

Uncommon Love 1) Living By the Spirit

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Earlone Woods began his 31 years to life sentence in a medium security prison. After two decades of prison life his sentence was commuted by the governor and he re-entered society.

When he was released just about a year ago, he noted how much the outside world had changed over two decades. For one thing people everywhere were walking around with their heads bowed down. He saw the odd phenomenon and realized they were all staring at their smartphones, something which didn't exist when he was first sentenced to prison. But the outside world wasn't the only thing that had changed. Earlone Woods had a whole new perspective on life. In fact, one of the reasons the governor cited for Woods' early release was his podcast, Ear Hustle. In the podcast which he co-hosts and produces he gives insight to an often hidden and forgotten part of society. The podcast lets listeners peer into the life of those who go through the prison system. The episode that I heard this past week dealt with the struggles which two different men had right after getting out of prison. What would they do with their newfound freedom? Had they changed? One it turned out didn't have a plan and was struggling greatly to live in his new freedom. The other had a plan and was excelling in a new direction in life. Adjusting to a new life can be hard even when you're given total freedom.

Even if you haven't ever been to prison, you should be able to identify a little with the struggle faced by those two newly freed men. The apostle Paul speaks to us as those who have a newfound freedom. He tells us, "it is for freedom that Christ has set you free!" We were once enslaved by sin and imprisoned by the law. But through Jesus Christ we have all been released from our bondage. The prison cell of sin and its curse was left behind. A whole new world of freedom lies before us. What are you going to do with your freedom in Christ? Today we'll begin a three-part series: "Uncommon Love." We'll be looking at what a Spirit-led life looks like for us who have been set free.

In God's court we would all stand guilty and deserve far more than a life-sentence for all our thoughts, words, and deeds. For all the selfish things we have done and all the good things we have failed to do we should stand condemned. But God set us free. He did more than commute a prison sentence for us. He has called us to be free. By his Holy Spirit he brought us to faith in Jesus and removed all the guilt, the curse, and the weight of sin. A Christian is very much a free person.

So what do we do with our freedom? Paul warns, "Do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh." The word flesh here which Paul uses is what stands in contrast to the Holy Spirit. It is that part of us that we are born with which rebels against God. Some Bibles rightly then translate this Word when it is used in contrast with the Spirit as "sinful flesh." You and I know what it is like to have a sinful heart of flesh working within us. It is the reason we do so much of what we do. It is the reason why one three-year-old will say to another in heated rage, "get off my bed!" And the sinful flesh is the reason a thirty-year-old will coldly say to his brother, "That's not my concern. That's your problem." And it is the reason so many when they get a taste of freedom end up right back in prison again.

But you and I have more than the sinful flesh. We have the Spirit of God working in our hearts. This creates a life of conflict. "the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want." Paul is talking about believers. Christians are different from the rest of the world because they have a dual nature. To be a Christian is to have an old-self that still works out sin and a new-self led by the Spirit that only desires what is good. Don't be mistaken. If you struggle with sin or if you see someone struggling with sin, you can't label that person an unbeliever. Christians still sin. The difference is that they have been freed from its curse and no longer face the sentence they deserve for their sins. But they still struggle against sin.

That's why Paul has to tell us "walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the sinful flesh's desires." He lists for us some of the things that the flesh wants to work out. They should be obvious to all: "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like." Even though these things are obviously wrong you will see them in the life of those who struggle against the flesh. You've experienced for yourself or have no doubt known Christians who foolishly let the flesh take hold when they open the door of their hearts and lust at images and movies or listen to immoral music. Some treat marriage with contempt and dishonor God's gift of marriage. This is an obvious indulging in the sinful flesh. Related sins of impurity let the heart wander into dark places and the hand and foot follows. Debauchery is unrestrained sensuality with no regard for what is good or godly. Idolatry and witchcraft are both sins of turning away from God and giving your hearts desires to anyone or anything above or in place of God. Works of the flesh listed after that can all be identified as sins which show disregard for the second table of God's Ten commandments: "hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy." You've witnessed these things I'm sure. It's a sad reality of our world. When I first started student teaching 6th grade students I tried to humorously illustrate what an awful life it would be if a husband came home, turned on the tv, ignored his family, and rudely demanded his wife bring him a beer. To my surprise I had about 25 inner-city children laughing. They weren't laughing because this was too extreme an example. They were laughing because for many of them I had just described a typical evening at home. This is not just seen in inner-city life. The strife of works of the flesh is seen from the trailer park to the million-dollar high rise apartments. I have pastored families from all walks of life. In doing so I've learned not to ask little children about their family life because a

little girl will just end up piping up in front of the whole class, “My dad yells at me and my mom a lot. He gets angry. I don’t like it.” The works of the flesh are obvious. Even a child knows what they are like and how they cause pain.

