

Freedom From Sin

Last week I began this series about freedom in Christ. Ask most anyone you meet if they think freedom is a good thing and they will say “yes.” There is something inherent in each of us that desires freedom. None one wants to live in bondage.

As I read and study the Bible it seems to me we can discern two types of freedom: 1) freedom given by God to every human to make choices about their lives - “natural freedom;” 2) freedom from the bondage of sin (which is also God-given) through the grace of Jesus Christ - “spiritual freedom.” These two freedoms are related and actually intertwined with each other.

The first type of freedom has its roots in the creation and God’s original intentions for humanity, and it seems to be in our DNA ... a desire for personal freedom. The second type of freedom is the result of receiving God’s remedy for humanity’s abuse of the first freedom. Christians realize that a freedom more costly and more valuable than our natural freedom is found in that second type of freedom. It is a freedom given us through Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins.

Today I want to spend a little more time talking about that ... because the Bible does. Freedom from the bondage to sin, which is talked about so much in the Bible, is essential to living as the free and whole persons God has designed us to be, and it also underlies all other freedoms

Seriously, There Is Sin

Someone once said that human sinfulness is the only philosophical concept readily on display every day in the news. Sin is simply our distance from God which causes brokenness, selfishness, and wicked behavior in humans. It is pervasive and insidious. This is a hard truth for many to understand because ... well because who wants their foibles and evil deeds pointed out? When bad things happen, most people are pretty good at blaming anyone or anything but themselves. Even Christians often do not realize how pervasive is sin in their lives. We may have the freedom of travel and opportunity and association that we’ve been blessed with in this nation, but many still do not recognize how much of a grip sin has on their lives. And this, in turn, to a greater or lesser degree, influences how every person lives. It is sin that causes people to abuse their God-given freedom. People (like you and me) make choices about their lives without reference to God and often without any concern for others. That’s what sin is: living apart from God and God’s design for us. How much influence does God have on your life choices?

Even when we realize that we want God in our lives, sin tugs at us to turn away from Him. That’s why the Bible says we are in bondage to sin and

therefore not really free. *For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out,* Romans 7:18.

For several weekends 'Ofa and I dug and dug to reach a broken sprinkler pipe. It took that long because of the mass of roots we had to get through. We found a knot of roots, many wrapped around one another and grown together forming a mass that had pushed the pipe to its breaking point. It reminded me of how the web of sin and presses down on you and me.

Of course, some people don't see it this way. They're more optimistic about human nature - believing that humans are basically good. Optimism has some superficial resemblance to Christian faith, but it has no root. It is really a counterfeit: it ignores the realities of our situation; that is, how far we have fallen into sin and how deep and wide is the distance humanity is from a holy God. Optimism produces a bland Christianity described by American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr in the 1930's - "A God without wrath brought man without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of Christ without a cross."

Some say they don't do really bad stuff, like murder, rape, carjacking, genocide and the like. Look at it this way: the distance between your sins of cutting corners, maybe lying now and then, not caring much about others, ignoring God, that distance from murder and rape seems very great. And in the eyes of the law of society it is very great. But seen from the distance of God's holiness, the distance between our petty sins and gross immorality looks miniscule. That's why Jesus said: *But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart,* Matt. 5:28. The point is sin is sin, and from small sins arise great sins ... all of it is a fallenness from God's holy intentions for us.

It is really only when you lose your optimism about the inherent goodness of humanity and your own well-intentioned efforts, that you will begin see the need for a savior. *Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,* John 8:32. Knowing the truth about ourselves - that we are indeed sinners, shackled by bonds of sin that prevent us from living as God so designed - is the first step toward freedom. No serious view of the blessing of God is possible without recognizing the radical fallenness of humanity. Only the merit of Christ is sufficient to remove the guilt of the tangled history of personal and social sin.¹

I don't say all these things to heap guilt upon anyone or oppress them with the knowledge of how sinful they really are. In fact, these words are a reminder to me. For we are all of us in it together, and it is in us all. When we get past our public selves, the self we want to show to the world, and enter our inner selves, the part of us all where our dreams come from, both the good ones and the bad ones, where images are more powerful than thoughts, that's where we truly address ourselves, in all our fullness and emptiness, our nobleness and

meanness.² In honesty we are faced with a judgement harder to bear than God's, because whereas God is merciful, we are none of us very good at showing mercy to ourselves in our deepest reaches, even if we may easily give ourselves a pass in our consciousness thoughts.

