

It's bad, our sin. For some of us, our sinful master isn't money or sex, it's myself. We live in a "me" world. Our lives are focused in on ourselves. We're told to do what's best for us. We're told to do whatever we want. To not care about anybody else. To shoot for our dreams, to follow our path. How much of your discouragement and your depression is a result of focusing your life on you. Is that freedom? I'm a terrible master. So are you. We're slaves to ourselves.

This is what sin does. It holds you captive. Sin promises freedom, like alcohol promises a drunk man happiness, but will it ever provide it? The Bible says that "*a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him*" (2 Peter 2:19). Who owns you? What owns you? A person? A thing? A drink? There is nothing more oppressive than loving something more than God. Loving something more than God will always and only lead to slavery. Slavery of addiction. Slavery of pornography. Slavery of relationships. Whatever you make your god will own you. So who owns you?

Jesus does, because he set you free! Ask yourself if these words describe you: poor, a prisoner, blind, oppressed. That's me, and I'm sure that's you too. So here's what you need to know from Jesus: "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" Your freedom doesn't depend on money. It doesn't depend on how many people love you. It doesn't depend on you. Freedom is knowing Jesus' forgiveness. Jesus set you free. He forgave your sin so you can live for him.

So here's the state of the church. We have a great God and a lot of sinful people. And what sinful people—like you and me—constantly need is to know more and more about Jesus. So our blindness can be removed. So our chains can be cut. So our burdens can be gone. The impact of our church is not measured in the number of programs we have. I'm sorry if I've given that impression. Programs don't set people free. The impact of our church is not measured in how well we follow our traditions. Traditions don't set people free. In fact, programs and traditions can make us slaves all over again. The impact of our church is measured in lives changed by Jesus. With everything we do, we need to ask ourselves not, "How long have we been doing this?" or "How many people came?" but "What does this have to do with setting people free from sin in Jesus?"

So, brothers and sisters, let freedom ring! Let Jesus' forgiveness be what drives your life. That can't just be a message that we preach here inside our church, because you know what, there are not many new people coming to our church. But every single day, you run across broken, blind, oppressed, depressed people. So let freedom ring! Let freedom ring between you and your spouse. Let freedom ring between you and your kids. Let freedom ring at work. That's Jesus' purpose. Freedom is forgiveness. That's our purpose.

Luke 4:14-21
Pastor Nathan Nass

Epiphany 3
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¹⁴Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. ¹⁶He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. ¹⁷The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Let Freedom Ring!

Out of all the people in the history of the world, who do you think needs church the least? I know a lot of people who would say, "Me! I don't need church at all!" But that's not true. It was Jesus. As the Son of God, you might think it was a waste of time for Jesus to sit in a church service. But of all the people in the history of the world, who loved being in church the most? Jesus. What does that tell you? Jesus loved his Father's house. I hope we reflect that attitude! That's where we find him today. Jesus went teaching from synagogue to synagogue, and "*everyone praised him.*" There was excitement building around this new teacher! Can you imagine the anticipation when Jesus came home to Nazareth? He did what he always did, "*on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue.*"

So what would Jesus' message be? What heart-warming speech would he have for the hometown crowd? Jesus was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled it to just the right spot, Isaiah 61, and read, "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" Everyone in that synagogue knew what those verses were talking about. They were talking about the coming Savior—the Messiah—who would set his people free. For 700 years, they had read those words in their synagogues.

But this time was different. Jesus rolled up the scroll and sat down. I bet you could hear a pin drop in the room. All eyes were fixed on Jesus, and here's what he said, "*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*" Wow! What a claim! We're used to leaders making bold promises. We're used to optimistic state of the union speeches that try to convince us of all sorts of great things. But Jesus went far beyond what any president has ever claimed. Here was Jesus' state of the union speech—his purpose. "You are prisoners, and I have come to give you freedom." Jesus almost sounds American, doesn't he? "Let freedom ring!"

But if that's what Jesus came to do, he did a terrible job, didn't he? If Jesus brought freedom, why was it necessary for Abraham Lincoln to declare in 1863 that "all persons held as slaves are, and henceforth shall, be free." I guess Jesus didn't do it, huh? If Jesus came to bring freedom, why did Martin Luther King have to dream of a better future and die for his cause of freedom? If Jesus came to bring freedom, why is there still inequality and injustice and slavery? Why are people still fighting all over the world for "freedom?"

