

Have you ever met with someone to plan something and you think you're on the same page with what you're going to do; then you go your separate ways to do your parts; and then when you get back together you look at the work they've done and you think, "That's not what I had in mind."?

Or perhaps you've gone to a store and bought some paint that you thought would be good. But when you got it home and started putting it on the walls it wasn't what you expected. From a guy's perspective this can be especially frustrating when your wife goes with you to select the color. Then she mysteriously disappears while you paint the room; but when she returns to inspect your work you get this, "Oh no, that's not what I want. We'll have to pick a different color." I can't complain. Nissa's usually pretty good about sticking with the color she selected. But I have a neighbor who went through, I think it was 11 colors, and his wife still wasn't happy!

Preventing this kind of mix-up is what is behind our second reading for today from Paul's letter to the Romans. I think it is safe to say that some of what is written in Romans is based on Paul's experiences with the Corinthians. Paul had preached the radical nature of living in God's grace to the Corinthians. He

taught them that they were freed from the law. They were freed from following its rules and regulations. And the freedom of God's grace was more than just freedom from religious laws, it was freedom from all the world's measuring sticks. And that was huge freedom.

We, like the Corinthians, are also freed from them but we know how powerful they are. From the moment we are born we are measured and compared: our intelligence, our looks, the amount of money we make, our homes, our cars, how our kids are behaved and on and on goes the list of things people measure us by. And of course there is the whole world of advertising based on telling you that you don't measure up, so you'd better buy the product so that you do measure up.

Yes, in Christ we are freed from these things, but they are everywhere. They influence our lives, and it is hard to see an advertisement and say, "No, I am a child of God. God defines me and God loves me, and God promises good and eternal things for me. I don't need what you're selling."

The Corinthians thought, "Well, if my relationship with God is based on grace;
and if God loves me and promises me good things;
and if I'm freed from following religious laws;

and I'm freed from following all sorts of social standards too, then this is a pretty good deal! Let's just sit back on our sofa's have a beer in one hand, a bag of chips in another, and watch premium cable stations all day long on a large flat screen TV's."

And that's where Paul thought, "That's not what I had in mind when I taught you about God's grace! You're getting this all wrong!" He had stepped away from them thinking they had gotten the idea, and when he reconnected he wasn't seeing what he expected. Now as we are reading Paul's letter to the Romans we see he is determined to not make the same mistake twice. That's probably why the second reading is so thorough and a bit redundant. Yes, like the Corinthians the Romans are saved by God's grace. But this is not a situation to be exploited. Freedom through grace does not mean a theological excuse for hedonism.

Paul's decided it's better to address the situation by using the image of slavery: You are either a slave to sin or a slave to righteousness. Now as we approach the 4th of July we might not be too keen on this idea of slavery. Aren't we free after all? Doesn't this country pride itself upon being first and foremost a free country? And what good is God if all he's going to do is enslave us? Better to go to the devil in slavery and at least

have fun along the way!

Paul seems aware of the awkwardness of his choice of images, but he uses it nonetheless, for slavery in Rome was different than our idea of slavery. Slavery in the Roman Empire was usually for a limited amount of time - not life long - and when a slave was freed he or she became a Roman citizen, with all the rights and privileges of being a Roman citizen. As I've studied Paul's writings I think he liked the slavery image because from a Christian perspective, it ultimately meant freedom into citizenship in heaven.

And let's also take a look at freedom. What is freedom? The ability to do what you want, whenever you want? Really? Where's that going to take you? Ask any poor person who's won a big lottery prize. You end up broke and dead.

We need to remember that freedom by itself is not really a goal. What we have to do is to ask ourselves, "Freedom from what?" Or, "Freedom to what?"

Now we begin to form our answer. It is the answer Paul has written for us. Through the work of Christ we are freed from dead end living. We are freed from wasting our time and energy. We are freed from living up to other people's standards. And

importantly, we are freed from feeling captive to this life of decay, where death is the ultimate end.

Okay, perhaps we will die, but we are freed from the power of death. We grasp what Paul says in verse 23, "For the wages of sin is death." So what you earn with your own selfish desires is death. "But the *free gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That's a deal I can handle. Why should work *my way* in sin and the wages of my work is death, when I can have the free gift of eternal life from God?

Paul wants the Romans to know that freedom doesn't equal hedonism, as the Corinthians took it. Freedom means a new hope, a new energy, a new life, and a new reason for living.

We make a mistake when we think of slavery to Christ as a huge and horrible thing to endure. It is really this new hope, energy, and life. It is a good reason to be alive! We know, of course, that not everything will suddenly become easy. But it is work with a true and lasting purpose.

We thank God for his generosity to us and his work freeing us from death. Let us rejoice and be glad in the new life we enjoy every day from our God. Amen