Seriously, There Is Good News

I'm not sure I've had a revelation moment as dramatic as that described in Paul's words found in Romans. When he realized how inadequate were his efforts to be good, and that his failure brought only more guilt, he cried out: *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?* Romans 7:24. The dawning in my consciousness of how deep and pervasive is sin in my life has been a gradual one. Yet, like Paul, I found I could only be rescued from the web of sin that entangles by a savior. In the very next line Paul writes, *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* Romans 7:25; and then ... *Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death,* Romans 8:2.

Christian author Frederick Beuchner wrote: The Gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner to use the old word, that he is evil in the imagination of his heart ... That is the tragedy. But it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure, but also bled for.³ *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us,* Romans 5:8.

The great good news is that on the Cross Jesus paid the price for all the sin of humanity. All the brokenness and wickedness that grows from leaving God out of life, the kind of living that only leads to spiritual and physical death, was paid for on the Cross. By His stripes are we healed of our sin-sick condition and given power to live a new life that transforms us into God's blessed and redeemed children. The great good news is that we don't have to follow every passion, desire, or thought, that wells up in us. We don't have to be captive to those drives that pull us into unseemly, immoral, or evil behaviors. Freed from captivity we can live in Christ, empowered to live as God has always hoped we would. People who have been redeemed from addictions by the power of Jesus Christ really know this truth and the joy it brings. But each and every one of us can know this great grace and joy in our lives when we turn our lives over to Jesus. When I remarked to the lay leader of a church I once pastored that the people didn't sing the hymns with much enthusiasm he replied to me: "Only those who really know they are sinners who have been forgiven by God will sing the hymns with enthusiasm."

Humility in Freedom

I think there is a certain humility that comes to Christians who have genuinely grasped such truth. Realizing where they started and where Christ

has brought them, through no merit of their own, they are humbled to receive such great grace that God offers in Jesus Christ. One would hope that Christians could truly identify with St. Paul: *But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life, 1 Timothy 1:16.* Each of us, in the world of our own making, is the worst of sinners. Yet, each one of us in God's world is the most precious of his children. He would die for us to have the life He planned for us. And that's just what He did. *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 1 Corinthians 15:3.*

The one who knows his/her true condition and also knows of Christ's true forgiveness that redeems us from the old condition, that is the one who will have the humility to refrain from pointing fingers at others. "But for the grace of God, there go I."

He said, *"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed,"* John 8:36. What has Jesus set us free from? We have been set free from the burden of our sins. We are set free from the penalty of sin (justification) and from the power of sin (sanctification). We have been set free from the guilt of our sins. We have been set free from empty religion. We are set free to call God "Abba" as His children. We are set free to approach the throne of grace with confidence (Hebrews 4:16). Thank God for freedom in Christ!

The old hymn says it like this:

*My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly lean on Jesus' Name
On Christ the solid Rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand
All other ground is sinking sand*

Benediction:

We are free in Christ. The only way to be enslaved again is to volunteer!

Sermon Take Away

- **We are free in Christ. The only way to be enslaved again is to volunteer!**
- **We don't have to be captive to those drives that pull us into unseemly, immoral, or evil behaviors.**
- **Jesus would die for us to have the life He planned for us ... and that's just what He did.**

Key Verses

- ***For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out, Romans 7:18.***
- ***It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery, Galatians 5:1.***

¹ Thomas Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings, Vol. 4*, Zondervan, 2014, 40.

² Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, Harper & Row, 1977, 4.

³ *Ibid*, 7.