



Better Than the Fourth of July

Romans 8:1-11

July 10, 2005

First Baptist Church, Wilson, NC

Last Sunday, on Fourth of July weekend, the message focused on the blessings of religious liberty in our nation. Our political and religious freedoms are a precious heritage. But today we focus on another freedom, a freedom you won't find in the Bill of Rights, for no government has the power to give this freedom. Today we focus on freedom from sin and death. You can have political freedom, you can have social freedom, you can have economic freedom. But if you do not have freedom from sin and from death, all those other freedoms turn into another set of chains.

Before I read the scripture from Romans 8, a word about translations. In this passage, the apostle Paul contrasts two terms: spirit and flesh. Now when you and I hear "flesh," the first thing we think of is sexual immorality. But Paul is talking about more than sex. Paul is speaking of all kinds of sin: sexual sins, social sins, economic sins, personal sins -- the whole range of ways we fall short. So I would suggest that you take your Bible, turn to Romans 8, and then take a pencil from the pew rack and make yourself a translator's note in the margin: flesh = lower nature. If your translation has made a literal translation of the Greek word *sarx*, then your translation will read "flesh," and you'll need to remember the broader meaning. (So KJV, NRSV) If your translation has made a less literal but more understandable translation of the Greek word *sarx*, then your translation will already read "lower nature," or "sinful nature," or "human nature," or some combination thereof. (So TEV, NIV)

Now we are ready to read this letter from Paul to the Romans, as he outlines the differences between life in the Spirit, and life in the flesh, in order to show the way to ultimate freedom, freedom from sin and death. (Read Romans 8:1-11)

A few days ago in New York City, Billy Graham held one more crusade. In a city of great economic and political power, in a city where its people are the most rich and the most free of any city in the world, thousands upon thousands of people came to hear this evangelist. They came because deep within them they knew they were not free at all. They came because they were struggling with the invisible chains of spiritual bondage. Something had hold of them and would not let them go. Sin and death would not let them go. In a great city, they found themselves walking through lonely streets where prisons have no key. Through lonely streets they streamed to hear the simple message of an evangelist: because Jesus Christ loved you and died for your sins, because God raised him from the dead, you are now free from sin and from death. Believe in the good news of Jesus, and walk out of here as free people.

Our culture talks a lot about economic freedom, about political freedom, but it does not talk much about freedom from sin and death. Neither does our culture talk a lot about sin, and thus it misses the depths of the human problem. The problem is this: in our world there is a force at work in human beings, a force of selfishness and rebellion against God. The force of sin is more than just our individual mean and stupid choices. Sin is “more than the sum total of human wrongdoing. It is powerful, and the power infects even those with the best intentions.” (*N. Thomas Wright, New Interpreter's Bible Commentary on Romans, p. 588*) That force separates us from God and enslaves us in a bondage that is beyond our power to escape.

A century ago, modern civilization used to think that it could outgrow whatever was wrong with it. People believed that the tide of progress would lift us all up toward better and better lives, closer and closer toward a human utopia. That was before World War I, and World War II, and Auschwitz, and the Bomb, and the War on Terror.

And what of your own personal war within yourself? Do you remember a time when you thought you would just get better and better? Do you remember a time when you thought that basically you were a good person, and that all that was wrong with you was nothing that couldn't be fixed by a little more positive thinking, or by trying harder, or by reading a good self-help book?

Some people still have that naïve view of themselves. They think that all they need is a good moral makeover, just a spiritual nip and tuck here and there, and they will be O.K.

