

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS

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Lesson 9 - Romans 6:1-23

Romans 6:1-3

Paul is always aware of the need to balance what he is saying. For example, the law makes people aware of sin, but the law is not evil. Good works are not the means of salvation, but they are necessary to our relationship with God. Grace is more powerful than sin, but that does not mean that we are free to sin.

As Paul begins chapter 6, he is again balancing his words. He has just given a long description of how Jesus is the new Adam who conquers sin and death. Paul knows that some of the Romans could misinterpret his message. Some may think that if sin occasions an outpouring of God's mercy, then why not sin? This sin gives God a chance to show how loving He is. But Paul says "No" to this way of thinking.

The question is asked in verse 1. Paul gives his answer in verse 2. Then Paul asks a question, "How can we who died to sin go on living in it?" What does he mean when he says that Christians have "died to sin?" Paul will spend the rest of chapter 6 addressing this question.

In verse 3, Paul tells the Roman Christians the meaning of their baptism. Through this sacramental action, they have been incorporated into the person of Jesus. Through baptism, they have died with Christ, and His death was a death to sin. This means that a Christian who is true to the baptismal promises cannot go on living in sin without denying the reality that has taken place in the sacrament. The sacramental action of being immersed in the waters of baptism symbolizes a sharing in the burial of Jesus. Being raised out of the waters symbolizes a sharing in His resurrection. As Christ's resurrection brought His human nature to a new dimension of life, so too, do Christians enter a new dimension of life. This new life is life in God, a sharing in divine life. This is how Christians have died to sin.

Romans 6: 4-14

The verses we will study today pertain to Paul's understanding of Christian baptism. He will speak of how we have died and risen again in Christ because we have been baptized into Christ. But before we actually look at these verses, let us take a few moments to address a related question. The question is, "What does it mean to say that the kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus Christ?"

If we examine the gospels, Matthew in particular, we find the theme which Jesus addresses most often is the theme of the “kingdom of God.” In Matthew 4:17 we read, “From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’” And in Matthew 4:23, “Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.” The kingdom of God, or synonymously the kingdom of heaven, is the benevolent reign of God over all creation. This definition, though simple, is filled with ramifications. For example, although the Church is part of the kingdom of God, it is not coextensive with the kingdom of God. The Church and the kingdom is not the same thing. It would be more accurate to say that the Church serves the kingdom of God. The purpose of the Church is to build up the kingdom.

The kingdom is present wherever God is accepted as the supreme good. The kingdom is present wherever peace and justice are fostered. God is the source of all that is good, and so when goodness is desired, that is a desire for the kingdom - for God.

In our Christian theology, we say that the kingdom of God has come in its supreme form in the person of Jesus. Jesus is completely obedient to the will of the Father, which means that in Jesus, God’s reign is totally accepted. As the incarnation of the Father’s love, Jesus is the supreme good present among us. The miracles Jesus performs are signs that the kingdom is present, for they show the loving mercy of God being bestowed upon the people. By looking at Jesus and seeing how he lived and what he did for us, we can say that God’s kingdom has come to its fullness in the person of Jesus. The kingdom in its totality is not yet complete, for all creation is not yet totally united with God. But in Jesus we see what the kingdom is meant to be. In Jesus we see that sin and death have been conquered. This is confirmed by his resurrection. In Jesus we see what God has planned for us as members of his kingdom.

Now, we bring into this discussion our Christian baptism. Paul says that by our baptism, we have been incorporated into the person of Jesus. We have become one with him. This does not deny our own essence or individuality. Our personality is not obliterated by our baptism. But in a real and unique way, we become one with Christ. It is in this sense that Paul can say that we have died and risen again with Christ. Because of our identity with Christ, it can also be said that when the Father looks at us he is seeing his Son. The love which the Father shares with the Son, he shares with us. This is what it means to be a member of the kingdom of God. This is what it means when we say that our hope in final salvation is rooted in the person of Jesus.

But baptism is not a magic act. Baptism is the promise of God that if we accept the gift of faith he wishes to bestow upon us, then we can be certain that he will bring us to the fullness of life in his presence. Love can never be forced, or it ceases to be love. God will not force his love upon us. There is a place for our free will response in acts of charity and holiness. This is what Paul is talking about in the verses we will study. Let’s look at them now.

We are studying a segment which has to do with the meaning of dying and rising with Christ. Paul has his imaginary questioner ask why we should not go on sinning so that grace may abound. Paul responds, "By no means!" We have died to sin by our death with Christ. We cannot go on living in sin.

