

Freedom in Christ: Our Daily Choice

At the end of the 19th Century there was an asylum in the suburbs of Boston, USA, that housed severely disturbed and disabled people. One of the patients was girl who they called Little Annie, she was totally unresponsive to anyone, the staff tried everything to help her but without success. Finally they confined her to a cell in the basement. She was given up as hopeless. A Christian woman worked there and believed that everyone, no matter who, was worthy of love and care. So she spent her lunch hours in front of Little Annie's cell reading to her. She prayed that God would free her from her prison of silence, over the months she would talk to Annie – without response and leave food for her – but she never took it.

After many months a chocolate brownie disappeared from the plate outside the cell, and then after more time had passed Annie began to talk to the woman the other side of the bars. The woman persuaded the doctors to look again at Little Annie. Within two years she was told she was well enough to leave the asylum and enjoy a normal life, but Little Annie chose to stay. She was so grateful that someone had loved her, that she wanted to stay to love others as she had been loved. So Little Annie stayed.

Nearly half a century later, Queen Elizabeth II held a special ceremony to honour one of the most inspiring women in the USA – Helen Keller. When asked to what she attributed her success at overcoming her dual disability of being blind and deaf, Helen Keller replied: "If it hadn't been for Anne Sullivan, I wouldn't be here today." Anne Sullivan was Little Annie. She had loved the incorrigible blind and deaf girl Helen Keller and believed in her. Because one selfless Christian woman in an asylum believed that a hopeless little girl needed God's love the world received the marvellous gift of Helen Keller. ¹

What does it take to live daily like that Christian woman? What does it take to move us beyond our own selfishness to live out the gospel like this woman did?

We must know who we are in Christ or we cannot become like him, we must crucify self and live by the renewing of our minds, and we must live in the power of the grace of God. Under grace we live by faith according to what is true, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Friends, the challenge is that to live this way is a choice.

“You, however are not controlled by the sinful nature but by the Spirit if the Spirit lives in you.” Romans 8 v 9.

It would be lovely to think that the moment you decided to follow Christ he switched the switch and you could follow perfectly. That doesn't happen. The moment we commit our lives to Christ some significant changes take place, we are given a new heart and a new Spirit, our hearts are turned towards God and we desire to please him rather than self. We begin more and more to recognise when we live against God's way and choose to live in a way that is not pleasing to him. We are made alive in Christ. Everything that God has he wants to share with us, for we are now in the Kingdom of the Son he loves.

But some things don't change; we still have our bodies – for now! And friends we still have our sinful nature. We have to learn to follow Christ and walk in his way, there is no “clear” button that is pressed when we come to Christ that deletes everything that went before. We don't suddenly lose all our old ways of thinking or acting, we have to learn to think and act in different ways – ways that honour God. We have to learn to think and act according to the truth in Christ, rather than the truth according to our old habits and patterns of thinking.

You see, when we choose to follow Christ – sin doesn't die! Actually sin can be just as appealing as it ever was. You ever struggle with the same problems? That's because sin didn't die when you chose to follow Christ. Everyday we will face the challenge of our significance, security and acceptance, but in Christ, we have access to something more powerful than the appeal of sin.

“Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of Life set me free from the law of sin and death” Romans 8 v 2.

Think of it this way – take an aeroplane – the law of gravity keeps me on the ground and I cannot fly, but if I get into an aeroplane I can fly, because the law of

aerodynamics can overcome the law of gravity. The law of gravity hasn't ceased to exist but there's a law that's greater and can overcome it.

The law now at work in God's children – the law of the Spirit of life – is greater than the law of sin and death, but we still have choice. We can daily choose life or death, we can choose how we think and react, we can choose to think and react according to our old nature – or we can choose to think and react according to our new nature.

Paul describes the contrast between a life lived under the old nature and one lived under the new nature: Galatians 5 v 19 -21 – “ The acts of the sinful nature are obvious; sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like, I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” That is the old nature at work.

But then comes the contrast with the new nature: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.” Galatians 5 v 22.

We did a whole series on this called Fit4Life. What Paul is saying here in Galatians is that we have a choice – which way will we choose to live? Let's read the whole passage: “So I say, live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the cravings of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are lead by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious; sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.” Galatians 5 v 16-26.

Before you came to Christ you lived in the old nature, now you are committed to him, you live in the new nature – which is more powerful. You have a choice as to how you will live and many of us get stuck! We have committed our lives to Christ – we have a new nature, but actually we choose most of the time to live in the old nature. Our minds are occupied with wrong thoughts, our emotions are plagued with negative feelings – we live with high levels of stress, we are plagued with feelings of inferiority, insecurity, inadequacy, guilt, worry, fear. We get stuck in certain sins, and we spend much of our time feeling we have failed again and again and again. We may feel there is no escape.

Friends, as a follower of Christ your eternal destiny is not in doubt, but if you choose the old nature daily, you may not become all that God has for you, and here’s the challenge. “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.” 2Peter 1v3.

We need to learn to live in the truth and use what we have already been given to live in the new, which means we must know the truth about who we are in Christ. Get one of the cards I keep reading – and keep reading it yourself. If you don’t know the truth, you cannot live in it. The more you know the truth, the less you will be drawn away. “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and over-flowing with thankfulness. See to it that no-one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” Colossians 2 v 6-8.

You are either growing in Christ or you are being drawn away! One of the main things that stops us growing is that we leave issues unresolved in our lives. Unresolved conflict, personal or spiritual will leave a door open for the enemy. Unresolved forgiveness and repentance are major stumbling blocks to growth, it reminds me of the older son in the story of the waiting Father. The Father,

actually is waiting to welcome him in the same way as his other son – he wants to give him everything he has. But the older son chooses to remain outside and leave his issues unresolved.

I can think of some things in my life that are totally, heinously unfair, they should not have happened ... but they did. I, more and more realise how much of my life I've spent kicking against them and, truth is, it has stopped me growing in Christ. None of them are easy to deal with – and I have to make the choice about which nature I will live in. For some of those things it will be a lifelong daily choice to live in the new.

Friends, everyday we have to choose to live in the new and walk by the Spirit, if I choose to follow my old nature, then slowly my choice will destroy me, it will suck the life out of me and I will not grow to become more like Christ, and I will never be able to live in the freedom that he won for me on the cross.

But... but... if I choose to walk by the Spirit and choose life daily, then I can know the power and release of God working in my life. How can you tell you are walking in the new – the Spirit of Freedom and life. How are you growing in the fruit of the spirit: in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

Friends you are free to choose!

1. Adapted from Neil T Anderson: " *Victory over the darkness*" by Monarch 2000 page 91/92