

June 6, 2010
The National Presbyterian Church

The Two Faces of Freedom

Romans 6 and 7

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

We're in Chapters 6, 7, 8 in the book of Romans. St. Paul says these words at the very end of the fifth Chapter. "Where sin increased," and by the way we know all about that. We know how powerful evil is, that it has its own momentum. Harmful acts and intentions have a cumulative momentum and power built in, but Paul knows of a greater power than harm. So he says that. "Where sin increased, the grace of God increased more" (Romans 5:20). There's a certain speed and momentum of evil and sin but grace has a greater momentum. And that's how Paul ends the fifth Chapter. Those words are still ringing in our ears. We can never forget those words.

In Chapters 6, 7 and 8 of Paul's letter, he is going to answer a huge question. That question is this: If all of that is true and I were to believe and trust it, then what effect would that have in my life where I'm living today? What would be the result of that in practical terms? Think of all that we have seen: In the first Chapter we encountered the turbulent line and the human crisis, and we encountered then in Chapter 3 - God's radical interruption on our behalf. And now this grand truth, "Where sin increased, grace increased more." What effect would that have in my life where I live now? I think that's what Paul discusses in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

He starts though with a humorous question. Paul likes to ask questions. For instance, in the 8th Chapter he'll ask this question: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). In the midpoint of the first century, people could come up with a lot of answers for that, and that's how he starts the great affirmation at the end of the 8th Chapter. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Now he starts Chapter 6 with another one of those questions, only this one's humorous. Just before at the end of Chapter 5, he said, "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more." And then here comes the question, "What then, shall we sin more to get more grace? (Romans 6:1) That's humorous. Since grace increased more, then shall we sin more? Then we'll get more grace, right? He answers it right away before anybody misunderstands him, "By no means!" By no means.

And then he introduces us to our baptism. Paul's theology of baptism now comes in at this point. He says,

By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us when we were baptized were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his sacrificial death on our behalf? [That's who we are identified with.] And therefore we've been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead, by the glory of God the resurrection of our Lord, so we might walk in newness of life
(Romans 6:1-4).

And that's what Paul will talk about now in the 6th, 7th and 8th Chapters. The next paragraph he introduces to us three wonderful words. In fact, we're going to meet three words now in these next two paragraphs. Because of this identification with Jesus Christ and his sacrifice, we died with him and we were then set free from sin. We have died with Christ, therefore we live with him, and we're set free from sin in order to live. The word freedom is going to play a big part in Chapters 6 and 7 and 8. Christ sets us free in this identification with his death and his victory, and now with that freedom we must ourselves choose two more words, two prepositions that are going to dominate these texts.

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion over your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members, [by the way the word here means your arms and legs] your concrete self to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought, [now here are two key prepositions] who have been brought from death to life. Present your members [your arms and legs] to God as

instruments of righteousness. For sin shall no longer have dominion over you, since you were not under the law but you are under grace (Romans 6:12-14).

So you were set free from death, from sin, from unrighteousness, from the power of the devil, toward life, toward righteousness. Set free *from*, set free *to*. This is a freedom granted to us and a free choice we ourselves make.

And now over in the next paragraph he says, “But now that you have been freed from sin, now you’re a servant to God” (Romans 6:22). It’s interesting: we’re set free to be obedient to truth. And it’s truth that continues to set us free. So what advantage do we get? The advantage we get is sanctification. And the advantage then is eternal life. And then comes a very famous line. “For the wages of sin is death. But the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord” (Romans 6:23). So now these two prepositions with the verb to choose, the freedom word. These three words will dominate the whole sixth Chapter. We’ve been set free from sin toward life; two prepositions, from – to. It’s very important to understand that that’s what happens. When we are redeemed, and by the way, the word redeemed means to be set free, when we were redeemed we were set free from – to. Remember the Egyptian bondage of the ancient Jews; when the Egyptians held the Jews captive and they were by Moses set free first from the Egyptian soldiers, from the dangers of that and then they went across the Dead Sea and then they’re in the 40 years in the wilderness, and then they had to be set free from starvation and free from a lack of water and set free from lapses into idol building too, set free toward their destiny and toward life.

Let me give you an illustration of what this might mean for us today. My first ministry after seminary was as the pastor to students, high school and college students at the University Presbyterian Church in Seattle. During that time one of my young students, a sixteen-year-old boy had a terrible accident. This story has a happy ending, but he had a terrible accident. He was water skiing and he was a superb water skier and also a superb snow skier. One afternoon when he was water skiing he was making a dramatic flourish at the end of a run and he made a terrible mistake. One of the worst things that can happen in water skiing is if you run into a dock. And while he was going full speed he ran into a dock, and he broke both legs; it was a terrible accident. They rushed him to Harborview Hospital for a while despairing, worrying about his life because his body went into profound shock. He could have died because of that assault to the human body as he went into

deep shock. At the emergency room first of all, they worried whether he would even live. He did live. So at the beginning the family was huddled around in the emergency room worrying about whether he would be set free from death. A little bit like the Jews being set free from the captivity to the attacks of Egyptian soldiers. First of all, they were set free from death. And he was.

