Fil-Am Community Church
Pastor Rolly Estabillo
5 July 2015

Key Verse Romans 8:1

**“Celebrate Your Freedom in Christ!”**

 I hope you all had a wonderful 4th of July celebration yesterday. Every year, people in this country celebrate the freedom they gained when brave and patriotic men and women fought against oppression, persecution, harassment and servitude 239 years ago with their own lives. And we should be grateful to them because without their sacrifice and selflessness we wouldn’t be enjoying and celebrating the benefits of freedom.

 We, Christians, should celebrate our freedom in Christ as well. This freedom is spiritual, as we know, not the kind that we fought for with our own flesh and blood but fought for us by the flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. We don’t have bragging rights, we cannot say, “I gained this freedom by my own power”, because we have no part in the achievement of it. It was given to us by God through Jesus Christ.

 The Bible says, *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.”* (Eph. 2:8-9).

 The Bible is clear. Because of the death of Christ on the cross, we have been set free from sin and death. We are no longer slaves of the enemy, Satan. He holds no more power on us. And we should be celebrating. But you know what, if we’re honest enough, I don’t think we are really doing that. Many of us seem to be still under the power of the enemy. We think of the past with remorse, we are ashamed and feel guilty of what we’ve done wrong, we think we have failed our loved ones, or friends, people around us, in short, we feel condemned. And feeling condemned is one of the worst feelings anyone could ever have. Just think of people in the death row, imagine how they feel.

They’ve been condemned to die by the system and so they must be feeling really despondent. This kind of feeling is what drives them to escape from the prison they’re in. Like those two escapees in New York. They went to great lengths to trick the system and they succeeded for a short time.

 This morning I’d like to talk about how to be free from the prison that anyone of us here may still be in. A prison that prevents us from enjoying the benefits of freedom that we already have in Christ. A prison that stops us from moving forward. A prison that denies us the potential to grow as a person. A prison that takes away the joy from our lives.

 Let me start by quoting these words from Romans 8:1:

*“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*

 That is God’s promise. No condemnation for you if you are in Jesus Christ. You have been set free. So, act like a free person not like a prisoner. Despite this promise, as I said, condemnation rears its ugly head every now and then in our lives. Why is that? Why do we still feel condemned at times?

 I think the reason is that we don’t have a very good understanding of God’s grace. Pastor Chris touched on this subject last week. I’d like to expound on it a little bit more because it is a subject of true importance for everyone. Not only for Christians but non-Christians as well. So, look at this as part 2 of the teaching on God’s grace.

 What is Grace? Grace is undeserved kindness. Or unmerited favor. In other words, it is giving people what they don’t deserve. The Bible says we are all sinners, we all have turned against God, therefore we don’t deserve his love and forgiveness. The Bible puts it like this: *“Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.”* (Colossians 1:21)Despite our evil behavior, what did God do?

The following verse says, *“But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation”* (Colossians 1:22). God says to you, “Not guilty!” And he lets you walk free. Why are you not guilty anymore? Because Christ died for you: *“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8).

This is grace: Forgiveness and love are given to us when we do not deserve them. In fact, we still do not deserve them, nor will we ever deserve them. Grace means that God has forgotten about my past sin, so I should too. Grace means that forgiveness and reconciliation with God have come, not based on what I have done, but on who God is. Grace is: God’s Reward At Christ’s Expense.

This morning, the first point I want you to understand today is:

1. **Grace is at the Heart of the Christian faith.**

There are hundreds, if not thousands of religions, that are known to mankind since the beginning of time. I’ve been involved or got acquainted with some of them like the Iglesia ni Cristo in the Philippines, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Worldwide Church of God, Ananda Marga, Hare Krishna, Eckankar, Baha’i Faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, New Age, and a few others. But it was frustrating I almost formed my own religion. I would have called it Confusionism, not to be confused with Confusianism. Praise God I’m no longer confused because of Jesus Christ.

