

“Free?”

This week we will celebrate July 4th, Independence Day. Hopefully, amidst picnicking, family gatherings, and fireworks, we will take time to reflect on the freedoms we enjoy in the USA.

There are people in the world today who long for freedom because their basic human rights are being violated and denied. Women in Arab countries trying to break free of harsh, age old restrictions placed on them by Muslim fundamentalists. People in countries like Iran, Libya, Russia, Cuba, China, North Korea - longing to be out from under ruthless dictators and oppressive regimes. Can we ever forget the photo of a young Chinese protestor throwing himself in front of a tank? *Show the photo*. There are *Christians* denied religious freedom in places like Pakistan, Vietnam, India, Bangladesh, Syria. (Google “Persecution of Christians” and you’ll get up to date information on widespread persecution of Christians around the world today). I hope that we can appreciate our freedoms, and make it a habit to pray for those who lack basic human rights!

Jesus talked about bondage and freedom. He had words to say about the *deepest* kind of bondage or freedom: “Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘ If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free’”(John 8:31-32). These words are part of a long discourse Jesus has with certain Jews. Here, He’s addressing some Jewish people who recently believed in Him. He says if they continue in His teaching, they will be His disciples. And they will know the truth, and that truth will set them free.

They interpret this *politically*, and take it as a comment on their *national history*. They are insulted, and get defensive. “They answered him, ‘We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, “You will be made free?”’” (John 8:33). Well, that’s a laugher! Never been in bondage to anyone? They have go to be kidding! Read the Old Testament. How many times was Israel defeated by more powerful nations. Even taken into exile. At that very moment, Palestine was occupied by Roman troops! The Jewish people were at the mercy of Roman rule!

But Jews here insisted that it was the birthright of every descendant of Abraham to be free! At different times in history, insurrections and rebellions broke out when a fiery leader rose up claiming that *God alone* was their King, and no human government should have any control over them. “*We’ve never been enslaved to anyone” these new followers shot back at Jesus.*

They missed the point of Jesus’ words. He wasn’t talking about civil rights or political freedom. He meant something even more fundamental to the human condition. Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). Jesus says, “You’re *not* free like you think. If you commit a sin, it’s a sign that you are enslaved to sin”

Jesus’ words here highlight a sober truth found in the Bible, that we human beings are slaves of sin. This is not a pleasant thought. A lot of people today simply wouldn’t buy that view of human nature. But this is the Biblical view. And it is the teaching of Jesus about our human condition! We are chained to our sinful nature. Even when we *want* to turn away from

something wrong or evil, we often *can't*! It's not like I can get up in the morning and say, "Well, I'm not going to sin today", and then follow through! Or with the snap of our finger vow that we're not going to be self-centered, or negative and critical in our attitude, or we're not going to ever lose our temper again, or have lustful thoughts – like we just decide to stop these things, and it happens!

We can't loosen the grip that sin has on us simply by just willing it away! Someone tells of neighbors who went white-water rafting. When they started out, it seemed they were in control of the raft. But then they came to the first rapids. Big waves threatened to engulf them. The water swirled around and pushed and pulled at them. One of the boaters remarked, "No matter how hard we paddled or even in what direction, we had no choice but to go through the rapids and down the river." This is imagery that describes what Jesus is talking about when He says we are slaves of sin. It's like being swept along by a force greater than ourselves. "Whoever commits sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). You're a slave; I'm a slave! The Apostle Paul echoed this reality about our human nature when he wrote: "(Everyone) Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin" (Romans 3:9).

But aren't you glad the narrative in John 8 doesn't stop on that negative note! "Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free'" (John 8:31-32). Jesus then continues, "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Jesus can set us free from our slavery to sin! _There is a freedom in Christ to be lifted out of our sinful condition, to loosen the grip that evil has over us! Let's think about this more.

If we're to find the deliverance from sin Jesus offers, first we have to get out of denial and recognize our need for someone to unlock the chains and set us free. Remember, the Jews to whom Jesus was speaking were indignant and said, "We've never been slaves to anyone!" There are a lot of people today who just don't want to deal with the fact that bad attitudes, bad intentions, bad behaviors have a stronghold on them. They are in denial! *USA Today* once had a long article about problems facing Japanese bankers. Bad debts for that country's banks rose 29% in the one fiscal year to \$350 billion, and that may be only a partial accounting. Some analysts think the real figure for bad loans that year was closer to \$1 trillion. The list of problems is long -- and disturbing. But, the article stated, much of this came about because of self-deceit and denial. Quoting from the article, "When the bad loans started piling up in the early '90s, Japanese bankers stuck to an unspoken, unbreakable rule: Never admit that anything is going wrong." *Denial!*

There was this man who was convinced he was dead, when in reality he was very much alive. His delusion became such a problem that his family finally paid for him to see a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist spent many sessions trying to convince the man he was still alive, but nothing seemed to work. Finally the doctor tried one last approach. He took out his medical books and proceeded to show the patient that dead men don't bleed. After hours of tedious study, the patient seemed convinced that dead men don't bleed. "Do you now agree that dead men don't bleed?" the doctor asked. "Yes I do," the patient replied. "Very well, then," the doctor said. He took out a pin and pricked the patient's finger. Out came a trickle of blood. The doctor asked, "What does that tell you?" "Oh my goodness!" the patient said as he stared at his finger... "Dead men *do bleed!*" *Denial!*

If we are to find the power of Christ to free us from sin, we have to admit that there are certain areas of our life out of our control and under the control of evil, and that we need help!

