

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 4 December 2011

No. T0705

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Freedoms and Liberties: Free from sin and free to serve

“Goalkeeper (noun) a player whose chief task is to keep the ball out of the goal” so the dictionary tells us. And yet with only 10 seconds left of the 1998-99 season, on 8 May 1999, Jimmy Glass, on loan from Swindon Town, but now Carlisle United’s goalkeeper, scored from a corner. It was a goal that kept Carlisle from relegation from the Football League Division 3 and possible financial ruin. It was so important a goal that it has been ranked 7th in *The Times’ list of the 50 most important goals ever* (Alex Murphy, 24 July 2007, *The Times*, London). What on earth was a goalkeeper doing in the opposition penalty box? Did he not understand what his role in the team was? Clearly he did. It was to protect his goal, and had he not scored, Carlisle would have lost its place in the football league, would have gone into receivership, and probably ceased to exist as a club. He was indeed protecting his goal. It has always struck me that this incident highlights exactly the difference between position and practice, and serves as a useful illustration to our subject this morning.

Last week we started our series on freedoms and liberties by looking at the difficult subject of the sovereignty of God and human free will. Today that series continues by looking at our freedom from sin and our freedom to serve. The Apostle Paul deals with this subject in his letter to the Romans. We shall read Romans 6:1-14.

“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.” Romans 6:1-14

Paul is dealing with two questions that might have been raised.

1. Does the Christian still need to keep the Law; and
2. If we are forgiven for all our sins, then should we sin without restriction, so that God’s grace can be exercised to the full?

The first has to do with the Christian’s position, whilst the second has to do with the Christian’s practice.

Does the Christian still need to keep the Law?

As believers on the Lord Jesus Christ our position is that we are completely free from both the penalty of sin (Romans 6:23) and from the power of sin (Romans 6:14). When we speak about sin, we are talking not of the individual wrong acts that we perform, but rather of the nature within us that causes us to do those wrong things. It is the very part of me that wants to put me at the centre of my life. When we are born into this world, it is the only nature that we have, and so we must be ruled by it. It is incapable of pleasing God. Paul likens this nature to an old man (Romans 6:6) and goes on to say that this old man has been crucified with Christ. As such, we are to understand that when Jesus died on the cross, my old nature was crucified and died alongside Him. My old nature is now dead. Now there is no point in my bringing a civil charge against somebody who is dead. They cannot answer the charge, nor can they do anything to make amends even were the charge to be proven. So it is with the believer. All the wrong things that I do are attributed to my old nature and that old nature died at the cross of Jesus, where full payment was made. As I accept Jesus as my Saviour, He gives me a new nature. This new nature is incapable of sin, for it is His nature, and is

therefore declared to be completely right before God. In the same way that Jesus died and then rose again, so we died at the cross in our old nature, but now are alive again in the power of a new and endless life.

So as to our position we are completely right before God. All the wrong things that we have done, and still do, have been judged already and payment made at the cross. No further payment can or need be made. We are accepted in the beloved (Ephesians 1:6), viewed by God in just the same way that He views His well beloved Son.

I don't know about you but I can look back to the time when I was younger and remember how I felt when important exams were coming up. I thought that if I was to be particularly good, conscientiously doing my Quiet Times and helping around the home, then God would be more likely to help me in the exams. We have a similar thought pattern around Christmas, when we say to our children, "Be good, or Santa won't bring you any presents!" On a human level, we are ingrained with the idea that nice things happen to those who deserve it. We instinctively feel that we have in some way to earn the good that happens in our lives.

However, when we come to spiritual things we just have to realise that this is simply not the case. Everything we have is by the grace of God. We do not, cannot, earn His favour. We have been brought into a position of nearness to Him, not because of something that we are or have done, but simply because He has chosen us and made it so. This is our position in Christ. No amount of earnest endeavour on my part will make me more acceptable to God. He cannot love me more than He already does. I cannot be more forgiven than I already am. I will never be closer to Him than I am now, although my appreciation of these things certainly will change. That "old man" within me that is still so alive and causing me grief each day, is dead judicially so far as God is concerned, leaving only His new creation within me to enjoy the relationship that we have been brought into on the basis of the completed work at Calvary. If nothing else this morning, let us just take time in our minds to accept this great grace once and for all, and to agree with God that we are now totally acceptable to God in terms of our position. This is frank forgiveness!