All these religions share similar doctrines more or less. All of them teach love, compassion, doing good, self-sacrifice, etc. At one time in my life, I thought of becoming just a Universalist, you know, one who subscribes to all religions because they’re all the same anyway. I thought Christianity was just like any of them. Until it became clear to me that there was one thing that separates Christianity from the rest of mankind’s religions. And that thing is called God’s Grace.

You see, the idea that God’s love comes to us freely, without any strings attached and asking nothing in return, seemed to go against what was taught in all the other man-made religions of the world. The Buddhist’s eight-fold path was a religious walk based solely on the individual’s performance. Likewise, the Hindu doctrine of karma with its successive phases which determine a person’s destiny was based on certain things a person accomplished. The Muslim’s have the code of the law which must be followed precisely in order to enter into paradise. All of these are ways which a person must work to earn approval. Christianity alone makes God’s love and acceptance something which is offered to undeserving human beings without cost or condition. Indeed, it makes clear that it cannot be earned, it comes as a free gift.

All the other religions with their gods and goddesses do count people’s sins against them. Reconciliation is a difficult, if not impossible, climb for them. But Christians understand that the true God of heaven is one who is full of compassion and mercy. Even in the Old Testament we read: *“And he] passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin”* ([Exodus 34:6](http://www.sermoncentral.com/bible/NIV/Exodus-34.asp?passage=Exodus%2034%3A6&ScrptureHover=sermon-31763-No%20Longer%20Condemned)-7). God wants to be reunited with us more than we want to be reconciled with him. And the cost of this reconciliation is free — paid for by the offended party. This is at the heart of the Christian faith. God’s love and forgiveness cannot be earned — it comes as a free gift.

Now, because grace is at the heart and center of the Christian faith, it means that we as Christians are covered by God’s grace from start to finish. In Philippians 1:6, it says, *“he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus”.*

You see, grace has two parts. The first part is the saving grace of God. It means God has saved you despite your sins. And he will keep you saved… because of the second part of grace which is…the enabling grace of God*. “He will never leave you nor forsake you”,* as Hebrew 13:5 says. This enabling grace of God brings us to our second point.

1. **Grace means that you no longer have to try to be perfect.**

Have you ever run on a treadmill? If you do, you do that because you want to exercise your heart to become fit and healthy, right? On a treadmill, what’s in front of you is a dashboard which tells you how many calories you’ve been burning and how far and fast you’ve been going. What else is happening? Aside from the fact that you’re huffing and puffing, and your whole body is sweating and your heart is pumping really hard, nothing is happening really. I mean, you’re not getting anywhere. You are basically stationary. You’re not moving from one point to another. Despite the energy you’re spending, you end up in the same place you started.

Many of us are running on a treadmill and we’re not even aware of it, spiritually speaking. I’m referring to a kind of effort we’re doing in order to earn God’s favor. We can call this the performance treadmill. This is when we get busy doing good things thinking that it will earn us points and get us closer to our goal which is to please God. Nothing wrong in pleasing God. But if we want to please him just because maybe, just maybe, he won’t get angry with us anymore because of a sin we’ve committed or to compensate for any guilt feelings we have or to earn merit points to get to heaven, then this is an exercise in futility. There’s nothing you can do or cannot do that will make God love you more or less than he loves you now. His love for you doesn’t change and it will never change. He says in Jeremiah 31:3, *“I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.”* So if you’re a child of God then he will not unchild you. Is there a parent who can unchild his or her child? Maybe disown but you can never change the fact that a child is still the child of his parents. But your Heavenly Father’s love is so steadfast, so stubborn, so far-reaching, so unchanging, that he will never disown you or forget that you’re his child, no matter what you’ve done or are doing.

I was a former Jehovah’s Witness, as many of you know. As a JW, shortcut for Jehovah’s Witness, I was so busy going from house to house ever since my conversion. What motivated me? Was it because of a genuine love for God? No, it was because of the fear of God’s wrath. I was afraid that if I don’t go “witnessing” to people, then I might lose my salvation. I was so busy “witnessing” and doing other ministries in our local congregation in order to keep my salvation. Until Jesus broke through my heart and showed me that it is he who keeps my salvation and not me.

