

Finding Freedom: The Seduction of Sin

1. Overview of our series “Finding Freedom”

- 1.1. Two weeks ago we began a new series titled “Finding Freedom.”
- 1.2. Many of us are living our daily lives with weights and burdens that God did not intend for us to carry. Some of us have become so accustomed to dragging an anchor behind us that we no longer realize it is affecting how we live.
 - 1.2.1. The pain feels normal.
 - 1.2.2. The weariness feels normal.
 - 1.2.3. The isolation feels normal.
 - 1.2.4. The fear feels normal.
 - 1.2.5. The insecurity feels normal.
 - 1.2.6. The anxiety feels normal.
- 1.3. But God has something better for us.
- 1.4. In this series we’re uncovering some of the causes behind this imprisonment of our souls. We began by examining some of the voices that shape our lives: voices of expectation and disappointment; voices of criticism, and voices of rejection.
- 1.5. Last week we noted that an unwillingness to forgive other people can function like a poison in our souls. When we don’t embrace Christ’s command to forgive others, we cut ourselves off from the grace of God.
- 1.6. **This morning our premise is simple: We cannot live in sin and live in freedom at the same time.**
- 1.7. **Before we go further, let me make a brief aside:** Some of you here this morning may just be beginning to explore the Christian faith. Or maybe you’ve just returned to church for the first time in a long time. And maybe you’re thinking, “Oh here we go. I’m about to hear a bunch of antiquated and narrow-minded views on

morality and human behavior.”

- 1.8. I want to encourage you to keep an open mind. Jesus is undoubtedly one of the most innovative and enlightened religious thinkers of all time, and, as we will soon see, the category of human sin was absolutely central to His message. And surely if there is a God who genuinely cares about human affairs then our responses to Him and our actions toward one another matter.
- 1.9. And so, even if you have some reservations, engage this subject with me this morning.
- 1.10. Let's begin by reading a passage from the Gospel of John that we have briefly touched on the last two weeks.

31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

33 They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

34 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

John 8:31-36

2. In this interaction, Jesus elucidates a remarkable reality. Sin is not merely some unfortunate, but otherwise isolated action or decision. It is a power that enslaves us.

- 2.1. His statement is all the more striking considering that He was speaking to a group of people who seem to be “good” people. These individuals were open to Jesus. The text says that they had

“believed” Him.

- 2.2. In other words, Jesus was talking to people who were probably like many of us in the room this morning. And He was saying, “The sin in your life has made you a slave.”
- 2.3. The apostle Paul makes a similar point about sin’s power to enslave in his letter to Christians living in Rome.

11 ...count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. 13 Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. 14 For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law (i.e. the Law of Moses), but under grace.

15 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! 16 Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?

Romans 6:11-16

- 2.4. It is very interesting how Paul puts things here. We are going to be slaves of something. As Bob Dylan famously put it:

*...it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody...*

Bob Dylan

- 2.5. We like to think we are free, and that we will always be free. And so even when we engage in some behavior that God condemns, we assume that those actions won’t have a serious impact on how we live going forward. We never imagine that our sin will actually

enslave us.

- 2.6. But sin is surprisingly deceptive. It gains entrance into our lives and begins to build a prison around us without our even realizing what is happening.
- 2.7. Let me give you a few of examples from the Scriptures of how sin can enslave us.

3. Consider greed.

- 3.1. In the sermon on the mount Jesus speaks about greed through the metaphor of healthy and unhealthy eyes. Here's what He says:

22 "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. 23 But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"

Matthew 6:22-23

- 3.2. To understand what Jesus is saying here, you need to know that in His ancient context, the language of "healthy" and "unhealthy" eyes also carried the connotation of generous and greedy eyes, respectively. So Jesus here is talking about being generous or greedy.

- 3.3. Now notice what He says:

22 ... If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. 23 But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness.

Matthew 6:22-23

- 3.4. **In other words, the sin of greed doesn't just affect what you do with money. It affects everything.**

- 3.5. We see this played out in a very famous story recorded in the Gospels.

17 ...a man ran up to [Jesus] and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

... 19 "You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

20 "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

21 Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

22 At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

Mark 10:17, 19-23

- 3.6. Given our preoccupation with possessions and the security most of us find in money, this is a very challenging passage for many of us.
- 3.7. Note first that the man who is talking to Jesus seems like the kind of person most of us would want to be. He's moral. He's successful. He's contemplating the big questions, like how he can receive eternal life. And he took the initiative with Jesus.
- 3.8. And Jesus gives him the greatest opportunity of his life: Jesus invites the man to follow Him and be one of His disciples.

3.9. And in that pivotal moment, the man can't do it. Why? He's enslaved by his attachment to his possessions. The sin of greed, which most people around him may never even have noticed, didn't just affect how he spent his money. It ended up affecting everything.

4. Consider another example.

4.1. Solomon was the most powerful king in Israel's history. His father David was deeply devoted to God, and he left Solomon an incredible legacy.

