

GOOD FRIDAY - To Set Us Free

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[0 : 00] Well, let's pray. Lord God, your word is truth, and you promise that the truth will set us free. So we pray that by the power of your word, about the powerful death of your son, you will indeed set us free in him.

Amen. As you may have heard on the news during the week, Nathan Allen is not running this weekend. Well, nor are most of us, but that didn't seem to be news. But Nathan Allen last year won the stall gift, but this year he's not running because of charges that he's taken illicit drugs. Now, we're getting used to this sort of story. Last year we were bombarded time and time again by the Ben Cousins story, one of the great footballers from West Coast Eagles, who was, maybe still is, a drug addict.

[1 : 08] And we've seen the story of him being arrested, fighting, flying to rehab in Los Angeles, getting out of rehab and going back on drugs, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Wayne Carey, the same.

I mean, we've known for a while that he was an adulterer and probably a bit violent, and now he's admitted a cocaine habit of dependency. And there seems to be a steady stream over the years, and not just in recent years, I think it goes back a fair few decades, of celebrities on drugs of dependence or alcohol, like another footballer this week, and off to detox units or rehab units. Britney Spears and Amy Winehouse and Paris Hilton, who apparently are meant to be famous, to name just a few people that I discovered are in that sort of category.

Some of them, of course, don't survive. There are some who, through these addictions and habits, end up deliberately or not overdosing, but others struggle with the addictions maybe for the rest of their lives.

Addictions are not the preserve of the rich and famous, though. You don't have to be a celebrity to be addicted. Let me tell you that in case you're feeling left out. Nor are addictions, of course, confined to illicit drugs, either, or alcohol.

[2 : 28] There are certainly people here in this church whom I know who have family members who struggle with addictions to drugs or alcohol, often at great grief to their family.

We know that there is an epidemic of gambling addiction in our society, something that the government has made comment about in the last fortnight. And I know of people in this church, again, who have family members who struggle with addictions to gambling that often are tearing families apart.

In addition, there are addictions to pornography, to power, to money, television, sport, computer games.

And, of course, there are the addictions to caffeine, chocolate, cars, cigarettes. Not every thing to which somebody is addicted is in itself bad.

There can be good things to which people are addicted, and the actual addiction is bad, even if the object of the addiction is not. The trouble is with addictions is that you cannot simply turn off the addiction.

[3 : 36] During the week, last week or the week before, I was in the car and sort of overheard a little bit of an interview, I think it was on John Fain on the ABC, and it was talking about gambling addiction.

And he asked the question, well, why don't you just stop? Now, I don't think he was quite so naive to think that the person could, but the question certainly gave a sense of naivety.

People with addictions cannot simply stop. Their willpower is no longer powerful. It's restrained. It's corrupted. It's disabled, in a sense.

It's as though the enabling switch has been switched off. They cannot control or break out of their addiction. And their mind often becomes preoccupied with the next hit, the next drink, the next spin, the next thrill, whatever it is.

And we know, and you may know personally, people who go to enormous lengths to break addictions through all sorts of patches all over their body. Can't quite work out if you're trying to break the addiction of smoking, why you don't put a patch over your mouth.

[4 : 42] That would have done it, I would have thought. But people who go through Alcoholics Anonymous or Gambler's Anonymous programs, often at high expense, often to rehab or detox units, often residential for a lengthy period of time.

Addictions diminish our liberty. They diminish our maturity. They certainly diminish human potential because addictions enslave us and cripple us.

The bad news, the true news, is that you and I are all, without exception, addicts.

Maybe not to illicit drugs. Maybe not to alcohol or gambling. Maybe not even to caffeine or chocolate.

Although those who religiously observe Lent are sort of panting today as they're waiting for their chocolate fix on Sunday. But you and I, without exception, are addicts to wrongdoing.

[5 : 52] Addicts to sin, as the Bible calls it. Addicts to sin, as the Bible calls it.

