

“Back to Reality”
July 3, 2011, Binkley Baptist Church
Raymonda Speller; Romans 7:14-25a

The life Paul describes in the first seven chapters of Romans is radically inconsistent. A life of perfect hope while living in an imperfect world with an imperfect body. He tells us that we are free several times in chapter 6 and then he calls you, he calls me, he calls all of us slaves. He wants us to feel the cold steel of handcuffs cutting into our wrists until they bleed. To experience the confusion of being blinded by a burlap sack with our hands clasped behind our back so that we have no way to free ourselves. The vulnerability of being powerless to break free from our captor; and that captor is sin. Paul is writing to converts of a fairly new belief system so they likely aren't exactly sure what to expect from their conversion. Some may have just assumed that conversion would immediately produce sinless perfection within them. Some were convinced that it was their job as new Christ-followers to fix themselves, slowly but surely working to discipline themselves and, through self-control, to decrease the number of their sins. Whatever their ideas about sin and holiness, one thing was for sure in the life of every one of those earliest believers and it's something that we wrestle with in our day as well. Nothing magical happens when one says a prayer or walks forward during the first stanza of the invitation hymn that immediately turns them into a perfect observer of the law and a mature follower of Christ. For those earliest Christians, and for Paul, and for us, it's not that simple. Sin, as Paul makes clear, is not a triviality.

I will admit that I sometimes have trouble working through this text, specifically its talk of slavery to sin. Verses 14 and 15 in particular can become discouraging with this talk of not being free to do good at all. After all, it's Independence Day weekend. We're all free, right? At least that's what we like to believe. We like to see ourselves as good people who do good things and who participate in the good work of God through our giving and charity work. And while I do agree with that last part at least, that we are called to participate in the work of God, it's not our participation that saves us or that saves the world. We can't do that job. Because as Paul puts it we and this whole world are still chained up by sin. Early Christian thinkers wrote about us being “habituated “to sin in their explanation of what slavery to sin looks like. Explaining that we sin and sin until our bodies and souls become used to sin and it becomes a sort of habit. In the same way, we habituate ourselves to doing things that are against the law of God and those actions gradually become second-nature. This is part of what Paul refers to; we become more and more under the power of or unable to resist sin and it becomes our master.

I so often find myself, when feeling truly mastered by sin, turning to this passage in attempts to explain why I have acted in a way inconsistent with what I know to be right and, honestly, to take myself off the hook for the next time that I inevitably sin. After all, it's so easy to rationalize that if I'm a slave to sin and cannot do the good I want to do then I'm off the hook for anything I do. And it's also easy to be trapped into a defeated attitude, seeing oneself as a sad little person with no hope of living the abundant life that Christ offered. This was only furthered by experiences of the ebbs and flows of the Christian life that Paul describes, feeling particularly holy during certain moments like youth conferences and revivals and Christian camps, only to realize within a few days that no matter how good the preacher was or how powerful the worship was eventually the high goes away. And in those moments of going back to reality I would pray and wonder, like Paul does in verse 24, “Who will deliver me from this body of death and sin?”

But I believe that there's another reading of Romans 7. The Scripture offers what I believe to be a solution for this spiritual roller coaster ride. See, in the very next verse after asking that rhetorical question, “who will deliver me?” Paul exclaims joyously in verse 25, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” For Paul, the response to our trepidation about sin and feelings of separation from God is clear, deliverance from the power of sin comes from God through Jesus Christ. The question then becomes, “What exactly does ‘deliverance from the power of sin’ mean?” Does this mean that by God through Jesus Christ we are freed from ever committing sin? That doesn't seem to fit with Paul's writing about the presence of sin in the life of believers throughout this chapter and the rest of Romans. I would submit, then, that we are delivered by God through Christ from the power or mastery of sin. We are no longer made the slaves of sin, meaning that sin no longer controls our choices, controls our bodies, controls our destination. The habituation to sin that leaves us unable to even exercise choice is reversed through Christ. Because we are no longer left in our sinful nature, we are “in Christ” as Paul loves to write, and that's where it gets interesting if we remember the cross.

