



Sermon Series: You're Invited
Sermon Title: Freedom From Forgiveness
Date: 4/26/2026

John 8:36

Big Idea: The chains you carry were never meant to stay.

Many of us are carrying something we were never meant to hold onto. For some, it's shame - a quiet, internal verdict that certain things are no longer available to you because of your past. For others it's bitterness - the residue of a real wound that has slowly become a lens you see everything through. These two chains don't usually announce themselves. Shame feels like honesty. Bitterness feels like justice. But both of them do the same thing: they keep you living in a past that was never meant to have this much power over you. Jesus said it plainly in **John 8:36** That's not a suggestion. It's a promise. And today we'll see what that freedom actually looks like.

Reality 1: You Can Be Chained to Your Past

Shame and guilt are not the same thing, and the difference matters. Guilt says "I did something bad." Shame says "I am something bad." Guilt is about an action. Shame is a verdict about who you are. That distinction is important because you can receive forgiveness for an action and still be carrying a verdict that the forgiveness hasn't touched yet. That's why some people know they're forgiven and still feel attached to the past - the action got addressed, but the verdict didn't. And as long as the verdict stands, the chain stays.

Bitterness works differently but lands in the same place. When someone hurts you, they take something - your trust, your sense of safety, years you can't get back. Holding onto that debt feels like justice, but it ends up costing you far more than releasing it ever would. Both chains - shame over what you did and bitterness over what was done to you - keep you living in a past that was never meant to define you.

Reality 2: The Chains Don't Always Look Like Chains

In Luke 15, Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son - but there's a third character we often overlook: the older brother. He stayed. He worked. He was faithful. And when his younger brother returns after squandering everything, the father throws a party. The older brother's response is understandable - but Jesus shows us that his unforgiveness is costing him. The celebration is happening inside. And he's standing outside, holding onto a debt his brother owes him, missing everything because he won't let it go. His bitterness isn't hurting his brother - his brother is inside celebrating. The only one paying a price is him. The same father who ran to welcome the younger son goes out to meet the older one too. But the older brother has to decide whether to let it go or keep standing outside. Peter shows us the other chain. After denying Jesus three times ([Luke 22:61-62](#)), Peter saw the risen Christ - and still went back to fishing ([John 21](#)). This wasn't confusion about the resurrection. It was a man who couldn't escape the shame of what he'd done. Shame doesn't need you to doubt the resurrection - it just needs you to believe that the forgiveness available to everyone else somehow doesn't fully cover what you did.

Reality 3: Forgiveness Breaks Both Chains

Jesus didn't leave Peter chained to his worst moment. In [John 21:4-9](#), He shows up on the shore and builds a coal fire - the same word (anthrakia) used in [John 18:18](#) to describe the fire Peter stood beside when he denied Jesus. Jesus intentionally recreated the setting of Peter's worst moment, then asked three questions - one for each denial: "Do you love me? Feed my sheep" ([John 21:15-17](#)). He didn't gloss over what happened. He walked Peter directly back into the memory that was holding him and broke the chain with a commission. That's what [1 John 1:9](#) means - "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." Not just forgive - cleanse. For the chain of bitterness, [Ephesians 4:31-32](#) sets the standard: forgive one another just as God in Christ forgave you. The measure isn't how much the other person deserves it - it's how completely you were forgiven. And as Paul writes in [Philippians 3:13-14](#), forgetting what is behind doesn't mean amnesia. It means refusing to let the past dictate your future. Whatever verdict you've been living under, grace can land on that exact thing. Whatever debt you've been holding, you can release it - not because it wasn't real, but because the chain is costing you more than it's worth.

Discussion Questions:

1. Which chain feels more familiar to you right now - shame over something you did, or bitterness over something done to you? What makes it hard to let go?
2. The sermon drew a distinction between guilt ("I did something bad") and shame ("I am something bad"). Have you experienced that difference? How does shame distort the way you see yourself?
3. The older brother's unforgiveness was costing him the celebration happening inside. Is there a situation where holding onto a debt is keeping you outside a door God has opened?
4. Jesus met Peter at a coal fire - the same setting as his denial - and replaced three denials with three questions and a commission. What does this tell you about how God handles your worst moments?
5. Philippians 3:13-14 says forgetting what is behind means refusing to let the past dictate the future. What would it look like for you to press forward rather than stay chained to something behind you?