You may not have gone out and murdered anyone. And you may not even have dreamt of murdering somebody. But as God defines his standards as love of himself with all our heart, soul, mind and strength all the time.

And love of our neighbor as ourself. Defining our neighbor not as the people we choose to love, but whoever we have contact with. Even our enemies or people we dislike.

Then at the end of the day, despite your resolve, you would have to say, I failed. It might have been a fleeting word that you said that was unloving or proud or selfish.

It may have been a time when you realized that you weren't honoring God in your thoughts or behavior. It may have been the absence of a loving action or generous deed or word.

[7 : 18] But none of us is perfect. And with all our resolve, we cannot break the addiction to sin. We may be very noble people in the eyes of society.

We may be pillars of our society. We may be very religious and very pious. We may spend our time praying and reading the Bible. We may be generous and do lots of community deeds and service.

But no matter our resolve, we are addicts to sin. We fail to live as God wants us to live perfectly.

Loving him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And our neighbor as ourself. We're like a car with faulty steering that keeps veering off the straight and narrow.

No. Jesus said everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. You see, it's not simply that we decide, oh, well, I'm going to do a sin.

[8 : 24] As though it's just an act out there. But when we commit sin, we're actually enslaved to it. We have a sort of compulsion where we're unable to stop.

I don't mean by that that each sin we commit, we just keep on repeating exactly the same sin. But sin in general, we're addicts to it. We're enslaved to it.

And that defines all of us. You and me together. Indeed, every person on this planet. And our practice of sin proves our slavery of it.

You see, sin, of course, is not simply bad deeds. It's our society defines sin as pedophilia, as terrorism, as mass murder and driving a car into teenagers. But God's definition of sin is anything that does not love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

And does not love our neighbor as ourself. All the time. We don't become sinners because we sin.

[9 : 28] But rather we sin because we are sinners. Because of our fallen human nature. We can't stop it. The Apostle Paul, when he reflected on this issue in Romans 7, said, Wretched man that I am, who will rescue me?

That is, the things I want to do, I find I can't do. The things I don't want to do, I think I find myself doing. Not that he's a bad man. But he's acknowledging that he fails.

He cannot break out of the addiction to sin. And of course it goes way back to the son of Adam and Eve. If not to Adam and Eve themselves.

But to their son Cain, God warns, Sin is crouching at your door. Its desire is for you. You must master it. And he didn't.

And he went out and killed his brother. And sin crouches at our door. Desiring for us to control us. And none of us has the strength to master it.

[10:37] My guess is that more than a few of you feel a little bit uncomfortable with this. We don't like being told that we're sinners. We don't like being told that, well, it sounds like I'm a bad person.

Because basically we like the message, the mantra of our society that is so humanist and secular. People are basically good. And we of all people would say, well, we're basically good people. After all, we're in church. We probably give some money to charity at some point or other or to the church. We probably do some good deeds and involved in community service. Yeah, I'm a basically good person.

I know there are a few failings here and there. But really, they don't matter all that much. The big package is, I'm not bad. I'm pretty good. And that shows, in fact, our blindness to our addiction. Because such a response is self-righteousness. And it's not a biblical right answer.

Self-righteousness in itself is a glaring sin.

[11:45] The people to whom Jesus spoke these words in John 8 also didn't like hearing the same sort of message. Jesus, in these words, is far from being a tactful diplomat.

He says in verse 21, I'm going away. You'll search for me, but you will die in your sin. It's a bit blunt, isn't it? You'll die in your sin.

And he's addressing Jews and Jewish leaders. Indeed, some of them might have been the cream of religious societies. The sorts of people that the society would look up to and think they are great people by their religious devotion and piety and their acts of goodwill and generosity and so on. You'll die in your sin. Sin singular, not meaning that they commit one sin, but sin singular as in their nature of sin that cripples and enslaves their hearts and minds.

In verse 24, verse 24, I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins, unless you believe that I am he.

