

- As Americans we tend to be proud of the freedoms we enjoy in this country. We often brag about ourselves on the world stage of being a “free” people.
- When we do, we’re generally referring to our right to do so many things without hindrance that people in other countries might not be able to do.
- And that we enjoy such freedoms is a good thing, for the dignity of our human nature demands self-determination. Simply being human means that we should be able to choose freely in the various aspects of how we live our lives.
- In fact, human freedom is of such importance that our Lord Himself refuses to trespass against it – even when a man chooses to use his freedom in a terribly sinful way that impinges upon the rights and freedoms of others.
- Just think for a moment about the worst characters in human history, men who have been responsible for the deaths of thousands and even millions of other people: Stalin, Hitler, Hussein, and bin Laden, to name just a few in our own age.
- Despite the terrible, unthinkable evils these men committed, God did not impinge upon their freedom to act as they did – so important, so vital, so precious as human freedom is. And why is this? Why did God not intervene to stop their evil?
- It’s because without true freedom to act, we cannot truly love God. Love is a choice that we make, and choosing requires freedom. If God mitigated our human freedom to force us to love and obey Him, then we wouldn’t really be loving Him at all, would we?
- Yet, freedom – properly understood – is not an unbridled license to do as we will, but rather the more perfect choice to do what is true, and good, and beautiful. Christian freedom, properly understood, is not license, but rather an exercise of virtue.
- Freedom, understood in a Christian sense, is the capacity to do what is right and follow God’s will by humbly obeying His commandments. As Sirach tells us today, God gives no man license to sin.
- And this gets at the most important choice that ever faces man: the choice to love and obey God, or not. For on this most fundamental of choices depends our very salvation.
- Think of the words of Sirach in our first reading today: “Before man are life and death, good and evil, whichever he chooses shall be given him.”
- In this, we see that our salvation is determined not so much by God’s judgment, but by our own free choice to love and obey Him, or not. God’s judgment upon our souls when we meet Him face to face is really the ratification of the choices we make here on earth.
- One of the evil fruits of original sin is the tendency for man to turn in upon himself, to sate his base desires and to give free reign to his passions.
- Disguised as good because they are pleasurable, it is easy for man to fall prey to the lie that sinful behaviors will satisfy us and make us happy. Yet when we give free reign to our vices and partake of their poison fruit, do they not quickly enslave us?
- And once we are enslaved by sin, it becomes all the more difficult to choose to do what is right, what is good, what is noble – thus putting our salvation into jeopardy.
- Certainly, who of us hasn’t had the experience of being tempted to sin in some way, knowing that the sin was wrong and truly not wanting to commit it, but ended up sinning anyway? And how many people today struggle with unwanted addictions?

- That's the slavery of sin at work in our lives. And the more we give in to sin, the harder it becomes to choose against it and the more pitiable we become. So, we must crucify that old man within us, that the sinfulness within us may be overcome.
- Fortunately, the ability to choose always remains with us – at least to some degree. And our Lord always remains merciful and willing to take us back.
- But make no mistake, though our will retains some amount of free choice, choosing to do God's will when we are habitually in mortal sin can be extremely difficult.
- This is the reason God has given us His commandments: His commandments protect us from slavery to our senses. His commandments protect our ability to act freely! Again, as Sirach tells us: "If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you."
- And Sirach is absolutely right. Living as God commands us to live saves us from slavery to a life of sin. Living by God's laws keeps us free to do what is true, and good, and beautiful.
- Because so many people equate the notion of freedom with license to do as one wills, the Church is oft-seen as an enemy of human freedom because of our moral teachings place very specific parameters around things like marriage and human sexuality.
- Yet, the moral laws and teachings of the Church should never be seen as restrictions to our human freedom, but rather as guardrails that keep us on track and help prevent us from harming ourselves. They are gifts from God!
- Does anyone ever complain that we have stoplights that tell us when it's safe to cross the street? Of course not! Our moral teachings are like stoplights in that they tell us when it's okay to proceed or not to proceed so that we don't hurt ourselves or others.
- Ponder for a moment the words of our Lord in today's Gospel: "Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven."
- God isn't kidding here, folks. He's deadly earnest.
- So, as we consider our readings today, we have to ask ourselves how we view God's commandments. Do we see them as a burden or as a hindrance to our personal happiness?
- And if we're striving to follow the commandments, are we doing so slavishly, only out of fear of hell? Or do we understand our obedience to God's law as a means of loving Him?
- Ultimately, as we consider our human freedom vis-à-vis God's commandments, we have to ask ourselves: am I living my life for God or for myself?
- Brothers and sisters, carried to its final end, our free will is our capacity to love God above all else, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. It's an incredible gift!
- To use our free will to commit sin is an abuse of this gift. It's a matter of loving ourselves more than God. It's a matter of living for ourselves rather than for God.
- But when we choose to love God above ourselves and to unite our wills to His by obeying His commandments, we are given something much greater than whatever pleasure we experience by sinning: we are given joy and even peace.
- May we each resolve today to be faithful to the commandments of God to the best of our ability, and beg pardon for the times we fail, and thereby enjoy the fruits of exercising true Christian freedom, which is not only joy and peace in this life, but in the next life as well!