I remember also a churchmate in Australia who shared her testimony. She’s a Christian from the Philippines. She left the Philippines because she wanted to forget her past and to start a new life. You see, she gave birth to a baby out of wedlock. She was in her early 20’s and she felt so much shame because she was so active in church and many have regarded her highly. She went to her mother’s province in order to hide her pregnancy. Of course, the news spread and after she gave birth, she decided to leave the baby with her mom and tried to find a job in New Zealand.

She thought that she would be fine what with her enviable academic credentials and good employment background. She thought it wouldn’t take her long to land a job. Days passed, weeks passed, months passed and she didn’t get any interviews. After several months, she became depressed and began to question God’s love for her. Feelings of guilt swept over her.

She wondered whether God was still angry with her because of her moral failure. She cried and asked God whether he really cared for her. At that point, she was ready to give up.

Then, the next day, she received a call from one company she applied at. They interviewed her on the phone, then interviewed her the second time, and interviewed her the third time, and finally offered her a job. The next thing she knew she was flying to Australia because the company had a branch over there and they wanted her there.

She testified that God really cared for her. She realized that what happened was God’s way of showing her that God’s love for her never changed despite her shortcomings.

Folks, having a relationship with God does not depend on how well we do or how perfect we are. It is based solely on the mercy and grace of God. This is good news for us failures. We read in the book of Titus: *“But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit”* ([Titus 3:4](http://www.sermoncentral.com/bible/NIV/Titus-3.asp?passage=Titus%203%3A4&ScrptureHover=sermon-31763-No%20Longer%20Condemned)-5).

Now, notice here that Paul uses another term to describe the manner by which God saved us. He saved us by his grace, yes, and he saved us also by his mercy. But let’s differentiate the two. We said that grace is God giving us what we don’t deserve. What is mercy? Mercy is God withholding from us what we deserve. Let me repeat that. Mercy is God withholding from us what we deserve. You see, because we’re sinners, rebels against God, we deserve death and punishment in hell. But God withheld them from us because of his mercy. So, the combination of God’s grace and mercy is at work in his salvation of our souls.

The Bible says*, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved”* ([Ephesians 2:4](http://www.sermoncentral.com/bible/NIV/Ephesians-2.asp?passage=Ephesians%202%3A4&ScrptureHover=sermon-31763-No%20Longer%20Condemned)\_5).

Now that we’re saved because of God’s grace and mercy, the guilt and condemnation is gone and a settled peace comes upon our hearts as we realize we don’t have to do anything to gain God’s acceptance — we already have it. Our relationship with God is not based on how good we are, but on the character of a gracious and forgiving God who loves us more than we can ever understand. Amen?

This brings us to the third point of this message which is

1. **Grace inspires us to no longer live in sin.**

One thing I have learned over the years, as a parent and as a pastor, is that guilt is a poor motivator. Some people are afraid to talk too much about grace out of fear that people will no longer think obedience is important. They say that it becomes a license to sin. Therefore, don’t talk too much about grace or people might cheapen it. Why not give instill in them a little bit of fear. You know, just like the Jehovah’s Witnesses?

The truth is, you can motivate people through guilt, but it does not last very long. You can force your children to obey your rules while they are home, but once they are away, and you are no longer there to enforce the rules, the rules will not stick. You can motivate employees through fear and intimidation, but you will find that they will do only what is absolutely necessary, and that resentment will fill your place of business. There are some coaches who try to motivate through humiliation — pointing out everything a player did wrong — even doing it in front of the public. If you want to rip the heart out of a team there is no better way to do it.

But begin to let your team know that you believe in them; let your employee know you appreciate them; let your child know that they have your approval even if they fail, and see what difference grace makes.

