

Love in a World on Fire: True Freedom

Romans 6:1-11

As we continue to look at this series of how to live the Christian life in the world we are in, today we are going to look at what freedom is for a Christian. And I want to frame our thinking on freedom a little bit. We hear a lot about freedom in this country. We recently celebrated July 4th when we celebrate freedom from European rule. We are soon celebrating the Latter Day Saint trek to Utah also seeking freedom from rule by others. We hear a lot about freedom of speech. And I don't want to belittle any of these freedoms because I enjoy them. I really enjoy the freedom to worship openly. And I know we are worshipping online right now which might not feel as free, but there are plenty of countries where this live stream would be blocked and not available. So, I respect the freedoms that people value. But if we look at most of these freedoms, or even the most recent freedom debate which is having the freedom to decide whether or not to wear a mask, which should not be a debate and not be politicized, these freedoms are, at the end of the day, having the freedom to do what you want. Isn't that the American concept of freedom? I want to be able to go where I want, say what I want, do what I want, etc. That is our culture's idea of what freedom is. And what we are going to look at this morning is that this is far from God's idea of what freedom is. So let's go to God's Word. Romans chapter 6. Before this in chapter 5 of Romans Paul has explained that the law has not saved us from our sin, but rather the grace of God has exceeded our sin. So now to chapter 6 where Paul begins with a question.

Romans 6:1-11

“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. ⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with,^[a] that we should no longer be slaves to sin— ⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹ In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

Romans chapter 6 is set up a question then answer format. Paul asks two rhetorical questions followed by answers and answers explained. The first rhetorical question is the one we are looking at this morning. The question is should we sin more to increase the flow of grace that we receive. Remember that Paul has just explained that we are saved from sin by grace. That God's grace can overcome the penalty and power of our sin. So Paul is asking this rhetorical question, well should we sin more to get more grace? He is trying to anticipate all of the misinterpretations of his explanation of salvation. The question begs an answer, should we sin more to get more grace? Of course the answer to that is no. It sounds like a ridiculous question. But what

if we take that question word it in a different way. What if the question were “May we sin now that we are not under the law but rather grace?” or... “Is it ok to sin now because I no longer have to hold my sin up against the law I could not keep? Now that it is all about grace, is sinning OK?” How do those questions sound to you? A little more reasonable right? Have we ever found ourselves asking these kinds of questions when trying to rationalize doing something we should not do? Or another dangerous one: “since God’s grace is always available to me, I have time, I’ll fix that sin later.” That is probably the one of which I am most guilty.

When you look at it this way, Paul’s question doesn’t sound as absurd does it? And then Paul answers the question quite strongly in verse 2 “By no means!” In the Greek it actually just says “not happening,” which is funny because that sounds more natural to us now than “by no means.” And then Paul explains why we should not even think of sinning more, because if we are in Christ we are supposed to be dead to sin. Back in Romans 5 Paul did not explain how we have moved from the reign of sin to the reign of grace, so here he now needs to explain it. And although this passage can sound difficult to understand, Paul is actually being quite practical about Christian living, both now and in eternity.

Paul then goes on to talk about this idea that if we are followers of Christ, we have died to our sin like Christ died, and we are new and alive in Christ as he is alive, and we will be resurrected just like Christ. And all of this begins when we come to faith in Jesus. In other words, when you come to Christ your relationship to sin has completely changed. If you are following Jesus your relationship to sin is forever altered. And this begins when you come to faith in the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. And Paul uses baptism as a way of indicating this new faith in Jesus. Starting at verse 4, “? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Now, although Paul talks about baptism in this passage, this passage is not about baptism. It is not Paul’s theology of baptism. A lot of people have gotten caught up, as Pastor Steve would say “in the weeds” in this passage and seen it as being about something it is not about. You do not have to be baptized to begin a life of faith in Jesus Christ. That is not what Paul is saying here. In fact we know you don’t have to be baptized to begin a list of faith. We know that is true because in the book of Acts whole families are converted and given the gift of the Holy Spirit before they are baptized. Baptism is a sacrament that visibly shows that faith and the grace we receive. So let’s not make this something it isn’t. What I think Paul is doing with baptism here is using baptism as an obvious part of the stepping into freedom and new life. But Paul’s real focus in this passage is on the contrast between the pre-baptism life and post-baptism life. Pre-faith in Jesus versus post-faith in Jesus. And although this idea of dying with Christ and being resurrected to live in Christ is very theological, it is also very practical. He is saying over and over again that you have to die to one to live in the other. You can’t play both sides. It’s one or the other.

