

FREED TO RIGHTEOUSNESS

A few years back, my wife and I binged a show called Breaking Bad. We watched all 62 episodes in less than a month. And I fell in love with it. It stands as one of my favorite crime dramas to this day. I loved it so much that I committed to watching its spinoff ‘Better Call Saul’ before it even aired. I don’t know if any of you have ever watched ‘Better Call Saul’ but ... it aint no ‘Breaking Bad’. There are a lot of characters from the original show that I’d love to see a backstory of, but Saul just isn’t one of them. And the irony of his story is that it’s a prequel to Breaking Bad that explains how Saul, a shady, two-bit attorney who is always knows how to help people in their trouble even if he never helps them out of their trouble. **To make a long story short, Saul is actually the new persona taken on by Jimmy McGill ... a less successful and smaller time attorney.** One of its critics’ biggest problems with the show is that the character is **virtually the same in action, morality and focus.** He’s got a whole new life, but no deep part of his life has actually changed. Ironically, this reflects the truth about witness protection and identity changing. Studies show that people can change names, documents, careers, even bodies but they are very rarely change their behavior.

Some opponents of the gospel in Paul’s day and ours would support the idea of a Saul Goodman. That a person can be “changed” yet appear to be the same in their actions. But the gospel doesn’t make room for that. The only way to become spiritual Saul Goodman’s is to distort or misunderstand the gospel. Because **at the heart of the gospel is change.**

Last week, Pastor Larry walked us through how Jesus resurrection brought about our justification. Romans 5 presents that when Paul declares that **by faith, we are justified in Christ which makes us righteous in the sight of God.** It’s one thing to know that in your head, but it’s a completely different thing to see the fruit of that in our everyday lives. The gospel changes who we are and whom we serve, which means it ultimately changes what we do.

The reality of the gospel doesn’t just bring theoretical change or even a level of invisible spiritual change. The heart of the gospel is that we would be changed completely. We are, as John Stott would say “Men Made New” if we believe in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And this is a truth that Romans 6 possess, that **the gospel changes us deeply by giving us a new identity that frees us from sin and binds us to God.**

The first way that we can see that the gospel deeply changes us is that:

1) THE GOSPEL UNITES US WITH CHRIST.

Can you truly be changed by God and live the same way you always have? The question that Paul is answering is close to this. If a person has encountered God’s salvific grace, will they keep on sinning? Paul says no. He gives a pretty resounding no and the reason behind that is simple. The gospel. If Jesus actually died for our sins and our faith in him justifies us, then we are buried with him and raised with him according to Paul. And as he writes this, he uses his first of three great pictures for the believers in Rome to envision. The first one was baptism. Take a look at verse 3, where he says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”

A. Baptism is the symbol of our union with Christ.

Although Paul did not start the church in Rome, it’s highly likely that he was more than aware of their discipleship methods. One thing that wasn’t even questionable was a believer’s baptism for all who had come to faith in the church, so this is a very relevant illustration. Think about the beautiful baptisms we get to do at the beach each summer. Just as we are buried under the water and then raised up into new life, through faith we are united with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. Again, this is an illustration that Paul is using so he’s not pointing to their own physical baptisms as the evidence of their unification with Christ but the spiritual baptism that took place at the moment where they had faith.

At the very moment that you believed in your heart that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior who died for your sins, you were made one, unified, identified as Christ. Your faith in Christ has made you one with Christ. The word united in verse 5 literally means “to identify as”. So, our identity is IN CHRIST and our lives should display that.

Being united with Christ changes us deeply because it gives us a new identity and a life that is completely new in relation to God.

The second way we can see that the gospel deeply changes us is that:

2) UNION WITH CHRIST BREAKS THE BONDAGE OF SIN.

Faith leads to union with Christ and union gives us a new life to live but sin ... sin never disappears. Not only that, many of us may have experienced the bitter moments of life where you realize you are no longer on the spiritual high that was sparked by the excitement of knowing that things are new ... and guess what is still peering down the halls of your life. Sin. Which leads us to the place that Paul is addressing in Romans 6.

And this is where we see the second picture that Paul uses to help the believers in Rome understand their new identity. And he uses a picture of slavery. This is likely very odd and probably a bit uncomfortable for us, but it was beyond relevant for their

day. See Rome was a city full of servants or slaves; many of them prisoners of war or those who looked to fulfill a debt. So, when Paul says that the relationship that they had to sin was one of bondage, it would have resonated. Because even the most privileged servant was told what to eat, what to wear, how to work and who to answer to. And some would say biblical slavery was not as bad as the slavery that we think of in the last 5 or 6 centuries and I'd say, you're probably right but there is never a day where a person wakes up and is excited about disregarding their own liberty. The concept of slavery is that you belong to someone and your purpose, identity and life is now subservient to theirs.

