

For Freedom - He Set Us Free

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 00] Well, we're going to be returning to that passage that we read together from the Book of Colossians. But I wanted to begin by introducing you to my nan, born and bred in the East End of London.

She is a real cockney and she knows what she thinks and she's not afraid to speak her mind. And one thing that would be unthinkable to my nan would be not to vote.

She has voted in every election or, let's say, several decades. And the reason why it would be unthinkable for her not to go and vote is because she is strongly and painfully aware that someone died for her to have that freedom.

So for her, there's no going back. There's no return to the shadows of a darker age where she couldn't go and vote because someone died for her to have that freedom.

She's been set free and she loves her freedom. Now, why do I say that? Really, you don't need to know my nan for any other reason than that Paul in this passage is calling us as Christians to share her love of freedom.

[1 : 21] But not just any freedom that we choose to think of. I'm not here today to tell you about voting or anything like that. No, Paul is calling us here to love the freedom that Christ died to give us from our sin.

There's a phrase in Paul's letter to the Galatians that I think gets right to the heart of what Paul is saying to the church in Colossae and to us today in this passage.

For freedom, Christ has set us free. For freedom, he has set us free. Now, Paul, if you notice, he doesn't use the words free or freedom in this passage.

So how can I say that freedom is at the heart of what he's saying here? Well, I wonder if you notice, this passage is full of the language of war.

It's there straight away in verse 8. See to it that no one takes you captive. In verse 15, we see rulers and authorities are disarmed by Christ's triumph in his death on the cross.

[2 : 25] In verse 20, the question that Paul leaves with the church is, if you died with Christ, why do you submit to purely human rules?

Paul wants us to see here that there is a conflict, a battle raging between the basic religious instincts of our world and Christ.

And it's a battle that's not fought for territory or land, but for our hearts and minds. And the outcome for us is either captivity or freedom.

And it's into this battle, into this free, that Paul speaks here to plant this flag in our minds. For freedom, Christ has set you free.

Because Jesus has set us free from sin. But not so that we will carry on living in our old chains of pride and hiding in the shadows of our old guilt.

[3 : 25] But rather that we would be free indeed. Free from the patterns of guilt and pride and self-centeredness that get in the way between us and God.

Wouldn't we love to be free from that? Free from our sin. Well, as the Colossian church was finding out, and as we well know, it is far easier than we would ever think to love our old captivity.

To crawl back into the shadows of guilt and pride. We long to live free from the harsh rule of sin in our lives. But how deeply we know how we lack the power to shake ourselves free.

How then do we hold on to our freedom in Christ when all the forces of sin are set on dragging us back into their grip? Well, Paul here gives us two basic strategies for this war.

And surprisingly, the first strategy that he gives us is to know that the war has already been won. The war has been won. And he calls us to embrace Christ's victory.

[4 : 38] To embrace Christ's victory. Will you read me again? Read with me again from verse eight. Paul writes, There's no middle ground between God and purely human rules and religion.

Yet in the no man's land that lies between the two, there's a constant battle going on. And we find that the church in Colossae was on the front line of that battle.

We've seen before the super spiritual clique of false teachers who came to Colossae. They came selling a package that included Christ, but offered so they claimed so much more.

And here we see a little bit of what they were saying to these young Christians. Verse 21. Do not handle. Do not taste. Do not touch. Do not touch.

Do not touch. In verse 16, we find rules about food and drink. A whole catalogue of festivals and rituals for them to participate in. And in verse 18, some really weird and strange innovations.

[6 : 11] Asceticism. Worship of angel. Visions. And their sales strategy was this simple. This is the only way for you to get free from your sin.

The things that get between you and God, they can only be gone with this package. Spiritually, you can't do better than this. Now, if we know how deep and dreadful our sin is, we might be tempted to give anything a go to be closer to God.

But like so much that is advertised to us day after day, the reality of religious rules and rituals cannot possibly live up to the hype. It's empty, says Paul.

Human traditions. The logic of this world. It can never do what it says on the tin. It can never deliver on its promises because it is not Jesus Christ.