In verse 4, Paul continues his teaching. He says that in the sacrament of baptism, we have shared in Christ's death. The waters of baptism symbolize our burial with him as we are immersed. But Christ did not remain in death. He was raised up by the power of God, and we share in this resurrection. In the Risen Christ we see the fullness of God's power and glory as well as the fullness of his kingdom. The victory over sin and death has already taken place in the one person, Jesus Christ. It has yet to be fully accomplished in the rest of creation, although we know that the victory is already won. By his resurrection, the human nature of Jesus has been transformed and raised up to glorified life. Again, because of our baptism, we too share in this resurrected life. This is why Paul says to the Roman Christians that they cannot go on living in sin. They have been raised up to new life. But since the kingdom is not totally complete within us, it is still possible for us to sin. That is why the call to conversion is a constant call.

Verse 5 should be read in conjunction with 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, where Paul goes into greater detail with regard to the resurrection of Jesus. He says that if we are not raised from the dead, then Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised then we are the most pitiable of people. This is what Paul says in verse 5 and this is what we profess at the end of the Nicene Creed each Sunday when we say, "(We) look forward to the resurrection of the dead."

To understand verse 6, we need to center our attention on the transformation which takes place in baptism. Paul says that "our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed." In this verse, Paul is not saying that the body is evil. That was an early Greek view. Paul is coming out of a Jewish background in which the body is looked upon as something good, a gift from God. What Paul means by the "body of sin" is anything which is in opposition to God. Baptism has transformed us in such a way as to remove us from our previous selves. We have been changed and made one with Christ. This new life is meant to be a life free from sin. Before baptism we were slaves of sin, under its power and dominion. Now, we are alive in Christ. This is new life.

Verse 7 can be understood in two ways, and it is not clear which one Paul intended. He could be making use of a legal concept. If someone has a case against someone else and the defendant dies, then the litigation stops. This was accepted in Jewish law. Paul could mean that sin has a certain power over human beings, but since we die in baptism then that power is broken. The other way in which Paul could be using this sentence is with the person's ability to sin. Death so changes a person that the ability to sin is removed.

This could also be Paul's interpretation with regard to the freedom given by baptism. In either case, Paul reiterates the belief that a transformation has taken place.

Verse 8 expresses Paul's version of certain hope. Paul has no doubt that our destiny is to share the life of God. We know this is certain because it is based on the promise of God that what happened to Christ will happen to us. As Christ was raised from the dead, so too will we be raised up.

The Risen Christ can never die again, for death no longer has power over him. This verse 9 echoes the profound statement of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:26 in which he proclaims, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." In the person of Jesus, death has been destroyed. Since we share his life, we know that we too will be raised up in glory.

In verse 10, Paul reminds his readers that death is due to sin. Christ willingly took upon himself the full weight of our sins, and in doing so, he was willing to go down in death. But in his resurrection he broke the chains of death, and so the life he now lives is a life of complete union with the Father. This same life is promised to us because of our baptism.

Verse 11 is a reminder to the Roman Christians to live the life they have received in baptism. Sin is now a direct contradiction to the relationship they share with God. They have died to sin with Christ, and now the challenge is to live this new life.

In verses 12 through 14, Paul envisions a battle between good and evil. The Christian must be aware of this conflict and choose to be an instrument of God for the sake of good. In verse 12, Paul gives practical advice: he warns his readers to guard against the sinful inclinations which try to rule the body. This warning not only concerns sexual matters, but also anything which is contrary to the life in Christ to which a baptized person is called. Pride, injustice and prejudice are also passions which attempt to rule in opposition to goodness.

Verse 13 continues the image of the battle with Paul speaking of the "members" as instruments, or weapons, of goodness or evil. Having been brought from death to new life in Christ, the Christian is now the extension of God. God is always free to communicate directly with his people, as he did with Paul. But this is a rare occurrence. Most of the time, God chooses to touch the lives of his people through other human beings. The love and mercy of God is shared through the love and mercy of the people in our lives. This is a tremendous responsibility. Our actions can be the means by which a person is drawn closer to Christ or is driven away from him.

In verse 14, Paul returns to one of his main themes. He marks the difference between law and grace. Because of faith and baptism, the Christian is free from trying to achieve salvation through fulfilling the law.

The Christian knows of the love of God, and so the response to God comes out of love rather than fear. This means that grace is the motivating force behind Christian living. The fear is not the breaking of the law, but the breaking of the heart of one whose love is infinite.

Romans 6: 15-21

Having mentioned in verse 14 that Christians are no longer under the law but under grace, Paul is reminded of a question. In 6:1 he imagined someone asking whether it was prudent to continue in sin since God forgives sins. This gives God the opportunity to be merciful. Paul's response was a very clear "No!" In verse 15, he asks the same question because he knows that someone could easily misunderstand what he is saying. In verses 16 through 21, Paul explains his reasoning.

In verse 16, Paul uses the imagery of slavery and freedom to make his point. He says that if the Christian returns to sin then sin is the master. This type of slavery leads to death, physical and spiritual. But if someone becomes a slave of God, that person is actually living in freedom and this freedom brings righteousness. The freedom that comes from grace is never meant as permission to sin; rather it is a call to service for good.

