

John 8:31-36

I saw some slaves the other day. They weren't out in the field with their master watching them. They weren't chained and shackled. One was wearing a business suit. Another was exercising. If you had asked them what life was like for them being a slave, they would have looked at you dumbfounded. "Slaves?" they might have said, "Slaves to what? What are you talking about?" That's pretty much how Jesus' audience reacted in our text. They liked Jesus. They believed in Him up to a point. But when He insinuated that they were slaves, they became offended. "We aren't slaves," they retorted, "Never been, never will be."

The word slavery carries with it a negative connotation. To be a slave means you are not your own. Someone else is in charge. Someone else is in control of your life. Sometimes we joke about being slaves. "I'm a slave to my job," we say, or "to my alarm clock," or, "to my spouse" or "my children." But these are not the things Jesus means when He speaks of slavery in our text. We live to work. And we live to serve our families. What God designs for us is not slavery. But that which Satan designs for us is. "*Everyone who commits sin,*" says Jesus, "*is a slave to sin.*"

I've heard it said that someone who tries meth just once becomes immediately addicted. No wonder there are so many meth makers in our area. Addicts are created pretty much on a daily basis. Unscrupulous people take advantage of this. They make meth, to make money, even with small children in the house.

Sin operates the same way. It is a power which immediately enslaves the person who tries it just once. And that "just once" happened in the Garden of Eden. Our first parents enslaved not only themselves, but all their children to the power of sin. We're like babies born to a mother on meth. We're addicts to sin already in the womb. Sin had us chained and shackled from the moment we were conceived. "*In sin my mother conceived me,*" laments David in Psalm 51. We are born addicts, and so we live as addicts, slaves to sin. When someone is a slave to the bottle, it's not liquor that has enslaved him; it's sin. The same is true of those enslaved by pornography, gambling, cursing, violence, and all other vices. Sin is the power behind all of these; the power that enslaves people. The life of the addict is not what we want for ourselves, or for our children. But we are powerless. The addict is controlled by a power that he is unable to overcome. And this is also the life of the one who commits sin. Sin enslaves the one who gives in to its temptation. Sin has created addicts of every one of us.

Jesus, however, has stepped into our addiction-filled world and speaks words of hope: "*If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*" There are a host of self-help programs out there which are supposed to put us back in control of our lives. There are self-anointed gurus who will put you in touch with your "inner self" and free you from all your addictions. Every religion under the sun claims to be the one that can deal with the power of sin in your life. But only Jesus can do all this for you. He can because He is God's answer to sin.

Jesus is the one whom God charged with your sin. Jesus is the one who allowed the power of sin to enslave Him and take Him to the cross. Jesus is the one, and the only one, who sets you free from your sin because He paid sin the debt you owed. He traded His life for yours. He accepted the punishment in hell you deserved. Jesus took your place in the chains and shackles of sin. He did not back away. He allowed sin to take Him even unto death. And then He broke sin's power by rising again.

This victory which Jesus won over the power of sin is yours in the waters of Holy Baptism. When you were baptized, sin stopped being your master. The chains were broken and the shackles were undone when you were baptized. From then on, Jesus became your Master. *“The love of Christ controls us,”* says the apostle. You are not under sin’s power any longer. The power of the risen Christ has set you free. You belong, not to the devil who can control you with sin’s temptations, but to God who has called you out of a life of sin to a life lived in Christ Jesus.

But addicts who are freed from their addiction are never rid of their desire to return to it. When God brought His people out of Pharaoh’s slavery, they cried with stubborn hearts wanting to return to Egypt. That same stubborn heart lives within you and me. We who have been freed from the power of sin, daily struggle with the ugly desire to go back to our sinful ways. You show me a person who has no desire to sin, and I’ll show you a Christian who has died and gone to heaven. As long as we live in this sin-filled world with sin-filled hearts, we will struggle, like addicts, to avoid giving in to temptation. If we do not struggle with temptation, then we have given up the fight. It’s not the Christians that struggle who are in trouble; it’s the ones who do not struggle.

You are here where God’s Word sanctifies you and empowers you to struggle against sin in your life. You come here faithfully because you know that you cannot make it out there without the Word of God. *“If you abide in My Word,”* says Jesus, *“then you are My disciples...and the truth will set you free.”* You are not going to have an easy time of it living in the world as God’s people. You’re weak, and so am I. You don’t come here for a pep talk each Sunday. You come to be nourished for your journey. You come for medicine to be healed. You come to arm yourselves with the weapons of God so that He will be your Mighty Fortress as you struggle with sin in your life.

You should not, therefore, be discouraged when you give in. You should not despair when the power of sin gets the best of you and, because you are weak, you fall. If you were not weak, if you never struggled like an addict, then you would not need God in your life. You could put away your Bible, you could skip church and the Holy Communion regularly and be just fine. But this isn’t you, nor is it me.

Today, Reformation Sunday, belongs to that part of the Church Year known as the Church Militant. *“A Mighty Fortress”* is in the Church Militant section of our hymnal. Militant means we’re in the fight. We’re in the struggle. We’re not the Church Triumphant yet. Those saints are at rest with Jesus in heaven. Their struggles are over. But not ours. We are the army of God still on the warpath because Satan and sin will not stop their bloody attacks until we are safe in heaven with Jesus. And God has not promised that we will win every battle. We will win the war against sin and Satan as we abide in Jesus’ words. But as with any army here on earth, some battles we lose in our struggles against sin.

Friend, you still belong to God. You still have a place in His House, a place at His Table. God does not despise your weakness. He is here to help you because He knows you’re weak. God does not become angry at you because you have lost some, perhaps many, battles with sin last week. He is here to forgive you, and He does. He puts Jesus’ cross here before you and tells you this is why you are forgiven. You have a Savior. You have a God who, in mercy, took your place in death. God forgives you...all of you.

You are wounded soldiers. All of us are. We have been bloodied out there in the fight. But Jesus’ blood is the ointment, the medicine that heals your wounds, that raises you back up, that gives you back your life. And so you can fight again this week. You can fight again with sin. And I’ll see you

here next Sunday for more mercy, more strengthening. You're in the fight. You're God's soldiers.
Jesus is your Mighty Fortress. Amen.