

## Thank God We're Free at Last

Romans 6:12-23 & Matthew 10:40-42

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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### Romans 6:12-23 (NIV)

<sup>12</sup> Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. <sup>13</sup> Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. <sup>14</sup> For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

<sup>15</sup> What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! <sup>16</sup> Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey —whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? <sup>17</sup> But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. <sup>18</sup> You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. <sup>19</sup> I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. <sup>20</sup> When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. <sup>21</sup> What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! <sup>22</sup> But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. <sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

### Matthew 10:40-42 (NIV)

<sup>40</sup> "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. <sup>41</sup> Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. <sup>42</sup> And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."

## Thank God We're Free at Last

In January 1985, a large suitcase was discovered at the customs office of the Los Angeles International Airport, and inside the suitcase was the dead body of an unidentified young woman. As would be expected the U.S. Customs agents who discovered the body immediately launched an investigation. What they uncovered was the tale of a horrible tragedy that resulted from the desperate desire of two young people for freedom.

The dead woman was the wife of a young Iranian living in the U.S. Her desire was to join her husband. However, she was unable to obtain a visa. So she took matters into her own hands. She squeezed herself into a large suitcase and had it smuggled onto a jet headed for the United States. It was

a foolish endeavor. Even if she had survived the journey in the cargo bay of the jet, she would have remained an illegal alien spending the rest of her life looking over her shoulder fearing discovery. And so she died a lonely death squeezed into a tiny space in the cargo hold of an airplane.

As we prepare to celebrate our nation's birth, it would be good for us to consider what American citizenship has meant to so many people over the past two hundred years, and what it means to many who seek to enter our land today. People, including many of our own ancestors, have gone to extraordinary lengths to make America their home.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT THIS LAND THAT HAS MADE IT SO ATTRACTIVE TO THE REST OF THE WORLD?

Doubtless many people come here looking for work. They are tired of eking out a subsistence living in their own land. They know that this is truly a land of economic opportunity. Most of them come here and work hard and become an asset to their community and to our nation.

Others live in lands torn with crime, or outright oppression by their own government. They come here looking for security. It's interesting in a sad way. Few people die in traditional warfare nowadays, that is war between nations. Most people who die today from violence are killed either in crimes, or they are the victims of terrorism, or they are victims of violence from their own governments. There are still some very cruel authoritarian governments in many parts of the world.

So people come to America as they have for 200 years for economic opportunity, or to flee crime or persecution in their own countries. Who can blame either group? Particularly if you have a family, you will go to extraordinary lengths to provide them with a better life.

But there is another reason people have risked their very lives to come to this land. And it's summed up in one word: Freedom. Blessed freedom. That's what America has stood for more than anything else since its founding two hundred years ago. It was founded by a group of individuals who had an amazing vision of a better way of structuring government — of the people, for the people, by the people.

Freedom. What a powerful word. What an amazing idea. Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of worship, freedom to pursue one's dreams — we dare not take these things for granted. And so in two days, on July 4th, we will enjoy picnics and parades and fireworks to celebrate, as generations have before us, the gift of freedom.

For Christians, however, every worship service ought to be a celebration of freedom — for the most important freedom available in this world is the freedom that only Christ can bring — freedom from sin and death, freedom from fear and failure, freedom from anger and vindictiveness.

Perhaps we should replace our Call to Worship with fireworks and our organ with a brass band. Why? Because nearly 1800 years before our ancestors fought a Revolutionary War, someone else died

for our freedom. On the cross of Calvary a man named Jesus of Nazareth gave up His life to free us from every scourge that would crush our spirits and bring us down to sub-human activity. “You have been set free...” writes St. Paul. Do you know what that means?

### ST. PAUL USES THE IMAGE OF SLAVERY.

Paul lived in a world where slavery was practiced on a widespread basis. Some people were enslaved because of military conquest. Others were enslaved because they could not pay their debts. But the people he was writing to knew the life of a slave to be a miserable one. Imagine living at the mercy of the whims of a master who, if he chose, could be cruel and vindictive — one who could whip you or banish you or even have you killed.

Of course, Paul himself knew what it was to be bound in chains while languishing in prison. You and I may have difficulty relating to slavery. Probably none of us will ever wear chains around our arms and legs, though I did read a story about one man, an artist named Trevor Corneliusen, 26, who discovered what that’s like.

Trevor was a pretty good artist. But he’s not always too bright. For you see, he decided one day to paint a portrait of his ankles as they would look bound in chains. Can you see that in your mind’s eye — a portrait of his ankles bound in chains? Seeking to make it as realistic as possible, Trevor obtained a heavy chain and a sturdy lock from a local hardware store and proceeded to bind himself as securely as if he were a prisoner. There was only one problem. When he was finished with his portrait, he couldn’t find the key to the lock. There was no way to take the chains off.

It wouldn’t have been that big of a deal if he had been at home. But Trevor was camping in a remote area north of Baker, California. That places him at the southern end of Death Valley. It took him 12 hours to hop through the desert and reach a gas station for help. Like I said, he was not too brilliant.

You and I will probably never have chains like that on us — unless we’re really clueless. But there are many people in our land who live as if they are bound with chains. I’m thinking of those who have become addicted to drugs or alcohol or tobacco or pornography or a host of other vices that have preyed on humanity since the dawn of time.

### A RECOVERING ALCOHOLIC WILL TELL YOU THAT THE FIRST STEP TO OVERCOMING AN ADDICTION IS TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOU HAVE A PROBLEM — AN ADDICTION HAS TAKEN YOU PRISONER.

