

Forgiven and Free
Colossians 1:13-14
Rev. Brian Bill
January 6-7, 2018

Transition from No Longer Slaves...

I'm no longer a slave to fear. You rescued me so I could stand and sing; I am a child of God.

We sing about forgiveness and freedom but some of us struggle to fully experience it. While most of us long for a reboot in a new year, for many it's just a new year with the old yuck. Instead of "New Year, New You," it's more like "New Year, Same You" or "New Year, New Fear."

Some of us garner up the willpower and make New Year Resolutions only to feel deflated and defeated a short time later.

- Perhaps these words on a coffee mug express your thoughts: *"My goal for 2018 is to accomplish the goals of 2017...which I should have done in 2016...because I promised them in 2015...and planned them in 2014."*
- Or maybe you're like the guy who said, *"I can't believe it's been a year since I didn't become a better person."*

And some of us can relate to this resolution:

- 1. Stop Making Lists.*
- B. Be more consistent.*
- 7. Learn to count.*

David DeSteno, professor of psychology at Northeastern University, has discovered that by January 8 (Monday) about 25% of all resolutions will have fallen by the wayside. Other studies report that 80% will fail by February and only 8% will be kept for an entire year.

In this brief series called "Identity Theft," we're not going to focus on what to do to make "a new you," but rather on who we are; or more correctly, *whose* we are. It's not what we need to do in the New Year but what's already been done for us by Christ. Here's where we're headed:

- Next weekend: *Sinner and Saint*
- In two weeks: *Created and Cherished*
- This weekend: *Forgiven and Free*

We live in an age where it's becoming increasingly important to safeguard our identity. Just this week a story broke that is sending shockwaves around the world. Check out this headline from the New York Times on Wednesday: "*Researchers Discover Two Major Flaws in the World's Computers.*" And here's the first sentence in the article: "*The two problems, called Meltdown and Spectre, could allow hackers to steal the entire memory contents of computers, including mobile devices, personal computers and servers...*"

While we certainly need to be concerned about this, we also need to make sure we guard our spiritual identity because according to Jesus in John 10:10, Satan is a thief who comes "*to steal and kill and destroy.*" Revelation 12:10 says that our Adversary accuses believers "*day and night before our God.*"

One of the best ways to protect our spiritual identity is to guard who God says we are. Earlier this week I posted some word art that describes who we are in Christ on the Edgewood Facebook page and was moved by the immediate response. In just one day, this post reached over 1600 people and was shared 19 times [show PPT image].

Over thirty years ago I read a very captivating book by David Needham called, *Birthright: Christian, Do You Know Who You Are?* I ponder the premise often:

"A Christian is not simply a person who gets forgiveness, who gets to go to heaven, who gets the Holy Spirit, who gets a new nature. Mark this—a Christian is a person who has become someone he was not before. A Christian, in terms of his deepest identity, is a SAINT, a born child of God, a divine masterpiece, a child of light, a citizen of heaven."

Grab your Bibles and bounce over to the Book of Colossians. We'll be focusing on 1:13-14 but first let's set the background and context. The Apostle Paul had never been to the city of Colossae but became alarmed when he heard that some false teaching had infiltrated these new believers. The message was that they had to *do* more and to *view* Christ differently. In essence they were being told that

Christ was not enough and the Christian was not enough. As a result, Paul lifted up the holy preeminence of Christ and the high position of the Christian.

He begins by thanking these believers and then assures them of his prayers for them. In verses 9-12, he lets us in on his prayer life. Incidentally, if you're struggling with how to pray for someone, this would be a great prayer to pray: ***“And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.”*** As a way to practice praying this prayer, think of a believer you care about and insert his or her name into the prayer [pick someone in the room and pray for them].

We come now to verses 13-14. This has been called one of the most important and profound sentences in the Bible: ***“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”***

To help us see that we are forgiven and free in Christ, let's focus on four indispensable ingredients of our identity in Christ.

1. We've been rescued from Satan. Verse 13 begins: ***“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness...”*** At the moment we receive Christ, we are immediately delivered from the domain of darkness. The word ***“delivered”*** is emphatic, and was used of snatching someone from severe and acute danger. It literally means, ***“to drag away,”*** much like what you see in war movies when a soldier pulls an injured comrade to safety. The ***“domain of darkness”*** refers to the realm of Satan.