Whereas the enemy of our souls might have thought that humanity's only hope for victory over sin and death was destroyed on that fateful day at Calvary, in actuality all the iniquity of humanity was done away with, condemned on the cross. Because Christ was born of a human being and therefore was part of the sinful bloodline of Adam, the original sin of all flesh was raised up before the masses on that Judean cross, drawn together into Jesus Christ. When death visited

Christ that day, because we were all present in Christ as Paul writes, all of our sins were atoned for or covered in the blood of Christ. That's why the veil in the temple was torn in two at the very moment that Christ died, signifying that no partition could stand between God and humanity once the blood of Jesus was applied. And so Paul writes emphatically in the very next chapter of Romans, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 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 to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us." Sin has been overcome for all who are in Christ through faith in Him.

And so now we live in the era of the torn veil. Even as we deal with the struggles of life, we live and move and have our being in the Kingdom of God with access to God through Jesus Christ. But the problem is that too often we don't remember that. This new reality has to guard our hearts and minds in order for us to escape the constant condemnation we place onto ourselves and allow others to place onto us. The Kingdom is nigh and we've been made free but if we're not careful we can find ourselves still living in the worst kind of slavery; slavery enforced by mental chains even after the physical chains have been taken away.

Two weeks ago many African-Americans across this nation celebrated our own Independence Day ahead of the 4th of July observance, in the form of Juneteenth celebrations. Juneteenth refers to June 19, 1865 when the very last of the slaves in Texas finally got word that they were free men and women at the conclusion of the Civil War. Of course, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had gone into effect on January 1, 1863 theoretically freeing all slaves in states rebelling against the Union. So for more than two years those men and women had been technically free, but they didn't know that they were free and more importantly didn't have the covering needed to walk away from their masters safely even if they did know. It wasn't until Gen. Granger arrived in Galveston with 2000 soldiers in tow and the proclamation in hand, planting the Union flag and restoring federal rule that those free men and women were able to walk in their freedom.

Every time I hear that story I think about the soldiers who marched up Golgotha's hill 2000 years earlier. They thought those crossbeams fashioned from an old tree was going to take a life, not knowing that God would use it to bring freedom for the world. They thought they were marching the Son of Man up to his destruction and Satan thought that freedom would be forever lost. But like Paul said, thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord, they took hold of a carpenter's son from Galilee and beat him all night long, not knowing that what they were really handling, was God's own divine emancipation proclamation, about to be signed and ratified with the precious blood of the Lamb. Freedom has come.

Just like America commemorates its independence tomorrow, the believers in Jesus Christ have our own freedom day called Easter and we are to remember it every time we take the Communion. Every time we gather around the sacred table we are charged to remember that Christ has set us free from slavery to the power of sin. So as we prepare ourselves to eat and drink together on this independence weekend, take the time to remember the love of God by which we stand unshackled and truly free. In the midst of excitement about the hot dogs and hamburgers coming tomorrow, take the time today to taste the body and blood that freed us from the power of death, Hell and the grave.

So in the words of the hymn writer, "Come on children, taste and see that the Lord is good." "Walk together children, don't you get weary." "Joy is here where the table is spread, and the feast of the Lord is going on." Though we were once enemies of God according to Scripture, we are now beloved friends welcomed to sit together at a meal and recount the story of our friendship over the cup and the loaf. Welcomed to partake of his broken body and spilled blood, to remember the depth of love poured out at Calvary. Tune your ears and listen to the love song of God in the words of institution. "This is my body broken for you." Open up your eyes and recognize the hand of the person passing the elements as the very hand of God, extended in peace to you. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. We are free. We are loved. We are brought near. We are accepted. We are Christ's people and He is ours. Welcome to reality!