Also notice, it is the truth that sets us free. “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). What does this mean? Does it mean that if we just learn certain facts, and get them into our head, we can be released from our sins? (Sort of like “salvation through knowledge”). No! We all know there are tons of people who’ve spent hours in Sunday School classes and Bible studies, “learning” stuff – but still are pretty much unchanged, still chained to their sins. We are not saved, nor released from our sins, just through *information*. We need *transformation!* *The Truth that Jesus is speaking about...the Truth that sets us free ...is Christ Himself!* *And having a living, vital, daily relationship with Christ.* Remember, He said, “I am the way, the **truth**, and the life...” (John 14:6). The power to find freedom from sin comes when our life is rooted in Christ, and we have a vital relationship with Him.

We are looking at these words of Jesus, where He promises that through Him we can find release from our sins. ***Now, maybe if you are honest, you are wondering, “Harry, is this all of this that you’ve been saying true in real life?”*** You may be thinking of people who say they’re Christians, and some of them are no saints. Or when a trusted Christian leader falls into some serious moral failure. Or maybe you’re looking at your own life and thinking, I’m still struggling with stuff in my life that I wish I could overcome. Can we really be free from sin?” Is Jesus putting us on here? Is He just teasing us about a freedom that really doesn’t exist in practical experience?

I will admit that my view over the years has changed on this. Have you ever found that you’ve changed your mind on how you understand Scripture, or how your convictions have shifted over the years regarding certain aspect of the Christian life?

I don’t think this matter of being freed from our sins is quite as simple as I used to think when I was younger. In my teenage years I went to many camp meetings and evangelistic services. Some of the preachers and evangelists made it sound pretty easy - just give your life to Christ, read the Bible and pray, and before long, You’ll be pretty much over this problem of sinning! I figured, maybe by the time I’m 25 or 30 years old, I’ll have it licked! Well, this overly optimistic view was quite shaken when an evangelist I followed and adored got a woman who wasn’t his wife pregnant, and he had to surrender his ministerial credentials.

As I have gotten older, and experienced more of life, I’ve come to believe that sin is more firmly rooted in us humans than I once believed. My training and practice as a Marriage and Family Therapist have confirmed this view. I’ve had both Christians and non-Christians in therapy, and found that Christians can be just as sick and dysfunctional as others not claiming to be followers of Jesus. So, maybe not as easy to get rid of sin as once thought.

But let’s not water down these awesome words of Jesus! Hear again these words of Jesus: “Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘ If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free...so if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed’”(John 8:31-32, 36). This, folks, is incredible news!

I see Jesus’ freeing us from sin more as a process now (sometimes a lifelong process). Now there are times when, in God’s mercy, He frees us from a certain sin in an instant. Maybe just

like that, God takes away one's desire for gambling, or swearing, or allows a person in an instant to forgive someone they've held a grudge against. Rocky Riedel, my pastor friend who had come here to church a year or so before he died, told of how he was a smoker. When he first went before the Board of Ministry to begin the process of becoming a pastor, someone on the board asked him if he smoked. He said he did. They said he would have to give that up if he were to be a Methodist minister. He said he walked out of that meeting, threw away the pack of cigarettes he had in his pocket, and never had a desire to smoke again. Thank God for these moments when the liberating power of the gospel is displayed in this way!

But I think most of time, our being freed from our sins is a more gradual process. And that is no less miraculous! Perhaps this is why Jesus talks about being a disciple, *holding* to His teaching, allowing His Word to get into us and slowly transform us: *"If you hold to my teaching", or "If you continue in my word"* (John 8:31). This *process* is highlighted in 2 Corinthians 3:16-18: *"Whenever someone turns back to the Lord, the veil is removed. The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. All of us are looking with unveiled faces at the glory of the Lord as if we were looking in a mirror. We are being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to the next degree of glory. This comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."*

Sometimes part of the process of our being released from our sins involves having other people help us, or using additional means that are offered. We hear a lot about *addictions* today. We are an addictive society - not just addictions to alcohol and drugs, but addictions to work, to spending, to sex or love needs, to eating, to sports, to TV, and so on. Although some find release from these kinds of strongholds just through prayer and faith, many find that they need more than that – like a 12 step program, or a recovery program. For instance, Celebrate Recovery is a Christian based 12-step program, modeled after AA.

I once visited a church on a Sunday I had off. A couple in that service shared a gripping testimony of how they came to Christ. The lady who spoke had an alcoholic father. She was addicted to her love needs, and as a result, led a promiscuous life. She got married, and her husband was an abuser. She had a spending addiction. She was suicidal. One day she heard a radio program, sponsored by the Minirth-Meyer Clinic, a Christian counseling organization. She had her husband drive her to one of their centers in Connecticut. She got saved there, and was released from her bondage to love addiction, spending addiction, and suicidal tendencies. Her husband was into pornography. At the insistence of his wife, he went to a conference called *Every Man's Battle*. He gave his life to Christ, and received the help he needed to overcome his addiction to pornography. It was thrilling to be there in that church service and listen to this husband and wife couple talk about their newfound freedom in Christ, made possible in part through dedicated Christian counselors and a 12 step recovery program.

So, gaining freedom from certain sins can be instantaneous or gradual. It may come directly from God, or with the help of a counselor or friend. However it comes, this freedom from our sins is still a miracle of Jesus' redeeming, liberating power. The promise holds true: *"If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed"* (John 8:36).

