

That was Tom Hiddlestone as Loki, the villain in the film The Avengers. Just hold in your minds what he said, because I'm going to come back to talk about it in a bit. Today I'm going to be talking to you about the fact that Jesus Brings Freedom. But wait a minute, you might be asking, how does that work, Jesus brings freedom? Doesn't following Jesus mean following a bunch of rules? How is that freedom? Freedom means being able to do whatever I want, when I want, right? It means I can make my own decisions, shape my own destiny, be whatever I want to do. I'm not tied down by responsibility or other people's demands. I mean, that's the message that we're fed today. You can do whatever you want, make your own decisions. Take hold of the freedom that's in your grasp. By buying our scent, or our car, or our petrol, or our furniture, or just giving us all your money.

Sorry to burst your bubble, but that's a lie. We have been lied to. The truth is that Loki is right: we were made to be ruled. This sounds like terribly bad news. We buy into the scam that tells us somehow we can rule our own lives. We push every which way to try and feel free, because we keep being told that we have to be free, that this is something that we should be aiming for, but nothing seems to work. Because we're trapped. And the more we chase after self-rule of our lives, the more we become blind to the fact that we are trapped. Sin is in charge and deciding what direction our life should go. So even despite our best intentions to live a good life and be a good person, we end up doing things that are selfish and hard-hearted. Paul describes it pretty perfectly here in chapter 7: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do... Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me."

We might think, "I really should give to charity," and our sinful nature – the part that rebels against God - says, "No, we can't afford that." Okay, then how about I help out on a church roster. No, we don't really have time with all that other stuff I'm sure we've got on. Well, look, Steve over there is looking upset, maybe I should ask him what's wrong. Oh, no, wouldn't want to get involved. Maybe you're right, sin. Let's just keep to ourselves and do whatever you want to do. Good. Now, get on Facebook. I've got a lot of passive-aggressive gossiping to do.

Okay, maybe we don't have that internal dialogue going on. Sometimes we can sit there blissfully unaware of what's happening to us. But if we look at our motivations for acting the way we do, then we can honestly see that we fight an unwinnable battle against sin, which makes us its prisoner, like Paul says in verse 23. Sin will run our lives. I hope all you Christians out there have also been listening to what I've been saying, because this situation that Paul describes applies to you too. Let me say that again: sin will run our lives, and it will destroy us.

A large part of the work I do when I'm not here preaching to you guys is typing police records of interview. What that usually is, is when someone has allegedly committed a crime, and the police bring them down to the station for further questioning. And one of the most depressing things I see is how messed up people's lives become when they get into drugs. It might have started out small – their friends were doing it, or they needed to get through a tough time – but by the time they come onto the police radar, they often have no money, no job, no family, and their closest friend is their dealer. And all this is down to the drugs. "I had to break into that house and steal stuff in it because I needed money for drugs. I was making meth in my shed

because I needed drugs. I threatened to strangle my girlfriend because I was drugs. My friend wandered off into a pond and drowned himself because of drugs. Their lives revolve around drugs, everything is focussed on getting their next hit. And they hate it so much. But they can't get off it, because they're trapped by their addiction.

But if we want to talk addiction, we have to talk sin. Sin is our addiction that we all suffer from. You might think that's a trite comparison if you ever see the shell of a person that is a meth addict, but I'm totally serious here. It is a deathly serious, desperate problem we have. We may not want sin anywhere in our lives, we may want to throw it far away from us, but it will rule us, and it will ruin us. It ruins our lives and the lives of others as we turn in on ourselves and focus on our own selfish little wants. We end up running in circles, destroying everything around us, become possessive of our stuff, fearful and aggressive, even to the point of violence, to those around us. As long as we try to rule ourselves, as long as we look to ourselves for freedom, then sin will be right there in control, and condemning us to death. We can't do anything but what our sinful nature tells us to do. How frustrating! How terrible! How wretched we are! Who will rescue us from this body that is subject to death? Paul says, "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Woah, woah, woah. Wait a second. Let's go back to my previous question. How is following Jesus freedom, with all the rules and stuff? We're told that we have to make Jesus Lord over our lives. Aren't we just going to be exchanging one sort of slavery with another? How are we any better off?

