

Pentecost 4 / June 25, 2023

Romans 6:18

“And having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”

Slaves of sin or righteousness

In our text Paul addresses the question of slavery to sin and the desires of our sinful nature. He asks: Are we slaves of sin or righteousness? Do we serve God or sin? Slavery to sin is human nature since the first people broke their perfect relationship with the heavenly Father. Sin came into the world through one man and is passed down to all his descendants. Slavery to sin is both subtle and obvious. Addictions visibly rule some people's lives. Hobbies, interests and pursuits that cut off our relationship with God and fellowship with believers, is a more subtle slavery to sin. We live in a time when there is no time for God.

In the scriptures the Holy Spirit teaches we are all by nature slaves of sin and servants to our sinful nature. We sin in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. As Paul observes in our text, the end result of slavery to sin is death. Death comes to all of us, because all sin and fall short of the glory of God. We all need to be set free from slavery to sin, enter into the service of God and become slaves of righteousness through faith in Christ Jesus. Sin pays the wages of death. God gives the gift of eternal life for the sake of Jesus our God and Saviour.

People today are uncomfortable with the word 'slave' and so our translation consistently uses the word 'servant,' And while the word can be translated as 'slave' or 'servant' depending upon the context, Paul identifies himself to the church at Rome as "the slave of Christ Jesus." He made no bones about it he was the property of His Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, as are all who believe and are baptized into His death and resurrection. The name 'Christian' literally means 'the possession of Christ.' In 1 Corinthians, Paul reminds us, "You are not your own, you were bought at a price." The price was the precious blood of Christ. The previous owners were sin, the devil and death. Although Paul took pride in being a free Roman citizen, he felt no shame in identifying himself as a slave and Christ Jesus as his owner. Christ had purchased him from the most degrading servitude to the most cruel masters. Sin once ruled over his mortal body to make him do its desires. Christ had set him free. Now he was a slave to Christ's righteousness

Paul was also a sinner. Writing to his disciple Timothy, Paul called himself 'the foremost of sinners.' Describing himself in such a manner, a person might think he had a lurid past, the kind of person you could write a best seller about, a real sinner. He was a real sinner. Sin ruled over him to make him do its desires, but it was a more subtle slavery. Outwardly he was a moral and religious man. He kept the rules of the strictest Jewish sect, the pharisees. He wasn't a thief. He wasn't sexually immoral. He was circumcised, observed the Sabbath and kept the dietary laws of the Jews.

Yet, he was a slave to sin. He did everything for himself, so he would be honoured by God. He was a sinner, because despite the glitter of his outward actions, he sought a relationship with God on the basis of his works of righteousness; done in outward conformity to the demands of the law. Done not out of love for God, but for his own blessing and benefit. With his shining life he served, not God's righteousness, but the righteousness of his sinful flesh. He was redeemed from His sins by the precious blood of Jesus, in whom He received the righteousness of God that is given through faith and experienced as forgiveness.

The sinful flesh is not simply our physical bodies. It is our whole spiritual nature, body and soul, that puts itself first and everyone and everything else second, even God. Especially God! The sinful flesh makes itself known in outward violations of God's law; lying, theft, profanity etcetera. It manifests itself more subtly in our ability to clearly see the faults and failures of others, while remaining nose blind to the odour of our own sins. The sinful flesh is our ability to convince ourselves that we are giving everything to God. When in reality, we are doing everything for our own blessing and benefit and using God as a means to our end. Paul needs to remind us, "Let not sin reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions." Even though Christ has redeemed us from the control of the sinful nature and enslaved us to His righteousness, the sinful nature remains within us. We must resist it, until it is completely uprooted in the resurrection of Christ Jesus.

How subtle is the allurements of the sinful nature? The sinful nature seeks its own good, even in things that are not evil in and of themselves. Peter obeyed the desires of his sinful nature when he denied knowing Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest. When Jesus spoke to Peter it's important note what Jesus said and what He didn't say. Jesus didn't ask Peter if he would do better the next time. Jesus asked him, "Do you love me?" He didn't

threaten him with hell, or ask if he wanted to go to heaven. He asked him “Do you love me?” Sometimes Christians attempt to evangelize non-believers by asking if they want to go to heaven. Who wouldn’t want to go to heaven? Given the choice between suffering eternal torment in hell and enjoying eternal bliss in heaven, who wouldn’t choose heaven. Wanting to spend eternity in a good place and loving Jesus are not the same thing. Jesus doesn’t ask if we want to go to a good place. He asks, “Do you love me?” Do you want to belong to me as my possession?

He loves us so deeply and dearly that He gave Himself into death on the cross, so we would be redeemed from our sins and freed from slavery to sin and the condemnation of eternal death. He comes into our hearts to break the chains of sin, so that we would be His own treasured possession. As His treasured possession, He wants us to love and serve Him even as He loves and serves us; with our whole heart, even if it means suffering and hardship for a time. He asks, “Do you love me,” even if it means denying yourselves, taking up your crosses and following me through hell itself? When Jesus asks, “Do you love me,” the sinful flesh blushes and looks away, because it loves itself. That’s its nature. The heart made right with God through the righteousness of Christ, received as forgiveness and brought into relationship with Him, is empowered and enabled to answer “Lord you know that I love you.”

We are all slaves and servants to people and things. It is the greatest indignity to inflict slavery on another human being, which is why bible translators hesitate to use the word. It is a terrible thing to be a slave to a person, habit or addiction. It is a gracious thing to be a slave to God in Christ Jesus. It is a terrible thing to be enslaved to the sinful nature, the devil and their desires. They are cruel taskmasters. They return service to them with misery and death. It is a most blessed thing to be God’s slave for the sake of Christ Jesus. Slavery to God in Christ is freedom from sin, the devil and death. God is the most loving Master. He adopts us as children for the sake of Christ and calls Himself our Father. He treats us not as humans treat their slaves and servants. He treats us as members of His household, as daughters and sons.

Paul concludes our text saying, “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” God doesn’t pay wages. God gives gifts. People can work for a company all their lives and dedicate themselves to its interests with all their heart and soul. For their service they receive wages and a pension benefit. When they retire the company has no further obligation towards them. They have received their wages. God calls us into relationship with Him through faith in Christ. He makes us partners in Christ Jesus. No matter how long or how short our earthly service may be, He gives everyone the gift of eternal life. God doesn’t pay wages. God gives gifts. The greatest gifts are Christ as our Redeemer and faith in Him as Saviour.

God bless us to live with Him in love through faith in Christ Jesus, until faith passes into sight. In Jesus’ Name.
Amen