Paul says, “Sin is that master”. That without Christ, we serve its purposes, we take on its identity and we bow to its power. And even if we wanted to revolt or fight back, we couldn't. C.H. Spurgeon would say: *“We cannot bear sin - when it is near us, we feel like a wretch chained to a rotting carcass; we groan to be free from the hateful thing.”*¹ And Paul would use his third powerful image here by presenting the only cure for releasing us from the power of sin. Death!

A. Sin cannot rule over the dead.

One of the most popular lines in the box-office record breaker, Black Panther, came as the protagonist (T'Challa) and antagonist (Eric Killmonger) clashed at the end of the movie. Spoiler alert. Black Panther has been out for a couple years, so I have no sympathy for you. But in the final scenes of battle between the two, Eric Killmonger says this in regard to being subject to someone else's rule. ***“Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from ships, because they knew death was better than bondage.”*** Killmonger voiced a hard truth when he asserts that death is better than living life in a dehumanizing system of bondage is. And as gruesome and disgusting and ugly as slavery has been in our history, it doesn't even compare to the bondage that we are in under sin.

The gospel pulls us from this bondage through our union with Christ though. Our faith in Christ's death, burial and resurrection gives us a spiritual baptism that is the picture of experiencing it with him which ultimately releases us from sin's bondage. Look at what Paul writes in verse 6: *“We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.”*

B. Faith brings us in the likeness of Christ's death.

¹ <https://www.christianquotes.info/quotes-by-topic/quotes-about-sin/?listpage=4&instance=2#participants-list-2>

Can sin rule over someone who is deceased? No. And that's comforting news because we will no longer have to wrestle once our race is over. We are free from the bondage of sin even if the presence of sin is a reality. And Paul brings about a deeper point. We are changed deeply because in Christ we are freed from the rule of sin because we have the likeness of his death and the hope for his resurrection. Look at verse 7 and 8: *“For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”* And then he'd go on to say in verse 10: *¹⁰ For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God.* Jesus Christ is alive, and we are alive with him and will continue to be alive in Him, even after our bodies are laid to rest. Our new identity in Christ has an everyday practical benefit that says I'm no longer a slave to sin because I am one with Christ in his death. And that truth is truly powerful enough to make a visible difference in our lives.

C. Freedom from sin is made real to us in our minds and through our actions

And the greatest evidence for that in Paul's words is how we consider ourselves and what actions accompany it. Does your work life say you are free from the bondage of sin? Does your home life say you are free from the bondage of sin? Does your sex life show that you are free from the bondage of sin? Your dreams, your relationships, your bank account? Paul says consider yourselves dead to sin and alive in Christ ... then the very next verse he says DON'T LET SIN REIGN IN YOUR BODY AND DON'T OBEY ITS PASSIONS. That's not a suggestion. That's a hard imperative that is based off of a truth that is known. That's what I call gospel coaching. Reminding yourself of truth and living out of the promise of that truth. If you consider yourself alive in Christ and dead to sin, then you can live like you are.

The evidence that we are convinced of our freedom is that we'd act like we are actually free. Do we act to receive our righteousness? By no means. Our salvation is not like a work release program where the more good deeds we log, the less time we must stay chained. We are made completely free through the power of the gospel and this motivates us to act in obedience to the righteousness of God. And verse 17 says this is from the heart.

But we aren't just set free to be wanderers with no direction. We are freed to righteousness. And that's a third way the gospel deeply changes us:

3) WE ARE FREED TO RIGHTEOUSNESS AND BOUND TO GOD.

“Freed to Righteousness”

April 27-28, 2019

I listened to a podcast not too long ago called The Nod², that featured post-Civil War stories with an emphasis on unique stories that not many people had heard of. There was one episode in particular that was so good that it made me call my mother after listening to it. It was about a woman who was just a few years older than my mother and who grew up just over an hour from where my mother grew up ... but she grew up on the plantation where her family had been enslaved. She described her struggle of coming of age in the 60's and realizing her family's life was still stuck in the 19th century. See her family, like many formally enslaved families of that day, stayed on the plantation to work as share croppers once slavery was abolished. This happened a lot because a family who has only ever known bondage often saw no promise in freedom just for freedom's sake. They'd rather continue in the way they had and just think of themselves as free, although nothing else in their lives changed. They ate the same food, did the same jobs, encountered some of the same problems and as the narrator of the story would say, “they did not have on chains, but they also didn't have dignity”.

