

The Freedom Path (Mark 12:12-17)

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[0 : 00] Mark chapter 12, verse 12 through to 17. This is the word of the Lord. Then they looked for a way to arrest him, because they knew he had spoken the parable against them.

But they were afraid of the crowd, so they left him and went away. Later, they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words.

They came to him and said, Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are, but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.

Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we? But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. Why are you trying to trap me?

He asked. Bring me a denarius and let me look at it. They brought the coin. And he asked them, Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription? Caesar's, they replied.

[1 : 06] Then Jesus said to them, Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. And they were amazed at him. I just read this.

It's a pretty memorable scene from the life of Jesus. Jesus tells the religious leaders, Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

Our Lord Jesus, you see, he gave this answer to the religious leaders who were questioning his authority about whether he could teach, what kind of power he had over people.

But when he made this claim, he confirmed a very important belief that actually Christians everywhere today still hold to.

What is this key idea? Well, it's the idea that we call religious freedom. Religious freedom is this, that faithful worship of God has to be a personal choice that is made freely.

[2 : 14] Right? Religious freedom means when you follow Jesus, it's something that you've decided, not something that's been forced on you. We call this principle religious freedom.

But look, we, that's a picture of, you know, the coins that Jesus was looking at. Look, we live in New Zealand though, don't we? Right? And in New Zealand, we just assume, right?

We just assume that everyone is free. Right? Free to choose our faith. Free to shop at the supermarkets we decide to, that sort of thing. We're free to choose which church or worship service to attend.

Right? For some of you, if you really don't like this church, you'll probably decide to go to another church or vice versa. You're free to believe. You're also free not to believe.

We just take all this for granted. That's because we're in New Zealand. Right? Imagine if you were a teenager living in North Korea.

[3 : 14] You are not given the option to worship Christ freely, are you? Or maybe you're a woman in Afghanistan. You're told you cannot have an education.

Or actually, maybe you're a family who live in Iran. One of the pressing issues that has been for many years is that Iran, you know, the leadership said that you must follow Islam.

We are an Islamic country. Or actually, think about even the schools that we go to, the workplaces we go to. Right? Where you're more and more being told, right, what prayers to recite.

What things to believe about people. Even if it's not what it says in the Bible. And so the question is, how can the good news of Christ break through freely in all of these kinds of places?

The answer is, there needs to be what we call religious freedom. And so, this is what we call the freedom path. This is what the Baptist World Alliance has been encouraging, you know, all Baptist churches around the world to walk towards, to journey on.

[4 : 21] We've talked about five different pathways. And this is part of a global campaign called the Acts 2 movement. Just as Julian mentioned, the church at Pentecost, right, was a church that was

on fire.

It was a church that was going all kinds of places. And this church pursued five pathways of gospel renewal. Five different ways to journey towards a faithful witness and worship.

And here at PCBC, we too, we're invited to join this journey with millions of our Baptist brothers and sisters worldwide. This is kind of leading up to the year 2033, which I know sounds like a long way away.

But when that year hits, we believe that's 2,000 years since the birth of the church, right? Okay? Our Lord Jesus, who was crucified and then rose again three days later.

And then we celebrate Pentecost in AD 33. That was when the church was born. And so, I hope that actually in these past few weeks, right, learning about the Bible path, for example, I hope that's inspired you to really just dig into God's word, right, to pray for people that don't yet have a translation of the Bible in their tongues.

[5 : 35] or maybe you were quite struck by the witness path, right? Now remember, just the encouragement to share your testimony, right, or to write it out so that others can hear it and to get to know it.

Well, maybe last week from Pastor Barry, maybe you were inspired to think about the caring path, right? And seeing God's heart for the marginalized, the poor, that was inspiring for you to think about how can I journey on the caring path as well as church.

But you know what? You know, the witness path, the freedom path, sorry, the witness path, Bible path, care path, and so on, these are all paths that all kinds of Christians throughout history have walked along, right?

It's not uniquely a Baptist thing, right, that we care for people, you know? I think our Pentecostal brothers and sisters, they care for people very well. You know, Baptists aren't the first people to walk down the Bible path, you know?

In fact, you know, we think of like Anglicans, Presbyterians, there are lots of faithful denominations where people open the Bible and treat it seriously. But I want to suggest to you the religious freedom path is one that, as a Baptist church, we can proudly walk along because actually it is one of the defining features of being Baptist.