And then the surgeons had to go to work, with operations on both legs. And fortunately human bones knit pretty well, but the big problem and the worry that they had and I remember the family was worried, doctors as well: ~~when he began to knit would both legs be the same length?~~ If they weren't then maybe he would not even be able to walk, or with great difficulty. And so they began to worry whether he would be set free from that sort of terrible lameness and the terrible problem of not being able to walk or one leg being longer than the other leg. So they worried about that.

So then again, he's moving on a journey of from's. From this, first from the danger to life itself, then from the danger of the bones and nerves and his legs not knitting properly; and then gradually getting stronger in rehab. I remember once going to see him in the hospital and I was trying to cheer him up and I said, "Look at the headway you've made." And I was just saying that, you know I would say it to anybody. After all, you've made all this headway. I didn't say, "We wondered if you were even going to live at the beginning." I didn't bring that up, but, "Look at the headway you've made." And then he said to me and it was really funny, I'll never forget this, he said, "Well, I'm not going to be happy until I'm water skiing again. I want to be able to snow ski again too, then I'll be happy." And I thought his reply was like a great parable. He wanted to be free not just *from* but *to*. He wanted both prepositions in full operation.

I want to alert you to be careful. Some people are very, very focused on what they're set free from. Some people can't wait to get away from their family, or to get away from school, or to get away from this or away from that. I want to be set free from this or that oppressive situation. Sometimes revolutionaries are very big on that. They're focused on the oppressors who oppress them, and at first all they can think about is being free or wanting to be free from those terrible people and sometimes we tend to talk about them and their terrible acts all the time, all the terrible things that were done to us. So that all we can stay focused on is what we are free from. But we need to ask,

well what are we free *toward*? What are our positive goals? What do we want to do next? Don't tell me what you don't want to do, don't tell me what once oppressed you. Tell me what you now want to do. Where do you want to go now? Don't just tell me about sin and death and the power of evil, tell me about what you want to do. What's the freedom toward? And notice, that's the way Paul focuses it. We have been set free from sin, death and the power of evil, toward life, toward servanthood. Notice, he says we're now servants of God, we're servants of truth. We want to water ski. We want to ski again and to do it well. We want to do everything again, to the glory of God.

So that's what Paul says in Chapter 6. But there is one more big question to ask: Where is it that that freedom is played out? Where does it happen? When we once experience this freedom and we are away from the Egyptian soldiers but now where do we live our freedom life? Does this mean that we have no more problems anymore? If you're set free from sin are there no more sins anymore? So that for me now there's no need to have a worship service where we start with the confession of sins, which we did today? Should we have to do that? Why do we have to do that? We've been set free from all this. Does that mean no more possibility of wrong choices with our freedom? Paul in the seventh Chapter of Romans speaks to that question. He tells us in the sixth Chapter this wonderful legacy of freedom from, then toward. It's sealed in our baptism. Our baptism identifies with that and that promise where sin increased, the grace of God increases faster. But where is that lived out? And then in the seventh Chapter, St. Paul tells us where it's lived out.

Paul now speaks autobiographically about his own life here and now. Listen to him. This is now in Chapter 7. He says, "I find it to be a law at work in my life, that when I want to do good, see I want to live toward, evil lies close at hand. The evil still hounds me, still bothers me" (Romans 7:21). Remember that turbulent line we met in Chapter 1 when we reflected on the human crisis? He says now in Chapter 7 that human crisis is still here with me. I've been redeemed and yet when Christ redeemed me he did not take my freedom away from me. He didn't take away the possibility that I could sin again and make wrong choices again. I have a victory that's greater than sin, yet the turbulent line is going through me. Listen to Paul:

I find it to be a law, a principle that when I want to do good, evil still lies close at hand. I delight in the law of God. [It shows that he's talking as a believer in Christ, saying I delight in the law of God,] *in my inmost self.* [In

my heart, in my mind, I want to do these good things.] *But I see in my*, [and now he uses the same word that he used earlier,] *members* [in my arms and legs, in my concrete self,] *I see another law that is warring against me*. [In other words I have a battle going on within me, battling with my mind and I'm struggling with it. It dwells in my arms and legs. And then comes a very famous line from St. Paul.] *Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, through Christ Jesus, our Lord!* [And it would be nice if he ended there but he doesn't, he goes on with one more sentence.] *So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God*. [In my mind I am a servant aiming toward Christ and toward life.] *But with my flesh and my body*, [my arms and legs] *I still struggle with the law of sin* (Romans 7:21-25).