You may recall the story Jesus told in Luke 7:36-50 about the two debtors. The one owed 50 pence the other 500. Yet neither had the ability to pay back their debt. We then read that the one to whom they owed money "frankly forgave them both." No record of the debt was kept, the slate was wiped clean, and the depressing weight of that which was owed was removed. Their future held a totally different outlook. Whereas, beforehand they faced years, probably a lifetime, of having to work to try to pay back the debt, now they faced a choice as to what to do with whatever they earned. They no longer stood in relation to the one to whom they had owed money as creditor and debtor. There was a new relationship to be enjoyed.

We, too, now exist in relationship with God in a totally new way. It is as sons and children with a Father! You see, under the Law, the great driving force had been, "Do this, and you will live". Consider a hypothetical individual who fully kept the Law in its entirety. Well, they would have lived for ever, enjoying the blessing of God, prospering under His guidance. Of course, such a thing was impossible. It was not that the Law was faulty. It could never be, for God gave it. It was that mankind could never live up to its exacting standards. In Romans 7:2-3, Paul likens this to being married to a hard husband, one whose standards were so exacting that we are bound to fail.

However, if one's husband dies, then a wife is no longer bound to him - she is free to love and marry another; her entire behaviour may change. Liver is disgusting! My wife knows this and so will never cook it for me. However, if I was to die, she would be entirely free to have it for breakfast, dinner and tea! The wishes of a dead husband carry no authority. We could never keep the Law and so the only thing that God could do was to put us to death, ending that relationship. So our old nature is crucified alongside Christ on the cross. Raised in the newness of His unending life we are free to marry another - to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God (Romans 7:4).

The Christian is no longer subject to the Law because death has separated us from that relationship. With the greatest respect to those who still look to the Ten Commandments as a guide to life, you are two timing the one to whom you are now married. Our former position could never make us right before God, but under our new position we can never be anything but right before God. I suppose the closest thing we have as an illustration is the change in relationship that occurred when my wife married me. Notionally, at least, she was subject to her father's law whilst at home. However, once she married me she accepted a new authority in her life. Now I think I would soon get a bit put out if she kept telling me that we could or could not do such and such because her father would not like it, or if he was to come around and start telling her what to do in my own home.

As those who form the bride of Christ, married to Him as we accepted Him as Saviour, we have moved from the authority of the Law to that of Christ. It is He, and He alone, who should be the pattern for our life and our devotions. So if by our position we are completely free, no longer bound to the Law in any shape or form, are we free to do as we please?

If we are forgiven for all our sins, then should we sin without restriction, so that God's grace can be exercised to the full?

Well, as we have seen in the illustration Paul uses we are free from one relationship, but have now accepted a new one. Twice in Romans 6 Paul asks the question, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Romans 6: 1, 15). On both times the answer comes back a resounding "NO!"

One can imagine the train of thought in his Roman readers going something like this: "Well if it is entirely God's grace that makes us right with Him, and that grace is exercised by Him to cover my sin, then the more I sin the more that grace must be poured out. Since the pouring out of God's grace is a good thing, then it follows that it would be good for me to carry on sinning, particularly since I am already forgiven for it."

On the surface, this seemingly logical train of thought may appear quite attractive. What, however, it totally fails to do is to understand the nature of God, His grace and our relationship to Him now. I made a promise to my wife, before God, that from the day I married her, until the day death separated us or He returns to take us to a wonderfully better relationship with Him, I would be her husband. Does this mean she can do as she pleases, with whom she pleases, knowing that I will always be there. Not if what she told me was true, when she said "I love you." Either she lied, or knowing that she did not, then her behaviour will evidence the truth of those three words.

We have been frankly forgiven. Nothing we do can ever change that, but that does not lead me to do as I please. In a world that has become so self-centred and focussed on self, we often forget how our sin affects God. King David had an understanding of this when he realised the awfulness of his sin. He had seen Bathsheba, and lusted after her (2 Samuel 11:1-27). So that he could satisfy his own desires, he had her husband killed, probably with a whole lot of other innocent, loyal, soldiers. And yet as he repents and is filled with remorse, it is not the wrong that he has done them that particularly weighs down on his soul, but as we read in Psalm 51:4, "Against You, You only have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight." If only we could appreciate what our sin does to the heart of God, we would cease to find it pleasurable. For let us not fool ourselves. We sin so often because we enjoy it, it appeals to us. But it does not appeal to Him! We sin because we think there is no cost to us, but there is an almost unbearable cost to Him. We get a glimpse of this in the prophecy of Hosea.

