

“The Freedom of Honesty and Grace”

Matthew 11:29 & Romans 6:1-19, 7:15-25

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Prayer for Understanding Radiant God the exploration of your word gives light. We are grateful that your light radiates into even the darkest abyss. Please help us learn your illumined ways. Amen.

The Apostle Paul wants us to be aware we are on a journey from a miserable life to life saving resurrection, from the country of sin to the country of grace, from old tyranny to the freedom of God. Paul explains that when we are at the end of our rope, freedom will grow from being honest about the mess of our life and accepting God’s grace to bridge every gap making us whole.

The Apostle Paul writes: **Romans 6:1-19 MSG** “**So what do we do? Keep on sinning so God can keep on forgiving? I should hope not! If we have left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or did not you realize we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land! That is what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by God so that we can see where we are going in our new grace-sovereign country. Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life—no longer captive to sin’s demands! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ’s sin-conquering death, we also get included in God’s life-saving resurrection. We know that when Jesus was raised from the dead it was a signal of the end of death-as-the-end. Never again will death have the last word. When Jesus died, God took sin down with Jesus, but alive Jesus brings God down to us. From now on, think of it this way: Sin speaks a dead language that means nothing to you; God speaks your mother tongue, and you hang on every word. You are dead to sin and alive to God. That is what Jesus did. That means you must not give sin a vote in the way you conduct your lives. Do not give sin the time of day. Do not even run little errands that are connected with that old way of life. Throw yourselves wholeheartedly and full-time—remember, you have been raised from the dead!—into God’s way of doing things. Sin cannot tell you how to live. After all, you are not living under that old tyranny any longer. You are living in the freedom of God. So, since we are out from under the old tyranny, does that mean we can live any old way we want? Since we are free in the freedom of God, can we do anything that comes to mind? Hardly. You know well enough from your own experience that there are some acts of so-called freedom that destroy freedom. Offer yourselves to sin, for instance, and sin is your last free act. But offer yourselves to the ways of God and the freedom never quits. All your lives you have let sin tell you what to do. But thank God you have started listening to a new master, one whose commands set you free to live openly in God’s freedom! I am using this freedom language because it is easy to picture. You can readily recall, cannot you, how at one time the more you did just what you felt like doing—not caring about others, not caring about God—the worse your life became and the less freedom you had? And how much different is it now as you live in God’s freedom, your lives healed and expansive in holiness?”**

Life is brutal, the world is a mess, and we repeatedly fail. Academic Amy Edmondson studies failure. In her book, *Right Kind of Wrong: The Science of Failing Well*, she concludes that thriving individuals and flourishing organizations are not the ones who never fail; they are the ones who learn to fail well having courage to face your shortcomings without excuses, the courage to name your mistakes honestly and the courage to acknowledge what went you did wrong and choose to grow. Failing well takes honesty and vulnerability, acknowledging the gap between the person we aspire to be and the person we are. Our Romans scripture continues with honesty and vulnerability. It is Paul, stripped of pretense, without excuses, without spin doctors or self-protection. Paul does not make excuses. Paul tells the truth about himself.

Romans 7:15-25 MSG “**What I do not understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I cannot be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God’s command is necessary. But I need something more!**

For if I know the law but still cannot keep the law, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I do not have what it takes. I can will it, but I cannot do it. I decide to do good, but I do not really do good; I decide not to do bad, but then I do bad anyway. My decisions, such as they are, do not result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it is predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it is pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. I have tried everything and nothing helps. I am at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Is not that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. God acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different."

Often, I am awake at 3am frustrated by my failures to have meaningful loving conversations. I regret that I struggle to ask good questions and actively listen. Sometimes I speak without thinking through the ways my words will be received. Sometimes my nonverbals and tone are harsh. I passionately long for all my communication to be gracious, joyful, good, uplifting, and loving. At this point, there is a healthy zone of tension between unhealthy thought patterns. One can beat themselves up over their failures, get stuck in the past and wallow in every instance of imperfection and on the other side, one can forgive self without any self-reflection, live in the future, and tell themselves they are in the right. One can be a brutal critic of self for every flaw and on the other side, one can be oblivious to the wake of their communication. One can obsess about doing good and on the other side one can be indifferent.