So, think back to that cultural understanding from the world around us that I talked about at the beginning. Most people, especially Americans, view freedom as having the freedom to do what they want and say what they want. But here is the irony, think about who rules you? You or God? Are you living the pre-faith in Jesus life or the post-faith in Jesus life? Are we living in bondage to sin, or living out a life of faith? If I am following my agenda, my freedom to do that actually results in bondage to sin. The secular understanding of freedom is the opposite of freedom for a Christian. The world says freedom is being able to chose what you

want to do and do it. But that is actually being a slave to sin because following my will means living in sin. Living out God's will, that is actual freedom from sin. See how upside down our world tries to get us? The world wants you to exercise your will and your "freedom" day to day. God wants you to live into your freedom in Jesus Christ by following him and doing his will.

And in verse 5 we are given a great promise of what is to come. "5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his." Eternity with God and without sin. Jesus has paid for the penalty of our sin. We are spared eternal death. That is huge. We could not do that. Paul is pointing out that no one, no matter how well they followed the law, was going to be spared the penalty of death. Jesus was the only one, because he was actually righteous, who could reconcile our sin. We have a great future. Paul promises it again in verse 8 "Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him." This is the great hope we have as Christians.

But what does this mean for us in the present? Are we just living in limbo waiting for the final day of salvation? Or can this freedom from sin start now? I don't know about you, but I still sin. Are we really free from sin now or later? Well, it's both. Right now it means we need to live in a way that reflects our new freedom in Christ. Later it will mean eternity with Christ. But we are still living in a sinful world right now. Will we still sin? Yes. But Jesus can overcome the power of sin in our lives. So being free in Christ now means living into his will. And this is a gradual process. The Welsh minister Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains this in this analogy which I really like; picture a British countryside with two fields enclosed by a high rock wall around them. All of us begin life in one of those fields, the one ruled by Satan and sin. We can't scale the walls and get out. It is only by God's grace that God reaches down and picks us up out of that field and puts us in the other field, the one with Christ in it. It is a change of position in regards to our relationship with sin. However, as he points out, we can still hear Satan in the other field. We can still hear Satan calling and we sometimes instinctively want to follow it because we have followed it so long. But, over time, we move away from the wall near the other field and the voice of Satan gets fainter as we rely on Christ instead. So, we are free from sin, but this happens over time and only by faithfully following Jesus.

Then, starting at verse 6 Paul says this: "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with,^[a] that we should no longer be slaves to sin— 7 because anyone who has died has been set free from sin." No longer slaves to sin, but rather free from sin. Now the word slave brings up a lot of negative feelings and pictures. And even though slavery in the Roman era was quite different from the abhorrent slavery in this country's history, I think it is OK to feel negative about the word slave, because no one would want to be a slave to anything. Would you want to be a slave to a person or a government or a terrible way of life? I wouldn't. Be here is the thing, if you are not following Jesus, you are a slave to sin. Every one of us is a slave. And the only way out is turning your life over to Jesus. That is what real freedom is.

And there are places in the Bible that Paul actually calls himself a slave to Christ. He does this in 1 Corinthians 7. Is that what we are really doing? Moving from slavery to sin to another slavery? Well, yes and no. When Paul says we are a slave to Christ, what he means is that Jesus Christ needs to be Lord of our lives. We need to see Jesus as Lord or master. But I think it is important to remember that this is not how Jesus sees us when freed from sin. He sees us as God's children, not slaves. Jesus himself points this out in that John passage that we read this morning. In verses 34 and 35 Jesus says this: "Very truly I tell you, everyone who

sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever.” Once we turn and follow Jesus we are sons and daughters of God. Jesus does not see us as slaves. He sees us as free from sin and part of the eternal family.

