

Free in Christ

Romans 8:2-3

Freedom is our heritage as Americans. The revolution of 1776 gave birth to our nation – it was our defining moment. There were many battles still to fight after Trenton and Princeton, but Washington had crossed the Delaware and won the key victories that turned the tide of the war for independence. Before Christmas day of 1776 the freedom of the colonies was greatly in question. But that surprise attack on December 26 was the defining moment – the turning point in the fight for freedom in America.

The defining moment of the 20th Century was June 6, 1944. The Nazis had overrun Europe and were threatening to conquer England. They had been unstoppable, their war machine producing seemingly unlimited submarines, tanks and planes with apparently unbeatable technology. But the Normandy landings turned the tide of the war, providing a beachhead for the Allied advance to Berlin where the Germans finally surrendered and Hitler took his own life.

The war wasn't officially over until September 2 of 1945, but the decisive battle was won by the brave soldiers who crossed the English Channel, stormed the fortified coastline and defeated their entrenched enemy. That was the defining moment in the fight for freedom in Europe.

As you look back on your life, **what was your defining moment?** What was your line in the sand? Can you see a day, or maybe a season in your life when you moved from darkness into light – from slavery to freedom in Christ?

Some of you can point to a specific date on the calendar and say – that was it – that was the moment I hit my knees and surrendered my heart and life to Christ. Others of us look back and see a more gradual process. But the fact is that there is a dividing line for everyone – a reality ***before Christ*** and a new reality ***after Christ***. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." John 3 describes that moment of saving faith as being born again.

So what was your defining moment? When was your **Independence Day?**

Turn with me to Romans 8 and let's look at the **freedom** we have in Christ. Two weeks ago we celebrated our freedom from the penalty of sin in v. 1 - "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Last week we turned back to Romans 7 to see the grace and glory of God to forgive weak and selfish sinners like us. Today we focus on our freedom from the controlling power of sin.

"The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death." Romans 8:2

This is tremendously Good News - just like the announcement of victory in Europe on VE Day or victory in Japan on VJ day. Believers in Jesus are no longer slaves to the law of sin and death - we have been set free!

But notice that these gifts of freedom are not promised to everyone – rather, they are found exclusively ***IN CHRIST JESUS***.

- Verse one – “there is no condemnation for those who are ***IN Christ Jesus***.”
- Verse two – “For law of the Spirit of life has set you free ***IN Christ Jesus*** from the law of sin and death.”
- Verse eight – “Those who are ***in the flesh*** cannot please God.”
- Verse nine – “You, however, are not in the flesh but ***in the Spirit***, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”

There is the key issue – ***do you belong to Jesus Christ?*** Do you have Jesus and does Jesus have you? Are you in Christ and is His Spirit in you? The Allied Victory in 1945 was good news for those in support of the Allied Cause - but it was bad news for the Nazis...

Theologically and practically there are only two options, **only two spiritual conditions**. A person is either alive in Christ or dead in sin. You are either in the flesh and enslaved to the law of sin and death or you are free from the law of sin and death and therefore free to follow the Holy Spirit, filled with the power of the Risen Christ. You are either ***IN CHRIST*** and under His protection or you are outside of Christ and therefore under God’s wrath.

Can you perceive a “before and after” in your life? Can you see a difference between who you used to be as a slave to your sin and who you are now since Jesus released you from your death sentence and set you free from the power of sin? The day of your liberation in Christ should be just as vivid in your mind as it was for the Jews who were rescued from the concentration camps by their Allied liberators.

Are you absolutely certain that you belong to Jesus?

There are three important indications that you do belong to Jesus. The first is a profound and growing ***humility***. The more you understand the greatness, power and glory of God - the more you come into the light of His presence - the more you will see your own selfishness and pride, your weakness and frailty by comparison. Last week we heard Paul’s cry, “Oh wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

The second sign that you belong to Jesus is a deep and ***abiding joy*** of knowing that you have been forgiven – that you are free from the penalty of sin. The weight of your guilt

has been lifted as you realize that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

But this desperate humility spills quickly over into the third sign: an overflowing **gratitude** for the infinite mercy God has shown to you despite how undeserving you were to receive it. “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

This gratitude should grow over time, not wane, as you increasingly understand the grace and glory of God and in the light of that glory you increasingly see your own weakness and sinfulness by comparison. “The law of the spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death!” A ransom has been paid to set you free from slavery! As a freedman or a freed woman, you should be filled with gratitude for this incredible gift!

