

**Make Your Mantra: I am free!**

A few days ago I was doing some prison ministry. I feel very comfortable entering the prison on the south side of Port Washington, but it is a different setting than we're used to. No one needs to tell the inmates that they are in prison. As soon as they open their eyes each morning, they see the sterile and steel environment all around them. They hear the chains and shackles and staticky radios of the guards. They know that they are not free. I've heard some people say, "Prisoners have it pretty good. They get three square meals a day and a free place to sleep." But that's not what it's like at all. Some inmates live in small cells, but most share a large room. Try sleeping in a room with 20 squeaky bunk beds and 40 snoring guys, except for a few who are still up watching TV and laughing. They can not walk to the kitchen and think, "I'll make myself some pancakes and juice." They can tell the guard, "It's a beautiful day. I'm going to take a walk. I'll be back in about ½ hour. Don't worry." They can not check their phones to see if got any emails or messages. They wake up each morning and think, "I am not free."

Neither are you. Neither am I. We all live with guilt. Our sinful nature pours sinful thoughts into our minds. It leads us to say bad words or not to say words we should say. The sinful nature steers us toward naughty actions that leave us feeling guilty. I doubt that I'm the only one. Jesus said (Mark 12:30), **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."** We are to give God first place in every aspect of our lives and never slip up even once. God, who made humans perfect, has every right to expect humans to be perfect. Perfection is the minimum standard, but none of us can achieve it. Famous author Mark Twain said, "It's not the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand that bother me." Even though Mark Twain said a lot of bad things about Christianity, he still understood that he was a sinner and that he deserved to be punished by God for what he did wrong.

This stress of guilt and death constantly nagged Martin Luther. The question that drove Luther nuts was, "Am I a good person?" That was like his mantra. He kept repeating it. "Am I a good person?" How would you answer that question? Not, "Are you pretty good?" Or, "Are you outwardly better than some?" Or, "Do you try to be pretty good?" Or, "Do you wish

you were pretty good?" None of that. "Are you a good person?" "Are you perfect?" None of us are, of course. Then how dare we look at other people and shake our heads because they aren't doing what we think they should do? Yes, others sin, but so do we. We should show them patience and loving concern as we expect God to show patience and loving concern. And why should we expect that. We haven't earned it at all.

If someone asked the Jews here in John 8, "Are you good people?" They would have quickly replied, "Of course. We have Abraham's blood flowing through our veins. We offer sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem. We celebrate Passover and Yom Kippur. We eat kosher. Certainly, we are better than the Samaritans, the Romans, and others."

That same stinking, sinful, selfish pride constantly pops up into our minds. Sometimes people, especially those who grew up Wisconsin Synod and read their Bible, can think that they are better than others. We are better than the other churches in town. Yes, there are differences in our teachings which we need to deal with, but we can not see into their hearts. I have met many people from other churches who are so sincere about their faith that I am humbled. Sure, we can criticize, but how often do we read our Bibles? Can you recite the 10 Commandments, or the books of the Bible or explain the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities? How much time do you spend in prayer each day and does your mind ever wander while you pray?

It's so easy to look at others here in church and think that we are better than they are. We are more polite. We volunteer more. We are never late for worship. We give a generous offering. We have been going to church for decades and know lots of pastors and teachers. (I'm always amazed when people tell me how many pastors or teachers they know, or how they played together as children, as if that is supposed to impress me.) We are totally tuned in throughout our worship. Etc. Remember that we can not see into other people's hearts. Someone might not do things the way you would like, but they might be more sincere in their faith than you are. One thing I've noticed lately is how people have become so critical of each other, always complaining. Maybe it's because the media or politicians are wearing off on us, but it's so discouraging. If we think ill of others because they are different than we are, or if they do something different than we would like, or if we consider them lower than us, then it doesn't matter how many years we've gone to church or how much of the Bible we know, then we've blown it. We have lost love. We are not perfect. "Am I a good person?" None of us are.