[6 : 51] It's a key part of our heritage. Baptists were kind of born out of this desire to worship freely, right? To worship in a willing sort of way, not in a way that was imposed on us, not in a way that was forced.

And so, today I want to show you from Scripture, from the Bible, and also just through history as well, how the religious freedom path came from Scripture and then how, right, it worked through history and how it can make a difference for you and I today, right?

And so, I'm just going to break it up into three parts. It's more about the free gospel, I'm going to talk about the free church, and then we'll think about what it looks like until Jesus comes back. And let's think about the free gospel.

This is where we journey through the whole Bible to see what it says about the free gospel. What's this picture represent? Anyone, anyone know? Yep.

Garden of Eden, okay? Beautiful picture of a beautiful situation. At creation, our first parents, they were made in God's image, right? That's what it says in Genesis chapter 1.

[8 : 00] And right from the beginning, they were given a choice, weren't they? Right? It wasn't just two robots put into the garden, right? This is no AI story. They were given a choice to freely obey God's good word for them.

You can eat all of this. There's a garden of yes, but don't choose the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But then we know what happens in the story, don't we? All right?

Genesis chapter 3. It's the first religious freedom choice in biblical history. And it's a disaster to choose to disobey God, to choose to take out the fruit.

That disobedience brings death, corruption to the world. And then the Bible story goes on and on, doesn't it? But all throughout the Bible, this issue of freedom of worship pops up over and over again.

I mean, think about it, right? You know the story of the Exodus, right? Moses says, let my people go. And then finally, Pharaoh relents and he is able to bring them to across the Red Sea.

[9 : 08] And there's a scene, right? Straight after that, soon after that, where God speaks to his people through Moses and he says, I'm the Lord your God, Exodus chapter 20, who brought you

out of slavery in Egypt.

And then so he says, don't choose other gods before me in a sense. And then later on, okay, when Moses is old and gray, he's about to pass away, he has to then tell this, bring this choice again to a new generation of people.

and he says to them, look, there's been a promise from God, right? A promise to you a land to live in and he set before you life and death.

Now choose life so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice and hold fast to him. That's Deuteronomy chapter 30, verse 19 to 20.

You see that, right? God's people always given a choice to obey him, worship him freely. And you know what? Even when God's people Israel disobeyed, just like we do, and even when they chose other gods to worship time and time again, God, the way he worked through the Bible history, he chooses to be faithful, doesn't he?

[10:25] He continues to give his people the choice to follow him. And so it's no surprise when God's son, Jesus, enters our world, right? One of the first things he says as he begins his ministry, he says, that there is a choice.

The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, right? So here's the choice. You need to repent and believe in the gospel. Can you see that? You see, the good news is an announcement that you choose to believe.

The good news is not, you know, a tradition that is forced on you or imposed. Some of you obviously know that I've been traveling, right?

Here's some travel photos, just all kinds of fun things in a city like London. That's Ian, by the way, just in the top, so it was nice to have lunch with him on one of the Sundays.

And I stopped by the Buckingham Palace. The king was not there, but there were all kinds of other interesting things as well. As I was kind of like, you know, journaling around, one day I walked like 20,000 steps around the city.

[11:31] As I was just walking around the city, there were heaps of churches, right? But most of them were from the Church of England. And so it dawned on me that actually in Europe, right, and actually in lots of places in the world, so much of church history, right, has been shaped by a state religion.

It's not unique to Europe as well. Actually, there are many, many countries where there is only one religion, right? If you go to Bhutan, right, the only religion that is allowed is Buddhism, for example, a specific kind.

Yeah, but there I was walking around London, right, and it's the Church of England all around me. When I went to Portugal, there was the Roman Catholic Church just surrounding me as well.

We'll talk a little bit more about the church history in a moment, but I want you to imagine right, just imagine that tomorrow there was a government announcement from the New Zealand government, right, and maybe our prime minister stands up and says, we've now passed a law that there's only one church and all of you belong to it.

I want you to think about that, right, a law's just been passed and there's only one church and you all belong to it. Turn to the person next to you, talk to them, just quick reaction, is it a good thing or a bad thing?