4.2. Early in his reign, Solomon cried out to God for wisdom, and God gave it to him. The kingdom was exceedingly prosperous under Solomon's reign, and Solomon built a magnificent Temple for the Lord that served as the focal point of worship in Israel for centuries. The prayer that Solomon offered at the dedication of the Temple is one of the most powerful in all of the Bible.

4.3. But we read the following in 1 Kings 11.

1 King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. 2 They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. 3 He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. 4 As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. 5 He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molek the detestable god of the Ammonites. 6 So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done.

1 Kings 11:1-6

- 4.4. Solomon was an amazing man and an incredible leader. But he violated a boundary that God had given to him and the people of Israel. And the result was not just that he created relational complications in his life. He was drawn away from God. Not only that, kingship in Israel went in a direction that Israel never recovered from.
- 4.5. Sin is seductive. It doesn't just stand alone as some isolated event in your life. It enslaves.
- 4.6. I want to consider one final example from the New Testament. And I want to use this example to unpack more practically how sin often works its way into our lives. My point in doing this is to enable us to more quickly recognize this same pattern when it begins to emerge in our own lives.

5. The church in Corinth

- 5.1. In the apostle Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul addresses a number of pressing issues that the Corinthians had been asking about. Beginning in chapter 8, Paul engages at length the somewhat complicated subject of eating food associated with idols.
- 5.2. In Corinth, like everywhere else in the Roman Empire, the worship of pagan gods permeated society.
- 5.3. You didn't really go out to eat at a restaurant. You went to a cultic meal at a temple. As part of the preparation for these meals, a sacrifice would be made to a god. And then the food was divided into three parts: One part would be burned before the god; one part would be eaten by the worshipers in attendance; and a third part would be placed on the table of the god.
- 5.4. Now these cultic meals took place not just on specifically religious occasions, but at official state festivals and at all manner of private celebrations as well.

- 5.5. In a place like Corinth, participation in these events and meals is how you stayed socially connected. If you were an artist or philosopher, for example, and you needed to build relationships with wealthy people who might be able to serve as sponsoring patrons, you wanted to be able make connections at these cultic meals.
- 5.6. So what did the Christians in Corinth do? They couldn't in good conscience participate in such meals, right? Participation in such cultic meals was basically participation in idolatry, arguably the greatest offense to God's glory and grace.
- 5.7. Well, many of them did attend these meals, and we can piece together from Paul's letter how they convinced themselves that it was no big deal.

6. Firstly, they embraced a slogan, a life principle, that was *almost* right.

- 6.1. Their slogan sounded a little like something Paul would teach, but actually had closer associations with the Greek philosophy of their day.
- 6.2. Here's the motto they embraced:

"All things are lawful for me..."

1 Corinthians 6:12 (ESV)

- 6.3. The NIV has it:

"I have the right to do anything..."

1 Corinthians 6:12 (NIV)

- 6.4. Paul quotes this slogan of theirs four times in this letter.

- 6.5. On the one hand, this slogan sounds a little like what we read earlier in Romans 6:

...sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

Romans 6:14

- 6.6. “We’re not under law,” the Corinthians might have said to themselves. “As truly spiritual people now, we’re free to live however we desire.” In fact, this is the sort of things their Greek philosophers said. Dio Chrysostom, a Greek philosopher of the 1st century, said:

“[t]he wise ... are permitted to do anything they wish.”

Dio Chrysostom

- 6.7. Something similar often happens to us. We start with an idea that sounds spiritual to us, or like it might come from the Bible. And in some cases the principle might have some relation to a genuine biblical teaching. But then we take it in a direction that God never intended.

- 6.8. Let me give you a couple examples.

- 6.9. **Consider the thought: “God wants me to be happy.”**

- 6.9.1. In some sense, this is clearly true. After one of His teachings, Jesus said to His disciples:

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

John 15:11

- 6.9.2. The problem is that it is easy to use this principle to make terrible decisions.
- 6.9.3. “I feel happy when I smoke weed, and so I’m sure God would be fine with it.”
- 6.9.4. “I’m not happy being alone, so I should get in this relationship.”
- 6.9.5. “I’m not happy in this marriage, so I’m going to end it.”
- 6.9.6. “I’m not happy when people challenge the way I’m living, so I’m going to avoid difficult conversations.”
- 6.9.7. There is a sense in which God wants us to be happy. But we can quickly take a wrong turn when we try to use this principle to make decisions.

6.10. Consider another principle: “I need to maximize my gifts and talents.”

- 6.10.1. When the Scriptures talk about employing spiritual gifts or stewarding resources that have been entrusted to us, the focus is squarely on bringing glory to God, accomplishing God’s mission, and bringing about good for other people.
 - 6.10.2. But we often turn the discussion of gifts and talents into a self-centered conversation about how we can feel better about ourselves.
 - 6.10.3. Many of us aren’t really serving people or organizations or causes with our gifts and talents. We’re just serving ourselves. And when we no longer feel like our interests are being served, we tell ourselves and others that we need to “find a better use of our gifts and talents.”
- 6.11. It’s very easy to embrace some slogan that sounds spiritual or meaningful to us, but is really more of a reflection of our culture

than God's Word. And then we use these mottos to justify actions that God deplores.

