

Romans 6:1-4
Exhibit C: Freedom
Rev. Jonathan Cornell
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During this season of Lent together, we are spending time reflecting on 3 chapters from Paul's great letter to the congregation in Rome. Each week, we are looking at Paul's words from Romans that help us make the case for a living hope in Jesus Christ.

It is not enough to know that we are justified by faith, if we continue to return to those same wells. Tell me if this scenario sounds familiar to you: "Ah, what a refreshing weekend! Rest, quality time loving and serving the ones I love, renewing time in worship where my faith was inspired and hope renewed. Monday again, my patience with the kids is gone and we're not even through breakfast, turn on the news and you put your head in your hands—what now? At work and your co-worker sends you an annoying message or your boss gives you an assignment that leaves you uttering four letter words under your breath, then you get home and...well, it's just a pint of ice cream, it's just a little purchase, after all I deserve it, or it's just a harmless picture—a little click bait can't hurt."

Next thing you realize, you're right back at those wells that go down so easily, but are really just holding you hostage.

You see, it's not enough for God to forgive you if you're still enslaved. He forgives you, but he also sets you free.

This morning, we're going to consider just a few verses, but in those verses lies the possibility of real life change. What Paul offers in Romans 6 are two considerations. Consider yourself, he says, dead in one respect; but in another respect, consider yourself profoundly precious and alive. And what should that mean as you live out your freedom?

So as you're able, I want to invite you to stand as we hear Romans chapter 6 verses 1-4.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

There is nothing that suffocates hope in our lives quite so much as enslavement. Now, we don't often think of ourselves as being enslaved, but what about our habits? Do you have any hope-killing habits in your life? Things that, if you were to be honest, have control over you; or to use the language of the Apostle Paul, "exercise dominion" over you?

Last week, we saw that shame, that reliving of our past failures, keeps us in the dominion of death long after Jesus says to you, "Come out from your hiding, it is for this that I gave my life." The Good News of the Gospel is that it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. That in Jesus, God grabs our sin, saying, "Let me take that for you." God carries our sin in his body and dies. And in his

death, bears the full brunt of judgment instead of us so we don't have to... ever. And all we have to do to receive is in faith.

This was the *aha* moment for Martin Luther. This October, we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation and Luther's famously posting his 95 Theses (95 grievances with the Catholic Church) to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral.

Luther struggled with this Romans text, believing that the justice meant God punishing us for unrighteous. But in a moment of divine clarity, he realized that the righteousness of God meant the sheer mercy and grace by which God justifies by faith. "When I realized this, I felt myself reborn as if I'd gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas, before, the idea of 'the justice/righteousness of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet, in greater love. In fact, this message of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven."

But something needed to happen in Luther for freedom to be possible. Paul addresses this later in verse 11 when he says **Consider yourself**. You can determine a lot in your life by how you think of yourself. Are you honest with yourself, or do you deceive yourself by thinking too highly or too lowly? Paul invites us to an honest assessment that is truly growth oriented.

First, he says, consider yourself dead to sin. In the first century, they understood slavery differently than we do. If a person fell into a difficult circumstance or they became indebted beyond their ability to repay, they would voluntarily offer themselves as a servant to the one whom they owed the debt for a period of time to repay the debt. And so, during that time, that other person has complete control over your life. In a sense, that other party was god.

We understand this notion of being held in bondage by emotional, psychological, even physical forces. Chapter 5 says that these are the forces that came as a result of Adam's choice in Genesis 3: sin and death.

The saying goes that old habits die hard, but so often it is because we haven't put our new identity as dead to sin to the test. But it's this kind of thinking that keeps us stuck in our ruts, in that familiar place that keep us apart from God and our true identity.

We have friends, Joel and Julie, who used to work with at-risk kids in Denver, Colorado. And one of the things they used to do every Christmas is buy each kid under their care a new set of clothes, shoes and all, for Christmas. And they said what would inevitably happen is that after a few weeks, they would see them back in their old clothes, with the new ones crumpled up in a corner in their room. Seems, even when we have something new, we go back to those old comfortable clothes.

There's a sign somewhere in Alaska that says, "Be careful which rut you choose, you'll be in it for the next 200 miles." But did you know that a rut is just a coffin with the ends removed? But to break out of our ruts, we must first be willing to recognize that we're in them.

