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West Valley Church
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Easter 2017
Chainbreaker
(Matthew 28:1-10)

I have a confession to make; I have chains. Now, I know you are saying to yourself, "Right, captain obvious. You are holding them in your hand." But I'm not talking about these chains; these chains are really only a visible symbol of the chains that you can't see. And the truth is that, here today, every one of us has chains. For most of us, our chains are not as visible as these, although some of them are. But either way, you've got them. No matter how hard you try to put on a good face and hide your chains, you have them. Some are large and heavy and you can hardly move under them. Some, you've gotten so used to them that you think it is normal to have them.

So the question for today is, "Why? Why do you continue to be bound by things that hold you down, that keep you from achieving your highest and best in this life? Why don't you just break free from them and move on?" And the short answer to that question is, "Because you *can't*." After all, if you could, you'd be done with them by now, wouldn't you? But the longer answer today is, "You *can*. You can be set free from the chains that bind you today, that hold you down, that hold you back, that keep you from achieving all that you were designed and created to achieve, your highest and best in this life and will be true forever. You *can* break free from your chains." If the resurrection of Jesus Christ is true, and I believe with all my heart it is, then you can break free from your chains. I'm guessing that today you believe the resurrection is true, too. Or, you are here because part of you *wants* to believe it is true. You can experience the truth of it today. I pray you will. You can be done with chains! So let's begin by naming some of the chains we have.

The first is...

Fear

According to psychiatric reference books, there are somewhere around two thousand classified fears. Those fears that have been identified and documented "run the gamut - everything from triskaidekaphobia (the fear of the number 13) to arachibutyrophobia (the fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of your mouth). There is even a phobiaphobia - the fear of acquiring a phobia."¹

We laugh about those, but your fears are far more real, aren't they? Perhaps you struggle with a fear of relationships; you've experienced painful rejection or

¹ Mark Batterson, *In A Pit With A Lion On A Snowy Day*, (Multnomah Books, NY, 2006), pg 51.

betrayal from someone, and so to protect yourself you've isolated yourself from others. Either you avoid relationships altogether, or the relationships you do have are safely shallow so that you can cut and run if things turn south. Perhaps you are chained in a lousy or abusive relationship, because you fear what will happen if you put a stop to it or get out of it.

Maybe you are afraid of failing – again. So you never step out and risk anything new or exciting. You never pursue anything that has potential for greatness because you are chained to your fear of failure.

For some people, fear has so taken hold of them that it has gone beyond a choice and they are stricken with such anxiety that they are disabled in some way.

Years ago, in one of the churches I pastored, I had a person in my church who was in the second half of her life. As her pastor, as I became friends with her, and I could tell there was something she wasn't telling me. I would ask her, "Is there something you want to tell me?" to which she would say, "I can't yet." I could tell it was weighing more and more heavily on her. Finally, one day, she told me. It seems that when she was a little girl she was horribly, repeatedly abused by the adult men in her life that should have loved and protected her. She wanted to tell me this part of her story so that I would know her better. About how they held a gun to her head and said that if she told anyone, they would kill the person she told. She was afraid to tell me for fear that they would kill me, and she cared about me and didn't want me to die. Here's the incredible thing, though: every one of these men had all been dead for years. That is how strong the fear had her in chains. It was no longer rational, but it was real.

"What's interesting is that psychiatrists (have determined) that we're born with only two innate fears: the fear of falling and the fear of loud noises. That means that every other fear is learned."² Somewhere along the line, you've experienced something that has led to your fears. It might have happened so long ago that it doesn't even register in your conscious thought anymore. All you know is that you are chained by your fear, and my friend, the resurrection of Jesus Christ means that you can have the very Spirit of God in you, and you can be set free from fear. If Jesus Christ can rise from the dead, he can certainly break the chains of fear in your life. Listen to what God's Word says:

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self discipline." (2 Timothy 1:7, nlt)

And again...

"So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, 'Abba, Father!'" (Romans 8:15, nlt)

God loves you so much, and wants to be your loving Father so much, that he sent his one and only Son to die on a cross for you, and then God raised him from the dead

² Ibid.

for you. He did that because he loves you and wants to set you free from the chains of fear that hold you back. First John 4:18 describes the end goal of our relationship with God:

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear...The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love.” (1 John 4:18, ceb)

If you need the resurrected Jesus to break the chains of fear in your life, you will have the opportunity to allow him to in just a few moments.

