



## **FREEDOM**

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When we took our trip down to California at the beginning of the summer, everyone kept saying “Are you going to California Adventure? You HAVE to go on the ride Soarin’ Over California.” Then they’d tell me it wasn’t a real ride – it was a simulation with views of scenery, so I thought it sounded more like Snorin’ over California. Not too exciting. But we’d never been there before, so we decided to give it a shot. And our friends were absolutely right – if you’re ever down there, you have to check it out.

You walk into what looks a bit like an IMAX theater with a huge curved screen and you take your seat. But you have to strap in, because they lift the seats off the ground so you’re suspended in the air, like you’re riding in a hang glider. Then the film begins to play with all these aerial images shot over different parts of California. What makes it more than a movie is the fact that the seats move to go along with the camera, so you feel like you’re moving. And the best part is that they pump in different scents to go with the different scenes. So when you sweep out over the ocean, you smell the ocean breeze and feel it on your face. When you go down over the orange groves, you catch whiffs of orange blossom. And as you pass over the mountain forests, there’s a hint of evergreen in the air. The only bad part about the ride is that it’s over too quickly and you wish you had more time to take in each view.

I was thinking about that ride as I was preparing this sermon. For the past several weeks, we’ve been soaring over some high country – that place where we reach wholeness. That place where the broken pieces of our lives find healing. We’ve been getting a bird’s eye view of what God offers us in Jesus. It’s been a quick fly by, and we haven’t even begun to cover the topic in depth. But I hope you’ve caught the tantalizing scent of restoration. I hope you’ve been able to detect a hint of peace and deliverance and health. And I hope it has been just enough to leave you wanting more.

If your summer has been like most people and you’ve been in and out during this series, let me recap for you what some of our big themes have been:

- *God desires our wholeness.*
- *Jesus is the way God offers us that wholeness.*
- *Wholeness begins with admitting brokenness.*
- *We’re all in need together.*
- *God’s power can work in and through our brokenness.*

As Bill put it, our goal was not to answer all the questions in these sermons so much as open a conversation. We want to create a culture here at New Day where we all can openly admit where we're at and humbly seek God together. There's something very powerful in the combination of transparency and genuine hope for change.

This morning, as we wrap up our time on this topic, I wanted to spend a little time looking at this from a slightly different angle. Our starting point in previous weeks has been our own brokenness and what we're hoping for. Today I want to look at where Christ has already taken us and how to stay there.

One short verse has been stuck in my mind, and it is found in Galatians.

**Galatians 5:1,**

*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*

Two Wednesdays ago, around 2 in the afternoon, 52 year old Terrence Germani quit his job in a sandwich shop and gave all his belongings to his roommate. He then walked down the street toward the Wachovia Bank in Waynesville, North Carolina, and as he walked, he called 911. He told the operator, "I'm heading for Wachovia Bank. I've got a note, I'm going to rob the bank. I need to go to prison. I got a black shirt on, brown pants, white tennis shoes and I'm a white male. Don't try to stop me because I want to go to prison."

Once inside the bank, Germani handed a teller a note demanding money. When an officer approached him Germani stated, "You got me. I'm robbing the bank." Germani also said, "Arrest me. I did it. I robbed the bank. I just handed her the note." So that's what the police officer did, he arrested him, and Germani is now right where he wanted to be. At least until his hearing this week.

It seems strange for anybody to voluntarily give up their freedom. You hear those kinds of stories once in a while of convicts who have spent most of their life behind bars and don't know how to function out on the street, so they'll do something to get thrown back in jail. You'd have to be in a pretty bad spot to want that.

Paul seems to be concerned that the Galatians are in danger of doing something similar spiritually. They had been given this incredible gift of freedom in Christ. What were they going to do with it? Would they end up voluntarily giving it up and returning to patterns that had ruled their lives in the past? Would they squander their freedom or take full advantage of it?