6.12. Every time Paul quotes this Corinthian slogan, he qualifies it:

"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but I will not be mastered by anything.

1 Corinthians 6:12

6.13. We need to engage the Scriptures until we really know the living God who breathed them. Otherwise we'll take some idea that sounds reasonable to us and use it to justify our sin.

7. Secondly, the Corinthians valued knowledge over love.

7.1. The Corinthians made the following arguments:

"We all possess knowledge." ... "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and... "There is no God but one."

1 Corinthians 8:1, 4

7.2. Basically they were saying, "We know that all these idols aren't real gods, so who cares if we participate in meals where these gods are being invoked? They're nothing."

7.3. Paul's response is twofold. Firstly, he says:

7 ...not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ...

9 Be careful... that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

- 7.4. In other words, to the people around you this sure looks like you believe that you can worship Jesus and other gods at the same time. You and all of your knowledge are going to mislead them.
- 7.5. Knowledge without love will lead you into sin. We see this repeatedly in the lives of the Pharisees. Jesus actually disagreed with the Pharisees on very few theological points. Note what He said to the crowd and his disciples.

2 "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."

Matthew 23:2-3

- 7.6. **Do you know that you can be right and yet completely wrong?** Some of us are blinded to our sin because we're technically correct on an issue, but we're not applying the truth in love.
- 7.7. Maybe you're right, but God is calling you to show mercy and extend grace.
- 7.8. Maybe you're right but God is calling you to be a help, not a critic.
- 7.9. Maybe you're right, but your heart is far from God.
- 7.10. The Corinthians focused on their knowledge, but disregarded loving their brothers.
- 7.11. The second part of Paul's response brings us to our next point.

8. The Corinthians had knowledge, but it was incomplete.

- 8.1. "An idol is nothing," they claimed. True, in a sense.

8.2. Paul writes:

18 Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? 19 Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20 No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. 22 Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

1 Corinthians 10:18-22

8.3. Here Paul modifies the claims of the Corinthians. There is a sense in which idols are nothing. They're certainly not gods like the God whom we serve. But it is also not the case that there is nothing significant going on behind these cultic meals. They're driven by demons. Sharing in these meals is to share with demons.

8.4. And for this reason Paul gives an extremely strong warning.

21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. 22 Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

1 Corinthians 10:21-22

8.5. Sometimes our incomplete knowledge can get us in trouble.

8.6. "Love is the most important thing in any relationship. And so as long as we love each other, it doesn't matter whether or not we actually get married."

8.7. "The festivals in the Bible involved drinking and music and dancing, so what's the big deal if I go to the club?"

- 8.8. "I can worship God wherever I am, so why do I need to commit to a church?"
- 8.9. "Watching pornography doesn't hurt anybody else or affect me, so what's the big deal?"
- 8.10. It's interesting how we think that the things we do won't affect the other areas of our lives. As you read on in 1 Corinthians you discover that the way some of the Corinthians were celebrating the Lord's Supper was a disaster. Some were feasting and getting drunk while others had nothing.
- 8.11. You have to wonder, what was influencing the way they celebrated this sacred meal? Perhaps their experiences from cultic meals at pagan temples?
- 8.12. Incomplete knowledge can get you in trouble.

9. Finally, the Corinthians began distancing themselves from the very person God had provided to give them direction in this area.

- 9.1. In the middle of this discussion on idolatry, Paul seems to digress to defend his apostleship. He writes:

1 ...Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? 2 Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 9:1-2

- 9.2. This is not random. Rather, it seems that because some of the Corinthians didn't like the things that Paul was telling them, they began to question the legitimacy of his authority and were distancing themselves from him.
- 9.3. I've watched this happen over and over again. A person doesn't like what he's hearing. So he begins pulling back from the very

relationships that God has provided to help him walk in freedom. Without those godly influences, the person begins to sink deeper into sin, and soon he's enslaved.

- 9.4. Sometimes it's in the moments we have the greatest disagreement that we most benefit from the relationships God has given us. Stick in the relationship. Keep the communication going. You may eventually find yourself thinking differently on the matter. Don't pull away just because you don't like what you're hearing.

10. Sin is seductive.

- 10.1. You cannot live in sin, and live in freedom at the same time.
- 10.2. So what do we do when our eyes are opened and we're able to see our sin?
- 10.3. Be quick to repent. Don't wait until later. Name it. Confess it. And turn from it.
- 10.4. Tell another person about it. Don't keep the matter in the shadows by keeping it to yourself.
- 10.5. Look to the cross. Recognize that because of Jesus' sacrifice you can receive full forgiveness. When you genuinely repent, your sin is wiped away. You're forgiven.
- 10.6. Look to the resurrection. Jesus conquered sin and death once for all and now we can be empowered to live in a new way moving forward.