There seems to be a disconnect between the Bible and reality. If Jesus came to bring freedom, it sure seems like he failed. Are you free? You don't always feel that way, do you? And if you don't feel free in the freest country in the world, can you imagine living anywhere else? "Let freedom ring!" It doesn't matter who those words come from—from Martin Luther King, from President Obama, from Jesus—they sound empty, because they don't seem to match up with reality. It sure seems like Jesus is just one of many who have tried hard to win freedom, but nobody's quite succeeded yet.

Unless you understand what real freedom is. This word "freedom" is used in other places in the New Testament. On Maundy Thursday, Jesus said, "*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the freedom of sins*" (Matthew 26:28). On Pentecost, Peter said, "*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the freedom of your sins*" (Acts 2:38). Except, you're not used to hearing the word "freedom" in those passages. What word are you used to? "Freedom" is the same word as forgiveness. When someone sins against you, you hold onto it and onto them, right? Forgiveness is to set someone free. Freedom is forgiveness.

That's the freedom Jesus came to bring, and he uses three beautiful pictures to describe it. He came to proclaim "*freedom for the prisoners.*" The Bible says that "*a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him*" (2 Peter 2:19). Every sinner is like a prisoner to her sin. You can see this in your life. How easy is it for a sin to take control of you, to force you to do things you really don't want to do, and then to hold it over your head? Like prisoners in Iran, sin and guilt hold on to you. They won't let you go! Except Jesus set you free. He doesn't undo what you did, but he sets you free from the guilt that you feel. You're a prisoner no more.

Here's another way to describe it. Jesus brings "*recovery of sight for the blind.*" Sin blinds our eyes so that we cannot see the truth. In fact, sinners often don't think their sin is really a sin at all. They're blind. A child is blind to the hurt he brings his parents. He can't judge his own actions properly. In the same way, sin blinds. The problem is that we see blindness in other people much better than in ourselves. Jesus came to give us sight again. To help us see that sin is sin. To help us see how far we've fallen. But like a child who grows up and understands his parents' actions, Jesus lets us see God's constant love for us.

"*Freedom for the prisoners.*" "*Recovery of sight for the blind.*" Just in case those pictures don't work for you, here's one more from Jesus: "*Release the oppressed.*" This last pic-

ture is a man sitting in a prison, where he has been beaten by the jailer and is bleeding from his wounds. This is what sin does to the sinner. This is what sin does to you. Little by little, it wears you down, it beats you down. Sometimes you can even feel its effects physically on your body. Oppressed. Depressed. Guilty. Until Jesus says, "*Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28). Forgiveness is freedom!

To top it all off, Jesus proclaimed "*the year of the Lord's favor.*" He had something in mind called the Year of Jubilee. Have you ever heard of that? In the Old Testament, every 50 years God's people celebrated the Year of Jubilee. In that year, all the slaves were freed, all debts were cancelled, and all property was returned to its original owner. Sounds great, right? Especially if you were in debt or a slave! Here's the cool thing: With Jesus, every year is a Year of Jubilee. We were in debt. We were prisoners to sin, blind to our weakness, beaten and broken down by our sinful world. But Jesus died to set us free. Today. Now! Let freedom ring! Freedom from sin. Freedom from guilt. Freedom from hell. Forgiveness is freedom! What a Savior we have!

So what are we going to do? In 1789, during the French Revolution, the revolutionists attacked a prison in the center of Paris called the Bastille. This famous prison was a sign of everything that was wrong in France at that time. It was where the government cruelly kept political prisoners. After heavy fighting, the French people stormed the building and released all their friends inside. They were overjoyed, except for one man who had been in prison a very long time. He came out in the sun, with people, in freedom, for the first time in years. But do you know what he did? He couldn't handle it. So he turned around, went back inside, and sat right back down in his cell.

That makes no sense, right? Who in their right mind would do such a thing? You would. I would. You're tempted every single day to give up the freedom Jesus gave you. We can very quickly become slaves again to whatever sin pushes Jesus out of our lives. "Oh, that would never happen to me!" Who owns you? What owns you? What is it that drives what you do? For some of us, it's money. Money owns us. This week, with the turmoil in the stock market, how much was money on your mind? How much do you worry? How much do you fret? How much do you dream? "If only I had...than I'd be free!" Is that freedom? No! That's slavery! Do you see what I mean?

Here's another example. Some of us are slaves to sex. It's hard to think of a more powerful master in our world today. Maybe for you it's that boyfriend or girlfriend, whom you've decided is more important to you than Jesus. Maybe for you it's the computer screen or the magazine or the television. This is the greatest freedom that our society tempts us with—the "freedom" to fulfill our desires in any way we want. Except, who really owns whom? Is that freedom? There is nothing sadder than when Christians consciously decide to reject Jesus and his will and think that things will go well. There is no freedom—there is no forgiveness—without Jesus.