're somehow on the outside. Everyone fears and suspects they're not really liked and included. It is a clever torture for us. It is a literally diabolical system.

How about the longing for freedom? It spun out of control in Eden when Eve decided that God was being unfair. He was keeping her from something good. He would not allow her to do what she wanted. She wanted to exercise total freedom. She wanted autonomy. This is how our God given desire for freedom gets warped. It becomes the insistence that I be allowed to do whatever I want. I don't want to have to answer to anybody, including God. I decide for myself how I am going to live and I don't want anyone telling me what to do.

The Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus said, "Is freedom anything else than the right to live as we wish? Nothing else." I resonate with that statement. It chafes at me when the government tells me I have to buy health insurance and mandates what kind I must buy. It really burns me when they tell me I must pay for health insurance for my wife that includes maternity care when it is now impossible for her to bear children. She's had that part of the plumbing removed, so that's no longer a possibility. So essentially we are paying for miracle insurance. I don't think it is a good use of money to have to pay to protect myself against the possibility that a miracle might happen. When the government insists that I do such an inane thing I want to rebel. What gives them the right to tell me what to do? I don't want anybody telling me not to eat the fruit of that tree or to pursue any other desire I have in whatever way I may happen to choose. In other words, we don't want anyone telling us what we must do. We want to choose for ourselves.

So our longings have been distorted. That is a problem, but with this distortion there is a second problem. In their current distorted state these two longings are totally in conflict. ***It is impossible to belong and to be autonomous.*** Paul points this out in the marriage relationship in 1 Corinthians 7:4. "The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but

also to his wife.” This is a lesson our world needs to get. When you enter a relationship with someone you do not belong to yourself anymore. You belong to that person.

I will give you a silly example. Recently the Stanley Cup playoffs have been on television. This is a glorious time for me, especially since my favorite teams, the Kings have been doing well in the playoffs. What is great about this is that there are games on television every night. I could watch great hockey games, flipping from one to the other for 5 or 6 hours every single night. In Rick Myatt world, the one where Rick Myatt is autonomous, totally free, does whatever he wants with regard to no one, hockey can be watched on television every single night. However, I don't live in Rick Myatt world. I could have lived there, but I have this longing to belong. That longing led me to marry this woman named Laurie. She is life to my soul. She touches the deepest parts of me and fills them with love. And she tolerates hockey, but watching it every night would be not unlike a form of punishment that might exist in Satan's realm. So I don't watch hockey the way I would if I lived only in Rick Myatt World.

Do you see the problem? I cannot be autonomous *and* belong. As soon as I enter into relationship it impinges on my freedom. This is true of every relationship I enter into. Suppose you join this church. You now belong to this church. You've just limited your freedom. You don't have the freedom to wake up on Sunday morning and say, “where shall I go to church today?” Your belonging calls you to be in the place where you belong. Whether it is a friendship, a marriage, a family, a business partnership or any other relationship it comes with limits to your freedom.

Why then would I enter into relationships? Because to opt for total autonomy where no relationship limits my choices is to leave my soul gasping for air. It is death to my heart. I don't just want to belong, I need to belong to be fully human and to truly experience life. Without belonging all I'm left with is emptiness and death. So how are we to resolve these conflicts with our longings for freedom and belonging?

The poet Robert Frost said, “You have your freedom when you're easy in your harness.” His point is that contrary to what some will tell us and what our own hearts might even say, real freedom is not the absence of a harness. You're going to be in a harness of some sort. Real freedom is being in a harness that fits. We need a yoke that is easy, as Jesus described it. Cambridge theologian Richard Bauckham said, “we were not made for freedom from belonging, but for freedom in belonging.”

Can it really be true that by taking Jesus' yoke on us we not only find rest but freedom? Yes, there is real freedom that actually requires a rejection of autonomy. You will experience it as you drive home today. What will happen if everyone gets in his or her car and chooses autonomy? “I don't want anyone telling me where to drive, how to drive, how fast to drive. I want to be free.” So they blow through traffic signals, drive 90 miles per hour on surface streets, go north in southbound lanes on the freeway, change lanes

with utter disregard for other drivers. Imagine that *everyone* drives like. Oh, you mean Tijuana? Will that be freedom? No, it is chaos and it is deadly. Our real freedom to drive only comes when we take the yoke of traffic laws on us. When we refuse we get tragedy.