But the rest of you know better. Maybe you learned it all at once when you made some colossal blunder that seriously hurt someone. Or maybe it dawned on you gradually until you looked in the mirror one morning and knew that you were in chains to your own selfishness. One day Paul took an honest look at himself in the mirror and this is what he saw:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ... So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?
(Romans 7:15, 18b-19, 21-24)

Sin enslaves us in a bondage that we are powerless to escape. In chapter 8:5-8 Paul describes how that bondage progresses and takes us over:

- We set our mind on lower sinful things (v. 5)
- We begin down a direction that leads to a dead end, to death (v. 6)
- Our minds set thus become hostile to God (v. 7)
- We are unable to submit to God's law (v. 8)

Thus sin curls around us like a boa constrictor until we are powerless to escape. But much of the time we are in denial, and think we can handle it ourselves.

Some of the most honest people I know are recovering alcoholics. They know what it is like to be in bondage to something they are powerless to escape. They know that the only way to recovery is to realize they are powerless, and to open themselves to a higher power.

It is the same way with everyone with sin. Sin is like addiction, for we are addicted to our own selfishness and our own self-indulgence. And we are powerless to save ourselves from it.

So we turn to religion. We turn to some a system of right and wrong, of good things to do and bad things not to do, and we try to save ourselves through that system.

Paul tried that, and found it did not work. (v. 3 “what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do...”) In Paul's case, his religious system was the Jewish law. It did teach him right from wrong. But something in Paul twisted the Jewish law until Paul forgot the gracious salvation of God and descended into legalities. Sin twisted the Law until Paul alternated between feeling superior for obeying more laws than others, or feeling inferior because not even Paul could keep all the Law. Paul's human weakness took a religious system that was meant to give life, and turned it into something that made Paul feel dead inside.

Now before we Christians start feeling superior and look down on Jewish religion, we have to admit what we do to Christianity. Our weakness turns Christianity into a legal system, too. Our sin twists the Christian ethic until we too swing between feeling superior over others because we keep more of the rules, or feeling like a failure because we can't keep all the rules.

We find out the same thing Paul found: we cannot save ourselves with religion. Paul's words once moved an old German teacher named Karl Barth to say:

No religion is capable of altering the fact that the behaviour of men is a behaviour apart from God. All that religion can do is to expose the complete godlessness of human behaviour. ... Woe be to us, if from the summits of religion there pours nothing but – religion! Religion casts us into the deepest of all prisons: it cannot liberate us. (Commentary on Romans, p. 276)

We are powerless before the addiction of sin. We cannot save ourselves from it. Not even religion can save us from it. We need a power greater than religion and greater than ourselves.

One of the steps of AA states: “We believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.” For our addiction of sin, dare we hope that there is a power greater than ourselves that can liberate us? Look at Romans 8:3

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh ...

The power of God in Christ on the cross sets us free from our weak and sinful lower human nature: “The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.” (8:2) Not even the Fourth of July can provide that kind of freedom!

Liza Broadhurst has given me permission to talk about her today. Liza went off to California to go to college. College, in California: how much more free can one be than that? But when she got there, she became miserable. She found herself burdened and weighed down and trapped. She went through what many call a “dark night of the soul.” And there, three thousand miles away from home, she started doing something she had been taught to do by her family and her church family: she started praying. She prayed and prayed. She prayed like her life depended on it. She prayed to be set free from all the loneliness and the turmoil and the sin and the death that bound her. And as Liza prayed, a Power greater than herself came into her life. And Liza received Christ Jesus into her heart. And now, she truly is free. And from now on, wherever she will be, in Carolina, in California, she will be free.

CONCLUSION

How free are you? You may have political freedom. You may have economic freedom. You may be the talk of the town, the upper-crust, you may know people in high places, you may have a billion dollars in your portfolio, and still be the most bound and imprisoned person on earth – bound by envy, greed, hatred and lust, bound by sin and death.

You are stuck. You cannot get free by your own power, not even by the power of religion. But there is Another Power. The Spirit of life in Christ Jesus can set you free from the law of sin and death. Then you may be shackled in chains in the deepest dungeon without a penny to your name, and still be the freest person on earth.

Would you like to be free? Then come forward and accept the Spirit in Christ, and you will make this your own Independence Day, better than the Fourth of July.

-- Douglas E. Murray