[12:56] It's a fairly strong rebuke. You will die in your sins. They think they're good and righteous. You will die in your sins, Jesus says, unless.

And their reply to him in verse 25 shows complete disdain for him. They said to him, Who are you? That is in the context of, or the connotation of, Who are you to tell us that we're going to die in our sin?

Jesus has just urged them to believe that he is God. Who are you to say that we're going to die in our sin? That's not an unexpected reaction. When I've talked to people over the years from time to time as I've tried to help them see their need for Jesus and the Christian faith, that's the sort of reaction I often get.

Who are you to tell me that I'm a sinner? And that's what they say to Jesus himself. And later on, when he promises them freedom, he says in verse 32, You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

And they respond to him not, Oh, that's great. I really am looking forward to freedom. Thank you for the offer. They answered him, We're descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone.

[14:10] That is, We don't need you. We're free. We're children of Abraham. We're Jews. We're religious Jews. We're loyal Jews. We are right in God's eyes.

They boast, in effect, of their self-righteousness in dismissing Jesus' words about freedom. Their reply, of course, is a little bit ironic because Jewish history and Israelite history through the Old Testament shows that there were certainly lengthy periods of time when Jews were enslaved, at least politically.

In Egypt, way back at the time when leading up to the time of Moses when he liberated them from Egypt through the Red Sea in the book of end of Genesis and into Exodus.

And then in the middle of the Old Testament times, in the times when they were enslaved to the Babylonians and carted off into exile. But then thereafter, they were more or less politically enslaved thereafter, from the Babylonians to the Persians to the Greeks and then in Jesus' day to the Romans.

Not slaves perhaps in chains and work gangs like Uncle Tom's cabin gives us a picture, but they weren't politically free or liberated at all.

[15:23] They were under the yoke of Rome quite severely at times. Their words are a bit strange. We've never been slaves to anyone. But Jesus is not simply talking about political slavery.

He's talking about sin. We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying you will be made free?

And they're not asking out of curiosity. Their question is contemptuous. And Jesus says, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.

That's the slavery that Jesus is addressing. What he's saying there is that the reality, whether we perceive it or not, is that we are slaves, addicts to sin.

Whoever we are, no matter how good we are, we cannot rid ourselves of our sinful nature. We are helpless, stuck, and weak, enslaved to sin and needing to be freed.

[16:35] The reality is, whether we know it or not, we need Jesus to free us. Now, in this passage, there are many who believe in Jesus.

It looks positive at first and quite striking. In verse 30, as he was saying these things, many believed in him. And as reading that, we might think, well, that's great.

They've realized their need for Jesus and their need for freedom so that they do not die in their sin. They claim to believe in Jesus, as indeed, I assume, most, if not all of us, do the same.

But the test is not lip service. The test is life. For after saying many believed in him, Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples.

Jesus is drawing a distinction here between what we might call a superficial or nominal lip service faith. Oh, yes, I believe in Jesus. And those who continue in his word, obeying his word and following him, they are truly my disciples.

[17:50] You see, there are many who say, oh, yes, I believe in Jesus. They might even come to church. They might be sitting in the pews today. But the test is, do they continue in Jesus' word?

That is, in obedience and faith following Jesus, letting him rule their lives or not? That's the distinction that Jesus is making here. Between a nominal, intellectual, or just a head knowledge, oh, yes, I believe in Jesus, as though, yes, I believe the creed, I can recite the Nicene or Apostles Creed.

The contrast that Jesus is drawing is those who truly follow him, who continue in his word, in the scriptures, in the Bible, believing it and trusting it and obeying it and changing their lives by it.

The result then, for those who are truly Jesus' disciples, he says in verse 32, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. Not the truth in an intellectual capacity alone, not the truth in a sense of, well, do you know the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, can you recite the Lord's Prayer, that sort of truth, not just something that's in your head, but a truth that's actually quite personal.

For remember that soon after this, in John 14, the night before he died, Jesus says those famous and provocative words, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

[19:16] So when Jesus says here, if you continue in my word, you're truly my disciples and you will know the truth, he's not talking about a formula or a creed, but a relationship with him.