In him, he says, the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. The whole fullness of God is found only in him.

[7 : 22] Those other things are shadows. But the substance belongs to Christ. So playing with the traditions and rituals and rules of this world is a bit like playing an endless game of pass the parcel at children's party.

You passing around the circle, this big, colorful package. And it shrinks and it shrinks and shrinks as the layers are stripped off it until you're left with a little sweet treat that lasts a few seconds and it's gone.

It looks really good and super spiritual to have lots of religious things to do. But in reality, it's all wrapping and no substance.

It's a dark side to this game. It's trying to take us captive.

Now, it's not 100% clear what Paul means when he talks about these elemental spirits of the world. But it's likely that he's hinting at evil spiritual forces that lie behind empty religious packaging.

[8 : 36] We in the West have been trained for centuries to live as if evil spirits were not really part of the real world. But as much as 80 years ago, C.S. Lewis pointed out that there are two equal and opposite errors into which humanity can fall about the devils.

One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. He's simply saying spiritual evil shouldn't take up our minds.

It shouldn't fill our thoughts. But we are equally wrong to forget that there are dark spiritual powers at work in our world, not least in the things that seem harmlessly religious or spiritual, but in which Christ is not held to be everything supreme and sufficient.

There is no halfway point between Christ and the so-called spirituality of this world. So Paul isn't going too far in saying that the fullness and freedom that the world offers is only emptiness and captivity.

Because the substance, reality, life, fullness, deity is found in Christ only. In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.

[10 : 01] There is a battle raging. But perhaps the surprise for us today is that the front line of that battle isn't out there somewhere. So it's in the church.

Paul is writing to Christians here. Do you realize this battle is fought over your heart? Over where you find fullness and freedom in life?

Over where you turn to deal with your guilt or pride or selfishness? Your anger or bitterness or lust? Over how you handle everyday conflicts at home?

Or stress at work? Or distractions when you're left to your own devices? What keeps us from being taken captive by merely human ideas of what is good and right and true?

What stops us from turning to simply human ideas of what works for us spiritually? Or this, says Paul.

[11 : 06] If you are in Christ, know that the war for your heart has been won. Will you read with me from verse 9?

He writes, But in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

Our whole being is filled with Christ, our God and King. So he defines who we are. Our identity is in Christ.

But what does that mean for our sin problem? Where does it leave us in this battlefield? Paul goes on to explain in verse 11, In him, You were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.

In other words, He's simply saying your heart has been circumcised. Your sin has been definitively cut off. That's what the physical cutting that happened in the rite of circumcision always pointed to.

[12 : 15] It's what Moses is speaking about in Deuteronomy chapter 30 in verse 6. The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

Our old hearts of stone that were cold and dead in sin have been cut away and replaced with warm living hearts that love God.

In short, we've been set free. Sin's harsh and abusive reign in us has been thrown out and replaced by Christ in us. So now we live a new life with a new heart, new identity.

But that identity is not one that God expects us to go out and create for ourselves by working hard enough or doing a course or progressing through stages.

So nothing short of dying and rising again is enough to set us free from sin's power. But that is exactly what has happened to us.

[13 : 25] Because through faith, we share in Christ's death and resurrection. Paul writes, Baptism itself is a picture of this deep mystery that through our faith, our lives are bound up with Christ.

We died with him. We were raised with him. We are united with him. So our identity is no longer in who we are and what we do.

Rather, it's in who Christ is and what he has done. And so it is a done and dusted fact of life in Christ that sin has no power over us.

If we are united to Christ, we are set free through his death and resurrection. And so the point is this. Our daily battle with sin does not come down to something in us.

It's not how we feel about God or how we feel about ourselves or feel about our sin on any given day. No, the power is all in Christ. If you're anything like me, you can look at your life and your sin and think, how can it be that the war over my sin has been won?

[14 : 49] I still sin. How can I have a new heart? Sin has an ongoing presence in us. But the power of sin over us is gone because the penalty for our sin has been paid.

You look with me at verse 14. Paul writes, Now this would be a common sight in the first century to see over the heads of criminals nailed to the cross a list of the crimes that had put them there.

