

## Christ Came to Set Us Free

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Galatians 5:13-15

*\*\* You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*

*\*\* If you are following along in this series by reading our study book ([Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam](#)) you'll remember this parable, which author James Moore shares at the beginning of chapter two... [The Parable of the Locksmith]*

*Once upon a time, there were some slaves in prison. They had been slaves in that prison for so long that they had forgotten they were slaves and were in prison. In fact, they decided that they were free and that the walls surrounding them did not imprison them at all, but rather imprisoned the people outside. The prisoners could often hear cries of pain from the other side of the wall. Once, a few of the prisoners escaped, but they came back. They told of wandering in the wilderness for years, of having to fight for their homes, of the problems of government, of the cruelty of war, and of other ongoing anxieties outside. They came back to the prison, back to the calm, secure, unchanging, less-threatening prison. Life is easier in here, they thought; and since prison is supposed to make life harder, they decided that they must not be in prison. They said over and over to themselves that the people outside were the prisoners: "They are the prisoners, not us!"*

*The prisoners went right on dreaming that they were free. Of course, their existence was not always peaceful and quiet. One day, a young locksmith came in over the wall. He not only told the prisoners that they were slaves and in prison, but he also did something much worse. He broke the locks on the prison door! With the door unlocked and pushed open, the cries of need and pain from outside the wall were no longer muffled; they rang out louder and louder and louder. Then the young locksmith had the audacity to tell the inmates that now they were free and should live outside the prison. He told them to "go out into all the world!"*

*A few of the prisoners believed him, but most of them said he was a troublemaker. They thought that anyone could plainly see that true happiness was right there where they were. The prisoners decided that this locksmith was a social menace; and for the good of the community, he ought to be silenced and done away with before he ruined things. So, they had a quick trial and accused him of being a dangerous troublemaker who was upsetting people and disturbing the peace. He was declared guilty and executed for the good of the community, they said piously. And then they said, "There! That takes care of that."*

*The locksmith's followers had been afraid and quiet during the trial and execution. But when they discovered that the doors could never be locked again, they began spreading the locksmith's message. Many of them were killed as well; but their companions kept on working, serving, and preaching. Every now and then, some folks believed the locksmith's message. They accepted the fact that they were in slavery. They recognized that they were indeed in prison. And they went out the unlocked door to freedom, entering the world of pain, need, and service.*

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*However, many of the inmates kept on dreaming that they were free. They never looked out the door for fear they might see someone in need, someone in trouble, or some problem that needed solving. They didn't want to see anything like that. They put cotton in their ears to muffle the noise of cries for help. They didn't want to hear anything like that. They continued to believe that it was the people on the other side of the wall who were imprisoned, not them. They could not understand why the young locksmith broke the locks on the prison doors.*<sup>1</sup>

\*\* I found this parable very thought provoking, as it illustrates a reality of the message of the Good News in Jesus Christ that we know: some people are more comfortable in prison! It is actually possible to be so afraid of the 'real world', or so comfortable with the routines that we're used to (even when they are bleak, and limited), so accommodated to the misery of our current situation that the offer of *true freedom* seems ... incomprehensible.

Moore continues...

"[This is] ... an unusual and relevant parable for us today because all around us, most everywhere we look, people are still in prison. People are still slaves to selfishness and pride, still imprisoned by hatred and jealousy, still bound by complacency and apathy and closed-mindedness. People still misunderstand the meaning of freedom, salvation, and deliverance. But the good news of the parable is that Jesus Christ is the locksmith."

\*\* "Jesus Christ, who was born in Bethlehem, is the one who breaks the locks and throws open the prison door! He sends us out into the world. He calls us to be not just human but humane. He saves us not just *from* something but also *for* something! He breaks the locks on the prison door and sends us out into the needy, hurting world so that we might be instruments of love, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, and compassion. He gives his life for us so that we might give our lives for others..."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who ended up as a martyr for his resistance to Adolph Hitler, wrote these words from prison to his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer...

\*\* *A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes, does various unessential things, and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened "from the outside," is not a bad picture of Advent.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam, James W. Moore, p. 41 - 43

<sup>2</sup> Christianity Today, Vol. 31, no. 1.

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We are in prison cells, until we come to understand that the door to freedom has not only been opened, from the outside... but as this parable describes - the locks have been destroyed, and 'the doors can never be locked again!' So, our choice is to either stay where we are, to pretend that we're OK in this cell, to convince ourselves that we are actually 'happy'... or, to embrace our freedom. To step out of the prison cell into a world that is complex, and hurting, and needy, yes, but one that is also full of amazing wonders and joys to discover ... a world in which we can live the abundant life that Jesus the Messiah is offering to each of us who choose to 'follow him'.