For decades, I have been drawn to the scripture **Matthew 11:29 "live the unforced rhythms of grace"**. In my youth, I strived for balance between, grace and strict adherence to goals, work and sabbath, receiving and giving, exercise and rest. Following the flow of rhythm is healthier than balance because different seasons continuously change our evolving lives. I am still striving to understand the "unforced" part. If I do not force myself to exercise and eat healthily, my health deteriorates. Conversely, if I am legalistic, condemning myself for every missed workout, refusing every delicious food and shared meal, life is drudgery. If I do not force myself to pray, study, pray, and write a sermon, then often there will be no sermon. Conversely if I do not create space for the movement of the Holy Spirit, days of reflection and patiently waiting for inspiration the sermon will be lacking. If I do not force myself to interact with people, I will be a hermit living in a seclude rustic cabin amidst the trees on a mountain. Conversely, if I over interact with people, I become exhausted. God invites us to live the unforced rhythms of grace. Honesty and accepting grace moves one from failure to abundant life.

John Capman planted apple trees. We see John's courageous honesty in his words. "Everyone can know that willing and not doing, when there is opportunity, is not willing. Not doing good, when there is opportunity, is not loving." The rhythm of grace and doing good animated John to cultivated orchards in areas of growing population in the western territories to create a reliable supply of fruit and cider for settlers.

Control is an illusion. We live in the golden age of self-improvement. There are podcasts promising to fix your bad habits. Books guaranteeing a "new you" in 30 days. Apps that claim they can reshape your mindset. Gyms that promise transformation. And influencers who swear that if you will just follow their morning routine, you will finally have everything together. Some of these tools can be helpful. But beneath it all is a quiet, unspoken assumption that with just a little more effort, the right strategy, or one more life hack, you can finally conquer yourself. The crucial question is, why is it so hard to be the person you want to be? Why do we circle back to the same struggles again and again? Why does life feel like rinse, repeat, regret? Paul understands this with startling clarity. Paul says it plainly: **"I do not understand my own actions."** We struggle with regret, inner battles and old harmful habits that keep resurfacing. Paul continues: **"I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."** Does Paul's dilemma resonate with you? We know better, but sometimes we do not do better. We have frustration over the gap between who we want to be and who we really are. Knowledge or willpower is not enough. Paul explains I cannot fix myself. Paul confesses woefully and stops pretending. Paul has hit the wall, the limits of self-help. You can optimize your morning routine. You can drink more water. You can get more sleep, read more books, listen to more sermons, set more goals and attend more workshops. Without God's grace, none of this can touch the deep fractures, disordered loves, and habits of mind and heart that shape how you behave, respond, and choose. We should strive to be the best version of ourselves and self-help can only do so much. Self-help can get us organized but without grace cannot heal what is broken.

Self-help can help you be productive but without grace cannot make you whole. Paul cries out, “**Who will rescue me?**” Honesty is a doorway to grace. One of the gifts of Romans 7 is that Paul refuses to clean himself up before writing. Paul describes the parts of himself he wants to hide. Distortion might cause one to think God is impressed with our strength, discipline, competence, ability to get our act together or faith. Instead, giving up control and lamenting I cannot do this on my own transforms our lives with grace.

After describing the tug-of-war inside himself, Paul runs out of explanations and strategies. Paul has tried willpower, knowledge and resolve. There is a quiet desperation in Paul’s question, “**Who will rescue me from this body of death?**” And then, almost as if the answer arrives in the very breath after the question, Paul says, “**Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord**” The shift is subtle but profound. Paul is not rescued because he finally figures himself out. Paul is rescued because he finally stops pretending he can. Grace is not God congratulating us for almost getting there. Grace is God meeting us at the place where we finally admit we cannot get to perfection. Many of us discover only after we have exhausted ourselves, that surrender is not the end of effort but the beginning of healing. God’s grace completes us. “**Thanks be to God!**”

Romans 7 ends on a complicated note. The struggle to live the unforced rhythms of grace continues. All the spiritual luminaries try to explain this struggle, Martin Luther’s “terrors of conscience”, Saint John of the Cross’ “dark night of the soul”, C.S. Lewis’ “house of cards.” The inner struggle continues. And the battle is won. Ultimately grace will perfect you and make all glorious. Freedom emerges when one reframes their struggles with the ultimate reality that all will be well. Failure is not the end, rather the beginning of something new. Death is not the end, rather the beginning of eternal resurrection life.

Next week, we will continue in Romans where Paul explains that bad things happen and ultimately all will be glorious, life is messy and nothing can ever separate us from God’s love, we are not in control and our love expands love forever, all of creation is painfully constrained and will be set free to enjoy grand harmonious adventures.

Live the unforced rhythms of grace. When you are at the end of your rope, freedom will grow from being honest about the mess of your life and accepting God’s grace to bridge every gap making you whole. The Apostle Paul wants you to be aware that God is carrying you from a miserable life to life saving resurrection, from the country of sin to the country of grace, from old tyranny to the freedom of God. Amen