This is what I discover in my marriage. Being married to Laurie means my freedom is limited. I am not autonomous from her. But in belonging to her I find a freedom that I would never know without her. I have found more freedom to be who I was meant to be than I ever would have experienced without her. When I was in college I had a few Saturday nights when I was all by myself in my dorm room. Everybody I knew had a place to be. They went home for the weekend, they went to a party, they had a date, but I had nowhere to go. I couldn't get home for the weekend. I had no girl to go out with, and none of my acquaintances invited me to the events they were going to. So there I was on a Saturday night all by myself in my dorm doing calculus homework. It felt bad. I felt lonely and I felt like a loser. Who stays alone in his dorm to do calculus homework on Saturday night when everyone else is out having fun? Awkward, friendless nerds, that's who. Hey, if the shoe fits. I admit I indulged in a healthy helping of self-pity. I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere.

Since Laurie married me I have never again felt like that. I may be an awkward nerd, but I'm not friendless. I belong to somebody. There is a person in this world who chooses to be with me rather than anyone else. And this person is the best person I've ever known, the person I want to be with more than anyone else. I belong to her, and there is more joy in that belonging than I can express. Is my freedom limited by being married? You mean my freedom to be all alone, lonely, sad and wallowing in self-pity on a Saturday night? Well, yes, I suppose so. To which I say, "That's awesome!" I get to always be with this epic woman! I don't ever have to be alone and unwanted. I'm good with that.

My freedom is limited. I don't make plans without consulting Laurie. I don't go out with whoever I feel like. I don't spend money or make big purchases without regard to her. I don't plan vacations without her input. I don't even decide how much sports I will watch on television without her thoughts on the matter. But oddly none of those things feel like a limitation to me. I have found freedom and belonging in this relationship that I would never trade for anything. The upshot of all of this is that the answer to our two seemingly contradictory longings is found in the fact that we belong to God!

Do you think about the fact that you belong to God? You are his. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Paul wrote, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price." Belonging to God has some profound implications. In Christ you and I are never, ever unwanted. We are never friendless, worthless nerds. We may be nerds, but we are nerds who are loved and valued every moment of our lives. We matter infinitely to God!

But belonging to God also means that what you do with yourself should be determined by him. You don't belong to you. Max and Kelly live across the street from us. They are

very nice people, but for some time they had a problem. Their problem was their garage door. It would seemingly open and close of its own accord. They'd be in bed falling asleep and suddenly they'd hear the garage door open. They went on a trip. I knew they were gone, but I looked out and there was their garage wide open. I knew they didn't leave it like that. I went over and disconnected their opener and closed the garage door. Their garage door opener belonged to them, but it didn't seem to think so. I exerted its autonomy and decided it would open and close whenever it jolly well pleased. Do you think that was a good thing? Maybe it made the garage door opener happy, though I've had trouble imagining an emotional garage door opener and have failed. But it made no one else happy. And it became worse than useless. **Having no garage door opener at all is better than an autonomous opener.** So what do you suppose happened? It became a former garage door opener. It went to the place of final punishment for garage door openers, the ultimate rejection. It was thrown away. As we go through our week at every juncture in all we do, we should be thinking, "I belong to God. I am to do what he wants me to do."

STAY ON TASK

You belong to God. You've been sanctified, reserved for a special, noble purpose. You are here to reveal the Father and so bring life to other people. As you think about how you will use your life, your time, your money, your talents, your words, your sexuality, your next few minutes this very day, you should be thinking, "I belong to God. The only question that matters is, what does he want me to do?"

Toby and Anna are on vacation. They are staying in a hotel that is spectacular. When they got there Anna texted us and said, "We're in the hotel. I'm never going to leave." Ah, but it's a fallen world. It turned out there are some people in the room above them who have the habit of early in the morning going out on their lanai and talking in Arabic on their cell phone so loudly it wakes Toby and Anna up. It is very frustrating. How are they to deal with this situation? Here's the first concern: they're on a mission to reveal the Father to everyone they deal with. Whatever they do the goal must be to show them what God is like.

In Christ we are sanctified, set apart for a noble purpose. What happens when we lose track of that truth? Listen to what I just said. We are set apart for a noble purpose. If we forget that, we lose nobility and we lose purpose. Our lives become mundane and trivial, and they become empty and without purpose. Why would we ever choose that?