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 #6—It's Ok If You're Not OK

Finding Freedom
Luke 4: 16-21

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Last week our friend Hap Pinkerton told us about a new ministry where he is serving: ***Kairos Prison Ministry*** at the Cimarron Correctional Facility in Cushing. This is a very powerful ministry as you might imagine, often changing the lives of the residents. Hap has asked us to pray for his ministry, and help buy meal tickets for their program for the residents. I hope that you will help him in that endeavor.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 25 that when we visit prisoners, we are visiting Jesus Himself, so we are all called to reach out to those who are imprisoned.

I want you to take a moment, and ***imagine YOU are in prison.*** Can you imagine how you might feel? It's hard, isn't it? When I think of that, I think of the ***humiliation*** I would feel.

Would you maybe consider yourself a **failure**, or a lost cause?
 How **embarrassed** would we be in front of friends or family?
 And what about **fear**?
 I would be afraid—of the unknown, of the other prisoners.
 How scared would you be?
 And what about the **isolation and loneliness** you might feel?

Now what if I told you that much of the time,
This is a REAL scenario for us.
We are already inmates!
 We are already imprisoned, in so many different ways.
 We may not have a mug shot,
 or a small gated cell we have to live in,
 But we might be trapped in a prison of some sort.

We might feel humiliated, or embarrassed.
 We might think of ourselves as a failure, or a lost cause.
 We might live with a lot of fear, or anxiety.
 We may feel isolated and alone.

Have you ever identified with any of those feelings
With the feeling of being trapped, or imprisoned?
 If we're honest, we all have, right?
 I sure have.
 I've been there in different times of my life.

What I'm describing is an **invisible prison**.
 And like the invisible scars we have, that we talked about last week,
 it's just as powerful as a physical prison.
 All too often we live in a **prison of shame---**
 shame from something that has happened in the **past**.

What puts us in this prison?
Suffering.
 Many times, it is trauma or abuse.
 It's especially powerful if it's from childhood,
 or if it is a type of sexual abuse.
 And we know that all too many of us have suffered in this way.

So, we end up in a kind of prison,
where we actually lose our identity,
 Kind of like the way an actual prisoner becomes a number, not a name.
We lose our freedom to be the people God made us to be.
 We lose our freedom to live as children of God,
 filled with the fruits of the Holy Spirit.
We lose our sense of being forgiven, redeemed and free.
 Instead, we become frightened, downtrodden,
trapped in a prison of shame.

And Jesus came to set us free—from just that kind of prison.
 In Luke 4 we hear Jesus' very first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth.
 Just like I told the kids, He stands in the synagogue,
 and they hand him a scroll of Isaiah 61,
 and he reads the words aloud to the congregation:

¹⁸ *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
 because he has anointed me
 to bring good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
 and recovery of sight to the blind,
 to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Then Jesus declares, as perhaps the **best short sermon ever:**
"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus essentially says that he has come into the world,
 and been anointed by the Holy Spirit, **to set people free.**
 Release to the captives.
 Sight to the blind.
 Freedom to the oppressed.
 And the year of the Lord's favor—
 well that was likely a reference to **the Year of Jubilee,**
 when slaves would be freed,
 the land would be allowed to rest,
 and people would commit themselves to simple living.

Jesus' first sermon is about finding freedom, from whatever binds us.
Physical, or emotional.

In all the Gospels we see Jesus announcing ***the kingdom of God***,
and here he defines what that is all about—

it's about freedom.

Jesus promised salvation,
and he gave us redemption and eternal life
through his death and resurrection,
but that was not just for the next life.

It was for right now. Today.

The freedom he proclaims is for us, today---

From whatever binds us.

I wonder, what keeps you imprisoned?

What has happened to you, that threatens to ***hold you captive today?***

I know of so many different things that have done this
over the course of my life.

Like many people, I have struggled with depression or anxiety
off and on in my life, especially after traumatic or difficult situations.

I once ***struggled to get over a horrible car accident*** in seminary, 25 yrs ago.

I hydroplaned early in the morning, and was hit head on—

I was smashed into the car (before airbags),

And I woke up in an ambulance after being cut out of my car.

I was rushed to a hospital, being cut out of my coat and clothing.

I spent a week recovering in the hospital.

As a result, I became afraid---really afraid—to drive,

especially if it was raining and dark.

I'd like to tell you that I got over this quickly, but I didn't.

I basically didn't drive much while in New Jersey,

thankfully we could walk around town, to class, to the store, to the post office,

and I only needed to drive to my part-time job at the church.

I struggled with this fear of driving off and on for years.

I still don't like to drive in the dark, in the rain.

It's a scar from a wound that has healed,

but it has also been something that I've had to surrender to Jesus,

again and again.

What is it in your life?

Is it the memory of an accident, or the pain of abuse?

Is it a fight with addiction?

Or the failure of a relationship?

It can really be anything that hurt us, or caused us to suffer.

Unfortunately, these experiences ***often cause us to 'become' the pain.***

We take on the ***labels,***

the negative labels from these experiences.

Walsh talks about the power of ***words and labels*** in her book,

'It's Okay Not To Be Okay'.