One of my favourite TV shows is The Dog Whisperer, with Cesar Millan. If you haven't seen it, I'll give you a brief rundown of how the episodes usually go. You'll get a plea from a dog owner, "Cesar, please help us. Our dog has all these problems. We've tried everything and we don't know what to do." Then Cesar turns up, and often in about five minutes he fixes their problem, and the owners are all like, "Cesar, you must be some kind of magician." But the problem in a lot of cases is simple: the dog has put itself in charge. But dogs aren't bred to be in charge of people. So they develop destructive habits. They run around in circles, they destroy everything around them, they become possessive of their stuff, fearful and aggressive, even to the point of violence, to those around them.

But then Cesar usually tells off the owner. "You must use rules, boundaries and limitations to stop your dog entering into this destructive state of mind. That's what I've just done." "But I don't want to take away his freedom," the owner might say, or, "I don't want her to stop expressing who she is." "No, no," says Cesar. "All you were experiencing before was a destructive state of mind. That's your real dog, the happy, calm, balanced one. Now she can actually enjoy being a dog."

The good news here is that Cesar is right. Freedom isn't doing whatever you want, that lie we've all been fed. Freedom is being the person that you were meant to be. Jesus took all our sin on himself in his death on the cross and crushed it by rising to life again. So now we can become freed from sin, free to become who we are meant to be. And this isn't just another sort of dictatorship: "the mind governed by the Spirit" is not at all the same as "the mind governed by flesh", or our sinful nature. Have a look at what Paul writes in chapter 8, verses 14 and 15: "14 For those who

are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. 15 The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.[ ] And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." This is not about having a better master, but having a family.

We're not driven by a master, we are led by a father. He gives us those rules, boundaries and limitations that enable our freedom. He shows us the best way for us to be ourselves through Jesus' life here on earth. And that same Spirit who defeated sin through Christ, sticks with us so we can continue to follow God and experience the full freedom of being a human the way a human was always supposed to be. When we're a Christian, we don't have to listen to our sinful nature any more

Like I said, our sinful nature tries its best to get the upper hand, and for the Christian the best way it tries is guilt. Even if we've already repented of our sin, even if we know that God has forgiven us, we still carry around with us for some reason, our guilt and shame for what we have done in the past. But what we're doing there is in fact nurturing our sin. We're giving it way too much credit in our lives. It's gone, dealt with at the cross. These are a couple of plates from different issues of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The caption for the second reads, "Christian at the Cross. His bundle falls off and tumbles away." It tumbles away, never to be seen again. Christian doesn't then go, "Oh wait, my bundle of sin and guilt! I need that for, um, something," and starts hunting around for it.

Paul writes in verse 1 of chapter 8, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." God does not condemn us because Jesus has taken our punishment on himself. And we should not condemn ourselves any longer. God breaks the power of cancelled sin, as Charles Wesley says. Sin is cancelled, it's gone. It's been nailed to the cross long ago, a cross that has fallen to the ground and rotted away, along with our sin. It has no power over us any more. The only way that sin can hurt us now is if we let it, if we nurture it and hold onto it.

In verse 13 here we're told to put to death the misdeeds of the body. And you know what? We actually can. This is a conscious decision where we turn away from our sins. Shove them back in the grave, where they belong. Shove them back in the past, where they belong. Live in the now, the now where you are free. Sin is defeated because you have the Spirit of God in you. So next time your sinful nature tries to guilt you into acknowledging it again, shove your freedom in its face. Tell it, "You've got nothing on me, sin. I don't listen to you any more, I'm a child of God. You can't even think of being able to tell me what to do."

So look for those points in your life where you're giving sin power that it shouldn't have. You gave it that power, so you can take it away again. It doesn't deserve it.

Trying to seek our own rule only ends up in a life dominated by our sin and guilt, trapping us in slavery to it. Real freedom is living a life led by the Spirit of God, a life of obedience to Christ and in the embrace of a loving Father who leads us to who we are meant to be. That is life far better, far deeper, far more liberating than the lie fed to us by the world. Real joy and real freedom is brought by Jesus.