“For God has done what the Law, weakened by the flesh could not do. By sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.”
Romans 8:3

We were unable to save ourselves, since we were dead in our sins, enslaved to our own desires and blind to this reality. But ***God has done what we could not do*** by sending Jesus. instead of condemning us for the sins of our flesh God chose to condemn sin in the flesh of His son. This is amazing grace! Our hearts should sing with gratitude and joy!

That is the starting point of our **Momentum Bible Study** in which we are following the Road Map of the Beatitudes toward growth and blessing in Christ. The gospel of God’s grace is the fuel for our progress - filling us up with gratitude and joy. The beatitudes show us the way to keep moving forward - a step by step pathway to follow.

So far we have grabbed the first ring, acknowledging our poverty - that we bring nothing of merit to the Lord. This week we reach for the second ring - mourning over our sin.

So let’s study our freedom from the power of sin Jesus won for us and then move in to a time of personal confession and particular repentance.

Look again at verse two: ***“For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”*** Romans 8:2

The law that governs the person who does not belong to Jesus is the law of sin and death. This is not a theory or a principle – it is a law. The non-believer belongs to sin and is a slave to it. Jesus says this in John 8:34, “Everyone who sins is a slave to sin.” And Paul expounds this in detail in Romans 6:16

“Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?” Romans 6:16

The common American view is that people are basically good. The Biblical view is that people are sinners by nature and by choice. The theological term is **total depravity**. This

does not mean that people are as bad as they could possibly be but that they are bad throughout – that everything in us is tainted, twisted and corrupted by sin.

There is a law that governs the person who does not belong to Jesus – the law of sin.

For the non-believer, sin reigns. If you don't belong to Jesus by faith then sin is your master whether you know it or not.

A clear sign that sin is in control of you is that ***you THINK you are free***. One who has truly been set free from sin remembers the reality of his slavery and can still see his old shackles and chains; he can still hear the voice of his old master. One who is still a slave thinks he is free and always has been free.

The suggestion that you are a slave may well sound absurd to you. But remember that the devil is the father of lies and the first thing sin does is deceive us.

Sin masquerades as freedom and will gladly assure you that you are totally free – you could stop drinking any time you want. You could stop spending money next week if you wanted to. You could start that diet and exercise program tomorrow. You could sell everything you own and give it all away, if you really wanted. You could fix that relationship if you ever chose to... The lie that YOU are in control of your sin is one of the devil's favorites.

Some of you may remember **The Matrix** - the sci-fi thriller where everyone on earth THINKS they are free, living regular lives. But then we learn that what everyone thinks is real is actually a digital illusion – “the world that has been pulled over your eyes.” Only those who unplug from the system can actually see the truth and they live as freedom fighters, trying to overthrow the evil Agents who would keep everyone happily and ignorantly enslaved. I would go further, but some of you are lost on this illustration, even if you did see the film back in 1999.

The point is that you shouldn't completely trust your own senses. You should doubt your feelings and question your self-protective instincts. Think about it. IF it's true that you are hopelessly enslaved to the sin that dwells in your own heart and mind – doesn't it follow very logically that your sin would be working overtime to prevent you from seeing the truth of that slavery?

And I wish this weren't true for followers of Jesus, but the fact is that our hearts remain deceitful and continue to hide and deny the remaining sin in our lives. We are professional blame-shifters and responsibility-dodgers when it comes to the stubborn sin that remains in our lives.

But there is all the difference in the world between the REMAINING sin in the heart of a Christian and the REIGNING sin in the heart of a non-believer.

- **For the non-believer sin Reigns – deceiving and enslaving them**
- **For the believer sin Remains – deceiving and influencing them**
“Sin is still your enemy, but it is no longer your master.” Colin Smith, *Be Yourself*

For the Christian, sin is no longer your master, but it is still your enemy. Pastor Colin wrote a really helpful little book a couple of years ago called, “Be Yourself – Discovering your new identity in Christ.” You can get the kindle edition from Amazon for \$3.

In that book he describes the condition of all people apart from Christ **like prisoners in a large cage** with a loud and cruel master shouting commands they must obey. Listen to how Colin presents this:

When you came to faith in Jesus, God moved you out of the cage and into the field. God moved you from imprisonment to freedom, from an old life in which sin was your master to a new life in which sin is no longer in a position to control you (Rom. 6: 14).

Being in Christ puts you in a new position in relation to sin. Sin is still your enemy, but it is no longer your master. The angry man will still shout instructions across the road. And when he does you will immediately feel that you should do what he says. After all, that’s what you always did before. But the fact of the matter is that the angry man is no longer your master. You are under no obligation to do what he says. You are not in the cage. You are in the field. You are free!