We read in the Gospels that the sign over Jesus simply read the king of the Jews. But it's as if in God's eyes a much longer list was nailed over Jesus' head.

Because the record of debt he died for was the debt that stood against us. The crimes for which he was nailed to the cross were our sins against God.

In the body of Jesus, God nailed your guilt and shame and debt to the cross. So that now that debt of sin has no claim on you.

[16 : 14] Its threats have been silenced. Its power has been broken. It can't demand any more payment or service. Because the penalty has been fully paid.

The debt is settled. This is what it means for us to be set free from the power of sin. The war for our hearts isn't won when we stop sinning.

We can't. The war wasn't even won when you gave your life to Christ. No, the war over our sin was won in the death of Jesus on the cross.

That debt was fully and finally settled then. At the cross, all those spiritual enemies that would take you captive and bind you into patterns of sin and guilt and shame and pride and human effort were defeated.

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him. Brothers and sisters, we continue to face battles now.

[17 : 24] But the war has been won. Christ is triumphant over the forces of sin and we have been filled in him.

So I wonder, is this how we see ourselves in the day-to-day rub of life? In the trenches of the First World War, it's said that often soldiers would become so overwhelmed and confused by the fighting that they would forget who they were.

Forget what they were fighting for and just wander off the battlefield. When we lose sight of Jesus' cross, the same thing happens to us spiritually.

We forget our identity in Christ. We forget that the chains of sin have been broken and we wander away from the fight. Because we forget that on the cross, Christ said, it is finished.

He has won the war. So embrace Christ's victory. Because it is only in Christ's victory that we are able to keep going on in the battle against the combined forces of sin.

[18 : 36] And that brings us to the second strategy that Paul gives us here. Endure the struggle. Embrace Christ's victory. And secondly, endure the struggle.

The war is won. But the battle rages on. And though Christ has set us free from sin's power, we still struggle to live out of that freedom.

And that's really why Paul's writing to this young church in Colossae. Because although they knew they had freedom in Christ, they were under pressure to live as if they were still slaves to their old sin.

And when we think of being slaves to sin, we can maybe think of the worst kinds of evil. Or the most hard-hearted things that human beings do.

But the captivity that Paul wants the church to avoid is being captive to our guilt and our pride. This is what he's talking about in verse 16 when he writes, Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you.

[19 : 38] And again in verse 18, let no one disqualify you. On the one hand, the risk is that these false teachers would come and heap guilt on the church by convincing them that they were getting it wrong somehow with God in questions of rules and rituals.

They would come to judge the church based on its lifestyle, questions of eating and drinking, the cycle of festivals and the calendar. Now those questions seem to be coming from the Jewish law. But as Paul has just said, the law cannot hold any guilt over us. Because our debt has been settled with God on the cross. So now he says, let no one pass judgment on you over those questions. Don't be taken captive by guilt and shame over things that have been settled already. Jesus says the things that are outside of ourselves, they're not even the real issue.

In Mark chapter 7 verse 18, Jesus says, Whatever goes into a person from the outside can't defile him. Rather, what comes out of a person is what defiles him, makes us unclean.

[20 : 56] In other words, the real sins that come out of our hearts are not touched by rules about what happens outside of our bodies. There is no freedom to be found whatsoever in rules and rituals.

They are empty of power to change us. They hold no spiritual currency. In fact, they only heap guilt and shame on us because we can never do enough.

There's never enough rules we can keep. Never enough things that we can do. On the other hand, these false teachers would disqualify the church on the basis of their worship, not just their lifestyle. Questions of asceticism, worship of angels, visions, which came through special rituals. But those things, as well as guilt and shame, bring pride.

Do you notice that in verse 18? Whoever it was insisting on these experiences was puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, or literally his mind of the flesh.

[22 : 04] You can imagine that, can't you? Someone going on about this special time of worship, feeling closer to God than normal Christians, or seeing dramatic visions of God's plans and purposes, or participating in heavenly worship of God.

But going after that kind of next level worship, it only leads to pride. This feeling of being a spiritual expert, or having insight into mysteries and secrets.

