

Warroad Baptist Church
April 26, 2009

“Living Out Your Freedom in Christ”
(Co 2:20-23)

Illustration: (The Grace Awakening, Charles Swindoll, pp. 103-5)

Chuck Swindoll in his exceptional book, *The Grace Awakening* writes, “I have never witnessed slavery. Not in raw reality. I have read about it, and have seen films, plays, and television documentaries where slavery was portrayed in all its cruelty, but I have never seen it firsthand. I’m glad I haven’t. I know of nothing more unjust or ugly. As an American I find it amazing – perhaps a better word is confusing – to think that my forefathers were willing to fight for their own freedom and win our country’s independence, yet turn around and enslave others without the slightest hesitation. The triangles of such twisted logic are not mentally congruent – free citizens owning slaves. It took a civil war to break that yoke. It called for a courageous, clear-thinking president to stand in the gap ... to be misunderstood and maligned and ultimately killed for a cause that was, to him, not only worth fighting for, but worth dying for.

It was on New Year’s Day 1863 when the emancipation Proclamation was publically stated, but it was not until December 18, 1865, that the Constitution made those convictions official. With the adoption of the thirteenth amendment of the United States Constitution, slavery was legally abolished.

The Headlines on newspapers in virtually every state trumpeted the same message: “Slavery Legally Abolished.” And yet, something happened that many would have never expected. The vast majority of the slaves in the South who were legally freed continued to live on as slaves. Most of them went right on living as though nothing had happened.

I call this tragic. A war had been fought – the bloodiest in our history. A president had been assassinated. An amendment to the constitution had been signed into law. Once-enslaved men, women, and children were now legally emancipated. Yet amazingly, many continued living in fear and squalor as though it had never happened. In a context of hard-earned freedom, slaves chose to remain as slaves.”

The sad truth is that many Christians today are making this same unfortunate choice. Although freed by the Great Emancipator, the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave his life and shed His blood to free us from the slavery of sin as a gift to be received by faith and cherished and enjoyed and lived out, have astonishingly chosen to go on living as though this had never happened. How heart wrenching.”

In Co 2:20 Paul writes, “Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of the world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules:

The very first word in v20, “Since” is the NIV’s translation of the Gr. conditional particle ‘If,’ a first class condition describing something that is unquestionably true. It could also be rendered ‘because.’ The idea here is: ‘in view of the fact that’ or ‘as is the case’ you died with Christ to the basic principles of the world (*a slave to sin*), why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules (*remain a slave to sin*):

Why would anyone who has been freed from the prison cell of sin still choose to live in it as if they had never been set free?

It is the truth that sets us free. It’s our own chosen ignorance that keeps us enslaved. Jn 8:31,32, “... Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching (*believe what I say and live like you believe it*), you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.’” You live what you believe.

The theme of these verses concerns slavery and freedom. The Gospel of Jesus Christ brings people from slavery to sin to freedom in Christ. The false teachers were promising something they couldn’t deliver even for themselves because they were children of the world and were enslaved to its principles. They couldn’t give freedom from a law-keeping way of life because they were enslaved by it. They couldn’t offer freedom from the desires of the flesh because they

were slaves to it. Their religion was the religion of the world. It wasn't bringing them to God, it was driving them from God.

The distinctive mark of God's truth is grace. The distinctive flaws of the religion of the false teachers were a law system, rules and regulations, and human works. A *slave* to sin doesn't know what *freedom from sin* is.

In responding to the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law in Mt 15:3, Jesus challenged them, "Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?" And in v6 He said, "You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition." He then quoted from Isa 29:13, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." How burdensome the rules and regulations of men have proven to be in the history of the church.

The false teachers promoted a system that was based on external performance rather than on internal authenticity.

From all outward appearances some people seem to be very sincere and intent on living disciplined lifestyles that seem to reflect genuine concern for the welfare of others but if Christ is not preeminently what it's all about, it is as lifeless as it is worthless.

The remedy for the sins of the flesh is the power of the Holy Spirit, not conformity to a list of man-made rules.

We can never through our own human efforts gain God's acceptance or achieve right standing before God or make ourselves spiritual enough through our own self-righteous attempts to be a good enough people who deserve the favor of God's acceptance.

Richard J. Neuhaus has stated, "The moralizing and legalizing of the Gospel of God's grace is a dull heresy peddled to disappointed people who are angry because they have not received what they had no good reason to expect."

In v20 Paul said that the Colossian believers had died. Death in Scripture always means separation. In this instance, the separation was from the old way of life in sin to the new way of life in Christ. When the Colossian believers first believed in Jesus, He changed them from natural children of the world to spiritual children of God. Or as the text indicates, from living according to the basic principles of the world to living on the basis of the Scriptural principles of the Word of God.