Isn’t that a beautiful picture? For the one who belongs to Jesus by faith, “sin is still your enemy, but it is no longer your master... You are not in the cage, you are in the field. You are free!”

The non-believer is locked in a cell and chained to the wall of his own desires. But at the moment of saving faith, Jesus breaks those chains and opens the prison door – just as God did for Peter in Acts 12. The believer has been set free from the law of sin and death. Sin no longer reigns over you as it does the non-believer who belongs to the desires that he serves. Sin does not reign over the true believer in Jesus but it does still remain in our hearts and minds and lives – like the voice of that old master in the cage, shouting across the road.

We have been set free from the controlling power of sin! “The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” This is our verse of the month because the truth in it is so important and powerful. There is a new LAW at work in your heart. You are not the person you used to be!

For those who belong to Jesus **the decisive victory has been won**. Jesus established the beachhead in your heart at the moment you put your faith in Him. His death covered your sin and his resurrection conquered it. **But Jesus is committed to your total perfection**.

His goal is total Victory. ***He WILL drive out every ounce of evil, selfishness and pride from every inch of your being***. That is the process of sanctification. Jesus will never bargain with your sin or negotiate a truce. He is 100% devoted to the pursuit of your total surrender to Him. And on the day you die or Jesus returns that victory will be fully and finally complete. You will be perfectly sanctified. You will be glorified, fully fashioned into the image of your Creator and Redeemer. Oh, what a glorious day!

C.S. Lewis said that this process of Christian growth is like **going to your mom with a toothache**. At first you just want some painkillers and to get back about your business. But you know what your mom will do. She will give you the aspirin but then she'll take you to the dentist and the dentist will probably end up drilling around and maybe even pull your tooth.

We all have problems - and, if we're honest, we don't want the Lord to pull them out like the rotten teeth that they are. Oh, we want relief! We want some tylenol or ibuprofen. We want relief from the SYMPTOMS of our sins but we consistently resist the full treatment. We deny our need for serious help. We resist the insight from friends and loved ones when they try to address our problems. We delay seeing a Christian counselor or making an appointment with the pastor, justifying in our minds - "it's not that big a deal." But really what is happening is that the sin in our flesh is doing its damndest to keep us from actually dealing with it. It is wriggling around, twisting and hiding just like the serpent who first provoked it.

Listen to how Lewis says it in **Mere Christianity**:

"Our Lord is like the dentists. If you give Him an inch, He will take an ell. Dozens of people go to Him to be cured of some one particular sin which they are ashamed of... Well, he will cure it all right: but He will not stop there. That may be all you asked; but if once you call Him in, He will give you the full treatment." 171

God says:

"If you let me, I will make you perfect. The moment you put yourself in My hands, that is what you are in for. Nothing less, or other, than that... Whatever suffering it may cost you in your earthly life... whatever it costs Me, I will never rest, nor let you rest, until you are literally perfect – until my Father can say without reservation that He is well pleased with you, as He said He was well pleased with me. This I can do and will do. But I will not do anything less." 172

Then Lewis shifts the metaphor to a home renovation:

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing... But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense... The explanation is that He is building a quite different house from the one you thought of... You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.” 174

God has set us free, through Christ, from the power of sin so that He can come and live in us Himself, through the Holy Spirit. Come back for the next two Sundays as we study Romans 8:4-7 and the new life of the believer in the Holy Spirit.

Look at this progression - from slavery to freedom to total victory; from justification to sanctification to glorification. First Jesus sets you free from the penalty of sin; then he breaks the power of sin over you. And the final step - when you die or Jesus comes back - is that He will remove the last traces of the presence of sin from your heart and life!

- Jesus' death paid the penalty for your sin.
- Jesus' resurrection broke the power of sin over you.
- And when Jesus returns, even the presence of sin will be gone in you forever!

Joni Eareckson Tada was a normal, happy, active teenager until she dove into shallow water and broke her neck, leaving her paralyzed from the neck down. For two years she struggled with anger, depression and suicidal thoughts – very much doubting her new Christian faith. But the Lord spoke to her in her pain, teaching her about her new identity in Christ and her eternal value in Him – not in herself.

And so her ministry was born – a ministry of encouraging other hurting and broken people to meet the Lord in their pain and give their lives to Him to use for His purposes. For over 50 years God has used Joni to bring glory to the name of Jesus and hope to the hurting, especially those affected by disability.