It's the same question for us. We've been handed an amazing gift. Let's look one more time at the passage Jesus read that has served as the backbone of our discussion:

**Luke 4:18-19**

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to release the oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Dead center in this quote is the line about freedom, which puts it right at the heart of Christ's message. Jesus came to release us from what has held us captive. That's the bedrock of what he has done for us.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. That is one of my very favorite verses in the Bible. Too often, Christianity is viewed as something that is restrictive and stifling. We see belief as something that tells us what we can't do. If that's our understanding, then we don't understand Paul. A true encounter with Jesus should be the most liberating experience we can have, because that's the whole purpose for his coming to earth. If we find something different, then we need to reexamine the Jesus we think we know.

We've spent a lot of time talking about how we are moving toward wholeness in this process of God restoring us. But Paul talks about freedom as something we've already been given. He's not concerned with getting us there – his fear is that we won't live like it's true.

The word freedom has different connotations depending on who's talking about it. For example, a freedom fighter in Central America will hear the word in one way, while the high school graduate getting ready to move into their own apartment will think of it in another way entirely.

So what we really need to know is who Paul had in mind as he talked about freedom. Throughout Galatians, he refers to two different life situations that will shape how we interpret this concept. The first is the image of a **prisoner**.

### **Galatians 3:23-24**

*Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.*

If I'm a prisoner and I hear the word freedom, two things come to mind for me. First, it would mean a **pardon** of some kind. Getting my freedom would mean either my sentence has been overturned, OR I've served all my time OR they're letting me out on parole. Any way you look at it, freedom involves getting out from under the weight of punishment.

The second thing I would obsess over as a prisoner would be a desire to live with **no walls**.

In his book, *To End All Wars*, Ernest Gordon recounts his days as a prisoner of war in a Japanese camp during World War II. He starts the book with this:

*I was dreaming, and I was happy with my dreams. Within myself I heard the raucous cry of seagulls circling above the fishing boats as the fishermen sorted their catch. I felt the touch of a salt-laden wind upon my face. I smelled the clean freshness of old-fashioned soap. I was savoring the cozy luxury of freshly ironed sheets on my bed at home, and the friendly flicker of warm shadows that my bedroom fire cast upon the wall.*

Gordon woke up from that dream to the sight and smell of guards moving dead prisoners past him. The beautiful sense of wide open spaces quickly vanished and the world closed in as he once again had to face the reality that he was stuck in a rancid hut in the middle of a remote jungle with no chance of escape. Prison is all about confinement, keeping you in one place, so of course your dreams of freedom would be about the beauty of a world beyond the walls.

Those would be the markers for a prisoner – pardon and a lack of walls to hold you in. Paul gives us a second perspective freedom, and that is from the point of view of a **slave**.

#### **Galatians 4:8-9**

*Before you Gentiles knew God you were slaves to so-called gods that did not even exist.*

If you want an honest discussion of how it feels to be a slave, pick up a copy of Harriet Jacob's autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. It's a very sobering account of her growing up years on a plantation.

For Harriet and other slaves, the concept of freedom meant the ability to **make choices** for herself. She tells of a time when her grandmother had skimped and saved to get her some new shoes, which she badly needed. She was so happy to have them. But when she walked into her owner's house, the shoes squeaked across the floor boards. Her owner said, "What's that noise?" Harriet told her about the shoes, and the woman said, "Take those off." She found the sound annoying. So she made Harriet remove them and run all her errands barefoot. And this was in the middle of winter with snow on the ground. Harriet had no choice but to obey, hurting her feet terribly. It's hard to imagine not even having a say in what you wear, but that's the reality of slavery. It takes away your freedom for self-determination.

But the underlying aspect of freedom that mattered most to Harriet was the chance to be seen as **fully human**. Reducing people to the status of property is at the core of what makes slavery so evil. It's dehumanizing. When Harriet's uncle Benjamin was explaining to her why he was running away from the plantation, he said, "We are dogs here; footballs, cattle, everything that's mean." To the slave, freedom ushered in a world where you could be treated with the dignity of being human.