[13:02] Okay, who says good thing that there's only one church and everyone belongs to it? Who says, hmm, that's a problem, that's a bad thing? Okay, all right.

Yeah, I think I would agree with you. I think there is a problem behind that because it would just make a whole bunch of people Christians by name only, right?

And that's not what we want. That's not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that genuine repentance and faith, turning away from sin, trusting in Jesus, is a personal decision, something that is freely decided by each person, not something that your parents decide for you, not something that your local MP can decide for you.

But don't misunderstand me, of course. The freedom path that we are talking about, it's not a freedom from any obligation or authority. For those of you who have chosen to follow Jesus, you now follow a new master, right?

the king of the heavens who now rules your life, who now shapes your decisions. You see, the freedom path is a freedom to follow Christ, a freedom to choose Jesus and to live for him as your Lord and Savior.

[14:16] And so, if you're not a Christian here yet, today, that is an invitation that is extended to you as well. Because God did not make you a robot. No.

But he did so love you and the whole world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes will not perish but have eternal life.

Because in our freedom, sadly, all of us, every single human being has chosen to lie, chosen to steal. In our freedom, we have dishonored our parents.

In our freedom, we have hurt and belittled our children. In our freedom, we've chosen not to love our neighbor when we could have. In our freedom, we've chosen not to pray or ignored someone's hurts.

And all these choices that we make in life, willing choices, the Bible calls sin. And because the wages of sin is death, eternal death, we need a Savior.

[15:20] We need someone who can freely reverse all the hurt that we've done through our choices. And the good news is this, right? Jesus Christ willingly chose to die for you as a sinless substitute.

And His death on the cross, His resurrection three days later, frees you now from being a slave to your own sins. So the first step in walking the freedom path is to be free yourself.

To look to Jesus, to choose life in Him. You can do that today. Galatians 5, verse 1 puts it this way, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

Do you believe this? If so, then you have a choice to choose life and not death. To step away from your failures and regrets and to stand firm freely in Christ's death for you.

This is the gospel freely offered to you. And you know what? When the earliest believers, right, the church, they truly understood this good news, the Holy Spirit set hearts on fire.

[16:30] Thousands of moments like Alexis talked about, right, just filled with the warmth and love of God. But, multiplied to so many levels more.

What was born on Pentecost in AD 33 was a free church. So let me talk a little bit about this free church. Okay. Someone here know how old PCBC is?

By any chance? Okay. Who knows when this church was started, you know, roughly. Okay. Earlier, you know, from before most of you were born, all right?

But, okay. Anyone? I'll give you a clue that sign over there, that blue one says 30 years and that was, you know, not last year, it was a few years ago. Okay.

Any guesses? Okay, 93, good. Okay, that makes us, what, 33? Okay, right, we're 33 years old.

Okay, good. All right, so, church, we're 33 years old, we're getting closer to a midlife crisis.

[17:31] Hey, praise God, though, that, you know, not our church, but the church, universal, is not just 33 years old, the church, universal, is nearly 2,000 years old.

And you know what, when it began, the early church walked the freedom path, right? They worshiped, finally free from the laws and traditions of all the religious rules that the Pharisees and others had been weighing down on the people.

And what was the result? We see that in Acts chapter 2, 47. They were praising God, they were enjoying the favor of all the people, and the Lord was adding daily to their numbers, those who were being saved.

What an incredible picture, right? The free church. And if you read through the rest of the book of Acts, and you're welcome to, you get to see how the church grew from just a little pocket of people in Judea, spread then to Samaria, spreads then to the ends of the earth.

And this is all despite persecution and pressure. Here is a church that grows, the word spreads. But what happens is that as new populations, people groups, countries, start to turn to Jesus, one particular method of turning people to Jesus starts to, I think, cause problems.

[18:46] We talked about, right, you know, if the prime minister said, tomorrow, everyone, you know, is part of one church. We thought that might be a problem. Well, that actually happened through Christian history.

Firstly, in 312, okay, the Roman emperor, Constantine, he announces his allegiance. He switched sides. He's now a Christian, he says. But then only a hundred years later, right, in the fifth century, emperors down the line in the Roman Empire, they start to say, well, since we're Christians, there should be no other ways to worship.

