

The Last Human Freedom

“The last of the human freedoms is to choose one’s attitude.”

So wrote Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist who survived the Holocaust, living through the deprivation and horrors of both Auschwitz and Dachau.



Consider the background for his writing about freedom.

His wife, parents and brother were killed by the Nazis. His captors imprisoned him with barbed wire. They assigned him his lice-infected bed. They gave him one set of striped prison clothes. They allowed him no menu options, just a crust of bread and watered-down soup.

They told him when to wake up, when to work and when to sleep. They controlled all his relationships and restricted his speech, severely punishing the slightest disrespect or opposition.

They took away every freedom a person can have ... except for one. They could not force their way into his mind and take away his freedom to choose his attitude toward his circumstances and his life. That was his and his alone to control.

The same is true for you and me, especially with the much smaller struggles we face.

Your difficult spouse cannot control your attitude. But you can.

Your rebellious teen cannot control your attitude. But you can.

Your ungrateful supervisor cannot control your attitude. But you can.

You and you alone will choose whether you will be hopeful or despairing today. Thankful or grumbling. Cheerful or miserable. Patient or irritable. Encouraging or critical. Kind or harsh. The list of choices goes on and on.

Yes, it's hard to choose a positive attitude in the face of difficult circumstances or hurtful relationships. But with God's help, you can choose an attitude that reveals his presence and power in your life.

That's what Paul and Silas did in Philippi. After offending some merchants, they were severely flogged and thrown into prison, with their feet fastened in stocks (*Acts 16:23-24*). Every freedom taken away ... except the freedom to choose their attitude in the face of brutal persecution. What did they choose?

They chose to pray for God's grace, which he poured out so lavishly that they overflowed with singing and praise, and a gospel sermon resulting in salvation for their jailer and his family (*Acts 16:25-34*).

You can draw on the same grace and choose a similar attitude today. If you dwell much on Jesus and his gospel, as Paul did, you can choose to be hopeful, thankful, cheerful, patient, encouraging and kind, no matter what your circumstances may be.

Doing so will impact every relationship in your life. It will impact how you view and engage God, how you view and engage yourself, how you view and engage the people around you (also known as *the SOG Plan*).

Most importantly, choosing to remember your identity in Christ, even in the midst of challenging circumstances, will give rise to an attitude of faith and hope, which will in turn reveal the life-giving and life-changing presence of Jesus Christ in your life.

– Ken Sande

Reflection questions:

- What enabled the apostle Paul to be content in every circumstance of life? (*Phil. 4:11-13*)
- What attitude does God call us to choose when we are experiencing hardship or injustice? (*Psalm 37*)
- How can an increased awareness of Jesus' attitude impact our relationship with the people around us? (*Phil. 2:1-11*)
- Both the Psalms and personal experience show that life sometimes involves real pain, grieving, and sorrow. What do the Psalms teach us about honestly experiencing and expressing that suffering, while still maintaining an attitude of faith and hope? (*Psalm 73; Psalm 102*)

For more guidance on how to improve your relational wisdom, see *Discover RW*.

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Acts 16:23-34

²³ After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. ²⁴ Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. ²⁷ The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved –you and your household." ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴ The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family.

Philippians 4:11-13

¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Philippians 2:1-11

¹ If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

⁵ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

⁷ but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death –
even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.