This is the autobiographical part of Chapter 7; it has troubled all interpreters. What is Paul saying? There are two principle interpretations of this passage. Some take it rhetorically and they say that what Paul is speaking here is rhetorical. He's saying this is what it was like before he experienced God's grace. And then when he experienced grace, that grace gave him a ladder that elevated him above this crisis. I don't have the turbulence any more, I have grace. Therefore, I am I'm delivered from that. And so the rhetorical approach says that Paul is describing what it was like before he became a believer. Certainly not now that he is a true and spirit filled believer. Now he has the power of God. And that's the rhetorical approach. St. Thomas Aquinas took that approach. Many pietistic interpreters took that approach and still do, that Romans 7 is discussing our life before salvation, or before we have God's grace in fullness in our life. But now when we have the grace, we don't have that problem anymore.

The Gnostics in the second century had their own variation of this view; they taught that if you knew secrets of gnosis you would have a ladder in effect that would transport you above the turbulent line where everybody else lives. I wrote a commentary on the book of Romans, it's called *Salvation by Surprise*, and I actually created a whole series of line drawings, you can probably see my line drawings here as I'm imagining them in front of you, but I created a number of drawings to show some of these different views. 1 And one, the Gnostic view has a sort of ladder above the turbulent line, saying that when you know the secrets then you would be spiritualized so that you don't have to endure the turbulent line as everybody else does. Is that

what Paul is saying? No.

The other interpretation is the view of the Reformers, of St. Augustine, of Martin Luther, of John Calvin, and I think they're right. And I agree with them. They believe that Paul is actually describing what the freedom is like. The freedom that Christ has given us is lived out within the turbulent line since he does not confine or destroy our freedom to choose. Remember we were given that dominion in Genesis 1, we can chose good and good things result, or we can choose wrong things and harm happens. We do not have our freedom taken away from us in our salvation and in fact our freedom is expanded by Christ's grace in our lives. That's why we need to start every worship service with the confession of sins. Because we do have a battle, a continuing battle with sin and the flaws in our own lives, our own desires that sometimes run amuck. And of course, often for Christians the worst sin of all, is the sin of pride. So we have to battle with those. And so Paul is describing what it's like in the midst of the 24-hour cycle where everyone else lives, he says that's where I'm living too, and I am living in this real world, claiming God's grace here and now.

I'm so grateful that Paul shares this autobiographical section because now he prepares us for the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives here and now. It's interesting, his presentation of the Holy Spirit comes in Chapter 8 and we'll see it next week. But the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to assure you and me and equip each of us to enable us to make it in the midst of that 24-hour cycle. Notice Romans 8:1-2, "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for the law of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of life in Christ, has set me free and sets me free from the law of sin and death and God has done that for me." And to show you that he's not fooled about who we are, a little later when he talks about the Holy Spirit, he says, "Likewise, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness" (Romans 8:26). He doesn't say, "In our power." He says, "In our weakness." We need God's strength and presence with us to make it in the 24-hour cycle, the 24-hour cycle where everybody else lives. This means that the turbulent line goes through the church, just like it goes through the world. But thanks be to God there is no condemnation because Jesus Christ has won the victory and we can claim it, we claim it every single day, and we can grow in it, and we can have victories and we can have defeats. But we have the personal encouragement of the Holy Spirit to enable us.

Brothers and sisters, if it weren't for this we couldn't come to the Lord's Table today. If the Lord's Table was intended for the people who are successful, if it was for the people who have triumphed, the people that don't have any of these problems, who are able to get above the turbulent line, then the Lord's Table would be for perfect people. But the Lord's Table is not for perfect people. It's for sinners who are repentant. It's for each of us who humbly confess our sins and ask for God's help. This table is food for us. It is our Lord himself, feeding us so that we can make it in the 24-hour cycle. So now I invite you to the Lord's Table, knowing that we're sinners. Remember we said it last week, we know two things about everyone: we know that we're sinners and we know we're beloved. And now Paul has made it really clear in Chapters 6 and 7.

Heavenly Father thank you for this text, thank you it's for us today, it's for all who struggle with sin, and struggle with all these challenges we face, and yet knowing your love is there in the midst of the challenge, in the turbulent line your love is here for us. We claim it today as we come to your table, Amen.

1 Palmer, Earl F. *Salvation by Surprise*. Word Incorporated, 1975.

Earl Frank Palmer Copyright © 2010 All Rights Reserved

Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20016

www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800