Hosea had been told to marry Gomer, who later went off and acted as the town prostitute. Hosea is told to go to the market place and buy her back again and live together as man and wife. In doing so, he would learn in his heart something of how God felt when His people pleased themselves instead of Him. Imagine it, the shame, the hurt, the humiliation. How did Hosea do it? I just don't know. But let us look at what God has to say to Hosea, in Hosea 11:7-8: "My people are bent on backsliding from Me. Though they call to the Most High, none at all exalt Him. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over to Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboim? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred." Because of his experiences, Hosea would learn in some measure what it was to have a churning heart. To love and only be abused in response, and yet to know that there was no refuge in hard heartedness for love was still as strong as ever.

Our sin, and our light attitude towards it, our unwillingness to judge it, still churns the heart of God. Does God, through tear streaked eyes still cry out, "Am I not enough for you? Do you not still love Me?" If only we understood a little more how much the heart of God still hurts when we sin, then perhaps we would find the sins that we commit, and find so pleasurable, quite repugnant.

But if the love we profess to have for God is not enough to keep us true to Him, then we need to understand the grace of God correctly. You see, it is just not right to think that in some way the grace of God can be exercised any more than it already has. One sin does not equate to one tenth of the grace of God so ten sins needs the whole of His grace. His grace is an all or nothing event. Nature itself is full of these. A woman is either pregnant or not, she cannot be 45% pregnant! An action potential in a nerve either fires or it doesn't, causing the transmission of a chemical. If the only sin that had ever been committed in the entirety of man's history, had been just the tiniest little "oops a daisy", then the grace of God would have had to be exercised in exactly the same way that it has, involving the death of His well beloved Son on the cross of Calvary. My continuing in sin does not in any way provoke a fuller outpouring of the grace of God, for it had already been fully expressed. It does, however, continue to hurt Him, and bring on myself the very necessary discipline of a righteous Father.

The third misunderstanding that the Romans were guilty of was as to their appreciation of Christian freedom. Nowhere in the New Testament is freedom spoken of in regards to individual wrong acts. It is always with a view to our position in Him, and our sacrificial living for Him. There are no such things as Christian singles - for we are all married to Him! We made the choice to have our sins forgiven, to enter a new relationship with God, to be assured of our eternal destiny. Well and good. But we need to accept the whole package and realise that we are now bound to Him as totally as a man and wife are bound to each other. There is no other form of Christianity. To put it like this makes it sound like some heavy drudgery. It is not, far from it! But the hardness of our hearts sometimes means that we need to have our

responsibilities spelled out in the clearest of terms. As Paul could say to the Corinthian believers: "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). My life does not belong to me any longer, it belongs to Him.

If someone asks me to do something of any importance, I first have to talk it through with my wife. That is because my life is not my own - it belongs to her, as hers does to me. Besides her advice is usually more likely to be right! Well what sorts of decisions dare we presume to take without consulting our truly better half - our Lord Jesus Christ Himself? Can a day really go by without us wanting to talk, to share each other's thoughts and aspirations for the day?

When we talk about Christian freedom, then, we are talking about being totally free from the penalty and power of sin. We are talking about the freedom to totally and unconditionally give ourselves to Him, who loves us and gave Himself for us (Galatians 2:20).

So was Jimmy Glass right to leave his goal unattended, to go to the other end of the pitch. Quite definitely! He understood that his chief task was to protect his goal, and that the only way for his goal to be protected from extinction was for Carlisle United to win that game.

This morning we need to show similar insight. We are free as believers in the Lord Jesus. We are free from the power of sin in our lives, for we have a greater power at work in us, and a new nature that can respond to it. Our old nature is now dead. We are to reckon this so each day. The penalty and guilt of our sins is forever removed from us. God has dealt with that - let us leave it with Him. We are free to choose to belong to Him, but having done so we are not free to then live for ourselves for this is an abuse of liberty. His grace has been poured out upon us, and in the power of that grace we should live for Him, allowing Him to come into every part of our lives. And let us never cite our freedom as an excuse to further open up the wounds in the heart of God that our sin and the cost of Calvary inflicted upon Him. If we understand all this then we will understand the truth of what the Lord said in John 8:36: "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

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