The question is often raised at this point with regard to institutional slavery in the society in which Paul lived. Why did he not speak out against it? In his letter to Philemon, Paul did expect Philemon to treat Onesimus, the slave, as a brother, but Paul still told Onesimus to return to his master. From Paul's theology, we can see that he envisions a new relationship among all God's people, but it seems that slavery was such a part of the society that its intrinsic evil was not yet clearly understood. It would take time and reflection on the gospel message before a higher moral stance was perceived.

In verse 17, Paul offers thanks to God for bringing his people out of the slavery of sin into life in grace. Paul reminds the Roman Christians that when they accepted the faith, they did so with sincere hearts. They had been instructed in the faith, and they understood what was asked of them. They did not make an emotional decision which faded with time. It should come as no surprise that this instructional approach is consistent with Jesus' words to his followers. Jesus told his apostles and disciples that if they chose to follow him, they could expect hardship and persecution. This verse in Paul's letter indicates that the converts to Christianity received the same message.

In verse 18, Paul repeats the thought contained in verses 16 and 17. His phrase "slaves of righteousness" carries no derogatory meaning. Paul uses this phrase in order to continue the imagery of slavery. But being a slave to God or a slave of righteousness is the ultimate freedom anyone could achieve. Although Paul lived almost four hundred years before St. Augustine, he would give full consent to Augustine's famous quotation, "My heart will never rest, O Lord, until it rests in Thee." Paul knows that we were made for God, and only in him do we find true freedom.

Verse 19 is a form of an apology. Paul realizes that human slavery is an inadequate analogy when trying to explain the relationship between God and his people. But he wants them to be certain of the seriousness of sin and even more certain of what it means to be in Christ. Sin has a way of deadening human sensitivity. This is what causes “greater and greater iniquity.” Once a person gives in to sin, the subsequent sins become easier. This is part of the diabolical nature of sin. But for those who strive to be slaves of righteousness, there is the promise of grace which leads to sanctification.

In verse 20, Paul makes use of a play on words. He tells his readers that when they were slaves of sin they were free from righteousness. Paul knows that being free from righteousness is not true freedom. But having spoken of slavery to righteousness, he wants to complete the logical sequence. Paul also wants to make certain that the Roman Christians understand that this type of freedom is not desirable.

With verse 21 we are stopping half way through a continuous thought. Paul wants to show the futility of sin. Sin has no advantage. It produces nothing good. The result of sin is shame before God for having chosen something which alienates a person from God. And the final result of sin is death. Paul knows of what he speaks. At this point he probably recalled the times he had persecuted and imprisoned Christians before his conversion. He probably recalled his approval of Stephen’s execution. But Paul also knows the love of a forgiving God. It is in response to this love that Paul has dedicated his entire life to the service of God.

With these two verses, we conclude chapter 6 and the segment titled “Slaves of (or, to) Righteousness.” Paul uses the imagery of slavery to describe the relationship a person has either to sin or to God. The slavery to sin leads to death. The slavery to God leads to eternal life.

In verse 22, Paul reminds the Roman Christians that by their baptism they have been freed from slavery to sin. Their faith in the person of Jesus has now made them slaves of God. Paul is aware that the term “slavery” usually carries negative connotations, but he still uses this word in order to continue the primary imagery. The slavery to God, or being owned by God, is good, for it leads to sanctification. Notice the last short sentence in this verse. Paul says, “The end is eternal life.” This sentence indicates that the sanctification which Christians receive at baptism is an ongoing process. Just as the kingdom of God is a reality which is already present but not yet complete, so too, in baptism the Christian is sanctified, i.e., made to share in God’s life, but the fullness of that life is yet to come.

This understanding of sanctification is one of the reasons why, in the Catholic tradition, we do not say “once saved, always saved.” If a person accepts the gift of faith and never rejects that gift, then we can say that that person is certain to reach the fullness of eternal life.

But because of human free will, there is the possibility that a person may choose to reject the gift and thereby lose salvation. The process of sanctification begins with God's free gift of his love, and if we allow his gift to grow within us we have the promise of eternal life.

In verse 23, Paul repeats the main theme contained in this segment. He uses the word "wages" because wages are earned. They are something for which a person works. If a person works at sin then that which is paid is death, both physical and spiritual.

At the end of this verse, Paul speaks of life "in Christ Jesus." Paul intentionally places "Christ" first because he knows that "Christ" is not a proper name, but rather, a title. The title "Christ" means "the Anointed One." "Christ" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew "Messiah." The kings and priests of Judaism were anointed because they had a unique role in God's relationship with his people. Jesus is "the Anointed One" because of his unique role as Son of God and savior.

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