Paul takes these two metaphors – prisoner and slave – and applies them to us in a spiritual way. We're the ones being held captive. We're the ones who aren't our own

masters. So if we're going to think about the freedom Christ gives us, then we need to think of it with the markers that matter to prisoners and slaves.

Jesus is our pardon. He took care of the death sentence we've been living with as a result of sin. He erased our guilt. Scripture says he also knocked down the wall keeping us away from God. The barrier is now gone. And nothing makes us more fully human than knowing the one who thought we were worth dying for. Jesus restores our dignity and calls us his friends. Christ also gives us the power of the Holy Spirit who allows us to make our own choices – we don't have to be controlled any longer by our desire to sin. And that's the kind of freedom that can't be taken away.

It can, however, be given away. Nothing forces us to live like what Jesus has accomplished is true. And that brings us back to where we started. Are we acting like the man who walked into the bank and voluntarily gave up his freedom?

Paul warns his readers to not go back to what Jesus had freed them from. It must have been a strong tendency for them, because if you read Galatians as a whole, you can see Paul pressing this point home over and over again.

Why would they do that? Why would we do that? It's like when the Israelites were complaining in the desert. God miraculously freed them from Pharaoh, and a few weeks into the journey, they were thinking Egypt looked pretty good. They were free, but they hadn't reached the promised land and the trip took faith. They knew what awaited them if they went back to Egypt.

Sometimes our past holds a strange attraction for us, even though God has set us free. We're not in paradise yet, and the journey is long. And we start to wish for the old places that look pretty good from a distance.

So what does it look like for us to back away from freedom? We can take each of those four markers we identified and see what happens when we choose the opposite.

For example, if freedom in Christ means pardon, then giving up freedom means not acting like that pardon is real. One way that shows up is when I keep **punishing myself**.

Guilt is a healthy feeling when it moves us to change our behavior and ask for forgiveness. But when we continue to carry it with us, it skews the way we live. We will refuse to let ourselves enjoy life, because we don't feel we deserve it. We'll impose our own demands on ourselves to make ourselves suffer for what we have done. We will keep replaying things we did or didn't do in our minds, feeling that if we're not thinking about them all the time, we're not taking our actions seriously enough. So we live with this cloud over our heads of constantly feeling like there is more we should be doing.

In the movie *Rachel Getting Married*, Ann Hathaway plays a girl named Kym who is struggling with guilt. When she was sixteen, she was babysitting her younger brother. But she was high at the time, and she drove her car into a river and her little brother

drowned. So she's going to a twelve step recovery group, and at one point she tells them this: "I struggle with God so much because I can't forgive myself. And sometimes I don't want to believe in a God that could forgive me."

Maybe you feel like her this morning. You don't want to believe in a God who could forgive you because that feels like he's not taking your sins seriously enough. It just seems too easy of a way out to accept God's pardon for whatever is in your past. It feels like saying magic words and waving a wand to make your sins go away. But that's completely misunderstanding God's forgiveness. He takes our sins far more seriously than we ever could. It taxed the very depths of God to make salvation possible. For Christ to tell us we're forgiven so completely, he first had to sacrifice everything. When we continue to punish ourselves, when we dismiss his pardon as too easy, we're saying what Jesus did wasn't good enough. We need to spend more time reflecting on the cross.

Paul made this bold statement to the church in Rome:

### **Romans 8:1**

*So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.*

No condemnation! What an awesome truth. I can stand here this morning and confidently say I'm speaking on Christ's behalf when I tell you, if you're in Christ Jesus, your sins are forgiven. You are pardoned.

Maybe you're not sure what that means – to be "in" Christ Jesus. All that says is that you've opened up your life to him. You've taken the hardest step of freedom, which is admitting you have a need for it. Only prisoners and slaves can be set free, so it means coming to Jesus and asking him for help as a needy person. You can simply pray, "Jesus, I know I need you. Thank you for dying for me, for making a way to set me free. Please come into my life, forgive me for my sins and help me change."

