

Sermon Proper 7 2017

June 25, 2017

Romans 6:12-23

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The sermon text this morning is the Epistle lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans. Amen.

While we are meditating on the Epistle lesson for this morning, it's worth beginning by noting something about the theme from the Old Testament reading and the Gospel. If you look at both of those, did you see what they were about? They were about persecution. The Gospel is about the persecution, presumably that the Christians faced from the Jews just after the life of Jesus until the time of the destruction of the temple. And the Old Testament lesson is about Jeremiah's persecution by the Jews as he spoke the Lord's Word regarding the fact that they would be taken into exile, something they didn't want to hear. In either case, the Lord's people were facing injury or even death in light of their confession.

Thankfully in our day and place, that's not necessarily a concern. Certainly, for Christians throughout the world it is, for example the Christians who are being killed with regularity by ISIS. In fact, while they may not worry for their life per se, there is the restriction of speech in Canada such that pastors cannot preach freely from their pulpits regarding the Biblical teaching on sexuality. But when it comes down to it, we don't have to fear at this time that we will be dragged from our homes and harmed because of our beliefs. With that being said, that does not mean that we are without attack from our enemies. And as I use that language, do you recall who our enemies are? Sin, death, and the devil.

In fact, as we speak like this, what is the gift of the Gospel but freedom from these things? Freedom from sin, freedom from death, freedom from the devil? The Gospel is that Christ has suffered to forgive sin that through that forgiveness His death would bring about the resurrection of the dead, and in those things the devil has lost his power. Of course, even though he has lost his power, the devil still rears his head and uses sin to attack us all over the place. He uses it to attack even the Gospel itself.

How do I mean? Well, look at the world. Does the world understand the Gospel? No, for example, recently I was watching a show where the grandfather was telling his grandson about heaven. He was saying how great it would be there, and how everyone that he loved would be there, that everyone would be there. Does the Gospel promise

that? No, there is certainly the offer of grace which appeared to all men as Paul says in Titus, but it's clear that many will not be saved. This is because there is real sin, and real rejection of God.

Likewise, on the flipside of this belief, which is called universalism, I was talking to someone recently about going to church. And this man was saying how he had grown up Catholic and didn't go to a Catholic Church anymore. That would have been OK except for the reason. Why was he OK with it? Because the new church wasn't much different: it taught about how to be a better person. Now, does God want you to be better? Of course, He doesn't want you to sin! Of course, He wants you to be more sanctified and holy. In fact, that's what this lesson from Romans Six is about. It's about understanding that God desires you to be freed from slavery to sin and to be made alive in Christ.

But you see that imagery of slavery hits the nail on the head. As we think about these two examples, which in their own rights deny the Gospel, we see how sin permeates even the way we think. Is it nice to think that everybody gets to go to heaven because they're nice? And that we can just be better people and the world will be OK? Sure, that sounds lovely, but when we look at the picture of slavery that Scripture describes, it's not such a rosy view, is it? No like I said, the image of slavery hits the nail on the head. And the false belief in the world of how this works reveals our slavery, as does our own false belief within the church, as well as our proclivity to still sin.

And think about slavery. Paul talks a bit about slavery in relation to God's law, making the point that we're "**not under the Law, but under Grace.**" And so, saying that we are saved by our works would be like saying that we were slaves under an abusive owner during the Civil War, but when the Emancipation took effect in the South we still chose to remain under the servitude of that owner. Rather, the freedom of Christ should be understood like the story of the woman who was bought by Lincoln at a slave auction, and upon meeting him and hearing that he had purchased her freedom, she begged to live and serve him in his household. This is what the promise of freedom does: it brings to us a new life.

But like I said, the devil still attacks us. He attacks us in our freedom and he says, "good you are free, now show just how free you are. Do what you want to do. Live how you want to live. All of the things you know are wrong, it's OK, keep doing them because that's what your freedom is for! Who cares if you are generous? Who cares if you are loving? Who cares if you are kind and pious? You are free!"