Moore suggests a few examples of the kinds of prisons from which Jesus offers us freedom.

### **\*\* One is the Prison of Hate.**

Some time ago I confessed to you that I occasionally tune in to Sports Talk radio. (Please don't think any less of me!) All those stations have a kind of inner 'lingo' - you know, words that they use to describe the realities of the world of sports junkies. Words like "Violation" (which probably isn't what you might expect, if you're not a sports fan in Philly). Another common word is '*hater*'. You'll hear the host say, "Well, you're just a '*hater*'!"

Someone is a '*hater*' when all they can do is find fault in others. A '*hater*' is someone who can't recognize that someone can actually do anything right - because they've decided ahead of time that they will never like or support this athlete, coach, this team, etc. Now, if it's just sports we're referring to, that may rise to the level of annoying, but 'no harm' done in the bigger picture. You can simply turn the radio off, or change the station if it bothers you.

But as sports is often a metaphor for life, we know that there are people in the world who live in a prison of hate. They are '*haters*' in a much broader sense. They are constantly angry, looking for someone to blame for their actual or perceived injustices. (Its not just sports radio that thrives on these personalities, either!)

I personally know a number of haters (none of which, of course, would describe themselves in that manner) ... but everyone knows that their conversations can rather quickly shift to complaints, and moaning, and blame about ... everything... at any time.

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And honestly, obviously, they're hard to be with! You have to choose your words and conversational topics carefully - lest you ignite their anger, and who wants to constantly have to deal with that? I've come to realize, over time, that people like this are to be pitied. This must be a very sad life... but I never really thought of it like this (until I read this little parable) that they are *truly* in prison. In prison to their hate, their jealousy of others, in prison to their self-centeredness - where everything in life becomes about 'them'.

I came across an extreme example of a 'hater' this week, but this story has such a good ending, I thought I'd share it with you. This story was reported in the Washington Post, and a number of other media outlets carried it...

\*\*Two years ago, a man named Chris Simpson, a 38 year old, hulking, 240 lb., 6'" former Marine, led a white pride march in his home town. He was the leader of a group called 'Battalion 16' a white supremacist group who had members in his home state of Michigan.

Six months ago, he abandoned the white supremacist movement. And this past April, he was baptized. Five days later, (see pic) he was sitting in the waiting room of a skin and vein clinic, ready to begin the long and painful process of removing his tattoos - over 40 of them - most of which depict Nazi or white supremacist symbols.

\*\* The first one to go were the words "PURE HATE", that he had tattooed across his knuckles. This was a summary of his life. Simpson admits, he was consumed with hate.

"Hate will blind you to so many things," says Simpson. "It will stop you from having so many things. It consumes you."

After the loss of his first child (who was born with spina bifida and only lived a few hours), Simpson had a lot of hatred and anger building up inside. The white pride movement gave Simpson a place to direct his anger and frustration—at people of other races.

Things began to change, however, during a family trip to a Walmart. When one of his young children looked down an aisle, then up at Simpson and said, "Daddy, you can't go down that aisle..." Then used a

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racial epithet to describe someone who was there.

"It was time to make a change for them," Simpson said of his children. "I don't want them following that path." After he and his family watched the movie Courageous, Simpson began attending church. One month later he was baptized as a follower of Jesus Christ.

\*\* Pastor Jerry Lyon placed his hand on Simpson and prayed:

"God I know that there are things from his past life that need to be buried. And God, today we enjoy the opportunity. We take glory in that opportunity to bury that old life and to say to you God, I am a new creation in Jesus Christ."

With Simpson holding his nose, Lyon lowered him back into the water while the congregation applauded.

Simpson later said, "Any kind of burdens I carried before, I let them go. There's no need to carry things that happen in the past. I forgave all those who have wronged me and asked for forgiveness from those that I have wronged."

Simpson has left hate behind. He's even going through the Freedom Ink Tattoo removal program, a very long, slow, painful process —and he's starting with the word HATE.<sup>3</sup>

Chris Simpson has come to realize that Jesus has broken the lock on the door of hatred... a prison in which so many people are trapped - maybe not as overtly as he, but the same prison nonetheless. the locks are broken but, we ourselves have to decide to walk out the door.

\*\* Another prison that Moore mentions is the **Prison of Unconcern**. To be disengaged from this hurting world.