It's not the words of the prayer that do it – it's the placing of your faith in Jesus for your freedom. And what an amazing promise is ours when we do that. Sometimes when we've been around that truth for too long it sounds like old news. But to be out from under any sense of condemnation is a huge weight lifted, and it's critical that we don't try to take that burden back on.

God's pardon isn't just for me, though – it's for other people, too. And one of the other ways we quickly quit living in freedom is by **judging other people**.

I like God's mercy for myself. I'm not always so sure I like it for other people. But when I withhold forgiveness or grace from other people, when I make them feel guilty and punish them for what I think they've done to me or someone else, I'm giving up some of my own freedom. Because I'm building a wall between myself and the other person. When I judge somebody, I cut myself off from getting to know them. I block off any sense of compassion for their situation. And it keeps me from knowing God's heart for that person.

I've shared the story with some of you about a class I had in seminary. There was a Korean woman in one of my classes who was very quiet. She barely spoke any English, and I quite honestly wrote her off as not having much to contribute. This was a discussion-oriented class and if she wasn't much of a talker, I couldn't see how I had anything to learn from her. I wasn't mean to her or anything – it was more like I had made up my mind about her and so I really didn't notice her at all.

Then one night the class discussion turned to persecution. People started to debate different theoretical ideas back and forth. There's nothing like a roomful of future pastors to fill up an hour with talking points. We all thought we had deep insights into suffering for Jesus. But toward the end of the discussion, this woman spoke up. She said, "When I became a Christian in Korea, my family was Buddhist. I would go to church every Sunday. And as I walked home, I would know that when I got there, my dad would beat me for going to church."

You could have heard a pin drop. We all felt incredibly small and foolish, because we had no idea what we had been talking about. Here I had completely ignored this dear sister in Christ who knew more about having your faith tested than I ever will. To my shame, I had judged her without knowing her, and I was putting up a wall that Christ had torn down.

To judge other people is to lose a little more of our own freedom.

We said that another part of being free was having the ability to make our own choices. To trade in that freedom would come in the form of **choosing slavery**.

Paul had a couple concerns about this for the Galatians. For one thing, he saw the real possibility that they would reimpose expectations and standards that God wasn't asking them to meet. Little rules that a good Christian should follow. They all add up to a big man-made burden that sounds spiritual, but that God never intended for us to carry.

We can place those expectations on ourselves and we can place them on other people. It's one of the easiest traps for churches to fall into. I get a magazine called *Your Church* that's mostly one big ad for church supplies, so I don't normally read it. But there was this article in the latest issue called "High Expectations." It was trying to tell you that by asking more of congregation members, they'll stick around longer. And they gave the example of one church that expected its members to do many things. They were supposed to go on at least one international mission trip every year. They were supposed to be part of a small group and Sunday school. They were undoubtedly supposed to give a certain amount. The list went on and on. It started to stress me out and I don't even go there.

All those are good things, and I understand why a church would take that direction. But it's not the gospel. That is creating a new form of slavery to rules that God didn't make.

I love what the great theologian F.F. Bruce said: “I am for whatever brings freedom in the church. I am for whatever brings the freedom of the Spirit in the church of God.”

God loves you whether you go to church or not. He loves you whether you tithe or not. He loves you whether or not you send your kids to Christian school, whether or not you drink, whether or not you are part of a Bible study, whether you vote Republican or Democrat, whether you dress up or down to go to church. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free, and we do an injustice to the gospel when we make it anything less.

We need to be clear here, because freedom isn't a license to sin, and Paul was equally concerned that the Galatians would interpret his message that way. A few verses later he wrote:

**Galatians 5:13**

*You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature...*

We had a little bit of pastureland when I was growing up, and we had a few cows. Bambi was my favorite. She was a big old thousand pound Charlais with this creamy coloring and big brown eyes. She had a lot of personality. For a cow. But Bambi liked the grass that was outside the fence. It looked so much greener than the grass on her side. So she would strain her neck through the barbed wire until the fence was all out of shape. And eventually she would bust clear through and find herself standing in a ditch right next to a dangerous road with fast cars and hard pavement.