Maybe there have been times when we resolve to be a better person and to show more love to God and others. You know what happens. You might stay on the straight path for a while, but then we wander and end up repeating the same sins again and again. Our sinful nature is like a beard. We can shave it off, but it's part of us and keeps growing back. We do not like to admit that we can not stop sinning. Our conscience nags at us. We are slaves to sin.

The Jews at the time of Jesus did not want to admit this either. When Jesus talked to them about being free, they objected that they had never been slaves. They argued (:33), **"We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"** They ignored the fact that they had been slaves to the Egyptians, most of the countries in Palestine during the time of the Judges, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and now the Romans. But Jesus was leading them to realize that they were slaves to sin, just as we are. Jesus simply pointed out (:34), **"Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."** In other words, "If you say that you are not a slave to sin, then simply stop sinning. You can't do it because you are a slave to sin. It controls you."

As always, Jesus confronted the Jews and saved this story for us because he cares about people and wants to help. He was leading the Jews to realize that they needed a Savior. He wants us to recognize that we need a Savior. You might be thinking, "Duh, pastor, tell me something I don't know." But this needs to be explored and reenforced again and again. With some of the most powerful words in the Bible, Jesus explained (:31,32), **"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."** If you want to be free from the slavery of sin, if you want to be free of a nagging conscience, if you want to be free from the fear of death, it's not a matter of trying harder until we get perfect, or simply improving. It's a matter of holding on to Jesus' teaching. Jesus did not say, "If you hold to whatever feeling gives you peace, then you're OK with God." Like, "The butterflies and good music give me peace so I never feel guilty." Nope. Won't work. Butterflies don't get rid of sin. Only a cold corpse on a cross will do that. Nor did Jesus say, "If you hold to whatever your friends and family think about God, then you're OK." As in I do something wrong but my family and friends say, "No one's perfect. We all make mistakes. No problem." But sin is problem.

Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching." The only way to find truth, peace, and the certainty of salvation, is to hang on to what the Bible says. That's the only place you'll find the truth that Jesus wants you to know. The truth of God's Word is that we are sinners who deserve God's eternal punishment. The truth of God's Word is that, purely out of love, God sent his own Son in human flesh to be our Savior. The truth of God's Word is that Jesus did not sin; he did not deserve God's eternal punishment, but God punished him anyway in our place. The truth of God's Word is that all who believe in Jesus will live with him in heaven forever. This truth sets us free and brings us freedom from sin, death and devil. God's favor can not be earned, even partially, by doing good deeds. Salvation is a gift that God gave you before you even asked for it.

Many people think that freedom means being able to do whatever you want. Put a 5-year-old in a store and tell him to do whatever he wants and what's going to happen? Give the keys to the car to a 17-year-old and tell him that there are no rules and how is going to drive? Such so-called "freedom" is really just giving in to the sinful nature. Freedom means being free from a guilty conscience so you're not afraid of God. Freedom means not worrying what happens to you when you die because heavenly glory is waiting for you. Freedom means knowing that God is smiling on you.

We used to have to admit, "I'm a prisoner. I'm not free." A prisoner to sin, to guilt, to death. But then Jesus came along. He unlocked the cell door. Jesus took away our sin so that we are now declared righteous, holy and pure before God. Jesus took away your guilt so no matter what difficulties you face in life, you know what God is not punishing you. He is always smiling on you and guiding things for your good. Jesus changed death from unending pain and agony into a doorway that leads to eternal happiness. Our minds can not grasp how awesome it will be.

When you wake up each morning, don't think, "I'm a prisoner." and live a life of guilt and gloom. I have gotten to know a few inmates personally. When they are released, it takes a while to adjust. They tell me that it takes a number of nights before they are able to sleep. Reality seems surreal. They wake up in the morning and walk to kitchen to make pancakes and juice. They take walks and enjoy the fresh air. They celebrate their freedom. How much more can we wake up each day rejoicing that our sin is gone, that God is smiling on us and that we are one day closer to heaven. Make your mantra, "I am free!" Amen.