You will know me, Jesus, the truth, and I, Jesus, the truth, will set you free. It's clearer even further down in verse 36.

So if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. the truth is the Son, and the truth, the Son, Jesus Christ, makes free, free indeed.

Nominal faith, the faith that doesn't continue in God's word, or Jesus' word, he attacks again at the end of this passage. He says in verse 37, I know that you're descendants of Abraham, yet you look for an opportunity to kill me.

Well, it's not what you should expect of a descendant of Abraham, but it is the case, because there is no place in you for my word.

[20:27] There are those who say, yes, I believe in Jesus, but is there room in them for Jesus' word? Do they continue in his word, as it's put back in verse 31?

The focus of belief and following of the son is not just his life, or his birth, or his goodness, or his teaching, or his miracles, but is his death on the cross.

There's a great paradox on Good Friday. The very power to set us free from our sin derives from an act that looks so powerless, enslaved by nails on a cross, by Roman and Jewish authorities, looking so weak and helpless and utterly defeated.

But there is the power to set us free, to set us free from our sin, because the taking away of our sin happens on the cross of Christ that we remember today.

Well, our response might be, but I believe, I follow, but I still sin. I don't know that I'm free. So what does Jesus' death actually accomplish then?

[22 : 01] Are his words idle about freedom or is it something that we've missed out on somewhere? Well, firstly, the penalty for our sins is paid for by Jesus' death.

So the condemnation that hangs over the sinner is taken away by him on the cross. It's why he died in our place. He died instead of us, taking the condemnation for our sin, the right punishment for our sin, so that we would no longer face the condemnation and wrongdoing.

But secondly, the power of Jesus' death doesn't simply just forgive us and take away the penalty, but it actually begins to break the power of sin in our life.

It's not an instantaneous thing, so that as we place our faith and trust in Jesus, bingo, all our sins disappear. We are now perfect in loving God and loving our neighbour, not at all. But that power begins to break up in our lives as Jesus' powerful word is in us and his powerful spirit is working that word into our hearts, beginning to clean up and break up the power of sin to which we are enslaved and addicted.

And for those who are continuing in Jesus' word, those who have a place in them for Jesus' word, to use the language of this passage, are people who find that gradually, bit by bit, God's powerful word is actually changing us more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ from one degree of glory to another.

[23 : 36] It's a process that we're part of now, and the completion of that will not occur until the final day of Jesus, when we'll stand in his presence, change from one degree of glory to another, to become a mirror image, a likeness of the character of Jesus on that day.

That's the day to which we look forward to, and it's enabled by the power of the cross, which we remember today. There's not an instantaneous sort of total liberation and freedom, but the beginning of the corrosion and end of power of sin over us.

And then on that final day and thereafter, in God's heavenly kingdom, the actual presence of sin is gone. The penalty of sin's been paid for on the cross already, sin.

The power of sin is already breaking up in our lives if we're true believers. And we look forward then to the end of the presence of sin from that final day of Jesus' return onwards.

The challenge of Jesus' words then, here in this passage in John 8 for us today, is this. Are we truly his disciples?

[24 : 55] disciples or not? That is, many believed in him, paid some lip service to him, but had no room for his word in their hearts. Basically, they lived their lives self-righteously with a little bit of a lip service acknowledgement from time to time to God.

God. So for those who are lip service believers in Jesus, come out of the woodwork from time to time, is that you? Or are you a true disciple?

Do you continue in Jesus' word? Is there a place for Jesus' word in you? Do you know the liberation from sin that Jesus' death accomplishes for you? That's the challenge.

because there are many who would say, I believe in Jesus. But Jesus is challenging such people today from this word to be truly his disciples, to let their lives be lived under his word, being changed by it, formed by it, knowing the son, Jesus, personally, and knowing true freedom from the addiction to sin.

if the son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. And that's why he died for us.