We might wonder how those things fit together, kind of strict rule keeping and full-on ritual worship. How do those things function in the same package?

But Paul strikes right at the heart of the problem with both. Because both these special rituals and strict rules, they looked super spiritual, they looked like the real deal.

But both were driven entirely by human will and effort. He says in verse 23, These have indeed an appearance of wisdom, in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body.

[23 : 16] But they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. Human rituals and rules that center on the self, but are of zero spiritual value.

Now, lots of folk would think that that is a recipe for freedom. What could be more freeing than the freedom to focus on yourself in your spirituality?

But Paul denies that. In reality, he says relying on yourself is spiritual slavery. It can be hard for us to get our heads around that, living as we do in a you-do-you, live-and-let-live society, where real freedom is seen as the freedom to pursue your own desires unhindered.

But Paul's point is this. Our own traditions and rules and rituals cannot change us as deeply as we need to be changed. In fact, he says they are of no value in stopping the selfish habits and destructive patterns that work in our lives.

They only feed our flesh as our basic instincts to serve ourselves, to rely on our own power.

Self-centered spirituality only keeps us away from God and keeps us trapped in this cycle of guilt and pride.

[24 : 42] Pride when we are not performing well enough when we think that we are doing well. But underneath it all, the sense that I need to do it.

I need to perform. I need to get it right. I need to do and do and do. But zero involvement with God in Christ, who gives us real freedom through his death and resurrection.

What does it look like to live freely with God? Not this package of rituals and rules. Rather, it's here in verse 19.

Holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. This is true freedom.

How do we grow spiritually? How do we kill sin in our lives? How do we endure through this battle for our hearts? We cling not to ourselves, but to Christ.

[25 : 47] The whole body needs the head. There is not one member of God's church that does not need Christ. Not only to be set free, but to live free from the guilt and pride and self-centeredness of our sinful selves.

Freedom from that endless cycle of guilt and pride driven by our own efforts. We are set free to live in freedom with God.

Never to fear being cast out of his presence. Never to feel we have to have something to bring or offer to show for ourselves. So it's worth asking today.

What is it that fills you with a sense of guilt? Or what is it that fills you with a sense of pride?

Probably it's not mystical rituals or fancy rules.

It could be anything. But however you answer, it will show you where the battle lines for your heart are drawn. Perhaps you live in fear of letting others down.

[26 : 56] And you live for the praise and thanks of feeling like you've done something for someone else. Maybe you feel shame after a bad day at work, but proud when you feel like you've done well and contributed.

Or perhaps you feel guilty for not being committed enough in your walk with God, but proud when you feel that you're ticking all the right boxes. Guilt and pride, they function like arrows that point to the battle in our hearts where we are still choosing to live in captivity to empty lies rather than to come to Christ and live free from those things.

If you are in Christ, your identity is no longer in your own performance, but in Christ's finished work. And we need to hold on to him.

If we had to live free from the cycles of guilt and pride that work to take us captive to a self-imposed religion of works.

See to it, brothers and sisters, that no one and nothing takes you captive to anything other than Christ. For freedom, he has set us free.

[28 : 15] So let's take our struggle to him and cling to him. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Our gracious heavenly father, we thank you and we worship you for you are the one who sees our hearts.

Father, we thank you and we thank you for you for you. We thank you and we thank you for you for you. You have welcomed us and embraced us in Christ.

You have forgiven all our sins and you call us to live freely with you without fear, without shame.

Father, we are sorry that we still choose so often to live in the shadows of our sin.

Father, we pray that we pray that as we come to Christ, that we will learn and remember who we are in him. Father, we pray that you would remind us each day that we are a new creation. You've given us a new heart for you and that you have wrapped up our lives in Christ. That we are dead and resurrected people, no longer living under sin and guilt, but under your grace and in your great love.

[29 : 36] So, Father, equip us, we pray. Give us power as we continue to battle our sin. Father, we pray to you for those who may not know even the depths of their own sin, that you would reveal that to us.

Or that gently, day by day, you would open up to us the depths of our own problem and lead us gently to Christ our Savior. So we ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.