A friend, not from this church (actually, not from any church at this point in his life) sent me a link to an article that you may have seen yourself, it's been making the rounds recently. It was a story about a new Senior Pastor who was to be installed at a very large (10,000 member church). But on the morning of

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<sup>3</sup> Aaron Aupperlee, "Former White Supremacist Sheds Hate and Embraces Christianity," The Washington Post (7-2-12)

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the installation service, he dressed as a homeless man and wandered around the church complex for a half an hour.

\*\* During that time, the only people who spoke to him were some ushers, who asked him to remove himself from the front row seat that he had taken. No one offered him any help, or spoke to him in any sort of friendly manner. I checked this story on [snopes.com](http://snopes.com), which reported *that* this actual event may or may not have happened, no pastor with this name can be found anywhere. But, they also reported quite a few instances of verified times when pastors really *did* do this, including a couple of United Methodist pastors; all, unfortunately, with similar results as the 'generic version' of the story that is going around now.

My friend, in sending this suggested that 'this might be fodder for future sermon material.' And I responded to him, that "I may be in denial, or delusionary, but I'm convinced that if a homeless person were to come to FUMC, I can't imagine that they would last five minutes before someone would reach out to them in kindness and love. Because I've seen them (you) in action."

I'm sharing that with you, because his response to that was touching...

He wrote (he's a witty guy) but he said that that he thinks 'my milage might vary'... "Based on what I know about First Methodist, that person wouldn't make it [even that] far."

The reputation of this congregation is that we are *not* bound in the prison of unconcern, at least as a church, as a whole entity. But what about *you*? Do you understand what it means when you read our mission statement that says we are '*committed to sharing the love of Jesus Christ with a hurting world?*' Its not an option to be unengaged, disconnected from the world ... when we take on the mind of Christ, we start to see the world through God's eyes. It's challenging, and sometimes we see things we don't want to see; sometimes we we have to make some really hard choices, but suddenly our lives take on a deep meaning. They have a real purpose .

In Christ, door to the prison of apathy has been unlocked, and in Christ it will never again be locked! We can never go back. We know now, that our freedom is a freedom to serve - and in following in the steps of our Lord, we too, find an amazing fullness of love and joy.

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\*\* New York Times reporter Nicholas Kristof chose two Cambodian prostitutes and attempted to buy their freedom from their brothel owners. He selected young women who admitted that they were there against their will, who willing to tell their story, and actually wanted to leave this life of prostitution behind.

The first woman, Srey Neth, was a simple transaction. For \$150, Kristof left with the girl and a receipt. (It's just unbelievable that this is happening in today's 'enlightened' world, but it is.) The other woman, Srey Mom's situation proved more difficult, since the brothel owner demanded more money for her. Kristof writes:

After some grumpy negotiation, the owner accepted \$203 as the price for Srey Mom's freedom. But then Srey Mom told me that she had pawned her cellphone and needed \$55 to get it back.

"Forget about your cellphone," I said. "We've got to get out of here."

Srey Mom started crying. I told her that she had to choose her cellphone or her freedom, and she ran back to her tiny room in the brothel and locked the door.

With Srey Mom sobbing in her room and refusing to be freed without her cellphone, the other prostitutes—her closest friends—began pleading with her to be reasonable.

Even the owner of the brothel begged her to "Grab this chance while you can," but Srey Mom hysterically refused to leave.

Srey Mom only stopped crying when Kristof agreed to buy back the cellphone too. Then she asked for her pawned jewelry to be part of the deal as well.

Kristof reflected upon the complex emotions which were making the decision to leave the brothel so difficult for Srey Mom.

Here I have purchased the freedom of two human beings so I can return them to their villages. But will emancipation help them? Will their families and villages accept them? Or will they, like some other girls rescued from ... servitude, find freedom so unsettling that they slink back to slavery in the brothels? We'll see.

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We hear this and think, "how can that be?" How could someone want to go back. Yet sometimes we may resemble this woman. Though Christ sets us free from sin and death, how often we choose to live in slavery rather than newness of life<sup>4</sup>.

\*\* But the Good New that we celebrate in this wonderful Advent season is that the coming of Jesus has broken down the prison doors! We can be free... we can be free from the prison of Apathy... we can be free from the prison of hate ... we can be free from the prison of addictions, and pessimism, free from constantly feeling guilty and unworthy... we can be free from the prison of greed, and anger, of listlessness, and cynicism, or any other prison in which we might find ourselves... but it is up to us to walk out.

To believe what to many might seem impossible, or scary, or overwhelming... the door is open. It's time to live!

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<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Kristof, "Bargaining for Freedom," NYTimes.com  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/21/opinion/21KRIS.html?th> (1-21-04)