BIBLE STUDY SERIES

Free Indeed

LESSON 9

Liberty of Conscience

Romans 14:12

"So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God."

The national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner," identifies our beloved America as "The Land of the Free." We live in freedom, but too few take the time to consider how and why this freedom was established. The history of our founding reveals that much of the liberty we enjoy today came about due to the direct influence of Bible-believing people who held a firm conviction that freedom is God's gift to all people.

Specifically, Baptists of the eighteenth century had an incredible impact upon our Founding Fathers. One distinctive belief of Baptist people throughout the centuries is that God has given a liberty of conscience to each individual. This is often referred to as "individual soul liberty." This means that God has created everyone with a liberty in their souls to seek God as their own consciences dictate. No one should be coerced or compelled to conform to a particular religious body or to certain religious rites, but is free to make their own choices.

Romans 14:12 states, *"So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God."* Scripture clearly teaches individual soul liberty: every person will answer to God for their own choices. Therefore, early Baptists in America, who had been greatly persecuted for not conforming to the state religions of the colonies, advocated that government should not mandate religion or prohibit the expression of one's religion. Rather, they asserted that government should provide for the free exercise of religion according to the choices of everyone, so long as those choices do not hinder the freedom of others.

Virginia was the most influential colony and, later, the most influential state. The Baptists in Virginia strongly advocated for individual soul liberty. Many Baptist pastors had been imprisoned or had suffered losses for simply living out their faith as they believed the Bible instructed. Key founders such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison listened to what they taught and were convinced that their cause was righteous. These Baptists did not want to establish the Baptist Church

as the state church. No! That was against their Bible convictions. They simply demanded that our newly formed government provide for the liberty of conscience that God has given to all people.

In *The Story of Baptists* (1884), Richard Cook writes,

> The grandest feature of our Constitution is the first clause of the first amendment. The Baptists have always claimed that the credit of the amendment belongs, chiefly, to them. The Baptists asked it through [George] Washington; the request commended itself to his judgment, and to the generous soul of [James] Madison, and to the Baptists, beyond a doubt, belong the glory of engrafting its best article, on the noblest Constitution ever framed for the government of mankind.

The first lines of the First Amendment read,

> Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Without the influence of those who believed firmly in individual soul liberty, our nation may never have been "the land of the free" that it has been for nearly two hundred fifty years. This powerful truth from God's Word undoubtedly served as a mighty pillar in the foundation of our country. With this amazing history in mind, let us consider the implications that individual soul liberty has upon our lives today.

Our Accountability to God

Liberty of conscience is a marvelous gift given by God, but it comes with tremendous accountability. Because God gave us this gift of choice, we will give account

to Him for the choices we make. We will answer to God for what we have done with Him and His Word.

Notice what the Bible teaches in Romans 14:10-12:

> *But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.*

In this passage, the Lord admonishes us not to see ourselves as the judge over our brother. Christ alone is the Judge. What we must be concerned about is the fact that we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Our brother will stand before Christ and give account of himself; we will each stand before Christ and give account of ourselves. Our accountability is directly to God Himself.

II Corinthians 5:10 declares, *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad."* This is written in reference to every believer, to every individual who has been born again by faith in Christ. According to I Corinthians 3:11-15, each believer will appear before Christ to receive reward for the work they have done for the Lord, or to suffer loss of reward for that which was not done for Christ. This is called *"the judgment seat of Christ"* (II Corinthians 5:10).

Revelation 20:11-15 teaches about another judgment called the Great White Throne Judgment. The scene described in this passage is one in which every unbeliever stands before the Lord and is judged. The Bible records, *"And whosoever was not found*

written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15). Those who made the choice to reject Christ, though they had the liberty of conscience to make that choice, must face the awful consequence of the choice they made.

For both believers and unbelievers, for those who choose Christ and for those who refuse Him, soul liberty means that each person must give account directly to God. Our accountability to the Lord should cause us to consider our standing with Him. Have you placed your faith in Christ alone for your salvation? Have you believed the gospel, the good news that Christ Jesus died for your sins and rose again? If so, are you living your life in light of the moment when you will give account to Him?

Our Access to God

Soul liberty not only means that we are accountable to God, but also that we have access to God. Because of the work that the Lord Jesus accomplished on the cross, we can have access to the heavenly Father. This access to God does not come through a church or religious organization. We do not achieve it by going to a priest or a preacher. Access to the Father is granted to those who exercise their individual soul liberty and personally place their faith in Christ Jesus.

The Bible teaches in Ephesians 2:13-18,

> *But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross,*

> *having slain the enmity thereby: and came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.*

Notice the truth clearly given in verse eighteen, *"...Through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father."* Through Christ alone we have access to the Father. What an incredible freedom! The Bible teaches that every believer is a priest unto God (Revelation 1:6; I Peter 2:9) and has the privilege to go directly to God through Christ by the Holy Spirit.

If you know the Lord Jesus as your personal Savior, avail yourself of this freedom to go directly to God. The Scriptures exhort us to come boldly to His throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). If you do not know Christ, realize that you have been given liberty by God to believe upon the Lord Jesus and receive Him. The Bible declares, *"But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name"* (John 1:12). When you receive Christ, you, too, will experience access to the Father through Him.

Our Advancement of the Gospel

As children of God, we have a mission to fulfill. It is Christ's mission given to us. He said in Mark 16:15, *"...Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."* We are to advance with the gospel message into all the world. But how shall we fulfill this mission?

Over the centuries, some people have erroneously thought that this mission should be fulfilled by force. They have supposed that they must enact a "Christian" revolution of sorts and seek to establish Christianity as a "must" for all people. In some situations, they have attempted to take over governments, to legislate religious mandates, and even gone so far as to persecute those who would not "submit" or "conform" to Christianity.

While this type of coercion and force is characteristic of some other religions, it is not consistent with biblical Christianity. Because of what we know to be true about individual soul liberty, we cannot spread our faith in Christ through force. The New Testament never advocates this. The churches of the New Testament did not spread the gospel through legal mandates, pressure, or manipulation. In the book of Acts, churches did not advance the gospel by using the tool of force. Yet, the Bible records that they *"turned the world upside down"* with their message (Acts 17:6).

A biblical understanding of soul liberty leads us to conclude that our only tool to advance the gospel is not the tool of force, but the tool of our influence. The Bible says in Philippians 2:15-16, *"That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life..."* Our influence for Christ is like a shining light in a dark world. According to these verses of Scripture, we cast our influence when others witness the

change Christ has made in our lives and when we hold forth the truth of the Word of God.

Sadly, many churches and Christians today teach that we must become like the world to advance the gospel. They minimize God's Word and holy living, thinking that will produce a greater acceptance of the gospel. This is a great error, because it removes the tool that God has given us to fulfill His mission – the tool of influence. Without the power of the Word of God and changed lives, we cannot shine as lights in the world.

Christian, we have a mission to fulfill. Every person has the liberty of conscience to either receive or reject Christ. We are not taught in God's Word to coerce or force people to believe. The way to advance the gospel is to live out the new life that we have in Christ, and to proclaim His powerful Word. The gospel is *"the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth"* (Romans 1:16).