

Slaves of Righteousness

Preached on The Seventh Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
July 26, 2020
Text: Rom. 6: 19-23

In our reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans, he presents us with one of his strict binaries. You are either a slave of sin, or a slave of God. This is the case for every man, woman, or child in the world. Those are our options. The King James translation found in the Book of Common Prayer translates the Greek word for slave—*doulos*—as “servant.” Now the King James is a masterpiece of English literature, and its formative effect on the English speaking world has been profound. But rendering *doulos* as “servant” betrays our cultural distaste for the idea of slavery; nowhere else in the non-Biblical literature of the first century does the word refer to anything other than a slave. A slave is someone bound to a master without any ownership rights of his own; a servant is technically allowed to leave the employment of the Lord of the manor, for instance. We need to let Paul's meaning stand.

Picking up from last Sunday: either we are enslaved to sin and free with regard to righteousness, resulting in death; or, we are freed from sin and enslaved to God, resulting in sanctification and eternal life. There is no middle ground. There is no place for a person who says, “Jesus is my Savior, but He isn't my Lord.” There are two and only two masters and we *must* choose: Will we continue as a slave of sin—the default mode for all of us by birth—or will we submit to Jesus as Lord and present ourselves as slaves of righteousness? God has bought us with the blood of Christ and so we belong to Him. As such, we owe Him total, unquestioning obedience.

Given that, says Paul, we must now yield our members as slaves to righteousness. This verb “yield”, also translated as “present” in more contemporary translations, repeats Paul's command in 6:13, “present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments [weapons] of righteousness to God.” The verb “yield” or “present” means “to give oneself as a slave.” As Douglas Moo explains in his commentary on Romans “[Paul] thus makes clear that Christians should serve righteousness with all the single-minded dedication that characterized their pre-Christian service of such ‘idols’ as self, money, lust, pleasure, and power.” Since we repeatedly gave ourselves to those false gods, so we now must repeatedly give ourselves to serve God and righteousness.

As those who are in Christ, the dominion of sin over us has been destroyed. This doesn't mean that we cannot sin; it means that sin is no longer our master. We are not bound to it; it does not own us. We are no longer under law, but under grace. Does this mean that good and evil no longer matter? Does Christian liberty mean we can continue sinning with abandon? Does God now grade on a curve, so that we all get A', no matter how we live? Certainly not! Rather, it means we are no longer under the condemnation due those who cannot keep the law

perfectly (which is all of us). The penalty for sin, to which all men are subject without grace, has been abolished for those “in Christ”. We are now under new management. The grace of God now dwells within us through Christ. He is our Redeemer, but also the one we are to emulate. To the extent He reigns in our hearts, we no longer want to sin. This is the process we call “sanctification.” We should be able to tell where we’re heading by our growing life of holiness or sanctification.

Now this goes against what Christianity has come to mean in contemporary America. The popular view among a huge swath of the Christians is that Jesus’s death gets us “off the hook” legally concerning the consequences of our sin. His righteousness is imputed to us through conversion, however that is understood. Now we can breathe easy. There is nothing more we need to do.

This view is at least partially the result of a rather questionable separation of justification from sanctification. Justification, on this view, is the really crucial thing, whereby one is truly made right with God. Sanctification is a conforming to Christ undertaken by the faithful out of gratitude. But here is the important thing: sanctification is in no way required for salvation. That would imply that we have some responsibility here; that we somehow contribute to our salvation. And that, we are told, lands us back in “works righteousness,” and so denies grace. So we should try to be better people; but nothing is really at stake if we find this burdensome and would rather just relax. All that there really is to Christianity is that I’m forgiven and headed for Heaven.

But if this is true, it seems that a lot of the New Testament is, if not misleading, at least unnecessary. So much of Paul’s perplexity with sin and how difficult it is to conquer appears to be misplaced concern. Why, if sin is no longer a real problem for Christians to tackle, does Paul talk about it so much? Why does he enjoin us over and over again to live the new life of the Spirit and not give ourselves over to sin?

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness.
(Rom. 6: 12-13)

For Paul, sin appears a problem for those who have allegedly been “saved,” including him.

I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. I find it a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! (Rom. 7: 18, 21-24a)

If you hold to the contemporary view, why should this battle with sin be taken so seriously? Most modern American Christians see this struggling with sin to be an attempt to earn salvation, or, at least, a futile attempt to defeat sin. We actually take a strange comfort in

the realization that sin is inevitable. It's just human nature, as we love to say. All Paul's talk of slavery to sin, then, is just his rather hyperbolic, Semitic way of making that point. But he needs to relax, or it will begin to appear that he possesses a defective faith. For some reason he persists in seeing the Christian life as one lived in a certain way, not as a mere notional assent that Jesus died for me. He wants to insist that something should be happening in us that attests to the reality of Christ in us.

