

“FREE”

Romans 6:12-23

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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July 2, 2017

During my years with the Jamestown church, I sometimes was asked to preside at the daily worship services at nearby Chautauqua Institution. I introduced the preacher, led the liturgy, and offered the prayers. In those days, Ross Mackenzie was the Director of the Department of Religion, a well-known name in Presbyterian circles at the time as he had taught church history for twenty years at Kelly’s seminary in Virginia before taking on the pastorate of a large church in Gainesville, Florida. During Ross’ time at Chautauqua he established the “Abrahamic Initiative” and stressed the importance of interfaith relationships.

One day, a Tuesday as I recall, the service being over and having concluded my responsibilities for the day, I left the Amphitheater where worship is held to head to my car for the return drive to Jamestown. An older woman waved at me and motioned for me to stop. She said she wanted to talk to me. I thought maybe she knew someone in my congregation and wanted to be remembered to them. I thought maybe she wanted to give me a message for the preacher. It even crossed my mind for half a second that maybe she wanted to express appreciation for something *I* had said in the service. I could not have been more wrong!

Shaking her index finger at me, she let loose: “I don’t like you any more than I like Ross Mackenzie!”

That was the beginning of a twenty-minute conversation with the woman and her husband (whose sole contribution to the discussion, because he was smarter than I, was to say after each of the points his wife made, “She’s right, you know”). They were members of a very conservative group on the grounds called “Chautauquans for a Christian Focus.” She did not like the way I prayed and she did not like that for which I prayed. I did not have the Holy Spirit, she reported, because her Baptist pastor did and I was not anything like her Baptist pastor.

I told her I was sorry I disappointed her and maybe my successor the following week would be more to her liking. But I also said that diversity of expression is something to treasure within the body of Christ just as a rainbow's beauty comes from its array of many colors and a quilt's fascination comes from the varied stories conveyed by its many squares. "Some people, for instance, find inspiration in the Bible from David who sang and danced before the Lord," I said. "Others resonate with St. Paul whose faith seems more formal and theological."

"Oh, I like Paul," she said, as if I couldn't have guessed. "That David was a sinner." (Never mind, ma'am, I thought to myself, that Paul once described himself as "the chief of sinners.")¹ I suspect she saw Paul as a "law and order" guy even though in reality he was very much a grace and love liberal. I suggested to her that many people loved David's psalms. "Well," she replied. "They were written after he repented."

The gist of the whole tedious exchange with the woman was that in her mind people like Ross Mackenzie and me are soft on sin and we give too much away when we emphasize God's grace, forgiveness, and inclusivity. She was afraid that pastors like Ross and me make things too easy for sinners and thus promote debauched, degenerate, decadent, depraved, immoral, lustful, lewd, lecherous, lascivious, libidinous, licentious, naughty, prurient, perverted, promiscuous, wanton, concupiscent, and corrupt behavior. For my part, I wanted to know how she knew about all of that stuff!

It is not that sin is not real or that sin is not hurtful to others and to ourselves or that sin is not an offense against God and against the new heaven and new earth toward which we are called to live. Sin is all of that. Sin desecrates God's creation and devastates relationships. "*The wages of sin, the payment required from you for your sin, is death,*" St. Paul says.² But, because of Christ, through Christ, and in Christ, sin is not the greatest reality of our lives. Blessing is. God is. "*While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,*" Paul preaches.³ It is not a matter of being soft on sin. It is a matter of not getting stuck there. It is a matter of accepting the gift of Christ's sacrificial love. It is a matter of embracing life and love and hope as God does and as Jesus does.

The cross of Christ is God's solution to our sin. We may not understand it. We may not comprehend how it works. But we are told it is God's way. "*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*"⁴ On the cross on which Christ died for us, we are set free from our enslavement and captivity to sin. We are set free from all that spoils and diminishes life.

¹ 1 Timothy 1:15

² Romans 6:23

³ Romans 5:8

⁴ Romans 8:1

We are set free from all that makes smaller the large life for which God made us and that Paul describes as “*more than we can ask, think, or imagine.*”⁵ On the cross, the tentacles of sin that wrap around us like a choke hold are pried open. We are freed to live in the freedom of Christ if we will!

Is that not what St. Paul says happens when we are baptized? Paul says “*...when we go under the water, we leave behind the old country of sin and when we come up out of the water we enter into the new country of grace, a new life in a new land.*”⁶ We die with Christ; we are raised with Christ; we are free in Christ.