Recently Joni shared what she's most looking forward to about heaven:

I can't wait to jump out of this wheelchair and have hands that work. But a new body is not what I'm most excited about. The main thing I really look forward to... is a sin-free heart... a heart that loves purely with no ulterior motives—no selfishness, pride or jealousy. I want a heart solely fixed on worship. When I think of heaven, that's what drives me, a heart free of sin.

Oh brother, sister – that is when we will be fully and finally free. That is when we who are justified and are being sanctified will be glorified. That is when the presence of sin will be eradicated not only from our hearts but from the whole world – when Jesus makes a new heaven and a new earth for his newly glorified and sin-free people. Oh, what a glorious day!

Until then, sin remains for the believer and there is a battle to fight. But sin no longer reigns over us, nor are we unequipped for the battle. No, the chains of sin have been broken, the door of the cell has been opened and we have been fitted with the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation. Jesus has given us the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. The belt of truth binds our equipment together and the Gospel of peace quickens our feet to bring good news to the nations.

So let me close with three simple questions.

First, ***are you absolutely certain that you belong to Jesus?***

Freedom from the penalty and power of sin is only promised to those who are IN Christ. John tells us “He who has the Son has life. He who does not have the Son of God, does not have life.” Paul exhorts: “work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” If you are uncertain about your salvation or unclear about the Gospel, please contact me or one of the other elders today so we can sit down and show you what the Bible says about how you can know that you have eternal life.

Consider – what was your defining moment? Do you have an Independence Day to celebrate like 1776 or 1944? Can you see a definite before and after in your story so that you can say, “I once was lost but now I’m found, I was blind but now I see”?

Are you absolutely certain that you belong to Jesus? If you do, two signs of that will be an unshakeable joy in Him and sincere gratitude for all God has done for you. So question two is:

Are you experiencing the joy of being forgiven and declared righteous in Christ?

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” There is such joy in letting the Gospel resound in your heart and mind. If the Gospel no longer moves your heart to sing praises to the One who died for you, then it’s time to come back to the basics of the faith and let the truth of Jesus’ finished work fill you up with gratitude. It’s time to shift your gaze from yourself, your struggles, your pains, your doubts, your plans, your desires – and focus on all that Jesus has done for you. It may be that your sin right now is the sin of pride in thinking you have little need for God’s forgiveness and grace. The one who is forgiven little, loves little. So maybe you need to meet with a trusted Christian friend to share about your lack of joy in the Lord and pray about how you can begin to rekindle your love for Him by reflecting on His love for you.

Finally, is your heart filled with gratitude? God has paid the price to set you free from sin and death forever! You are no longer enslaved to your own desires! “The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ from the law of sin and death.” Sin is still your enemy, but it is no longer your master. You are not in the cage anymore. Your chains have been broken and the door is open in front of you

But you have to walk out that door. You have to turn from your old sinful ways and walk in the new life Jesus has given to you. Come back next week to learn more about life in the Spirit.

For now, **let the mercy and kindness of God move you to repentance**. Consider all He has done for you - the infinite price that was paid for your sin and mine. The penalty for sin has been paid. The power of sin has been broken. One day even the presence of sin will be removed!

Let's take the next few minutes to prepare our hearts for the Lord's Supper. In a moment you will hold in your hands a little cracker that represents the body of Jesus Christ - the perfectly righteous, fully human body of our Lord that was beaten and bloodied, crucified and executed for you and for me.

Listen to this promise from God's Word: ***"If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*** 1 John 1:9

There is a promise here to not only forgive our sins but also to cleanse us. Jesus has already paid the price for our sin. But he will not stop there. He is committed to making us perfectly holy and righteous like him. And part of that lifelong cleanup process is confessing our sins and turning from them.

God will forgive us our sins. He will cleanse us from all unrighteousness. IF. If we confess our sins. If we turn from them and come to Jesus in faith. Often all we want is relief from the symptoms of our sins. But Jesus is committed to giving us the full treatment - to our total and eternal perfection. That process of home renovation is painful at times as the Holy Spirit does some demolition in order to do some rebuilding later.

Let's invite the Holy Spirit to do some of that work today. Invite Him to show you an area where you need to surrender more of yourself to the Lordship of Christ. Invite the Spirit to bring you conviction of sin. And when He does - because He will - bring that sin into the light of God's grace. Admit it. Confess it. Acknowledge what you have done and the punishment you deserve. Then claim the promise in this verse - and as you turn away from that sin in repentance, take hold of Jesus in faith and rejoice to know that He has forgiven you already and will use these moments right now as part of your cleansing and growth!

Let's pray as we prepare to go to the Lord's table.