

“Holding the Key”
 Pastor Sam Richards
 Sermon for 22 September 2024
 Texts: John 7:33,34,37–40 and 8:1-12

“Lord, I have fallen again—a human clod
 Selfish I was, and heedless to offend;
 Stood on my rights. Thy only child would not send
 Away his shreds of nothing (his rights) for the whole God!
 Wretched, to the who saves, low I bend
 Give me the power to let my rag-rights go
 In the great wind that from thy gulf doth blow.”

George MacDonald

Wretched. That is what I fallen again most surely am. **Romans 7: 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from [a]the body of this death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.** It is Jesus Christ our Lord who sets us free. He is the key to our liberty.

We are in such desperate straits! Trapped in mortal sin. We are those whose hands are bound, tied behind our back, or bound to a tree with a stout rope, or chained to a stake and dying of exposure, thirst and heat. Prisoners in some great game of “Capture the flag,” bound by invisible rules, rules of play, hoping some rescuer breaks free, visits us, loosens us and sets us free! Only this game is in soul earnest! The stakes are everlastingly high. It’s dying forever, versus dying to live again. Again, it is the Lord Jesus who holds the key.

O Lord open our eyes to those who are in danger of mortal sin. Pinned down by sin to the point of death, starving with refreshing bounty inaccessible, near at hand . . . a drink that can’t be reached, tauntingly near . . . a mere key between our captivity and freedom. Look to Him who holds the key. Or the knife to slice your bonds asunder, the hammer to shatter the chain links asunder.

And you think it is the sins of others who pinned you to this infernal stake, who exposed you to this suffocating heat. Ignorance. Vanity. Futility. Why does it never occur to you that the sins of others are none of your affair? You are glued to them by the firm cement of un-forgiveness. You are the one who will not let them go. You are addicted to blaming them, resenting them, accusing them. Besides, their repentance is none of your affair! They will stand before the Judge on their own indictments, for their own transgressions. It is our duty to pray for their release, their forgiveness, the lifting of their bonds. They, as you, are even on the point of death. Isn’t it most cruel to stand by and watch them twist and dangle and nothing do to relieve, or rescue them? Whose sin is that? What hatred? Remember what our Savior said to the thief on the cross, **I tell you true, even this day, you shall be with me in paradise.** We were cruel to Him, but he was not cruel to us! I say, if prayer would loose the chains that bind those who hurt,

harmed and sin against God and you, are you not by gratitude, grace and love bound to so pray? Else you shall also remain in torment and affliction. **If you forgive not those who sinned against you, how shall our Father in heaven forgive you?** He declares he won't.

Matt. 18:24 When he had begun to settle *them*, one who owed him [a]ten thousand talents was brought to him. **25** But since he [b]did not have *the means* to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. **26** So the slave fell *to the ground* and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' **27** And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the [c]debt. **28** But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred [d]denarii; and he seized him and *began to choke him*, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' **29** So his fellow slave fell *to the ground* and *began to plead* with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' **30** But he was unwilling [e]and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. **31** So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. **32** Then summoning him, his lord *said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. **33** Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' **34** And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. **35** My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from [f]your heart."

Just supply fellow-sinner in place of fellow-slave and you will immediately see the application to your own self.

In John 7 Jesus has just warned the unbelieving Jews, scribes and Pharisees included, that they, in their present spiritual state would not be entering into heaven (**where he was going**, vv.33-36) And Jesus. On the last day of the great feast, he declared, "**If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said** (Isaiah 12:3 and 43:20), **out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water**, when the scribes and Pharisees (John 8:1-11) dragged before him an adulteress. This was a serious charge, a capital offense in Mosaic law, adultery; we are desensitized to it because the practice of it is so common in our tolerant age. She was **taken in the adultery, in the very act.** (8:3) This declaration establishes her irrefutable guilt. However, this point is problematic: where was her partner in

this sin. According to Mosaic law both parties were to be indicted! Surely they knew who he was, caught in the act establishes that as well. Where was the man? Why wasn't he, an accomplice, also to be accused of the sin?! ***The scribes and Pharisees broke the Mosaic law when they brought only the woman and not the man also!*** (See Lev. 20:10 and Deut. 22:22,24!) And in this they proved themselves transgressors, sinning against the law of God!