They were no longer living their lives naturally in their own strength and based on worldly standards, but supernaturally by the power of God based on His divinely ordained standards as revealed in the Bible.

Jesus had set them free from a legalistic, rule-keeping, works-righteousness kind of life to living by faith in the freedom of Christ's all sufficient grace.

V21 says, "Do not handle! Do not Taste! Do not touch!" The three prohibitions listed in this verse are referred to as "rules" in the preceding verse and the context is "The basic principles of this world." Earlier in Ch 2:8 Paul cautioned the believers in Colosse along these same lines by saying, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of the world rather than on Christ."

Do not handle! Do not Taste! Do not touch! Are false, worldly, religious, elementary teachings and practices that are relied on to qualify a spiritually worldly person who uses these kinds of rules as leverage to set themselves apart from others by keeping these "holier than thou" standards. "Look at me!" "See how good I am!" "I don't dabble in that kind of thing, and I don't eat these things and I wouldn't even think of coming near that. These are human regulations based on physical and external practices that have nothing to do with the condition of the soul and everything to do with the attitude of an unregenerate heart. Asceticism is essentially the worship of self. We are not to be "Look at me!" people of God. Rather, we are to be, "See Christ in me" believers in Jesus who are drawing people's attention to Him by how we live. People use man-made rules or taboos as false standards of supposed righteousness, as if doing

certain things and not doing other things makes one spiritual. This is all fleshy stuff, there's no real spiritual substance to it at all by God's definition of spirituality in the Bible. It's the epitome of self-worship. God-worship is in spirit and in truth which has everything to do with what God does in us and not what we do for ourselves. Spirituality is living by the power of the Spirit of God in union with Christ and is not the result of our will power to do or not do certain things.

In an earlier message, I referred to the Colossian heresy which involved false teachers who heralded legalism, mysticism and asceticism as means of attaining righteousness, superior knowledge, and a rigidly disciplined lifestyle designed to set oneself apart from others as a special class of people. How worldly can you get? It's all a man-made system of rules. Paul says in v22,

V22 These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. They are a waste of time and are worthless. He continues in the next verse,

V23 Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Our biggest problem in this life is sin. It is sin that fuels the desires that we struggle with in life. As believers in Jesus Christ, Paul is saying in v20, *We have died to sin*. He makes this same point in Ro 6:2 but adds that this doesn't mean sin is dead in us. We have an ongoing struggle with it as Paul teaches in Ro 7:8-25 through the example of its influence in his own life.

Chuck Swindoll says in the *Grace Awakening*, "In a world of darkness and demands, rules and regulations, requirements and expectations demanded by the hypocritical religious leaders, Jesus came and ministered in a new and different way – He alone, full of grace and full of truth introduced a revolutionary, different way of life." (p.7)

Nothing has the power to change us from within like the freedom that comes to us in Christ Jesus by the grace of God.

In Jn 1:16, 17 we read, "For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ." (NASB)

We are to be trusting in God to bring about the kinds of changes in our lives that reflect His presence and activity in us as He shapes us to become more and more like His Son. The changes God brings about in us are eternally significant.

Man-made religion focuses on human effort whereas Christianity depends on Christ's work in us. By understanding and coming to terms with the essentials of the faith, we place ourselves in a position where the errors of false teachers are readily exposed for what they are. What are the essentials of the Christian faith. I'm going to suggest 15 essentials that simply cannot be compromised by a true child of God:

1. There is only one true God who is sovereign over the entire universe and the only One worthy of our worship.
2. The Trinity of God or the Godhead is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – three distinct persons yet one God
3. The Deity of Jesus Christ – He is Perfect God
4. The Humanity of Jesus Christ – He is Perfect Man
5. The virgin birth of Jesus Christ
6. The sinlessness of Jesus Christ
7. The atoning death of Jesus Christ
8. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ
9. The bodily second coming of Jesus Christ
10. The sinfulness of man
11. The necessity of God's grace
12. The necessity of faith - Salvation is by grace through faith alone which eternally binds a believing sinner to God in an inseparable relationship that can never be broken.
13. The reality of heaven and hell

14. The verbal, plenary, inerrant, infallible, divinely inspired, authoritative and absolute truth of the Bible
15. The historical grammatical literal interpretation of Scripture

Whatever you may be presented with that is inconsistent with any of these essentials of the Christian faith is to be rejected. Because it *seems* to make sense, *sounds* convincing or appealing, and is *bought into* by other people doesn't make it right. Sin is like that. Why do you think we do it so naturally? It does something for us or we wouldn't do it. Problem is, we fail to weigh the long range implications and consequences of sin and instead ignore them in light of the immediate gratification that sin brings.