But there is another way that many of us are in chains today, and that is by...

Wrong Thinking

There's nothing wrong with thinking that you're smart. You probably *are* pretty smart, and good for you if you do think that. But that's a lot different than how some men on a dating site apparently classify themselves. Dating website OkCupid.com revealed how thousands of its users had answered one particular question in a survey to measure partner compatibility: “Are you a genius?”

Amazingly, according to their research, nearly half of all men (and a third of all women!) said, “yes” to that question. Now, to qualify for most high IQ societies—“genius clubs” like MENSA—you usually need to have an IQ *at least* in the 98th to 99th percentile. That's about one in a hundred. Fifty out of a hundred men think they are one in a hundred! There's something seriously wrong there!³

When I'm talking about wrong thinking, I'm not just referring to the over-inflated ego of men, or the lies men tell thinking they'll impress a potential partner (Although there really is something seriously wrong with that, isn't there?!)

All of us are chained to wrong thinking, to one degree or another.

The Bible tells us:

“For as he thinks within himself, so he is.” (Proverbs 23:7, nasb)

In other words, you are what you think about, and what you think about is what you are.

All of us have tapes that play in our heads, from events that have happened to us in the past and how we've processed or interpreted them, to wrong messages we've either had put into us by significant people in our lives or that we've put into our own heads.

The first fifteen years of my ministry were as a youth pastor. Typically half of the teens I worked with were children of divorce, many of them having experienced it as younger children. Nearly every one of them thought that they had somehow contributed to their parents' divorce; that they were somehow responsible. I remember one young lady telling me that if she had only prepared her dad's toast correctly the day he left the house and didn't come back, then her parents would still

³ Adapted from Rosie Cima, “The Psychology of Self-Appointed Genius,” Priceconomics blog (5-11-15)

be married.

That might seem extreme and irrational, but wrong thinking *is* irrational. For years now, you may have been chainfully attached to wrong thinking that has kept you in bondage to negative or criticizing thinking toward others, negative self-talk, to regret, or guilt, or bitterness, or anger, or passive-aggressiveness, or shame. Maybe you blame everyone else for how messed up your life is, and so you are a victim. Or maybe, if you allowed yourself to think about it for just a moment, honestly, you'd admit that you dislike yourself, or even hate yourself. And those attitudes are poisoning every relationship, every activity, every potential that you have. You are chained to the past. Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead to set you free from the chains of wrong thinking!

The problem with our own attempts at resolving wrong thinking is that they are based on what is called "self-esteem." The problem with that is, it is based on your own opinion of yourself – *self*-esteem. But your thinking is already screwed up, chained to wrong ideas. Somehow, what you need is to base your worth and self-thoughts on the opinion of someone who thinks *correctly*.

Let me put it this way: (*pick a person, example of a purchase, what was paid for it, whether they paid full price or not*). You determined the value of that (*article*) by the price you were willing to pay for it, correct? No matter what the price tag said, you determined the value of it by what you were willing to pay.

When it comes to our lives, our own wrong thinking, the world around us, and the enemy of our souls, the devil, all say that we are not worth much. The price tag has us, at best, at thrift store prices.

Remember now, the value of something is determined by the price paid for it. God looked at your life, and disagreed with the price tag – God said it was too *low*. And God bartered *UP* for you, not down, and God said, "I'm going to pay a price for you. The price I'm going to pay for you is the highest price inside and outside of creation; there is no higher price. The price I'm going to pay for you is the price of the life of my one and only son:"

"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life." (John 3:16, msg)

Your wrong thinking has convinced you and chained you to the belief that everyone is out to get you, that you deserve what you get, that you aren't worth anything at all. But you need to base your thinking on someone else's opinion – not your own, not the world's, and certainly not the devil's. You need to base it on the opinion of the one who really matters; who knows you better than you even know yourself, and he *still* paid the highest price for you:

"He knows us far better than we know ourselves...So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly

and freely do for us? And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way!"
(Romans 8:27-39, msg)

Christ died and rose from the dead to set you free from being chained to wrong thinking! You don't need "self-esteem," you need "Savior esteem!" If Jesus can rise from the dead, he can certainly set you free from wrong thinking. You'll have an opportunity to accept that freedom in a few moments.

Keep in mind, though, that if you have been chained to wrong thinking, then most likely you are also chained to certain...

Habits

Wrong thinking leads to wrong choices, and continual choices lead to habits. Your chainful thinking has led to certain actions so much that you don't even have to think anymore; your actions have become habit. Habits are remarkably easy to develop. They're just really hard to reverse.

Tech gurus know what it takes to design a successful app for your phone. It has to be an app that will hook consumers and then keep them hooked so they keep coming back to the app. They call this process "captology," or the art of capturing people's attention and making it hard for them to escape. A man by the name of Nir Eyal is a professor at Stanford and a game designer, and he's written a book called "Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Product." He explains why applications like Facebook are so effective. A successful app, he writes, creates a "persistent routine" or behavioral loop. The app both triggers a need and provides the momentary solution to it. Eyal writes: "Feelings of boredom, loneliness, frustration, confusion, and indecisiveness often instigate a slight pain or irritation and prompt an almost instantaneous and often mindless action to quell the negative sensation. Gradually, these bonds cement into a habit as users turn to your product when experiencing certain internal triggers."⁴

Since long before phone apps, *you've* got habits that you are chained to that have developed from your wrong thinking.

Two and a half years ago I had a major automobile accident that left me with a traumatic brain injury that still affects me to this very day. I have to constantly monitor my brain fatigue, I have short term memory issues, I have to take daily brain breaks, I have to do certain things everyday to work my memory and thinking ability. I've learned a lot in the process about the neuroplasticity of the brain – that our brains can change, no matter what age we are. That basically means that our

⁴ Jacob Weisberg, "We Are Hopelessly Hooked," The New York Times Review of Books (2-25-16)

thoughts create patterns for the neurons that fire in our brains, and used often enough, those neuronal patterns become “grooves” or highways for that thought pattern to become action or habit. Wrong thinking leads to habitually wrong acting. You’ve got bad ruts in your brain! Jesus said:

“Don’t you know that everything that goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? But what goes out of the mouth comes from the heart. And that’s what contaminates a person in God’s sight. Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adultery, sexual sins, thefts, false testimonies, and insults.” (Matthew 15:17-19, ceb)

I can promise you, if you’ve got wrong thinking, you’ve developed wrong habits. You may be conscious of them or you may not. So you lie to cover things up for yourself. You get defensive all the time or you treat people poorly. You dress in certain ways, or say certain things, or choose to act in ways that are keeping you from growing, from becoming a better person, or from becoming a person of influence. At best, your habits are wasting the valuable and short amount of time you have. Worse, you are destroying relationships with God, with others, and with yourself.

If Jesus can rise from the dead, he can easily give you the power to overcome those habits and begin choosing productive, life-giving habits that will cause you to grow and make your life, your relationships, and your world a healthier, better place.

If you want Jesus to break the chains of your destructive habits, you are going to have the opportunity to ask him to in just a few minutes.

If you don’t allow the resurrected Jesus to alter your habits, before long you will find that your habits will soon become...

Addictions

Some of you in this room know exactly what I am talking about. You are struggling with an addiction right now, and you winced when I said the word. Or you are someone who is recovering from an addiction. Worse yet, maybe you don’t even realize that you are addicted. But addiction now controls you. You are chained to it, and your life is revolving more and more around the addiction. You no longer make decisions; your addiction makes the decisions.

An addiction is defined as “a brain disorder that is characterized by compulsive engagement in rewarding stimuli, despite adverse consequences.”⁵

In other words, you’ve created a need for that thing that, when satisfied, gives you a momentarily positive feeling. But you need that thing more frequently and in greater amounts in order to achieve that pleasurable response.

The pleasurable response for you might be that it numbs the pain that you carry around in you. Your pain or anger or self-loathing has sent you to the food, or the

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Addiction#cite_note-8

drug, or the alcohol, or the pornography that creates a chemical reaction in your brain, drowning out your problems. But soon it's no longer about the pain; the need for that rush or that relief is now what drives you. So now you are miserable, angry, deeply pained, or hating yourself even more because those feelings are still there but the addiction has a life of its own. And your addiction has a ravenous appetite. It will demand more and more of you. You are no longer in control. You might think you can keep it hidden, or that you can manage it. But it will grow until you are chained to it over relationships, over your job, over your family, over your God, over your life. Those who love you are walking on eggshells around you all the time – if they haven't left you yet.

So what is it for you? Perhaps you have an eating disorder; some, on one extreme, are starving themselves. Some on the other extreme are eating themselves into the morbidity of an obese death.

Perhaps you are addicted to pornography. You've been so immersed in it that you no longer see men or women as people made in God's image – they are merely objects for your gratification. In your mind you have done things to children, or to enslaved women, so that the line between your mind and reality is blurred and it wouldn't take much for you to carry out those actions; or maybe you already have.

That drug, or that bottle, or that smoke, controls you. You lie to feed it. Faced with a choice, you'll choose it over your children or your spouse. You are finding ways to hide money or get money to feed it. Maybe you don't even know what you're doing anymore and you black out. Listen: I don't care that your drug is now legal recreationally – why do you need to recreate that way in the first place? It is addictive; it will own you and kill you. It changes the way you think and act.

I remember hearing a story once of the way they would train elephants in the circus, back before they treated them humanely. They would start when the elephant was just a young calf. They would chain it to a metal stake that was driven so far into the ground, that the elephant could not pull it out or break free. After some time, the elephant would become so accustomed to the truth that he couldn't pull out the stake, that even as he grew, they wouldn't have to strengthen the stake or the chain, until finally, they wouldn't even have to drive the stake into the ground; they would just have the elephant chained to a stake that was only laying on the ground. The full-grown bull elephant would never test the chain because he'd become convinced a long time ago that as long as he was chained, he couldn't break free. Maybe that's what your addiction has told you.

The Bible says this:

“I am allowed to do anything,’ you say. My answer to this is that not all things are good. Even if it is true that ‘I am allowed to do anything,’ I will not let anything control me like a slave.” (I Corinthians 6:12, erv)

Jesus Christ rose from the dead; he can give you the power and lead you to the resources and the help and the community you need to overcome that addiction, whatever it is. You need the resurrection of Jesus Christ to break your chains of addiction. You will have the opportunity to ask him for that in a moment.

There is another set of chains that all of us need to be set free from, and ultimately are why Jesus came to earth and died on the cross and rose from the dead, and that is...

Sin and Death

There is a reason that these two go together. Maybe you've come through this message so far feeling pretty good about yourself; you feel like you've got things under control – you don't have any irrational or crippling fears. You feel that you are a positive person most of the time. You are self-disciplined enough that you don't have any bad habits and you certainly don't have addictions. And if you have sinned, maybe you feel like the good you've done at least outweighs the bad. Well, good for you! You've got everything under control. But guess what? That need you have for controlling your life is called "sin." The middle letter in the word "sin" is "I." Sin is all about myself – about my control, my desires, my pleasure, and no one is going to tell me what to do with my life! Sure, I'll allow God to make suggestions, but I'll decide, thank you very much. And the Bible has a lot to say about how chainful sin is.

Sin can be defined in many ways; it is when we violate God's law of Love. We can sin by commission – when we do something wrong – or we can sin by omission – when we don't do something right. Some have called it "falling short of God's perfection." And all of those things are true. But there are a couple of big problems we have with sin. There is the problem that one single sin is far heavier than any pile of good things you might have done. There is nothing that outweighs one single sin. Just one sin is like a black hole from outer space in your life; it has a density that is so heavy that it sucks in all light and life in you. All it takes is one sin and you are addicted – you are chained to it.

But there's an even worse problem with sin; it's not just something you do, it's something you *are*. It is in our nature. We are born addicted to sin. Our parents had it, and they gave it to us. It is in our DNA. It is a blood disease and, once you were born into the human race, you inherited it. And the reality is that all the other things that we are chained to – all those things find their roots in sin and death.

The Bible says:

"Yes, all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious ideal." (Romans 3:23, tlb)

It is so addictive, that we are chained to sin – every single one of us. Jesus said very solemnly:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin."
(John 8:34, nasb)

We are in chains to sin. We can't help it, we can't stop it, and we can't change it. Again, sadly, the Bible reminds us:

“Now do you see it? No one can ever be made right in God’s sight by doing what the law commands (*or by just doing good*). For the more we know of God’s laws, the clearer it becomes that we aren’t obeying them; his laws serve only to make us see that we are sinners.” (Romans 3:20, tlb)

But I’m afraid it gets worse; not only are we all chained by sin, it’s that very sin that leads to death. The Bible makes it clear:

“For the wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23, niv)

and again...