But how do we see ourselves? Let me ask you this because I was asking myself this over the course of the week. Do you feel free? Do you feel liberated by Jesus? I think we sometimes don't feel that way because we don't live into it. The world bogs us down. In lots of ways we don't feel free right now. If you are at high health risk you can't go out and socialize. If you had a big trip planned you can't go on it right now. You may not be able to go to work right now. You may have lost your job and you feel financially trapped. We don't feel free in a lot of ways right now, but we need to live into our freedom from sin. We need to realize it.

I heard a story on NPR this past week about a family with two sons. Zach a teenager and his younger brother Justin. They lived in rural Mississippi and enjoyed fishing and hunting together. Both boys were close to their father. And one day the father got the worst phone call of his life. Zach called him and said he found Justin dead and it looked like he shot himself with his shotgun. The father rushed home to find the shotgun laying there, Justin dead, and Zach shaking. They called the police and while they waited the father noticed something. Justin's wound did not look consistent with what a shotgun wound would look like. He was in shock and shrugged it off. The police questioned Zach later that day and he told them the same thing he told his father. He was in the other room when he heard the gun go off. A couple days later, the police called Zach and his father back to the police station and separated them. In one room they questioned Zach again, while in the other room they told the father that the ammo found in Justin did not come from a shotgun. It came from a rifle, the kind of rifle that Zach had been given as a gift. They eventually told Zach the same thing and his story fell apart. He then told the police and his father that they had been goofing around and that the gun went off on its own. Zach swore he never pulled the trigger. Zach was arrested. The father was devastated. He was now losing two sons. At trial Zach maintained that he never pulled the trigger, but that did not hold up in court. He was convicted of manslaughter and sent to juvenile prison and when he turned 18 moved to adult prison. His father called him in jail regularly. They had surface conversations. The jail was 5 hours away so he visited just sometimes. But on one of those visits, after several years in prison, Zach skipped the surface conversation and went right to the heart and told his father he needed him to believe that the gun went off on its own and that he never pulled the trigger. He would never kill his brother. Even if he spent his whole life in prison, he needed his father to believe him. So his father tried. He went home and googled “guns that go off on their own.” And to his surprise and amazement there was a ton of information on this. In fact, there was a recall on the gun that Zach owned because of a trigger design flaw. Zach had been telling the truth all along. His father, riddled with guilt, hired a lawyer to get Zach exonerated. After 5 years in prison the father got a call that Zach was being paroled. Not exonerated, but released. The father left in the middle of the night so that he would be at the prison first thing in the morning. They brought Zach out and after hugs and tears, Zach got in the truck to go home. As they drove home the sun began to rise. Zach had seen the sunrise over the water in Mississippi a hundred times fishing with his dad. But this sunrise was different. He said this sunrise would be the most beautiful one he ever saw. Because at that moment he realized he was free and he was reconciled with his father.

He was free and reconciled with his father. Did you know that you can be free and reconciled to your heavenly Father? Right now? Think back to a time when you sinned and you regret it. You wish you hadn't

said what you said or done what you did. What weight are you carrying? Freedom in Christ means you don't have to be that person anymore. And God's grace means you don't have to regret it anymore. Christ has died and risen to life and you can participate in that right now and be free from your sin. Live it out. Live out your freedom from sin. It begins with faith in Jesus Christ and making him your Lord and savior. Professor Craig Keener puts it this way: "Through faith one receives a new identity, and through faith one must also continue to embrace and live in that new identity, so that obedient works become expressions of living faith."

So, friends, for those of you who do not feel free right now. Not free to go where you want and do what you want, the real freedom that matters, the freedom from the power of sin, that is available to you right now and even in the midst of a pandemic, you can still be free. In Jesus you are free and reconciled with your Father. In the name of that Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.