It takes an act of God to even give us a fighting chance against it. Our own resources just can't deliver us from it. This is Paul's conclusion in vv24, 25 of Ro 7, "Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

In Ro 8:2 Paul states, "Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

Consider carefully and thoughtfully God's words through Paul in Ro 6:17,18 "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. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."

Paul elaborates on this reality in more detail in Ga 2:20, 21 where, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he writes, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live (*through my own self-righteous efforts to prove that I'm a good enough person for God to accept*), but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me (*It's the righteousness of Christ in me that makes me righteous and acceptable in God's sight*). I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing. (*Why would I revert back to trying to make myself good enough for God to accept when by grace God has already accepted me based on what Jesus has done for me through His death on the cross?*)

In Jn 8:34-36 Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Jesus is the One who sets us free from sin's dominating and controlling influence in our lives.

Ro 7:4-6 "So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to Another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code."

Ro 6:6,7 "For we know that our old self was crucified with Him, so that the body of sin might be done away with that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin."

God does not force us to serve Him, He frees us to willingly live for him by the power of His Spirit. Prior to believing in Jesus we didn't have the ability to live for God because we did not have the Spirit of God within us to empower us to do so. It is God who produces in us the spiritual characteristics of a child of God. Ga 5:22-25 "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."

What point was Paul making here. I believe it's this: Because of Christ's presence in the lives of those who believe in Him, we live our lives not with a determination to obey a set of rules, but out of spiritually changed hearts and minds that are overflowing with Love for God and a desire to serve, please, honor and glorify Him.

When a person realizes that they have been living their life in a very self-centered way and that what has been motivating them has been self-gratification and that their greatest needs can never be met this way and that God's way through faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to a meaningful and fulfilled life and that this comes by being other-centered and they choose to Believe in Jesus and receive all that a relationship with Him brings they find that their whole way of looking at things begins to change.

How different would it be to be living life out of a heart filled with love and gratitude to God and from a genuine desire to live for God relying on the Spirit of God within you to bring about the behaviors of a child of God than being compelled by the fear of rejection to keeping a bunch of rules to gain the love and acceptance that is conditioned upon how well you perform for it and conform to the demands of a god who can choose to offer it or withhold it at will?

Believing that God's favor can be earned by doing certain things and not doing certain other things rather than trusting in what He has done for us through His Son's death on the cross, makes what Jesus did pointless and meaningless and of no value whatsoever for anything.

Jesus is the only One who can make us acceptable to God. He is the only solution to our sin problem. Doing certain things no matter how noble does not make us a good person. No amount of doing anything can make us good enough for God. Only what God does in us in His Son, Jesus Christ can make us good enough for Him to accept. These are God's terms and He's clearly laid them out for us in the Bible.

If our belief is that we must make ourselves acceptable to God, then we will feel pressured to do the right things not knowing for sure what they are – not knowing what God wants or how good good enough is, all the while living in fear that at some point we may have crossed the line because we haven't met the expected standards and He'll give up on us and reject us because of this – because we can't get it right.

People are desperate for relief from the pressures of life and in most Christian circles they only experience more pressure. Get it right! Do it right! Freedom in Christ is not pressure to try harder. There is no freedom where the requirement is to measure up. Our responsibility to God is to pursue His truth, not simply to avoid error. Until we know what's right we'll not know what's wrong. We can be so afraid of doing the wrong thing that we miss the truth.

God doesn't want us to shape up. He wants us to enter into a trusting relationship with Him that frees us to live as His child because we deeply respect and love Him and we delight in doing what pleases Him and enriches our lives.

If living for God is a burden to you, you're not living for God, you're living for other reasons 1 Jn 5:3 says, "This is love for God: to obey His commands. And His commands are not burdensome." Jesus said in Mt 11:29,30 "Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me. For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Well, what does it mean when living for God feels like a burden or seems like a chore? It means that we are looking to and relying on ourselves instead of God. So when this happens what can we do? Jesus says in Mt 11:28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (What do we think? "I just have to try harder, be more disciplined, be more committed and determined to get it right? Get what right?") Then who are we depending on – ourselves – to do better, be better and we're wrong. God is right. We need to rely on Him not ourselves.

There is only One Answer to all of life's problems, trials, challenges, fears, disappointments, tragedies, catastrophes and uncertainties and that is the Person of Jesus Christ.

Benediction: And now "To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made us to be a kingdom of priests to serve His God and Father – to Him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen.