

# The Keys to Freedom

## Pastor Paul Dinges

July 9, 2023

Sermon Audio file

Scripture Text: Romans 6:12-23

Most citizens are law-abiding folks who have no desire to spend any time whatsoever inside a jail. Even ex-cons don't want to go back to the joint. Prison is not an attractive option for anyone.

Remember television actor Lori Loughlin and her husband Massimo Giannulli? They were indicted by the FBI and U.S. Attorney's Office in 2019 for fraud and bribery offenses related to a nationwide college bribery scandal. Loughlin fought tooth and nail to avoid jail time, spending thousands of dollars. She served her two-month prison sentence at a facility in central California late in 2020 and was home by New Year's Eve.

So, most people don't want to go to prison, and those who are in prison want to get out. Prison escapes have been subject for many novels and movies. Even the Bible has stories of prison breaks and escapes from authorities. For example, in Acts 12, the apostle Peter is in prison under tight security: "Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison" (v. 6). And when "the chains fell off," Peter went immediately to the house of some friends who were praying for his release and astonished to see the object of their prayers standing before their very eyes!

Do you think Peter wanted to be in prison? A small number of people, however, want to go to prison, and there are some residents of correctional institutions who prefer to remain where they are rather than be released to the civilian population.

Several years ago, The Buffalo News ran a feature about an ex-con who said he stole shoelaces, a pair of sandals and other items so he could get "prison health care that is very good." Then there is the North Carolina man who robbed a bank for \$1 for the same reason.

Consider the case of a man suffering from a life-threatening liver problem who decided his best bet to save himself was to go to prison. Dr. Joshua Mezrich, an assistant professor of surgery in the division of multi-organ transplantation at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, tells the story of a 41-year-old man who turned to crime to get medical care.

The felon was in prison when he got a scan that revealed two aneurisms in his liver. Later, a follow-up scan showed the aneurisms had grown and the prisoner needed surgery soon, but he was released before the surgery could be scheduled. He realized that a trip back to prison was his best choice since he knew he could get his surgery paid for behind bars.

But most folks going through the motions of daily life, working at their jobs, paying their bills, and eating too much junk food don't want to go to prison for even one day. Although many people would not cross ethical and moral lines that could send them to jail, the very presence of the law and threat of prison help motivate at least some of the population to walk the straight and narrow.

Bob Dylan makes the point in his hit song, "Gotta Serve Somebody," that there's a real sense in which we all have a boss to whom we're accountable. No one gets through life without answering to a higher authority. You are an employee; you must work, and you get evaluated. C'est la vie. And those who do not like this natural order of things may find themselves behind bars singing "Jailhouse Rock." "It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody," Dylan sang.

"Nonsense," John Lennon retorted. He wrote a parody called "Serve Yourself." Well, you can do that, but it's a bad choice as the apostle Paul makes clear. "Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions" (v. 12). Notice the words "dominion" and "obey."

Sin — the principle of sin, our fallen nature as it's called in other places in the Bible, or our human propensity to make bad choices and fall into bad habits — uses our actual human bodies as a means of getting us to do what sin wants us to do. Sin dominates us; sin is a bully; sin coerces us to obey our basest impulses. And when that happens, we don't look so pretty. And we're not happy.

Why? Because we're in an awful place where we are bossed around, told what to do, and must obey the prison guards even when we don't want to. "Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?" (v. 16).

This jail of the body is a horrid place. Paul refers to us as "slaves of sin" (vv. 17, 20), which sounds terrible. But he also mentions being "set free," which implies we were once captured, imprisoned, and toiling under the scourge of a jailhouse master (vv. 18, 22).

The good news is that we do not need to toil in this prison — serving ourselves when we could be serving God instead. Why serve Sin when we could walk in the Spirit? The bad news is that our mortal, very human bodies seem to provide constant opportunities for us to be tempted every which way.

We're tempted by what we see. And what we see always ignites a lustful appetite. This might be quite literal. We see food. It is everywhere. Not all of it is healthy. But we see a bag of salty potato chips, or a pint

of Ben and Jerry's and we want it. We lust for it. We want to eat it and eat more of it than we should.

We also see seductive images everywhere — on billboards, advertisements, and websites — that we should avoid. We keep neglecting to monitor the “safe search” options on our laptops. We see wonderful gadgets and vacation opportunities that we know we can't afford. We see new clothing lines to die for. We see gambling opportunities touted by the NFL, casinos and more.

And if temptation doesn't assault us with our eyes, it does so with our other senses. We can smell the aroma of French fries boiling in the deep fryer, a burger sizzling on our neighbor's grill, or the pesto of an enticing plate of gnocchi.

Our bodies are vulnerable to scores of temptations every day! Our physical appetites (hunger, thirst, sex) cry out for satisfaction. But we hold the keys to this jailhouse battle. We can unlock the cell door and walk out — free.

Self-discipline is a key. Paul says: “Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions” (v. 12). Sometimes we forget who's in charge of the jail. We might feel like prisoners, but we're also wardens. We are in control of what goes on in this prison of ours. “Just don't do it!” to paraphrase a popular marketing expression.

Remembering our identity is a key. Paul writes to the Roman Christians: “Consider yourselves also to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (vv. 9, 11). We are children of God! Serving ourselves, serving sin, and yielding to temptation is not how we roll. It's not who we are. We have been blessed through Christ's redeeming sacrifice with a new nature. We are new creations in Christ: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Remembering our vulnerability is a key. Our bodies make us vulnerable to excessive living. We must never forget this. The fact that we are baptized Christians doesn't mean that we will always do the right thing. Christianity isn't a vaccine that ensures our spiritual health. Our vulnerability to lustful infections doesn't disappear just because we love Jesus.

Staying alert is a key. The Bible says (and it is not a suggestion): “Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion, your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith” (1 Peter 5:8). Sin is a slippery slope. Without vigilance, we may not be aware of the booby traps lining the path we're following.

Remember to take your keys with you. Have you ever walked out of the house to your car and forgotten your keys? You're not going anywhere without them. As believers, we have Scripture, prayer, worship, and Bible study on our key chains. Sometimes it's easy to forget our keys, but without them we're stuck in the garage, doomed to stay in a prison of defeat, bondage, and servitude.

The cool thing is that we get to choose whom we want to serve. This was not a choice for Brooks Hatlen in the classic 1994 film *The Shawshank Redemption*. Brooks, played by James Whitmore, had been in prison most of his life. When Brooks was finally released on parole as an elderly man, he didn't really know what to do. A life in prison was all he knew.

Perhaps we all have a bit of Brooks in us. Forgetting that we are children of light, we become accustomed to behaving as though we are children of darkness. Yielding to temptation has become so normal that temptations have ceased to be temptations. They have instead become our rule of life.

Upon learning of his own pending release, Brooks attacks fellow inmate Heywood (William Sadler), holding a knife to his throat and threatening to kill him so he can stay in prison. Red Redding, an inmate played by Morgan Freeman, explains the attack to Heywood and Andy Dufresne, played by Tim Robbins:

"Brooks ain't no bug. He's just ... just institutionalized. ... The man's been in here 50 years. Fifty years! This is all he knows. In here, he's an important man. He's an educated man. Outside, he's nothin'! Just a used-up con with arthritis in both hands."

And maybe that's all we are — used-up old cons with arthritis in our hands. We can't get out, perhaps we don't even want to get out. We're used to prison life, and by now our arthritic hands can hardly hold the keys God has given us to get out.

Unable to adjust to freedom, Brooks commits suicide shortly after his release. But we are not doomed to the same fate. The Bible says: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 23). We are free. Now we know it. We don't need to die in a prison, the doors of which Jesus has blown off the hinges.

Andy Dufresne and Red Redding both made it out of prison. Red crosses into Mexico where he reunites with Andy, and they enjoy their freedom by the azure waters of the Pacific Ocean. Their freedom is a symbol of

ours. Thanks to Jesus Christ, we too have left prison life behind. We hold the keys to freedom from sin in our hands. The question is: "Are we ready and willing to use them?" It's God's and my prayer that we are ready and willing to use the keys to freedom from sin - right here, right now!