It is not possible that Jesus would miss this point. The woman should not have been exposed to this public accusation and shaming on her own. And he turned the Mosaic law on her accusers when he said, **Let him who is without sin cast the first stone at her.** (John 8:7)

The charge is straightforward and simplistic—perhaps to increase its universality? We don't know much about the accused. Was this a "one of", the consummation of a former romantic episode and so fully consensual? Was she a sex slave, or a sex worker? Was she coerced? Drunk? Or just plain lusty? Had she cohabitated, fornicated outside of marriage, aborted babies, been abused and abused others? Certainly there was a whole case history to be developed here; but we are offered none. I mean, both parties may have had sin clusters, bunches of transgressions by either the man, or the woman.

But here's the wonderful news, there isn't a single sexual transgression, or misstep that isn't covered by the atoning death of Christ and all of them repented of are carried away by the great wind of the divine gulf of forgotten, forgiveness—done, covered and removed forever. All of that self-recrimination and self-condemnation—yes, all the accusers mounted on horses of guilt, shame and blame—are banished with Jesus' **neither do I condemn you.**

So we have Jesus stooping down, **acting as if he heard them not** and writing on the ground twice, not once.¹ Amazing, the charge wasn't engraved in stone, or committed to pen and parchment! All the charges against us are likewise as transient as the dust wherein they were written. Remember that detail—it's for you. No one recorded what Jesus wrote down—many have speculated though. I have a few suggestions. Maybe Jesus wrote like this:

- Where are your reliable witnesses?

¹ If the first sign related to God writing the law, it is possible to view the second acts as being interference to Jeremiah 17:13: **O Lord, the hope of Israel, All who forsake You will be put to shame. Those who turn [a]way on earth will be written down, Because they have forsaken the fountain of living water, even the Lord.** A judgment on the accusers who have denied Christ! This ties Jesus' actions to John 7:38-39 and establishes the deity of the trinity.

- Where is the man? You know who he is, is it manly to proceed against this woman and protect the other sinner, gentlemen?
- Why have you chosen to test me in this manner? Test yourselves. Besides you are certain of the law, why haven't you acted upon it already, justly, including both parties? Is that man one of your number? Here? A friend?
- Have any of you defiled yourselves with this woman, or someone else's wife? Will you condemn her for the very things you are practicing?
- Are you hypocrites? Is your moral outrage just a show, a proof of how righteous you purport to be?
- Does love have anything to do with this?
- Where's the love in your exploiting her sin to test me?

I apologize for the paltry questions I have suggested. I am positive Jesus' questions would have been better, more searching and pointed than mine.

But what Jesus might have written is unimportant because he was performing a sign. *By writing with his finger, Jesus was signifying to those who had eyes to see it that he was the God who wrote the ten commandments, inscribing the Mosaic law which is the law of God.* So these accusers, were hoping to bring accusation against Jesus based on the Mosaic law which he wrote!

After all, Jesus does say, **Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.** And none there was found worthy to do so. Their consciences caught up with their villainy. No, I actually do mean to say, their hearts were villainous, hateful and cruel. Is that not sinful? And Jesus delivers her from them!

But her deliverance doesn't end there. Jesus asks, **Where are your accusers? Hath not man condemned you?** Yours, our, and my guilty consciences have been cancelled! Hear. Receive. Rejoice, my fellow saints!

As you know the men all retreated, guilty as charged. Each one convicted by his own condition and his need for forgiveness. That is precisely what I meant when I said, "You are the one who will not let them go. You are addicted to blaming them, resenting them, accusing them. Besides, their repentance is none of your affair! They will stand before the Judge on their own indictments, for their own transgressions."

So pray for them and pray to release them. Emancipate yourself from your past, your history, too,—for if your sins are forgiven (They are!), they are all forgiven. And you do not have any penance, or works of repentance to do!

Forgiveness is an upfront gift, not the reward waiting at the end of a long “to do” list. We don’t deserve forgiveness and we certainly don’t earn it!

Rather, you are tagged by grace, cut free, set loose, unbound . . . run, run for your life! **If Christ has set you free, you are free indeed.** (John 8:36)

Only do not regress, do not tie yourself back up in dead, cancelled sins—neither abide the memory of them, nor dwell on the former effects thereof!

What is forgiven must be abandoned. To be accused of what’s forgiven is a trick of the devil. We must let the final words of Jesus echo in our ears:
Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.

Amen.