Addictions can be a terrible master. Some of you are familiar with the so-called Darwin Awards, given to people who lose their lives doing something incredibly stupid. So often these tragedies are linked to drug or alcohol addiction. For example, in May of 2004 the manager of an apartment house in Austria was surprised to find the legs of a corpse sticking out of a window of one of his apartments. Police entered the apartment and found the deceased man’s head soaking in a sink full of hot water.

Apparently, this out-of-work Austrian had returned home after a night of drinking and drugs. He decided to slip in through the kitchen window. The window was fixed at the base and tilted out, giving him just enough room to squeeze his head through as far as the sink before he got stuck. While flailing around trying to escape, he somehow turned on the hot water tap.

Police are not sure why he didn't simply turn off the water, or pull the plug to allow the water to escape from the sink. Too high, I suppose. Of course, the real question is why he didn't just enter the apartment through the front door, since police found the keys to his apartment in his pants pocket. But perhaps it's not too surprising. People have been known to do incredibly dumb things under the influence of alcohol and drugs.

As former football coach Lou Holtz once said, "I have never heard a successful man or woman get up and say, 'I owe my success to drugs and alcohol.' Yet I know of thousands of people that have ruined their lives because of drugs and alcohol."

Of course, you can become addicted to a host of activities. I am beginning to wonder if some of us aren't becoming addicted to our smart phones. That's a rather benign addiction, I suppose. However, I understand that, in England, they've decided to try to protect smart phone addicts from themselves. They've begun establishing so-called "Safe Text" streets in London. One feature of these "Safe Text" streets is padded lampposts. You want to guess why the lampposts are padded? That's right, to keep people from walking into them while they are texting their friends.

I may seem to be making light of a serious situation. I don't mean to be. It's important to understand that we can be addicted to a great many things. Some addictions can even be beneficial. For example, some people are addicted to exercise, which most of us could use more of.

Psychologist William Glasser wrote a book several years ago titled *Positive Addiction*. In his book, he notes how some people actually improve their lives through developing what he calls addictions to positive endeavors. For example, he believes a person who jogs one mile a day not only strengthens their heart and lungs, but they increases their self-confidence and imaginative powers as well.

Though he uses language more suited to his time, this is basically what St. Paul is saying. In this passage Paul is saying we can be addicted to sin, which includes everything that would pull us down and keep us from being what God created us to be — or we can be addicted to God who will help us, if we will let Him, increase our sense of well-being and give us something wonderful to live for. That is the ultimate positive addiction — being bound by chains of love to God.

**THIS IS TO SAY THAT THERE IS NO GREATER FREEDOM IN THE WORLD THAN THE FREEDOM THAT GOD GIVES US THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.**

Whether it is freedom from a debilitating habit, or freedom to simply be the very best you can be, there is something about being connected to Christ that allows us to experience a richness to life that those without Christ will never experience.

Writer Steve Beard wrote an interesting column about the recent Nobel Prize winner and legendary folk/rock singer Bob Dylan shortly after Dylan was nominated for the Nobel Prize. He noted that, not too long ago, Rolling Stone magazine asked Bob Dylan what song he wanted to hear on his death bed.

Dylan said, “How ’bout ‘Rock of Ages’?” Steve Beard thought it was fascinating that Dylan — the eccentric man that hippies christened as a prophet in the 1960s — still sings songs from his gospel albums.

Maybe we should not be surprised. A few years ago, Dylan was opening many of his concerts with the song “*I Am the Man, Thomas.*”

The song is about the conversation between Jesus Christ and Doubting Thomas. “Look at these nail scars here in my hands/They pierced me in the side, Thomas, I am the Man/They made me bear the cross, Thomas, I am the Man/They laid me in the tomb, Thomas, I am the Man/In three days I arose, Thomas, I am the Man.”

Some of you will remember that back in the 1970s Dylan was reportedly converted to Christ. His background is Judaism. But his spiritual path has taken him into an array of philosophies and religions since then. Could it be, however, that through it all God really has a hold on Bob Dylan and has never completely let him go?

Beard notes that in his recent concerts Dylan had been singing the song “Solid Rock” from his 1980 album *Saved*. In it, Dylan proclaims: “For me He was chastised, for me He was hated/For me He was rejected by a world that He created... Well, I’m hangin’ on to a solid rock/Made before the foundation of the world/And I won’t let go, and I can’t let go, won’t let go.”

That sounds like to me, that way back in the background, in spite of his many experimentations, Dylan really is addicted to Jesus. That can happen to a person. Maybe it’s happened to you. Maybe at one time in life you were addicted to one of the many vices in this world that lure people and then trap them. But one day you met Jesus and He took the chains of addiction off and set you free — free to be a new person with a new heart and a new spirit.

Maybe you were bound by a different kind of addiction. Maybe you were bound by self-righteousness and a condemning spirit. Maybe Christ has set free that spirit in you to love and to be loved.

Whatever your situation, there is One who longs to take off any chains, even if it is simply the chains of a meaningless and self-centered preoccupation with your own needs. Jesus wants to help you make a new start. He wants to be your Friend, your Ally as you seek to live an abundant life, filled to the brim with a joy that surpasses understanding.

Today is the day that can happen. Will you join your life to that of Christ? Then you will be able to say that glorious chant that we first heard from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr: “Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, I’m free at last.”

Let’s thank God for freedom this day, and let’s open our hearts to the One who gives us freedom in this world, and the world to come. Amen.

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