We must recognize that apart from Christ everyone is under the authority of the evil one and in bondage to sin. Proverbs 5:22: ***“The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin.”*** Jesus said in John 8:34 that ***“everyone who practices sin is a slave of sin.”***

There are only two options – you are either in the domain of darkness and under the dominion of the Deceiver or you have been transferred into the kingdom of the beloved Son, under His reign and rule. There is no middle ground. Psalm 86:13

tells us that He did all this because of His love for us: ***“For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.”***

2. We’ve been reestablished to serve. We’ve been *taken out* of one realm and *taken into* another; we’ve been *rescued* from Satan and *reestablished* to serve in the kingdom. We see this in the last part of verse 13: ***“...and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.”*** The word ***“transferred”*** was used to describe a change of place or condition. In the ancient world, when one empire won a victory over another, it was customary to take the population of the defeated country and transfer it totally to the conqueror’s land.

When God sets prisoners free, it’s always for the purpose of bringing them into His own kingdom. Isaiah 43:1: ***“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”*** Titus 2:14: ***“Who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”*** Interestingly, we go from slavery to sin to slavery to service according to Romans 6:18: ***“And, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”*** We will either serve Satan and self or the Savior. As the song goes, *“You’re gonna have to serve somebody!”*

“Beloved Son” literally means, *“the son of His love.”* This echoes back to the baptism of Jesus when the Father declared in Mark 1:11: ***“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased”*** and in Mark 9:7 at the Transfiguration, ***“This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”***

I like how the commentator Lightfoot translates verse 13: *“Yes, by a strong arm he rescued us from the lawless tyranny of darkness, removed us from the land of our bondage, and settled us as free citizens in our new and glorious home, where His Son, the offspring and representative of His love, is King.”*

We’ve been *rescued from Satan* and we’ve been *reestablished to serve*. The third indispensable ingredient of our identity in Christ is that...

3. We’ve been redeemed by the Savior. Check out how verse 14 begins: ***“In whom we have redemption...”*** Notice the key phrase, ***“in whom.”*** None of this is possible in our own merits; no matter how committed we are to our resolutions. It’s only *in Him, by Him, because of Him and for Him!* As the Reformers would say, *“Soli Deo Gloria!”*

The concept of “**redemption**” harkens back to the market when a slave was released from captivity through the paying of a ransom price. The word was also used for the release of prisoners of war by the paying of a ransom. This idea was rooted in the Old Testament as seen in Deuteronomy 15:15: “***You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you.***”

The phrase, “***we have***” is in the present tense, meaning that redemption is our current and continuous possession because in Christ we are once and for all time liberated from bondage. Hebrews 9:11-12: “***But when Christ appeared...he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.***” Our redemption is not just for now; it’s for eternity.

Jesus has fully paid the price of ransom, satisfying the demands of a holy God. Here’s how Jesus said it in Mark 10:45: “***For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.***” When He died, He triumphantly proclaimed, “***It is finished,***” which means, “*the debt has been paid.*” Because we now belong to Him, we must give our very bodies to Him. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: “***...You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.***”

Martin Luther, before his conversion, was tormented by the guilt of his sins. He felt like he was a slave to sin and didn’t know how to break free. After he was saved he renamed himself *Martin Eleutheros*, which in the Greek means, “*Martin the Free.*” Let’s personalize this. Let me rename some of you right now [walk around...*John the Free, Mary the Free, Randy the Free, Sharon the Free,* etc.].

If you’re born again through faith in Christ alone, you can say, “*I’ve been rescued from Satan, I’ve been reestablished to serve, and I’ve been redeemed by the Savior.*” There’s one final ingredient of our identity found in this passage...

4. We’ve been released from our sins. As a result of redemption, verse 14 ends with this promise: “***...the forgiveness of sins.***” To “***forgive***” has the idea of “*releasing, sending away and removal.*” *We are released from the power of sin and from the penalty for having sinned.* In the Greek text the word “***the***” appears before *forgiveness* as well as before *sins* to show the specific cancellation of the sum total of all the sins that we have ever committed or ever will commit.