One of the most powerful encounters of this transformative message is Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees who have caught a woman in the act of adultery in John chapter 8. A pack of Pharisees brought this woman to Jesus and said, "The **Law of Moses says we're to stone her, what do you**

say?” Right away, we are witness to two parties caught in their own ruts of sin and isolation. The Pharisees in their judgmental self-righteousness that kept them isolated and unable to see the truth of themselves, and the woman caught in the isolation and shame of an act of infidelity. Instead of being swept up into the moment and either joining the Pharisees in their judgment, or defending unlawful behavior, Jesus slows the situation down and offers them the chance at freedom.

Which of you is without sin? In other words, who stands with God in their righteousness and is prepared to determine her fate? No one. One by one, they walk away, until Jesus is left with only the woman. And as he is looking down at his little sand drawing, he asks, **“Where are they? Has no one condemned you?”** **“No one, Lord.”** **“Neither do I condemn you,”** but he doesn’t stop there. He says, **“Go and sin no more.”**

Here are two parties caught in the grips of two masters: self-righteousness and self-loathing. One of them totally incapable of getting over their self-righteousness, and thus still enslaved, and the other is completely vulnerable and caught, but receives a new lease on life, not only that her life is now caught up into Jesus as one who is shown mercy.

What is our new identity? Well, in verse 3, Paul says: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.” When Paul looked back on his life, he saw his manipulation, his deception, his arrogance, his violence as a persecutor of Christians. But in Baptism, Jesus literally took every one of those acts and bore them to the grave. They died; we can have a funeral for our old stuff.

All of the former masters self-absorption, anger, lust, materialism, self-pity, all the things that used to define us were buried with Christ in baptism. To use the slavery metaphor again, the debt has been paid and we are released from our captivity. So consider yourself dead to sin.

But the second movement of that act was rising to new life. In verse 11, Paul says **consider yourself alive to God in Christ. We were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (6:4).**

And that’s where we realize that the freedom we live in Christ, we never live alone. You won’t find a two-lane rut. Ruts by their very nature are isolating; their walls keep us from seeing beyond their bounds. In our sin and shame, we believe that we’re the only one, or that we have to face it alone. But Paul says that you were raised with Christ from the dead in order that we too might walk in newness of life.

When Jesus lifts us out, he doesn’t just dust us off and say good luck to you. No, he joins us to himself. The life we live, we live in the communion of the Holy Spirit in unity with Christ. Throughout chapter 6, Paul says over and over, you are with Christ, with him in his death and with him in his resurrection.

We often think freedom is being able to forge our own way and make it on our own—the Bible would call that bondage. True freedom is when we see ourselves, our lives caught up into the body of Jesus Christ. It’s in the safety and security of the community where we see our true God-given

uniqueness and are able to tap into the strength of the rest of the body to become who we were intended to be. Freedom is not individualism; it's community.

For the last couple weeks, Amy and I have been hooked on a show called *Parenthood*. It's on Netflix, so after the kids go to bed—there's not a lot of energy to do anything else at that point in the day—we look in on the fictitious stories of the Braverman Family. Amber, the teenage daughter of single mother Sarah Braverman, faces her captor, a negative self-image and the belief that she wasn't worthy of good things. But she just got some unexpected news: Amber nearly aced the SATs, Amber's a wiz. But she is still confronted with her past, decisions she and her mother have made, and believes that she is not cut out for admission to the school of her dreams: Cal Berkeley. For all intents and purposes, the future is limitless, but she can't see it until she builds up the courage to live into the reality that has been true of her all along.

Let's watch this clip.

Did you notice how the interview shifted when Amber began to trust her true identity? Instead of living under the weight of the past, she allowed herself to be pulled out of that rut and live into the truth of who she was—an articulate, thoughtful, empathetic person.

Jesus Christ stands ready to pull us up from our sin, our shame, our brokenness, and invites us to walk in newness of life. And how do we grow in our ability to see this? By considering the community of which you are a part. You are the precious chosen beloved child of God, each uniquely special, created in the image of a Father who loves us, and joined with Christ and each other as members of his body the church.

It's hard to live in shame and isolation if you aren't alone. It's hard to be disconnected when you're surrounded by community. Consider yourself alive to God in Christ. It reminds me of the song from *Oliver Twist*: Consider yourself at home, consider yourself one of the family. I wonder if we can sing this together only use these words: alive to Christ and one of the family.

You have been released from a great debt; don't continue to live under its weight. You see, like a heavy pack, sin keeps us from looking up and looking out at the great horizons of freedom we have in communion with God in Christ. So let Jesus take that weight from you, consider yourself set free, consider yourself dead to sin, consider yourself alive to God in Christ, consider yourself one of the family.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.