

FREEDOM FROM BAD HABITS

Romans 7:15-20, Romans 8:1-2

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During these six Sundays in the season of Lent, as we prepare ourselves for Easter, as we think about Jesus' journey that led to his death, we are invited to think about these questions, "**OF** what do we long to be free?" "**FROM** what do we long to be free?" and "**FOR** what do we long to be free?"

In the book of Galatians, we read, "For freedom Christ has set us free." We know that there is a certain kind of freedom that is part of optimal human existence. And we also know that there are obstacles that keep us from experiencing freedom.

As we were preparing this series, I asked people to share with me what it is from which they most long to be free. Here were some of the responses:

Worry
Anxiety
Fear
Loneliness
Shame
Regret
Guilt
Blame
Addiction
Debt
Racism
Shoulds
Oughts
Arrogance
Injustice
PTSD
Clutter
Insomnia
Criticism
Despair
Sickness

Pain
Busyness
Distraction
Expectations

We long to be free from the things that keep us from the life God intends for us. And we hear, in our passage from Romans, that Paul does, too.

Paul's words are raw and honest. I can't imagine anyone who doesn't relate to them, anyone who hasn't said something similar at one point or another. We don't know exactly what Paul is talking about, what habit it is that he can't break, but he's speaking from the heart, isn't he? Or would you say he's speaking from the gut?

"What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another...I obviously need help! I can will it, but I can't *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don't *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway."

What could it be? Drinking too much? Gossiping? Criticizing other people, putting them down? Did Paul have unrealistically high expectations for himself, thinking he should spend several hours a day in prayer? Was he a perfectionist who thought that every sermon he delivered should be eloquent, every letter memorable? Clearly there's something specific he's addressing here, some habit he doesn't like.

It really doesn't matter what it is; the point is we can relate. And that's what makes this passage of scripture so potent. If Paul had specified one action, this passage wouldn't have such universal relevance.

For each of us, there is a gap between our intentions and our actions, because none of us is perfect. It's impossible to be at your best 24/7/365. Sometimes you'll lose

your temper, sometimes you'll snap at the person you love the most. Sometimes you'll over-indulge in ways you'll regret.

The bad habit you most want to change is the one that is keeping you from experiencing your optimal life, the life God intends for you.

This morning, I want to talk about an approach to freeing ourselves from bad habits that is consistent with Christian biblical theology. Let's begin by considering the language we often hear and may sometimes use ourselves, words like:

Self-Improvement Striving to Become Better

I SHOULD lose weight

I SHOULD drink less

I SHOULD volunteer more

I SHOULD save more money

I suggest to you that there are two problems with all of these phrases. First, they can lead to us equating who we are with our habits. "I need to improve" or "I need to become a better person" can be translated as meaning, "There is something wrong with me." But having bad habits doesn't make us bad people.

The "shoulds" that we tell ourselves can lead us to thinking that we will somehow be more loved by God if we only change certain aspects of ourselves.

A healthy approach to changing habits separates the essence of our being from our actions. When parents are at their best, they're teaching this to their children. They want to teach their children right from wrong, but they don't want their daughter to think

that SHE is wrong, or bad. There's an action that needs to be addressed, but there's also the person, the soul, who is made in the image of God. And that God loves us unconditionally.

Here are some biblical passages that begin to lead us in a more helpful direction.

The creation stories affirm for us that God looked at everything God made and declared, "It is good." That includes you and me.

At the moment of Jesus' baptism, Jesus hears God saying, "You are my beloved child; in you I am well pleased." And those words are affirmed at each baptism, including yours and mine.

If we were to continue reading in Romans chapter 8 beyond our passage for today, we would come across these words, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord..." That means nothing — no thought, no word, no action will keep God from loving us and wanting the best for us.

And in John 10, Jesus says, "I came that you may have life, and have it more abundantly..."

What if you were to talk to yourself about those habits you most want to be free of, using this language that emerges from our Scriptures: "Because I am a beloved child of God, remembering that God always loves me, I want to become a person who can live the abundant life God intends for each of us. Therefore, I ask for God's help in becoming free from this habit..." Do you hear the difference? You're not shaming yourself, you're not putting yourself down. You are speaking to yourself with the

compassion you would show to someone you love. It's much more motivating; it creates the desired outcome.

The book and the movie, Just Mercy, are both about the work of Bryan Stevenson, an attorney who works with people who have been wrongfully imprisoned and unjustly sentenced. He writes this, "I frequently had difficult conversations with clients who were struggling or despairing over their situations - over the things they'd done or had been done to them. Whenever things got really bad, and they were questioning the value of their lives, I would remind them that each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done. I told them that if someone tells a lie, that person is not just a liar. If you take something that doesn't belong to you, you are not just a thief." Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done.

The bad habits of which we seek to be free keep us from God. The traditional word for that is sin. But those bad habits do not define us. And the more we separate ourselves from our actions, the easier it will be to become free.

Starting with shame doesn't produce the fruit of abundant life. Starting with a long series of "shoulds", comparing ourselves with others — not only are these spiritually unhealthy approaches, but they don't create lasting change. People who shed the cocoons of unhealthy habits and become more whole and free people begin from a place of self-compassion. They acknowledge that they are beloved of God, worthy of forgiveness and grace, and from that place of acceptance, healthy growth begins.

The last two verses of our passage for today read: “So now there isn’t any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.” Thanks be to God.

Let us pray. Holy God, thank you for creating us for abundant lives. Help us to experience the freedom of your grace and love. In Jesus’ name. Amen.