So, he actually bans the worship of other Roman gods throughout the empire. Now, if you're a Christian, maybe, you know, you work in ministry, you bet, yay, less competition, right?

It sounds good at first, but you know what? Actually, over time, as this now one church gains more and more power, gains more and more wealth, this Roman Catholic church becomes a force for good, but also for much evil as well.

And so, actually, by the time we reach the 16th century in Europe, there's a monk, his name is Martin Luther, and, you know, no relation, of course, Martin, he nails 95 statements, right, sentences to the door of his church, and he's trying to protest, look, this is what's happened to the church.

[20 : 16] You're doing all these things that are not what the Bible says. And it sparks something called the Protestant Reformation. And there's big debates, there's actually wars as, you know, whole regions of Europe start to pick sides.

But what happens is this, you know, the church in Rome is no longer the one church. Again, right? Ordinary people, they're not forced to just believe what the church in Rome says or not to worship in a particular way.

But then the question then became this, what kind of Christianity should the whole population now go to, look to? And so, for many rulers throughout Western Europe, the answer was to create a new church.

They called it the Protestant Church or the Lutheran Church. Across to England, right, there was actually a new church born, right, called the Church of England, right?

So this guy, Henry VIII, he wanted to have more than one wife and all kinds of not so good things. And as a result, he decided to create his own church. But this Church of England, right, began in 1534, but in the 17th century, 1606, then requires all the priests and ministers of the land to use the Anglican, right, the Church of England's liturgy and teaching.

[21 : 38] So in other words, it's saying, here's a book you must now all worship throughout England using this book and nothing else, okay? Right? No worship leader praying about, okay, what songs to choose.

No, you just go to the book, yeah, right? In fact, I wouldn't even have to write a sermon because I just pick up one of 24 sermons to read to you on a given Sunday. And it was actually early Baptists, Baptists like John Smith, Thomas Helwis, who were the first to argue, again, that faith and baptism and following Jesus should be a willing, free choice.

These are our forefathers, right? All right, Thomas Helwis put it this way, okay? This is a bit of a quote, but I hope you can kind of get the gist of it. I'll just read it out and I'll give you a TLDR version. All right, for men's religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it, neither may the king be judged between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, or Muslims is what he means, Jews, or whatever it appertains, not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.

This is made evident by our Lord the King by the scriptures. In other words, it's what Jesus said, right? Give to Caesar what is Caesar's.

[22 : 59] Give to God what is God's. Right? Our governments, our ruling authorities, they can look after us in lots of different ways, but when it comes to who I worship, that's a decision for me and God.

God gives us earthly rulers to maintain peace and order in our society, and they do a great job, right? Most of the time. But all things religious is not for a king or a prime minister or president to command and control because a free gospel can only come from a free church.

And so let me break it down to you like this. If you value the privilege of deciding to follow Jesus, that is something that actually Baptists fought for and actually died for, many of them.

If you and I, we appreciate how different cultures and faiths can actually live alongside each other, we can appreciate each other at work without arresting them or killing them, that's something that Baptists have helped us to understand together because of the many brothers and sisters who walked the freedom path before us.

That's the free church, and that is one thing that we have our Baptist ancestors to thank. I think there's two implications when it comes to the fact that the church is free.

[24 : 22] If the church truly is free, then firstly, we need to use our freedom and not waste it. We need to use our freedom to share the gospel, to make Christ known to others.

I mean, here in New Zealand, maybe we're starting to feel the pressure and cost of following Jesus. I get it. All right? Sometimes you even don't want to tell people you're a Christian because you're

afraid that they'll make fun of you.

And yet there's going to come a time maybe that you might actually get into more trouble than just a funny remark. Church, will we be known as a family that's passionate about using our freedom to share the good news of Jesus?

Or are we going to be sadly squandering, wasting our opportunity to make Christ know why we can do that? All right? That's one implication. If we're a free church, let's freely share the gospel.

Secondly, if we're a free church, then we must speak up for freedom of worship for all kinds of people and all kinds of faiths.

[25 : 31] I mean, we get it, right? So we're very naturally disposed to, oh, wow, okay, our brothers and sisters in Nigeria, they're getting persecuted and bombed and attacked. We feel for them. All right?

And we speak up sometimes. But actually, this is also true. If a terrorist murders people who are worshipping in a mosque in Christ's church, it should be Christians that speak up and say, no, that's not right either.