Some of you don't believe that you're forgiven. Here are some verses to write down when you feel like God won't forgive you:

- Psalm 103:12: *“As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”*
- Micah 7:19: *“He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.”*
- Colossians 2:13-14: *“And you, who were dead in your trespasses...God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”*

Did you hear the key words? *Remove our transgressions. Cast all our sins. Cancelling the record of debt. Set aside, nailing it to the cross.* Still think you've sinned too much and too greatly? Do you feel like you're disqualified because of your disobedience? Listen to what Jesus said in Luke 7:47: *“Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven.”* Are you feeling condemned and burdened by false guilt and incessant shame? If so, commit Romans 8:1 to memory: *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*

Here's what we've learned. If you are in Christ as a born again believer you have been...

- **Rescued from Satan**
- **Reestablished to serve**
- **Redeemed by the Savior**
- **Released of your sins**

Acts 26:18 brings all this together: *“To open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified **by faith in me.**”*

None of this will happen unless you put your faith in Christ! Have you done so?

The first thing we need to recognize is our condition apart from Christ. If we want to be forgiven and free, we must give an honest assessment of our situation. I'd like to introduce Mike Russell to you.

Mike Russell Testimony

Hi! I'm Mike Russell and I'm an addict.

I didn't know it, but I've been an addict all of my life. As I look back on my youth and early years of adulthood, the signs were there. I just didn't recognize them. Simply put, an addiction is obsessing over something to a point where it becomes the most important thing in your life. There are countless addictions. You can become addicted to gambling, pornography, stealing, lying, people (codependency). You can also become addicted to things that might normally be seen as good things like work, exercise, food, shopping, etc. The point is this; If you engage in an activity to a point that it becomes an obsession; where it is the most important part of your life; then it's an addiction and you're an addict.

In my life, I've had one addiction after another. I was introduced to pornography at an early age. I won't get in to that story today, but I struggled in that area for years. There was a time in my life where alcohol was very important to me. Not just a "beer now and then", but top shelf scotch. When I was in college, I was a bartender and bouncer in a bar. Since I was the head bartender, I drank for free and I didn't just drink a Budweiser, I picked the good Scotch off the top shelf. Chivas Regal became my drug of choice. You wouldn't have known I ever touched a drop by looking at me. I was a functioning alcoholic. I stopped drinking, not because I wanted to. I stopped because my pancreas and liver told me I had to. A couple bouts in the hospital with pancreatitis will get your attention. The doctor asked me if I was a drinker. Of course, I said "Oh, I only have one every once in a while." I don't think I convinced him. He highly suggested for me to stop drinking entirely. My pancreas and liver would eventually shut down and then I would be in serious trouble. So, I quit drinking.

Those were just two of my addictions. I also was addicted to work. I loved what I did and worked very hard at it. 60 and 70-hour weeks were not uncommon. Must have been a good thing right? After all, I was "Principal of the Year" and climbed to the top of the professional ladder! I didn't see it at the time, but the hours I spent in the office replaced hours I could have been spending with my wife and kids. Oh, how I regret that and would trade all of the recognition for more time with Jan. I didn't know that she was going to be taken away from me at such an early age. I thought we had many years to come and that the work I was doing

now was going to allow us a happy retirement together. Live in the now! You may not get tomorrow!

My most recent obsession has been with gambling. A couple years ago Jodie and I went to see my cousin at one of our local casinos. She had just moved to the area and gotten a job at the casino as the manager of fine dining. While we were there, we decided to each take \$20 and play the slot machines. I don't remember if we won or not (I doubt it!) but we had an enjoyable evening. A few weeks later, we happened to be in the area, had nothing to do, so we stopped in again to play a few slots. Again, we had a good time. In fact, I had such a good time I thought it would be kind of fun to go during the day while Jo was at work. Gosh, I'm retired and doing leisure activities is what retirement is all about! Little did I know, I was cultivating another obsession. There are 3 casinos in the Quad Cities and if you go on a road trip, you can find several others in just about every major city within an hour of here. One day a week quickly became two. Two became three...and a new addiction was born!

I wasn't spending family money. I'm a picker. Pickers buy and sell interesting things. "Rusty gold" as Mike Wolfe on the American Pickers calls it. Pickers usually carry obnoxious amounts of money with them. You have to be ready to buy at a moment's notice. You never know when that great deal is going to come up! (BTW...picking is also another one of my addictions. Via the Internet it's a 24-hour business. And it can eat up a ton of time in a hurry. Time that could otherwise be spent with your family...sound familiar?) So, I would use my picking money to have fun at the casino. It was cash and Jodie would never know.

