

Have You Been Set Free



Gary Wilkerson October 15, 2012

Let me ask you a simple question: Have you been set free? You probably think, “Of course! I’ve been washed, redeemed, made holy by Jesus, and I live for him. That’s every believer’s testimony.”

Now here’s a follow-up question: Does your everyday life reflect the glorious freedom you’ve just described? Would your friends, your spouse, your children say you’ve been set free? Or are you like multitudes of Christians who feel they’re on a spiritual seesaw? Is your walk with Christ continually up and down, seemingly spiritual one moment and carnal the next?

We accept by faith the great theological truths about Jesus’ work for us — salvation, redemption, sanctification, deliverance. Yet for many of us, these are “spiritual truths” that exist in another world. We sing and rejoice at church each week over what Jesus has done for us — but is his gift of freedom a reality in our daily lives?

At times we all struggle to remain pure in thoughts and actions. Maybe this week you said something unkind to your spouse and you’ve been stewing, “What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I be a blessing in my marriage?” If you’re a young person, maybe you’re repeating unwanted habits, wondering, “Will I ever be free of this?”

Whenever we fail in our walk with God — which is often — we wonder, “Has God really set me free?” If your answer to that is no — if you feel stuck in an up-and-down life — maybe you worry about your standing with God. Perhaps at times you even question your salvation. Friend, that isn’t freedom. So what does it mean to really be set free in Christ?

The first thing you have to know is that God tells a different story of your life than you do.

The first evidence of this comes from Jesus, who says, “Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?... Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:27, 33).

Lately I’ve been anxious about something very real: My age! When I was in my twenties, I looked at my dad in his fifties and thought, “He’s so ancient.” Now that I’ve reached my fifties and am well into the second half of life, I’m starting to freak out. What does Jesus say to me in my worries? “Gary, can you add a single hour to your span of life? Don’t be anxious.”

Christ offers the same words to all of us who fret about our spiritual lives: Don’t be anxious. It doesn’t matter how broken down and teetering you feel about your walk with him; he declares, “You are a new creation.” The moment you chose to follow Jesus, he made you new — and that never changes. Even when you think you’ve strayed too far, Jesus says the opposite: “Don’t be anxious. I have provided everything for you to have fellowship with me.”

As a pastor, I’ve noticed a common problem when most people sit down in my office for counseling. “I’ve failed God’s standard,” they say wearily. “My sin has cut me off from fellowship with the Lord.” They think their sins cause the Holy Spirit to flitter away like a dove and then hover in the air until they get their hearts right.

These are all sincere believers, yet they could not be more mistaken about God. When we sin, that’s when we

need Christ's fellowship the most! Jesus doesn't abandon us in our sin. He intercedes for us, going to the Father and sending the Spirit to remind us of his grace — a grace based on his shed blood, not our performance.

Yes, the Bible and the Holy Spirit convict of sin. But we are not to be anxious about the outcome of our sin. God's grace is more powerful than any demon, than our sinful nature, than any mountain of guilt. So the outcome of our sin is to rest in him! We don't have to reestablish fellowship with him, because he's already at work convicting, washing and cleansing us. He never leaves us; the very life of God lives in us. His godly work in us never stops, even when we stop being godly!

Grace this amazing is hard to grasp in the frustrating course of our daily lives.

Most of us would admit we rarely feel God's grace at work in us. That's why we're prone to doubt his presence abides in us. Paul addresses this dilemma for us in Galatians. He writes, "I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16).

It sounds simple enough. But we tend to take Paul's counsel here as a hard command to be obeyed with striving. We grit our teeth and say, "I will walk in the Spirit today." Then once we stumble we think we aren't "being spiritual." So we try harder to walk in the Spirit. Suddenly we're under the law again because we've turned to our fleshly ability, rather than trusting that we're already in the Spirit.

Paul says, "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (5:18). In other words: The Spirit of God abides in you, giving you access at all times to his grace, which empowers you. When Paul says, "Walk in the Spirit," he means, "Walk under grace, not the law."

Paul then shows us the result of a walk in the Spirit: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (5:22-23). Take note: These things don't come about because of what we do. They are the fruit of the righteousness God has put in us — the result of his work in us.

You may not feel very loving at times, but love is in you; God put it there. You may not feel joy and peace, but God has implanted both deep within you. His Spirit is at work in you every hour of every day, to his great glory and to your deep blessing.

So, why do we sense we're in a constant battle? It's like the old cartoon where a devil sits on one shoulder and an angel on the other, each warring for attention. We are engaged in a battle, but not that kind. Paul addresses our real dilemma in Romans 7: "We know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (Romans 7:14-15, 18).

Paul doesn't mince words here as he describes his condition: "I am of the flesh. I do evil all the time. No good dwells within me." So, is this Paul's basic description of a Christian? Is he saying, "All your days will be full of such conflict"? Not at all. Yet Paul presses in further:

"When I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (7:21-24).

Many Christians stop here and say, "That's me — I'm saved but my life is wretched. There's no way God could ever use me. I spend every waking hour just fighting off sin." The problem is these Christians don't know who they are in Christ — and that is exactly Paul's point. He paints a full picture of our dilemma, describing our wretched condition, and asks, "Is there any way out? How can I ever be delivered from this? It's impossible in my own strength."

Then, in one of the most amazing passages recorded in Scripture, Paul gives us God's response to the human condition: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!...There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death" (7:25, 8:1-2).

There is a new law at work in you — because there's a new sheriff in town! Jesus, the new sheriff, has run out the

old, corrupt one — the “old man” of your flesh. You no longer live under the law of sin and death, for “the law of the Spirit has set you free in Christ Jesus.”

You may ask, “So what about the crazy battle still going on inside me?”

I tell you, sin is no longer reigning in dominion inside you. The forces coming at you are from without — from Satan, the world, your human nature — not within your old, dead sin nature. I still have a human nature, prone to be stirred up by sin, but I don’t have my old sin nature. Christ put that to death. The old, corrupt sheriff might shout at you from the city limits, “You’re not spiritual or you wouldn’t have those tempting thoughts.” But meanwhile the new sheriff has hammered up a sign that reads, “If you live here, you are free.”

This doesn’t just mean, “You are free from the penalty of sin.” Paul actually states, “The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” This means you are no longer under the law of sin, but are set free to walk in the Spirit by grace. Your old man is gone; all things have become new. You no longer have to say, “I can’t do what I wish to do.” Your motto now is, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). Yes, you can—not in your own ability, but through Christ, who has cleansed you and called you to righteousness by his grace.

“For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do” (Romans 8:3). We can’t strive our way to righteousness. God has established his righteousness in us through his Son, “in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (8:4).

So, what is on my to-do list to be righteous? Nothing. I am to work out my salvation with fear and trembling, but I do so in freedom — because the righteous requirement of the law has been fulfilled. I no longer have to barely hang on to Jesus; he has filled me with his own Spirit. And there is no longer any condemnation toward me because he has fulfilled the righteous requirement of the law. Nothing is required anymore; he has met all my requirements for being justified, made holy and righteous.

Are you anxious? Haunted by your failures? Do you wonder, “Is there really such a thing as freedom for me? Is there deliverance? Does this Christian life even work?” Jesus answers: “You have been set free.” That’s not some Pollyanna-ish, otherworldly truth, but a reality God declares about you. It’s the story he tells the devil about your life when the accuser comes.

Pray this prayer: “God, I know you’ve done this for me, but I’ve lived as if you haven’t. Settle it in my heart now. I can walk in the Spirit knowing you’ve done all to make me righteous. Amen!”

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