We've all heard the old saying:

sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.....

But that's ridiculous! Right?

Words DO hurt.

And often, they become labels that we wear,

that we take into our hearts.

And they can make a ***big difference in how we live and act,***

Even how we love and care for one another.

Some labels are fine--- parent, caregiver, spouse, child, student.....

But other labels are hurtful, and shame-filled.

Labels like: Loser. Failure. Victim. Ruined. Fat. Ugly.

Have you ever thought about ***what labels you accept about yourself,***

About which ones you wear?

What lies do you believe about yourself?

Are you at a loss to come up with them?

Then think about this.

Do you have situations that cause you to overreact?

Things that irritate you---way beyond what seems reasonable?

What if it's a reaction from something in the past?

Sheila Walsh lost her father to suicide after a brain injury.

Before his death, he lashed out at Sheila as a small child,
 so she writes about how this has made her overreact to things
 that her loving husband does---like his driving,
 Or when he reaches out to draw her close to him.
 Her husband means her no harm.

But these things are like 'triggers'

that bring back all the bad feelings from her past.

She writes about how these difficult memories and experiences
 eventually led her to a psychiatric ward.

But it was there—when she was at her most vulnerable and real self,

That she truly experienced the grace and mercy of God!

Sometimes we have to breakdown, to break-through, right?

It may sound strange to say that something in our past can be so powerful,
 but think about ***PTSD for our veterans.***

That is very real.

I'm talking about the same principle.

When we aren't able to deal with the past, it affects our present day.

So what can we do?

We can ask for help.

From God, from other believers,
 from professional counselors, doctors, psychiatrists.

We can ask for ***Holy Spirit's help,***

to surrender our hurts and our past to God.

We can give it to Jesus,

and ask for His grace and truth to be the ONLY label we wear,

and THE truth we take into our hearts about who we are today!

The truth is, we are children of God.

That's our real identity.

We are not whatever has happened to us!

Let me say that again: We are not what has happened to us!

We are not the victim.

We are not the loser.

We are not the black sheep of the family.

We are not the failure.

It helps when we go back to scripture to find the truth about ourselves.

1 John 3:1 reminds us that we are God's children:

*See what love the Father has given us,
that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.*

In Psalm 139:13-14 we hear this about who we are:

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

In Philippians 4:13 Paul reminds us we can do anything with God:

¹³ I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.

In Romans 8:38 we hear that nothing can separate us from Christ's love:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In John 10:27-28 we hear that we can never be taken from Jesus.

²⁷ My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

2 Corinthians 5:17 says: Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation!

We might need to *memorize these truths, or write them down.*

We might need to spend time *meditating* on them.

If we have the wrong label and story about ourselves,

It can take time to change it. We often have to take one step at a time.

So, how can you work on changing any bad labels in your life?

How can you seek the freedom Christ brings?

Do you remember the story of ***The Velveteen Rabbit***?

How does the worn old rabbit become real?

By being loved.

The wonderful thing is, ***Jesus does that for us.***
 We become who we really are, who we were created to be,
when we know and accept His love for us!
Jesus loves you—He loves me—He loves all of us!
 That is ***THE truth*** we should live by!
 It sounds so simple, but when we really take it in, it is so profound.
 So life-changing!

***Jesus is the one who can work in our hearts and lives,
 when we let go, and let God be in control!***

In the book of Revelation Jesus is referred to as ***the Alpha and Omega***,
 in Greek that means the beginning and the end.
 In other words, Jesus is the one who takes care of us
 from the beginning of our faith journey to the end of it!

In Philippians 1:6, Paul says:

⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

In other words, God started working on us when we were born,
 and God will finish that task for eternity.

***We are under construction,
 which is great news if you ask me!***

We can surrender our past and pain to God,
We can also fight the good fight in life.
 We can ask for Holy Spirit's help when we fall down, or fail,
 To help us get back up!

Sheila Walsh, in her book *It's Okay Not To Be Okay*,
 She talks about how she interviewed ***an Olympic skater***,
 and asked him about his failures.
 He told her that he had fallen down over 30,000 times.
 But he had gotten back up on his feet over 30,000 times.
 It was a statement about perseverance, and not being afraid to fail.
 Sheila Walsh, *It's Okay Not To Be Okay*, Baker: Grand Rapids, 2018, pg. 163.

We don't have to be afraid of failure.

We will all fail. Again and again.

Which can be a good thing---a great thing—when God helps us learn from it!
It can even be healing, if we give it to God!

I have learned so much from my biggest failures,
and my deepest regrets.
What about you?

I love what Walsh says at the end of her book:

“If you have a pulse...it’s never too late to start again...and again.”

Sheila Walsh, *It’s Okay Not To Be Okay*, Baker: Grand Rapids, 2018, pg. 182.

How true is that?

We can always start over again with Jesus!

And in starting over,
we find the freedom that only Jesus can give!

That is the Good News of the Gospel, my friends.

Jesus came to set us free.

May we surrender whatever binds us,
May we give to God any prison of shame,
And accept the gift of his freedom and grace!
And for that, all God’s people said, Amen.