“Therefore, as sin entered the world...and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.” (Romans 5:12, niv)

The last time I checked, the death rate in the United States was still right at around 100%. No one gets out of here alive. In fact, I can pretty confidently say that the death rate worldwide is 100%. Every one dies. And the reason everyone dies is because everyone sins. There is nothing that we can do that will break the chains of sin and death. And that death is forever; not only are you living under the effects of death now, but you will experience eternal, horrible death *forever*.

But this is how much God loves you: he saw that you were eternally chained to sin and death, and he knew that the only way to break those chains was to send his one and only Son to die the death that we deserved; he did not, but to die for us.

“Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit.” (1 Peter 3:18, nlt)

And so when you belong to him...

“The power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.” (Romans 8:2, nlt)

Everything we’ve been talking about – all of it that chains us up – has been broken by the great chain breaker:

“He led them from the darkness and deepest gloom; he snapped their chains.” (Psalm 107:14, nlt)

Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and if he can rise from the dead, he can break whatever chains are holding you down, and he can set you free. He even said:

“If the Son sets you free, you are free through and through!” (John 8:36, msg)

Listen; people often ask me, “How could a loving God allow chains like this to exist in this world? How could a loving God allow suffering in this world? First of all, the chains of suffering and sin are not his fault; they are ours. He made us in his image; that means he’s given us the freedom to choose. And tragically, we choose sin. We choose chains. But here’s what a loving God does: he enters our suffering. He suffers at our hands. He suffers, and he dies. He experienced the worst chains of sin and death and hell – all its consequences. But then he rose from the dead! The God of love did what only a loving God could do: he died in our place and rose from the

dead so that all the chains that hold us down can be broken, and we can live in his life – we can live a new life in him!

It's not enough to believe it; you must have faith in it. Believing it is to acknowledge it is true. Faith is to act on it as truth. I want to give you an opportunity to add faith to your belief: to *act* on what you believe. If you want to be set free from whatever chains you have (we all have them!), then I want you to come forward in just a moment and take one of these little sets of chains, and then take it back to your seat with you. It will serve as a reminder to you that your chains have been broken by the Chainbreaker, Jesus Christ.

Worship team, would you please come and prepare to sing for us a powerful song: "Amazing Grace, My Chains are Gone." And as they sing, I encourage you to put faith to your belief, come forward and take one of these. And as you do, understand that you are telling the Chainbreaker, Jesus Christ himself, that you want him to break the chains in your life through his resurrection power.

Sing

Please have a seat, there's one last thing I want to tell you. Years ago, the great Bob Dylan sang a song that said, "You're gonna have to serve somebody...it might be the devil, or it might be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody."

He was right. Really, he was quoting the Bible. Because it says:

"Don't you realize that you can choose your own master? You can choose sin (with death) or else obedience (with acquittal). The one to whom you offer yourself—he will take you and be your master, and you will be his slave. Thank God that though you once chose to be slaves of sin, now you have obeyed with all your heart the teaching to which God has committed you. And now you are free from your old master, sin; and you have become slaves to your new master, righteousness.

I speak this way, using the illustration of slaves and masters, because it is easy to understand: just as you used to be slaves to all kinds of sin," *"so now you must let yourselves be slaves to all that is right and holy."* (Romans 6:16-19, tlb)

So now that you have been set free from your chains, offer yourself to serve Jesus. Go from this place determined to no longer be a slave to sin, but ask Jesus to give you the Holy Spirit, who will give you the power to be free from the chains of sin.

If you made a decision to be set free from chains, I would strongly encourage you to make your next act of faith to be to walk to that corner where it says "Starting Point." There are people there who will give you information that will be helpful to you.

But for all of us, may we be determined to leave here walking in the chain-breaking power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

“Now glory be to God, who by his mighty power at work within us is able to do far more than we would ever dare to ask or even dream of— infinitely beyond our highest prayers, desires, thoughts, or hopes. May he be given glory through us, and forever and ever through endless ages.”
(Ephesians 3:20-21, tlb)

Dismiss