For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and lawlessness...so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. (Rom. 6:19)

By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit...Those who are in the flesh cannot please God...Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. (Rom. 8:3a-4, 8, 9b)

So there is, according to Paul, something evident in the life of a true Christian in addition to belief that Jesus is Lord. Perhaps it is a true growing in sanctification. St. John concurs:

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. (1 John 2: 3-4, 5b-6)

This means that if we're not moving in the direction of holiness, we need to examine whether we truly belong to the Lord. Do we love God more now than we used to? Do we hate our own sin more and more? Do we love others more, as seen in laying down our rights to serve them? Do we see the fruit of the Spirit more in our daily lives?

Yes, sin is so pervasive that we feel helpless before it. But the grip of sin is not inevitable for the Christian. We have been delivered from it because God has given us a new nature through the new birth. But we must live as if that is really true. As we continually walk with Christ and conform ourselves to him, things begin to change. Our desires begin to alter and we desire to sin less and live more and more instinctively as Christ would. We will advance in holiness and look forward to the day when we are in unbroken fellowship with God. As Paul says, "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification, and its end, eternal life." (6: 22)

This is our new position in Christ. God did it for us through His grace and power. It is true of *all* Christians, not just of some who have attained a higher level of spirituality. As Paul repeatedly states, in Christ we *all* have died to sin and have been raised to newness of life. Therefore, be what you now are. Live in light of your new position in Christ. We are now in Christ by the Spirit, identified with Him in His death to sin and resurrection to new life. We need to live as if sin is no longer our master.

But how do we get to this point? The simple answer is: discipleship. It is surprising that something so important to the New Testament authors, and Jesus himself, has not caught on yet in American Christianity. At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. (Matt. 28: 19-20a)

This makes clear that Jesus wanted his followers to *be* and to *do* certain things. He wanted them to be his disciples, and this presumably meant growing to be more like him. Unfortunately, few churches in our country seem too concerned about this. One reason for this we have already discussed, namely, bad theology. Another reason is probably that many Christians in America see themselves primarily as consumers of religion, and are interested in what they "get out" of church. Discipleship sounds too demanding. Clergy, of course, realize this. In a religious free market, Christians have lots of options. Pastors are afraid of driving people away. Hence, "discipleship" might be reduced to an 8 week study series at best. Head knowledge, after all, is not too threatening to our lifestyle.

But while propositional knowledge is important, it is not discipleship. When Jesus told the Apostles to go and make disciples, they knew what he was commanding. They had experienced the phenomenon themselves. Discipleship was about going and doing. Jesus mentored them into understanding what living the Kingdom in all areas of life really looked like. He showed them how to act as a counter-culture against the principalities and powers oppressing mankind. To be a disciple of Jesus is to do what he said, not just give it lip service.

In churches across the theological spectrum in this country, we've set up a system where you have trusting Jesus over here and obeying Jesus over there, and no connection between the two. An unwritten contract is in place, which stipulates that if we claim our allegiance to Christ, he will then meet our needs. The purpose of the Church is therefore primarily therapeutic. We go there to get an emotional "boost." But this doesn't really result in changed lives or in seriously tapping into God's powerful reality. Pastors and congregations lose a sense of passionate purpose and settle for being a support group. So when people hear about discipleship or the spiritual disciplines they think, "Oh no, more work."

But the disciplines are really a way to live into the reality in which we claim to believe. They are meant to enliven us, and bring us the "peace that passeth all understanding." If we claim to trust Jesus, we have to believe he knows what he is talking about. When we actually begin to live the way he says to, we learn and progress. It isn't trying that gets us there; it's *training* that gets us there. As we make an effort, we will have his assistance. As Jesus said in John 14: "Obey my commandments and I will send the paraclete and he will help you." He didn't say, "I'll send you the paraclete and then you will obey my commandments." Real faith in Christ means we choose His way and we take what comes with that. Probably the biggest fault of the Church throughout its history has been not taking Jesus seriously here. As the late Dallas Willard put it, "[s]o much of what goes on in the Church and in organized religion is nothing more than a systematic attempt to protect our way of living against the wild claims of Jesus on us."

So what do we need to do if we want our Christian lives to be more than a “holding pattern” that waits for God to whisk us away to Heaven someday? Church attendance is a good start, as is partaking of the sacraments. But we must also resolve daily to present ourselves to God as slaves of righteousness. He is our new Master. We no longer have authority over our souls or bodies—He does. Talk about counter-cultural! In an era that prizes personal autonomy and rights of self-definition above all else, this is a real challenge. But in becoming slaves of righteousness, we paradoxically become free. We are not bound by our past failures. Rather, we are free to exult in our blessed present, enjoying all of the unfathomable riches of Christ. And we can look forward to our glorious spiritual future of eternal life free from all sin in the presence of the Lord. We won’t be perfect in this life; but we can, through God’s grace, grow in holiness and so continually make ourselves more fit for Heaven.

In the Name...