We're a lot like Bambi when it comes to sin. We see something “over there” and suddenly God's rules seem so confining. So we break them and think we've found freedom. Really, we've just put ourselves in a ditch that's hard to get out of. We've put ourselves on a dangerous road and soon find we don't have the will or the ability to choose anymore, because the sin that looked so appealing has now taken control and is running our lives.

I think it was Becky Pippert who once said, “Sin is so boring.” It's so predictable in its path. And it always seeks to make us feel like we have no choice in the matter – we HAVE to keep sinning. But the freedom Christ promises says we do not have to stay trapped in sin any longer. Now we have the Holy Spirit to empower us with strength we'd never have on our own.

You may feel like you're so far outside the pasture with some sin right now that there's no turning back. You feel like you've given up your freedom and now you have no choice. But that's not true. You do have a choice. You can resist. The Bible says that the one who is in us is greater than the one that's in the world. It says when we resist the devil he flees.

Getting free just needs one word: repentance. It's a good old fashioned word that means turning around. Change where you're headed. Turn around and look at Jesus. No matter

where you're at with a sin, if you turn toward Christ, he's ready with the same freedom. It is not too late.

I'm going to give a moment right here and now to talk to God about what feels like it's too far gone for you. Now is time for turning around. Don't put it off. You'll forget. Take it to him while it's on your mind and heart.

Our freedom is undermined when we punish ourselves, when we judge others and when we sign up for slavery again, either with rules or more sin. I want to end with the way we give up the part of freedom that lets us be fully human, and that's by **listening to bad shame**.

I say bad shame because there can also be good shame. When I feel the good kind of shame, I hear the message, "You're not living up to your potential." When I'm feeling bad shame, I hear the message, "You don't even have any potential. You're worthless."

This may sound like the guilt and punishment we talked about earlier, but it's not. Guilt is over things we've done or not done. Shame is about who we are. Here are some characteristics of bad shame:

*Bad shame is never specific.* There's nothing we can do to fix what we're ashamed about, because it's just about who we are. We feel like complete failures as people.

*Bad shame can't distinguish between big and little mistakes.* We lose our sense of perspective on what's important and what isn't. Everything about us is wrong.

*Bad shame takes over our personality.* It becomes the driving force in how we see ourselves, lowering our self-esteem, making us angry and hating ourselves. We are constantly on the defensive – even about the small stuff – hiding some part of ourselves because we are sure if we were found out, we couldn't survive it.

Often we internalize that feeling from some rejection we experienced. Maybe you had a parent or family member who belittled you or constantly told you that you were no good. If you've been fed a steady stream of messages that you're no good, that you won't amount to anything, that you're a mistake – those lies seep into the way you view yourself. Salman Rushdie once said, "Shame is like everything else. Live with it long enough and it becomes part of the furniture."

When we believe those lies – and they are lies -- we lose a little more of our freedom, because we see ourselves as less than people created in God's image. We stop seeing that God values us and we quit moving forward toward what he has in mind for us. We get stuck and frozen

This ties in with everything we've been talking about over the last several weeks, because when there is brokenness in our lives, we can start to think we're so flawed that we're

past redemption. We can see ourselves as unsalvageable and live in total despair because we're beyond hope.

If you take away anything from today, from this series, I hope it's this: Jesus loves you. He values you. He wants you to be free from shame, free from fear, free from lies, free from sin. Here's a verse worth memorizing:

**Zephaniah 3:17**

*The LORD your God is with you,*

*he is mighty to save.*

*He will take great delight in you,*

*he will quiet you with his love,*

*he will rejoice over you with singing.*

God loves you enough to sing about you. Isn't that amazing? I've asked Sarah to come in just a moment to share a song that sums up the message of this series very well. As you listen to her, let it be your prayer this morning. Thank God for the freedom he's given us in Christ, and ask him for help in whatever area of freedom is hardest for you to live in – pardon, having no walls, making choices or being fully human.