Our freedom from sin isn't just freedom to be free, but it also doesn't allow for us to be sharecroppers on the plantation for sin. We are freed for something and to something.

A. We are freed to a holy master

Paul is very clear about the fact that our enslavement to sin pulled us in to a nature of unrighteousness, yet our justification brings us into a position of righteousness. We are essentially freed to be righteous. Verse 18 says **“having been set free from sin, (you) have become slaves of righteousness.”** This is where the gospel is clearly centered on Jesus and not us. GOD FREES US FROM SIN SO THAT WE CAN NOW SERVE HIM. Because we are otherwise incapable of pleasing him outside of his grace. Hebrews 11:6, “It is impossible to please God without faith”. We saw the same thing in Exodus 5:1, 8:1, and 9:1 all say, *“Let my people go, so that they may worship me.”* When God frees us from the ugly bondage of sin, he frees us into himself. You are deeply changed by the gospel and one of the keys to knowing you have changed is that you have a new master. Paul would write to Titus about this in Titus 2:14, saying **“(Our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ {who} gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”** God frees us to himself. And this is also grace. Because we are ultimately not free from sin unless we are under a master who has defeated sin and makes us look more like him each day.

B. We are bound to a righteousness that leads to holy service.

² The Nod Podcast by Gimlet Media, Episode: “The Hairstons: Snakes on a Plantation”

<https://gimletmedia.com/shows/the-nod/kwha2b/the-hairstons-part-1-snakes-on-a>

[?utm_source=gimletPlayer&utm_medium=copyShare&utm_campaign=gimletPlayer](https://gimletmedia.com/shows/the-nod/kwha2b/the-hairstons-part-1-snakes-on-a?utm_source=gimletPlayer&utm_medium=copyShare&utm_campaign=gimletPlayer)

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Where our bondage to sin produced unescapable immorality, our bondage to God produces holiness through his righteousness. The gospel changes us. Not just in the sense of justification but also in the sense of sanctification. Romans 6 is about Paul explaining how our justification leads to sanctification and sanctification is gospel change. And as we get to the end of chapter 6, we can see that Paul is referencing an evidence of real change through the actions of those who trust Christ.

Changed identity. Changed heart. And a changed heart leads to changed actions.

Paul calls on the actions of our past life to become the proof that we're able to live in the newness of life through faith. And it's very practical help for us. He prescribes that our lives display the same passion and devotion that we lived our lives of sin with, that we consider doing the same in CHRIST. **Are you going as hard as a Christian as you went when you weren't a Christian?** Or for some of us who may be blessed to never remember a time where we went crazy in the kingdom of darkness, are there days where you have presented your body, your mind, your life to yourself over God?

From Paul's prescription, signs of gospel change in our lives is us being all in on serving God. This is from a man who was fervent in his oppression of the church and now he's fervent in his service to it.

We have an opportunity to display the gospel change that's taken place in our hearts when we live our holy lives with the same level of service that we did our unholy lives. This is what it means to present yourselves as obedient slaves to God. This is a part of my testimony. I used to throw parties in college with hundreds of people. I loved leading people to an experience of what I thought was fun and celebration. And now that I know and am known by Christ, I have the opportunity to give myself over to him in service. So now I can still throw parties, but in a redeemed way. **And that's what it means to present your members as slaves of righteousness which leads to sanctification.** You grow when you learn to give what you love, what you're naturally gifted in and openly passionate about in service to God instead of sin.

It's okay to go just as hard for Jesus as you did for sin. Don't let go of your desire to party when you come Christ. Party harder in a holy way, for him. Don't stop being an impassioned business man or woman when you come to know Jesus. Be just as passionate and use that passion for business in the building of the kingdom of God. He's given you that. Use your members. It's not as if he gave you new members ... he's just given you a new life that holds new passions that come from your new identity. A sign of gospel change in your life is how you use what God has already given you to serve God.

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I wonder sometimes ... do people think I am keeping that same energy or if I look like Saul Goodman, trying not to be noticed as Jimmy McGill. The gospel empowers us to give ourselves over to our new, holy master ... who only wants us to be new, holy and with him for all of eternity.

CONCLUSION:

Kimyatta got a new job recently and one of the most exciting parts of it was going through the benefits package. In times past, we would have just picked the cheapest of everything and called it a day but this time we sat and perused through the benefits that will make for a better future for us and a better present.

The bondage of sin and the bondage to God both have a benefits package. One likely appeals to our desires, our dreams and probably even our idols. The other though ... it promises to not only change us now, but to have an even greater level of security in the future. And there is no premium. It's already been paid.

The gospel changes us deeply and if you believe in the power of that change then you also can live in newness.

AMEN.