How does Paul deal with this struggle in the lives of God’s people? First of all, notice this wasn’t anything new! He says, “I warn you again as I did warn you before.” He had spoken against living according to the flesh before. He knew he would have to speak against it again and again. Still today it must be repeated again and again in our church and every Christian home. The struggle against the flesh is ongoing. Our freedom is won. But our lives are in conflict day by day.

And the struggle is for something real! When someone gets out of prison, they are truly free. They have the ability to live a whole new life. But if they persist in their old ways, they can lose that freedom and forfeit it. Paul does not say that we earned our freedom. Nor does he say that we must live up to expectations to maintain it. We have been set free. Christ has paid the full price for us. We are not on parole. We are truly and absolutely free. That’s why our position is described as being adopted into his family. And as members of his family we stand to receive the inheritance of a glorious and eternal kingdom. But Paul warns of rejecting God and loving sin more. “I warned you before and will again that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Live according to the sinful desires of the flesh and you lose out on the gift of the Spirit. To let sin reign in your life is to disqualify yourself from the gift of freedom. To love sin and live in it is to reject God’s gift and place yourself back under the sentence you deserve.

So what are we to do? Paul doesn’t tell us what to do. He doesn’t say, “make sure you are doing the opposite of what the flesh wants.” No. He instead begins by reminding us what we are. First of all we are free. There’s no work to be done to regain our freedom. We have it for Jesus’ sake. He then goes on to describe the fruit of the Spirit. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” I could go on to expound on this list, but they are all basically the opposite of what we heard worked out by the sinful flesh. This is not just a list by the apostle of what is good and what is bad. That much should be obvious to all. Rather what he intends to highlight for us are the two different sources of these things. All the bad is worked out by the flesh. It is what we are able to do on our own. Everything good that stands in contrast is not of us. It is from the Spirit.

Imagine a life where you see these things! This is a most uncommon type of life! A man gets home from a long day at work and he considers how his children need him and how he has opportunity now to work at showing love to his family. He is patient. Imagine a man who sees the opportunity to lust at something before his eyes but remains faithful to his spouse! Imagine a wife who fills her home with joy and peace because that is what she has from the Spirit! Imagine a two-year-old filled with self-control and gentleness who shares not only his favorite toy but his desert with his brother. Now imagine all this not being the result of fear or trying to earn a reward or to prove anything to the judge. Imagine it all done by someone set free from punishment and given all good things already. Imagine them all doing that simply like a tree which gives fruit because it is a tree. They do it set free by the Spirit and through the Spirit’s working new life.

You don’t have to imagine it. That is the life that is led by the Spirit and the fruit that is worked by the Spirit in the lives of those who belong to Christ through faith. Through faith in Jesus the Spirit has given us a whole new mindset for life. “Those who belong to Christ have crucified the sinful flesh with its passions and desires.” When Jesus died on the cross he died for the sins of the world. We know that for every evil desire and every evil action our flesh ought to perish. It is counted as crucified with Jesus. For every guilty work we have done or will do we are free. Christ, the Son of God, came to carry the weight and the punishment we all deserved. Our sentence was commuted in full. We pay nothing while he paid it all for us with his own suffering. Though his flesh was sinless, it bore our sins once for all.

Now we belong to him. Through faith in Jesus God considers us adopted into his family and belonging to himself. We know that we have an inheritance with him who rose to life. We will live from this day on and forever with Jesus free from our sins. Imagine the man who is brought before the governor’s office and told the news that his sentence has been removed. Imagine receiving word that today is the first day of your life of freedom. You could go back to the way of life you once knew that made you guilty. Or by the Spirit you could plan to live a new life in your freedom. Paul tells us “since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” All Christians need this encouragement. We have a new self and a new heart of faith that desires to be Spirit-led instead of led by the flesh with its evil passions and desires. When Earlonne Woods was released a letter declared the observation, “He is clearly no longer the man he was when he committed his crime.” Sadly, about two-thirds of those released from prison end up committing a new crime in less than five years. Woods doesn’t want that life anymore. He affirmed it and said he no longer sees life the same. He is done with the crime, done with the gangs, done with everything from the past. The change for those who have been set free by the working of the Spirit is even greater. It is a new heart of faith with a new life of thanksgiving and fruits of the Spirit.

What is it that you want with your freedom; to fall back into common sin or to live in uncommon love? Remember the Ear Hustle episode I mentioned earlier about two different men adjusting to freedom? The one man who had success in his new freedom found he had his friends and family to thank for his new life. He couldn’t have done it without them. We have the Holy Spirit to thank for our new life. We cannot do anything without him. The Spirit-led Christian, you see, is out of the ordinary. For the rest of our series we’ll look at how the God directs, empowers, and sustains us in this new life. It starts with the Holy Spirit giving us God’s extraordinary love. Our life is then filled with that same love. It is uncommon love. And it is living by the Spirit.