There's another sign of an addiction. You hide it. You lie to protect it. Why? Because, if somebody knew about it, you might have to stop it and then you'd be losing the most important thing in your life. Something that's more important than wife, your children, and even more important than God.

That's where I had gone. To the land of lying and cheating. Eventually, I gambled all of my picking money. Mike's Picks is an official business. As with all businesses, it has expenses and I couldn't pay mine. I had no choice but to confess to Jodie what I had done and ask for money to pay my expenses. She graciously forgave me. I admitted that I had a problem with gambling. To deal with it, I banned myself from casinos in Illinois and Iowa. This is a voluntary program available in both states. If I am found in a casino, I can be arrested for criminal

trespass. With that, I thought my problem was solved. Take away the source of the problem and you won't have any more issues.

In 2009, looking for another source of revenue, the State of Illinois passed the Video Gaming Act. The legislation allowed for establishments to provide video poker and slots for its customers. Much like the casinos, a portion of the revenue was going to be used by the State to fix roads, build schools, etc. So, slot machines began to appear in bars, gas stations, and restaurants. Now, you even see video gaming parlors popping up. Though "regulated" by the State, these establishments have few restrictions. My "ban" is not enforced at the local gas station slot machine. The opportunity to play is everywhere! Recently, on my way from my doctor's office in Silvis, to my home in Rock Island, I counted 23 establishments with video gaming. You can't get away from it. Billboards and flashing signs are everywhere luring you to come in to play and win big!

Unfortunately, in spite of me attending Celebrate Recovery, joining a 12-step group, and having several accountability partners, I gave in to the lure of video gaming. And again, I was fine for quite some time. Until the money ran out...and in gambling, the money always runs out.

Again, I had to confess to my wife. The first time was bad enough. The second time, however was very serious. Addictions are like bombs. There is always shrapnel. The addict is not the only one hurt. They also hurt the ones they love the most. I broke Jodie's trust. Trust is one of the most crucial components of a successful marriage. Jo is an amazing woman. She is one of the most giving and loving people I know. I would doubt if there's anyone in this church who has not experienced her "hug ministry". But in spite of her natural tendency to forgive, she now had to deal with the fact that I misplaced her trust. I can't speak for her, but that's not an easy thing to do. Hurting my wife is my biggest regret.

Like I said though, Jo is an amazing woman. She has forgiven me, but now has to "look over her shoulder" all the time to make sure that I am not straying again. I no longer keep great sums of cash on me. Jodie manages all the finances. I make sure that she knows where I'm at all the time. I have 3 accountability partners that assist me as well. Recovery takes time, hard work, and the support of many people who love you. I am blessed to have an amazing wife, though she doesn't full trust me yet (and she shouldn't), she loves me enough to support me. She knows that I have to attend Celebrate Recovery Fridays and my 12 step group on Sunday. That

takes time away from things that we could be doing together. Her sacrifices for my recovery have been immense and I don't take that lightly.

The message Pastor gave today is titled "Forgiven and Free." When Brian first asked me to share my story, I thought to myself, "But I'm not free..." I know some people who prayed to be free from alcohol and were immediately set free from the desire to drink. God chooses to do that from time to time. But, the vast majority of the addicts I know have not had that experience. The apostle Paul prayed for God to take away the "thorn in his side", but God chose not to do that. You see, if God made our life trouble free, then we would no longer need Him.

But we are set free from the penalty of our sin. If we have put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ, our sins (past, present, and future) are forgiven. God sees us "white as snow". When Jesus died on the cross, He took the penalty for our sins. It is done! When He died and rose again, we were resurrected with Him and sit with Him in the throne room of God. Those things are done. God knew us before the beginning of time (predestination). He forgave our sins when we accepted Christ (justification) and said that we would have an eternal home in heaven (glorification) when we leave this earth. I can rejoice that those things have already been given to me.

While I am here on earth however, I'm a work in progress (sanctification). Philippians 1:6 says "He who began a good work in you will see it through until the day of Christ Jesus." God is working to make me more like Him, but I won't be finished until I join Jesus in heaven. In the meantime, I use the tools that God gives me to accomplish that. The "whole armor of God" is at my disposal. Faith, the Word of God, the Holy Spirit...the list goes on.

