

Free! (part 2)

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“Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (Romans 6:16-18).

Notice that the above passage never says that we are freed from the *guilt* of sin only. Rather, we are freed from the sin itself. Unfortunately, many have a “give up” attitude about sin, assuming that we will never be able to overcome it. So God conveniently reassures us of salvation and releases us from the guilt of sins that we will always commit. This attitude completely misses the overwhelmingly optimistic message of the gospel, though. Take Ephesians 4:20ff, for example. The writer stresses that his readers are to overcome sin, stop committing it, and move on, because they did not *“learn Christ in this way”* (as in, the attitude of the previous three verses). They must stop being corrupted, stop practicing falsehood, stop being angry, stop stealing, stop being unwholesome, and stop being bitter.

That all sounds good, does it not? Easy enough, right? Well, God can only set us free from sin when we finally submit to His will with all our heart. We must make Him the master of our lives. As Paul said in Romans 6:16, we are slaves of whoever we obey, so it is my own fault when I become a slave of sin – I obey sin, and it becomes my master. We become the hypothetical “fleshly Paul” from Romans 7:14-25, seeing the sin coming and knowing exactly how harmful it is. We do not want to commit it, but because we have voluntarily submitted to sin so frequently we feel like we have lost control.

You Are NOT Strong Enough

“I’m just not strong enough to escape this sin,” the despondent sinner cries. The resolute, but misguided, believer responds, “You must not be trying hard enough!” Perhaps this is why we fail so often to break the cycle of sin. We have been so trained to believe in our own strength that we forget one of the most essential lessons from the gospel. Christ Himself told Paul on one occasion, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness”* (2 Corinthians 12:9). The stricken apostle gladly concluded, *“When I am weak, then I am strong.”* The more he depended on Christ for strength, the stronger he became – to the point that he knew he could do all things through the source of his strength (Philippians 4:13). This includes overcoming sin.

In our counseling and teaching, we should do less cheerleading for our own ability to overcome sin. I am free from sin, not because I just *stop* doing it through sheer force of will, but because I submit myself totally to being Christ’s slave. I give my heart wholly to His service and align my will with His will. I make a conscious, practical, measurable decision to pursue godly activities. I cannot say exactly how Colossians 1:11 or Ephesians 3:16 work, unless my daily choices start reflecting the theory I claim to believe. And perhaps that is the most *practical* way of looking at it. When David gives credit to God for strengthening him, we cannot point to anything miraculous or magical. David is never bathed in heavenly light and filled with renewed vigor. Yet, he frequently names God alone as his source of strength and reassurance – *“I love Thee, O Lord, my strength”* (Psalm 18:1). When David faced a trial in 1 Samuel 30 (the kidnapping of his entire family, along with the families of his soldiers) he *“strengthened himself in the Lord”* by turning to

Him for counsel (1 Samuel 30:6-8). When David sang a song of salvation in 2 Samuel 22, he gives God all the credit for being his “*refuge*” and his “*strong fortress*.” But how did God strengthen him? First, David depended on prayer like he actually believed it would help him. Second, he made sure that he obeyed in all of the things that were within his control (2 Samuel 22:22-27).

Perhaps one of the main reasons that we have such a hard time being free from sin is that we have not fully committed ourselves to God. This is not mere theory or flowery language. Think about it in day-to-day, measurable terms. When was the last time you willingly, happily prayed to God about everything bringing you anxiety? Do you stubbornly make time for worship, no matter what distractions come up? Do you avoid evil companions and situations that repeatedly bring you trouble? And, above all, do you humbly admit to yourself and others that you are a sinner? Do you call sin exactly what it is and acknowledge that you are weak, broken, and in desperate need of strength from God? If not, then Psalm 32:1-6 is a passage that probably feels a little uncomfortable!