Right? We are free to be church. They are also free to worship. It's not imposed on them. For them to come to Jesus, it needs to be a willing choice.

Right? Because religious freedom for Christians means we actually support religious freedoms for all people made in God's image. We cannot force people to follow Jesus.

Rather, God's promise is this. He will draw all peoples to himself. And the way he'll do it is through us willingly sharing the good news and inviting people to freely choose him.

[26 : 32] You see that? Right? You see that? That's what the freedom path looks like. And it looks like this until Jesus comes back. And maybe at this point you're still wondering, wow, okay, I've got a church history lesson, I've got a Bible lesson, but how does this relate to me when I go to school, go to work tomorrow?

I just want to, again, ask you to imagine what your dream church should be. Okay? Take a moment, right? Imagine if you could just have your perfect church experience. What would it look like?

And now imagine someone really interrupts your dream and then says, well, next week you're going to worship at this time. Next week you're going to have to worship in this way.

In fact, these are the instruments that you are approved to use when you worship together. And you need to read these words and only these words when you worship. That sounds terrible, doesn't it?

Praise God that's not our experience. Praise God that the freedom path has been walked and we get to walk down this path. We get to choose how to worship here at English Service and our other congregations when we meet up with other brothers and sisters when we use different languages.

[27 : 46] Praise God that we have the freedom to do that, right? Praise God we have the freedom to use our different gifts here as a church family. Right? Thank you Lord that we can sing God's word, we can pray his word, we can listen to it, live it out with all kinds of different ways.

And praise God that one day Jesus will return and then wow the freedom of worship there, right?

That mass gathering, that group of people that no one can count from every tribe, tongue, nation, language all freely worshipping the Lord.

No barriers. and until Jesus returns we're freely able to follow him and we're freely able to advocate, support others to do the same.

And so I wonder if you want to walk along the freedom path then. Would you take a walk along this path? The Baptist World Alliance is actually inviting one million Baptists to sign their covenant of religious freedom.

Sounds like some sort of wedding vows, but why don't you look it up online? See what it says, right? And see if you support okay the language of this text, right?

[29 : 00] The language of this covenant and saying well I support the freedom of worship for people all around the world. Maybe that's one way you can take a walk along the freedom path. Or maybe you could go for a run along the freedom path, right?

I mean can you think of someone in your friends or family that doesn't worship Christianity? Maybe they have another faith.

Maybe you can join them or join others to build relationships, right? To break down barriers. As we prayed earlier, this is Ramadan. It's a very important month for many, many people in Auckland.

And wouldn't it be great if we took an interest? Even if we don't believe what they believe, we say, I'd love to know more about why you take part in Ramadan. What does it mean for you?

Or, I don't know, anyone have friends who are Jewish? Yeah? Imagine how hard it is for them right now, living in such a tense environment, you know, after the Bondi shootings.

[30 : 06] Maybe you can talk to them, ask them, how can I support you and your families in worshipping without feeling pressure to worship and safety.

Maybe that is what it could look like for you, running along the freedom path, encouraging others, building bridges to those who don't share our faith. Or maybe you could soar along the freedom path because maybe you have the resources and means to support prayerfully and in finance people who are persecuted for following Jesus.

Our church actually supports Open Doors. it's a ministry to and for the persecuted church and so maybe that's something you might want to look up and consider, right? Not just praying for the brothers and sisters who are persecuted in places like North Korea, Iran and so on, but actually maybe investing in their freedom, investing in supporting them.

Maybe you could be soaring on the freedom path as well. Whatever way you walk or run or soar along the freedom path, remember, we do so because Jesus is Lord.

We do so because just as the gospel is an invitation to you to freely worship Christ, a free church, a free country is worth supporting and defending everywhere until King Jesus returns.

[31 : 26] Let's pray for a moment. Father, we thank you so much that it is for freedom that you've set us free and we ask that you would help us stand firm and the promises of the good news of Jesus.

Even as we continue to worship in response, as we move into a time of remembering the Lord's Supper, thank you for the freedom to do all this without coercion, without pressure, without any barriers that might hinder us from worshipping you in spirit and in truth.

We give thanks, Lord, and we ask for your blessing on our continued worship. In Jesus' name, amen.