One of my heroes in the Bible is King David. Why? Because he was a sinner...just like me. He was declared "a man after God's heart..." but still was an adulterer, a murderer, a liar, and a thief. It wasn't until confronted by Nathan that David found any relief from his sin. In Psalm 32, David says, "until I confessed my sin, my body groaned all day long." John Baker, one of the founders of Celebrate Recovery, says, "You are as sick as your secretiveness". Unconfessed sin puts a barrier between God and us. I love what I heard Pastor Dan say at CR one night. "You can't blackmail me! I lay all my cards on the table." Dan is a pastor and ex-alcoholic. His testimony has encouraged thousands through his ministry.

So, I put all my cards on the table. I'm an addict. In the course of my recovery, I have come to understand however, that gambling, alcohol, pornography, food, guitars, work, or anything else is not the issue. Frankly put...I'm addicted to me! I want what I want and not what God wants. My "old man" still lives inside my "new man". I still desire the "earthly lusts" mentioned in Galatians. I am discovering that that's not where peace and happiness are found. The "fruit of the spirit" (love, joy, peace...) comes when we avail ourselves of the promises that God gives us. In Psalm 119, David makes the same discovery. The longest chapter in the Bible (176 verses) basically tells us that if we follow God's commandments, we will find happiness and joy.

Solomon also discovered this. In the book of Ecclesiastes he tries a variety of things to make him happy. He had concubines (sex), riches beyond measure (materialism), and all anything he desired. But, he concluded that it was all worthless. In the last couple verses of the book, he states that only two things matter...."fear God and follow His commandments".

What have I learned in this journey?

- *I can't navigate through this life without God. I've tried "self-improvement". It doesn't work.*
- *All addictions are a form of idolatry. ANYTHING (good or bad) you put before God is an idol.*
- *Addictions are a symptom of a greater problem. The real issue is my sinful nature that wants to please itself with earthly desires. I am addicted to me. We all are. Self-gratification and self-improvement have been my mantra for decades. Turning control of me over to God is the only way I can be free.*
- *This side of heaven I won't be perfect, but I can rest in the fact that I'm getting closer with each passing day.*
- *"Freedom" can only be found in following God's commandments.*

We ALL are addicts. We ALL are addicted to our sinful natures. But God, in His perfection has given us the tools, knowledge, and path to finding freedom. All we have to do is use them.

I'd like to close by leading us in the Serenity Prayer.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace.

Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it.

Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His will.

That I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.

Amen

We are complete in Christ...there's nothing more that we need to do because it's already been done for us.

At the heart of what it means to be a Christian is to receive a new identity. We are given freedom from the penalty of sin (justification) and the power of sin (sanctification) and one day we will be free from the presence of sin (glorification).

On Tuesday of this week Albert Mohler spoke about New Year's Resolutions. Here's his conclusion: "*Our most basic human needs can't be met by greater resolution. [They] can only be met by redemption.*"

We've been declared forgiven and free because we've been...

- **Rescued from Satan**
- **Reestablished to serve**
- **Redeemed by the Savior**
- **Released of our sins**

Communion

On the night before He was betrayed, Jesus celebrated the Passover Supper with his followers.

Matthew 26:26-28 says, "*Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my*

body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”

The Bible tells us to make sure we don’t take communion flippantly. Listen to 1 Corinthians 11:27-28: *“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”*

Could you close your eyes and allow me to guide you through a spiritual inventory?

- **Remember.** Focus on what Jesus has already done for you. Remember his life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and remember that He is coming again. In short, remember the gospel.
- **Reflect.** How are you living right now? Are you close to Christ or far away? What sin is holding you in bondage? Have you been withholding forgiveness from someone who has wronged you? Do you need to ask forgiveness from someone? Is there an addiction you’ve never owned? Is there a decision God is calling you to make? Give Him thanks for His grace and mercy in your life.
- **Repent.** When God brings sin to your mind, confess it to Him and repent from it.

We practice open communion at Edgewood. If you’ve saved, you’re welcome to the supper! We use gluten-free bread and grape juice instead of wine. As the elements are passed down the rows, please hold a cup in each hand and continue to remember, reflect and repent as we do so in silence.

Benediction – *“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”*