

The Seventh Sunday after Trinity
Romans 6:19-23: "Who Is Your Master?"
July 25/26, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Thy work alone, O Christ,
Can ease this weight of sin;
Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God,
Can give me peace within.
Thy love to me, O God,
Not mine, O Lord, to Thee,
Can rid me of this dark unrest
And set my spirit free. *Amen.*
(*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary #433, v. 2*)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the sixth chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. / For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. 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. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who bound our sin and death to Himself, so we would receive His forgiveness and life, dear fellow redeemed:

One of the lies the devil plants in people's minds is that they are completely independent and free. "You are your own boss," he says. "You make your own decisions. You don't have to answer to anyone else." This attitude is perhaps more prevalent in America where we enjoy such wide-ranging personal freedom. But we are not as free as we like to imagine, and we do not have freedom in all matters, particularly in spiritual ones.

In today's text, Paul shows that every human being conceived and born into the world comes with strings attached. He writes that all by nature are "*slaves of sin.*" That is strong language! A slave is someone who must follow the will of his master. He must obey at all times. He is not allowed to chart his own course or make his own decisions. It's a hard life.

This is how Paul describes our connection to sin. Sin is our taskmaster. It forces our will to submit to its plans, to participate in its campaign. It demoralizes us. It causes us tremendous suffering. Sin offers no way out, no relief, no hope. After all is said and done, the only promise sin makes is that we are unquestionably going to die. Death is *"the wages of sin."* Death is what our slavery of sin has earned us.

This is the way it is for all of us. We do not start out good and then either stay good or go bad. Neither do we start out neutral, choosing good or bad from that point. We start out in slavery – spiritual slavery – slavery to sin. But there is hope for sinners. Paul outlines this hope at the beginning of Romans chapter 6 which we heard last week. This hope is Baptism into Christ.

Through water and His powerful Word, Jesus comes to the sinner in Baptism and gives him tremendous gifts. He brings forgiveness for all sin on account of His death on the cross, and He brings eternal life on account of His resurrection. Jesus' work on our behalf frees us from our slavery to sin and to death. He broke apart our chains of spiritual slavery. Sin is not our master anymore. Or at least it shouldn't be.

Baptism joins us with Jesus, but it does not stop us from sinning. Sin is washed away in Baptism, but our sinful nature remains. This means that until the end of this life, we must be ready for a fight. Our sinful nature, our old Adam, wants to lead us back to a life of impurity and lawlessness, back to our slavery of sin. Our new man of faith, on the other hand, wants us to live a life of righteousness drawn from and focused on Jesus.

If we do not understand or acknowledge that this battle is going on inside us, then sin will gain the upper hand. This happens to those who are baptized into Jesus receiving His blessings, but then fail as they get older to fortify and strengthen their faith through His Word and Sacraments. This is something like an army unit rushing forward into enemy territory with no concern for its supply line or any reinforcements. The likeliest outcome is capture by the enemy or death.

We must not be so reckless with our faith, or be so self-assured that we think we could never fall. None of us here is immune to this. Any of us could give up our life in Christ and return to our slavery of sin. We can all think of many people who have done just that. Today's text calls us again to attention. It reminds us of the battle: *"For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification."*

In short, what the apostle Paul is urging here by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is that we view our Baptism into Christ not only as a freedom from, but also as a freedom for. In fact both of these must go together if we want to remain with Jesus. Because of what Jesus did for us through His perfect life, death, and resurrection, we are freed from our unrighteousness, sin, and death. If that's all there is to it, we might conclude that we can keep on living in sin, doing whatever we feel like, because Jesus suffered the consequences for our sin and forgives us.

Paul addresses this wrong-headed attitude just before today's text. *"Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?"* he asks (Rom. 6:1). *"Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!"* (v. 15). Then he explains, *"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?" (v. 16).

So either way, says Paul, you are enslaved. Bob Dylan took up this theme in one of his songs when he sang, "Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord / But you're gonna have to serve somebody." That doesn't sound too great. We like the idea of being free from any coercion, any commitments. But that kind of freedom does not exist. It cannot exist, unless we had created ourselves and had complete power and authority over everything around us. Because this is not the case, "you're gonna have to serve somebody."

You have already heard what happens to those who are "*slaves of sin.*" They experience a lifetime of pain, sorrow, and hopelessness and receive in the end the reward of death – not just physical death but eternal death in hell. How about those who are "*slaves to righteousness,*" or as Paul refers to them a couple verses later, "*slaves of God*"? It seems that this wouldn't necessarily be much better. You might picture God as the taskmaster demanding that you do everything right, just the way He wants it, or else you will face His wrath.

But that is not how Paul describes your slavery to righteousness and to God. He says that your slavery to righteousness "*leads to*" or is "*for*" sanctification. Sanctification here is contrasted with lawlessness. Lawlessness is living contrary to God's commands. It is living as though I am the lord and not Him. This kind of unrepentant life does not welcome His judgment.

But sanctification is living according to His will. It is finding all strength, peace, joy, and love in Him. You are sanctified as you hear the Gospel message of Jesus' work to save you and as you receive His gifts in His Sacraments. These are the means by which the Holy Spirit continues to break apart the chains of your slavery of sin and draw you closer and closer to your holy Savior.

As we hear His Word, we find that God is hardly a violent taskmaster. Instead we learn of His great love for us and the great mercy He has shown to us sinners. When we like the prodigal son have run away from Him and misused His good gifts, including the gift of our bodies, He does not deal with us in anger. He comes to embrace us with forgiveness (Luk. 15). In our sinful weakness when we fail to carry out the duties He has given us, He picks us up by His grace and helps us to move forward according to His will.

God is not the kind of master who sacrifices His slaves for His own benefit. It's just the opposite. God sacrificed Himself for our benefit. That is how He exercises His lordship; He gives. God the Father gave His only Son to free us slaves of sin. Jesus suffered for our disobedience, for our rebellion against God. He took the wages of our sin. He took the punishment of our death. He died for us so we could be counted as righteous and receive His gift of eternal life.

This is how we "*slaves of God*" are treated. We are cleansed from the stains and bruises and cuts of the sin we have committed, and we are given a new status. We slaves are now treated like lords! We peasants are treated like kings! Jesus calls us to partake of His eternal glory and reign with Him in His heavenly kingdom.

But our time to depart from this world has not come yet. That means our battle here continues. With the devil and our own flesh constantly trying to deceive us and lead us back to our slavery of sin, we know the fight will be hard. We remember how often in the past we let sin gain the upper hand, so that we chose impurity and lawlessness instead of righteousness and sanctification. Does that mean we have no hope of winning the battle?

This would be the case if you were fighting by yourself. But your Master does not leave you alone in this fight. When you become discouraged or overwhelmed, or when the temptation to sin is strong, He steps right in where the conflict is most intense. He comes to you through the spiritual supply line that you were joined to at your Baptism. He speaks faith and courage into you through His holy Word. He strengthens and cheers you through the holy food of His body and blood. He protects you and guides you so you are not carried away to your former slavery.

Your merciful Lord has broken you free from your sin and death and joined you to Him. There is no shame in being a slave of this Master. Because of His grace toward you, you want to be His subject and serve Him. You want to obey Him because you know He is working for your good. You want Him to guide you where you should go. And you look forward to the day when He will lead you from the heat of this battle, from your struggle against sin, to the joys and blessings He has prepared for you in heaven.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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