



Living Free of Guilt and Shame

There's an old story about an Arab ruler who offered convicted prisoners of war a choice. Captives whom a tribunal had already determined to be guilty of heinous crimes would be marched into the commander's tent for sentencing.

Each condemned man was given the choice of a firing squad or a dark and foreboding door in the back of his tent.

Time after time, with few exceptions, virtually everyone chose the firing squad—it seemed no one ever chose the door.

One day, after yet another condemned man died at the hands of the firing squad, his trusted aide asked the commander, "What's behind the mysterious doorway at the back of your tent? It's almost never chosen by prisoners."

The commander explained, "That's the door to freedom. By the time these condemned men appear before me for sentencing, most of them have already given up—they have accepted their damnation. I've only known a few courageous souls brave enough to accept my offer and walk through that door."

A few months ago, a friend of mine asked me to provide my response to a project she was working on. Peggy Andrews lives with her husband David and family in the beautiful Twin Cities of Minnesota. As a part of her "blog" Peggy asked a number of people to summarize the central focus of the last few decades of their lives in six words.

It was a great time to pause and think—and before we talk about my response, why don't you join me?

Let me pass on Peggy's invitation to summarize the center and core of your life—in six words. Before reading another word (assuming you have made it this far into my column!) describe, in six words, the major life lesson of the last decade or two of your life.

When you have your six-word summary, come back, and we'll compare notes.

My Six-Word Summary

Here's the six-word summary I emailed to Peggy—a modified, condensed version of Romans 8:1: "...there is no condemnation in Christ."

No condemnation in Christ means living free. No spiritual debts or debtors. All debts cancelled—no power can intimidate you, bully you, email you, text you or phone you and strike terror in your heart by blackmailing you about your past.

No condemnation means you are no longer a hostage of any power of any kind.

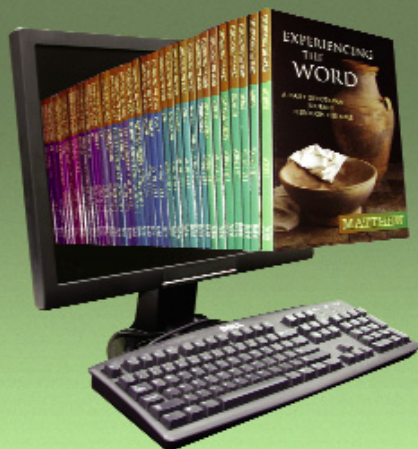
No condemnation means being free of guilt and shame. Living free in Christ means rejecting controlling individuals and agencies, be they corporations or churches—that do their best to lock you up in a spiritual straitjacket.

Please forgive the gruesome example, but many of you know I'm not overstating reality—living free in Christ means refusing to allow religious authorities to subject you to spiritual water-boarding, in the name of God (see Matthew 10:17).

Living free in Christ means living by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). No condemnation. Freedom to be who God wants you to be, as Christ lives his life in you. That's part of what it means to live in God's presence. He has taken our condemnation and offered us the Door.

Of course, the doorway that leads to freedom is a challenge. It's the road not taken—the narrow path of grace that Jesus described in Matthew 7:13-14.

The doorway to freedom in Christ entails absolute and total faith and trust in him. The doorway to freedom in Christ means being willing to surrender the mirage of certainty and dogmatism that religion offers, and instead to walk in faith with the Lord of your life.



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Living free means choosing life in him, and letting go of religious powers and pretenders that attempt to buffalo you into subjection, seeking to intimidate and control you with your guilt and shame. The doorway to freedom in Christ means unreservedly trusting in the Good Shepherd, knowing his voice and following him (John 10:11,14-15).

Now hold on! I didn't say I have arrived. It's been almost 20 years since I chose the door to freedom, but in all honesty, I have to tell you I didn't burst through that door like Superman.

My choice of Christ over religion came one cautious baby step at a time. Like a worm, I crawled through the door of grace inch by inch.

There are still times when my guilt does its best to recapture me with its shame-based shackles.

I admit it. I have times of doubt when I crave the certainty of the

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firing squad of legalism that I know instead of the unknown life of faith that lies behind the Door (John 10:7,9 NKJV).

I can completely identify with the Israelites who were given their freedom by God, but then became ready to give that freedom back in return for the comfortable, guaranteed, three-square-meals a day religious bondage of their Egyptian taskmasters.

Paul's words ring so true to me—I certainly have not "made it"—I haven't arrived—but because of my Lord my Shepherd I know I am assured of reaching my destination. Therefore I continue to walk with Jesus.

Paul said, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have

already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Philippians 3:12).

I know that I haven't delivered myself from the bogs of doubt and despair, and I know that I can easily fall back into the quicksand and swamps of ignominy and disgrace.

I also know since the "Lord is my light...whom shall I fear?" (Psalm 27:1). We will all have those dark times as long we are in this flesh—times of doubt and despair, times when we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death as every menacing enemy, real and imagined, does its best to terrorize us.

Would You Believe a Five-Word Summary?

Let me provide another challenge, taking a page from Peggy. I suggest a five-word summary that, for me, accurately describes the focus God provides those who put their trust in him—*Christ-centered, and grace-based*.

Living free of condemnation means that Christ Jesus:

- Occupies center stage in our lives,
- Defines our hopes and our dreams,
- Provides the measurement by which we assess our direction,
- Represents the benchmark and cornerstone of the life we lead,
- Illuminates, as our Light, the journey of our lives,
- Constantly is there for us, next to us, with us, as the Lord our Shepherd.

Which will it be for you? The firing squad of religious dogma that effectively turns you into a religious dead man walking, or the Door to freedom—Jesus Christ—who alone can give you his risen life?

There is no condemnation in Christ. Accept God's grace. Walk through the Door—walk with him.

Live free of guilt and shame. □

—Greg Albrecht