

6th Sunday of Ordinary Time
February 16th 2020

Theonomy and True Freedom

I want to talk with you today about how we discover true freedom. To do so, I want to begin by discussing with you three words. They are:

1. Heteronomy
2. Autonomy
3. Theonomy

Now let me unpack each of these in turn. Heteronomy comes from two words: hetero, meaning other, and nomos, meaning law. Heteronomy therefore means the “law outside of me”. Think about this in relation now to young children. In childhood heteronomy is the guiding principle of a little person’s life. Mom and dad set the guidelines and structure their children’s lives with very clear directives. Bedtime, bath time, dinner time and what will be eaten are given a clear direction by the law outside of the child, what we call heteronomy. Now of course this law outside of ourselves is something we also have to observe as adults. There are rules that we follow when driving, expectations as to how employers are to treat employees. Directions governments gives as to how much tax we owe and when we have to pay it. These are all examples of heteronomy.

However heteronomy can run amuck when exercised in homes where the law is so strict that it stifles the growth and development of the children and is characterized by households of fear. The same can be said of the State, where authority becomes authoritarian resulting in the citizens living in fear of those representing the governing bodies.

Now what about autonomy? This is a word we are more familiar with. “Auto” means “self” and so autonomy means a law unto one’s self. Think about this in relation to children as they reach the adolescent years. They want increasing degrees of autonomy because they are aware that they are separate from their parents as they go through developmental stages where they need to explore the world that will at times require trial and error. As children grow into early adulthood, there is a separation that happens from parents where they are entrusted with greater freedom. But there can be a problem with autonomy. It can lead to adults who are immature because they claim to be a law unto themselves. Within modern philosophy autonomy has resulted in the principle of voluntarism that while an unfamiliar term is a popular life philosophy.

Voluntarism says that the will is so powerful that it trumps truth and it trumps being. What finally matters is the sovereignty and omnipotence of will. I decide what to do. Go to Jean Paul Sartre, the French atheist philosopher of the mid 20th century. He famously said existence precedes essence. This means that my freedom comes first and it’s so absolute that I determine who I am.¹

¹ <https://wordonfire.institute/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/TheologyBalthasar-Lesson7-Transcript.pdf>

But this is not the Christian understanding of freedom. And this is where the word theonomy comes into the conversation. *Theos Nomos* means that God is the norm, God is the law. What this teaches is that at the heart of discovering true freedom is to attain to the higher freedom that is directed by God and towards God. In this understanding of the will, it is not about doing whatever I want but rather to seek the highest good. A good that is established by God and has God as its ultimate goal.

Now let me use an everyday example to make my point. Think of a person deciding to get out of bed in the morning. It's an act of the will. I'm going to get out of bed and start my day. Okay, why do you want that? Well because I have to get to work. Well why do you have to get to work? Well that's how I get money. Well why do you want money? Well I want to support my family. Well why do you want to support your family? Well because if I support my family, then they're going to be able to flourish. Well, why do you want them to flourish? Because I love them and that will make them happy and making them happy makes me happy and I, in fact, want to be happy all the time. Now see what I have done here? I've taken a very particular act of the will, getting out of bed in the morning, and finely situated it within the context of the ultimate happiness. The ultimate good.

In this example I haven't said anything about the meaningfulness of the work for which a person may have trained for many years. That would lead to a whole other sequence of the will being governed by a higher good motivating me to get out of bed in the morning,

Now how should the will be ordered to our ultimate good? The Catechism of the Catholic Church gives a clear answer in its opening sentence in paragraph 1:

God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life.²

How will we discover true freedom? When we learn to respond to God's sheer goodness by responding to his invitation to share in his own blessed life. This is theonomy.

Now let's see how theonomy plays out in our Old Testament reading from Sirach and Psalm 119. Sirach and the Psalms are taken from the part of the Bible called the Wisdom Literature and details how we can live wisely when governed by the principle of theonomy. In Sirach we read this:

***If you choose, you can keep the commandments,
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.***

***¹⁶ He has placed before you fire and water;
stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.***

¹⁷ Before each person are life and death,

² Catholic Church. (2000). [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#) (2nd Ed., p. 7). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

*and whichever one chooses will be given.*³

Do you hear the choice offered to us here? We can choose either theonomy or autonomy. Four times in three verses we have the words choose, choice, choose and chooses. And what can we choose? Well, fire or water, life and death. And whichever we choose, that is autonomy or theonomy as the governing principle of our lives, we will be given. Listen to how Sirach next affirms the guidance God gives to the person who chooses to set his or her will on the highest good - to share in God's own blessed life.

*For great is the wisdom of the Lord;
he is mighty in power and sees everything;
19 his eyes are on those who fear him,
and he knows every human action.
20 He has not commanded anyone to be wicked,
and he has not given anyone permission to sin.*⁴

While God has not given us the permission to sin nor directed us to be wicked we can choose to avoid God and set our own selfish and willful desires on the way of autonomy. Or we can view God in the more restrictive framework of heteronomy. We could say that this is what was represented by the Pharisees of Jesus time and reactionary forms of Catholicism that can become very legalistic. But when we choose the way of theonomy listen to how our Psalm for today echoes the reading from Sirach.

*Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD!
2 Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
who seek him with their whole heart,*⁵

*Deal bountifully with your servant,
that I may live and observe your word.
18 Open my eyes, that I may behold
wondrous things out of your law.*⁶
³³ *Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes;*

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Sir 15:15–17). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Sir 15:18–20). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁵ [*The Holy Bible*](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Ps 119:1–2). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

⁶ [*The Holy Bible*](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Ps 119:17–18). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

and I will keep it to the end.
³⁴ Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart. ⁷

Do you hear the wonder of the psalmist who in this longest of psalms (177 verses) celebrates the freedom of the person who is learning to live by the principle of theonomy.

Each day we have a choice to make. Will we see God's law as something imposed on us like the heteronomy perspective, will we see that we are a law unto ourselves and so live an autonomous life or will we discover more fully the way of theonomy. Where our will is directed to the highest good, to share in God's blessed life and so discover true freedom.

⁷ [The Holy Bible](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Ps 119:33–34). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.