Guilt and fear are poor motivators, but love motivates us inwardly, from the heart, to do our best. As the apostle Paul says*, “The letter [of the law] kills, but the Spirit gives life”* ([2 Corinthians 3:6](http://www.sermoncentral.com/bible/NIV/2-Corinthians%203.asp?passage=2%20Corinthians%203%3A6&ScrptureHover=sermon-31763-No%20Longer%20Condemned)). He also says, *“Christ’s love compels us”* ([2 Corinthians 5:14](http://www.sermoncentral.com/bible/NIV/2-Corinthians%205.asp?passage=2%20Corinthians%205%3A14&ScrptureHover=sermon-31763-No%20Longer%20Condemned)). We want to serve. We want to do our very best, because we are moved by grace and motivated by love. People whose lives have been touched by grace understand that the Christian life is not a matter of following a moral code, nor is it a matter of believing a prescribed set of doctrines; the Christian life is a relationship with God. That relationship is marked by love and trust. We discover that we are respected and accepted by God and our hearts respond with love and dedication.

Some people prefer what someone has called, “the God of the Gotcha” — a God who is always out to get you for something you have done wrong. A God who tells us that we never quite measure up. Even when we do something good we are made to feel we could have done it better. People who live with this kind of God in their brain may serve him, but they do it with cringing and they harbor resentment. Rebellion is never very far away. But we serve a God who loved us when we were still sinners. We were unlovable, but he loved us anyway. This grace changes us.

Augustine said, “Who can be good, if not made so by loving? . . . Love God and do as you please.” He could say that because he knew that when you love God, what pleases you will be what pleases God. Grace has put us in contact with the love of God and love has changed us. But even though grace is our defining doctrine, we in the Christian church have not lived up to it very well. We understand that we have been saved by grace, but then we act as though the rest is up to us.

Some have even taught that we are forgiven at the time of our salvation, but if we mess up after that there is no hope for us. But we know that we live by grace every moment of every day.

If we were to scrutinize the thoughts, decisions and actions of our life on any given day, we would find that even the best of them would be filled with selfish purposes and wrong motivations. We never get to the place where we no longer need the grace of God. We can never talk too much about the grace of God. There may be those who misunderstand the message of grace so that they feel they no longer have to obey God at all, but better that than to have an image of an angry God who can never be pleased and find yourself resenting him. If you have to err, always err on the side of grace.

Let me close with a story of a little boy who was visiting his grandparents and given his first slingshot. He practiced in the woods, but he could never hit his target. As he came back to Grandma's back yard, he spied her pet duck. On an impulse he took aim and let fly. The stone hit, and the duck fell dead. The boy panicked. Desperately he hid the dead duck in the wood pile, only to look up and see his sister watching. Sally had seen it all, but she said nothing.

After lunch that day, Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes." But Sally said, "Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen today. Didn't you, Johnny?" And she whispered to him, "Remember the duck!" So Johnny did the dishes.

Later Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing., Grandma said, "I'm sorry, but I need Sally to help make supper." Sally smiled and said, "That's all taken care of. Johnny wants to do it." Again she whispered, "Remember the duck." Johnny stayed while Sally went fishing. After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's, finally he couldn't stand it. He confessed to Grandma that he'd killed the duck.

"I know, Johnny," she said, giving him a hug. "I was standing at the window and saw the whole thing. Because I love you, I forgave you. I wondered how long you would let Sally make a slave of you."

Folks, let not the enemy accuse you or condemn you. Just believe that God loves you despite what you’ve done. You are already free in Christ. Don’t be enslaved by your past. Let nothing hinder you . If you sin, all you need to do like this little boy, is to confess that sin to God and he promises to cleanse you, not to condemn you. He can restore your joy if only you come to him and open up your heart to him. He knows what’s going on anyway. You cannot hide anything from him. Just be honest and God will honor that. If you don’t, you’ll keep on living in the past, a prisoner of your own mistakes and sins. Don’t let the enemy continue to accuse you. He doesn’t want you to experience the abundant life that Jesus promises. He says in John 14:10, *“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”*

Let me encourage you, today celebrate your freedom in Christ!