But what does Paul say to that? Do you see there? He says, **“Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! 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?”** Should you sin? If you have the fork in the road where you say, should I do this thing which I know is wrong, what do you do? You don’t sin, right? That’s clear. Paul tells you why. If you obey that sin, that leads to death. In fact, that’s exactly what sin brings: death. **The wages of sin is death.** And that word for wages there is like the subsistence that something pays. Sin lures you with this illusion of joy and pleasure, but in the end it gives you a subsistence of killing you.

But **“the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** You were enslaved. You were dead, bound to that death and unable to walk yourself. But now is life in Jesus. He took your sin upon Himself and was crucified that by His resurrection you would live. As Paul says, **“thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”** You see, now you have a new master, like I said before you, this is like the slave whom Lincoln bought, you now want to serve your new master. You don’t want to serve sin, you want to serve righteousness. God purchased and redeemed you in love in Christ, and now you want to pass that love along.

But what if you don’t? By that I mean, there is a real struggle for us as Christians, isn’t there? Paul will go on to talk about that in Romans Seven. He’ll talk about the good he wants to do that he doesn’t. He’ll talk about the sin he doesn’t want to commit, but he still does. This is hard! And the devil keeps attacking us with this sin, doesn’t he?

So, what do we do? Do we double down and try that much harder? Well, let’s be clear if that sin is reigning over you, you have to admit what’s really going on. If you have a sin that rules over you, you have acknowledge that that’s what’s happening. So, does that mean that you have to just try that much harder?

Well, you should certainly struggle, but in the end, you see you are powerless. I was listening to a podcast this week that compared it to being an alcoholic. How does an alcoholic gain freedom? By acknowledging he’s not free. By acknowledging that the bottle has power over him and not him over the bottle. In the same way, you are a slave remember? How does a slave properly gain freedom? By someone coming from the outside and purchasing you. By someone giving you a new life. And that is what God

has done. He has purchased and redeemed you, not with gold or silver, but with the holy and precious blood of Jesus and His innocent suffering and death for you. And if you know this chapter you know that Paul has described where this death became the death of your sins. Do you know what he says? In baptism. You were buried with Jesus in baptism so that your sins died on the cross with Him and are laid to rest in His tomb. Now those sins are dead and you walk in newness of life by His resurrection. It's your identity now! It's your life now!

In fact, as I say that I want to clarify this for a minute. What we've been talking about here relates to two commonly used terms: justification and sanctification. Justification is the forgiveness of sins, the making of us to be right before God. And sanctification is our holiness. Now we receive that holiness by faith when we are justified, and so it becomes easy for us to focus on sanctification as only our good works. Often the two are conflated. But the good works don't make us holy. How are we made holy? We are made holy by Christ, by His blood, by His forgiveness. And where is that for us? In that baptism, in the Word of God, in the forgiveness of Jesus' body and blood given and shed for you. And as we refrain from sin, we refrain from being tainted by the unholiness of it. And as we receive God's gifts we are sanctified and love more and more because of God's love for us. This is new life in Christ. In other words, the good works we do result from that new life. They reflect it, they manifest it.

So, yes devil still attacks us. But we have the weapon of these promises. That this sin is powerless against the forgiveness of Christ. Death is powerless against His resurrection. The devil is powerless against the God who devoured Him by succumbing to evil on the cross and creating the greatest good in the resurrection. And as you hear that promise, our Lord draws you to Himself in His loving care, so that you can see what Jesus said, that you are far more important to Him than many sparrows.

And to bring this full circle, then with that promise of that love He shows you where your strength is in trials: in Him. He is your strength in trials, even in persecution. He is your strength as He promises this grace, promises this new, eternal life in Christ. As we hear of this sanctification, this new life in Christ, may He grant us that strength in the midst of the attacks of the evil one even now. Amen.