So, then, does that mean we can do anything we want? Since we are free in the freedom of Christ, can we do anything that comes to mind? Is the character in W. H. Auden’s *Christmas Oratorio* right when he says: “I like to sin. God likes to forgive sin. Really, the world is quite admirably arranged?”⁷ If grace abounds, should we therefore sin boldly? Shall we sin early and often?

St. Paul says, “By no means!”⁸ Of course not! We all know well from our own experience that there are acts of so-called freedom that destroy freedom. I have heard at least a hundred teenagers say through the course of my ministry that they cannot wait to grow up and be out on their own so they can do anything they want to do! They imagine wistfully not having to listen to anybody else. They dream of being captains of their own destinies.

But then they find, as we do, the more we do what we feel like doing without caring about anyone or anything else, not considering how our behavior affects others, having no interest in discerning the wisdom of God or being a disciple of Christ, the messier and murkier our lives become and the more our freedom is constrained.

To say that God has forgiven our sin in Jesus Christ and thus we can live any way we desire, that we do not have to live compassionately, justly, or mercifully, that we may indulge ourselves whenever we feel like it is to build our house on sand. It may sound like freedom in the short term but it most assuredly is not. Where does it get us? What do we get out of living like that? Anything of which we can be proud? Does it enlarge our lives or contribute to the common good?

⁵ Ephesians 3:20

⁶ Peterson, Eugene H., *The Message*, Romans 6:3.

⁷ W.H. Auden, “A Christmas Oratorio”

⁸ Romans 6:15

The freedom that comes to us in Christ is a Christ-focused freedom. No government, no country, no president or Congress, no military victory can give us that ultimate freedom. Only Christ can set us free. In the freedom of Christ we are free to live the gospel as Jesus taught it, preached it, lived it. We are free to live “upside-down” lives relative to the world’s ways. We are free to seek more to understand than to be understood. We are free to serve rather than to be served.

What being free in Christ does is to immerse us so deeply in life as it is created and intended by God we end up being more alive, more in tune with life, more at one with God and one another, more free than we ever thought possible. There is an old hymn that sings this truth, *“Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free...”*⁹

What I wanted to tell that woman at Chautauqua and her husband was to get over their preoccupation with sin, with defining their lives by what they thought they and everybody else should and should not do. Even the Bible gets over it. The Ten Commandments of the Old Testament, the “thou shalt not,” certainly were formative in helping a Hebrew community that had been in chains for four hundred years in Egypt to learn to live as free people together as they journeyed toward the Promised Land. But, Jesus summed up those commandments in one positive commandment: *“Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and mind and soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.”*¹⁰

Sin has nothing to teach us. We do not learn joy from sin; we do not learn compassion; we do not learn justice; we do not learn love by focusing on sin. That is why Jesus, when he wanted to guide us in living truly and deeply, spoke to us in beatitudes, in blessings. Live blessedly, according to Christ’s blessings, and see how free you become, how free you are! *“For freedom has Christ set us free!”*¹¹

I read not too long ago a story about the great missionary explorer, David Livingstone. He was at home in Scotland between his journeys in Africa when he was invited to the University of Glasgow to receive an honorary doctor’s degree. Usually, the biographer wrote, there was a great burst of applause and cheering when the degree was conferred. But when Livingstone got up to go to the podium he was greeted with an almost reverential silence.

He was gaunt and haggard from the thousands of miles he had logged making his way across a mostly unexplored continent. Thirty times he had been laid low with fevers. His left arm, crushed by a lion, hung limp at his side. There was a hush over the audience as he announced his determination to return once more to Africa. He said to the crowd:

⁹ George Matheson, “Make Me a Captive, Lord.” Hymn #378 in [The Presbyterian Hymnal](#).

¹⁰ Luke 10:27

¹¹ Galatians 5:1

*“I want to tell you what supported me through all the years among people whose language I could not understand and whose attitude toward me was uncertain and often hostile. It was this: the voice of the One who says, ‘All power on heaven and earth is given to me and, lo, I am with you always.’ On these words of Jesus I staked everything and they never have failed.”*¹²

Always at the heart of Christian freedom is the presence and power of Jesus Christ with us. The most important things in our lives are what we do in obedience to Christ, what we risk out of our commitment to God’s love, what we undertake because of our passion to live in God’s way, and how we grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ who was the freest person who ever lived.

I cannot imagine anything more important for a pastor to say to his or her congregation than what St. Paul said to his and what I now say to mine: *“Live freely in the freedom of Jesus Christ. For freedom has Christ set us free.”*

Amen.

¹² Smith, David J., How Can I Ask God for Physical Healing? Enumclaw, WA: The Redemption Press, 1917.