

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

What then? Should we 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? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Through the first five chapters of this letter to the Romans, Paul's line of reasoning has been fairly easy to follow. Point 1 is that all human beings are sinful and are therefore not righteous - they are not faithful to the covenant God made with them and are therefore not in a proper relationship with God. Point 2 is that in spite of Point 1, God *is* righteous - God *is* faithful to his promises and has demonstrated this righteousness by the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. Point 3 is that we are made righteous not by what we do or don't do, but solely by faith, by trust, in what God has done in Jesus.

That line of reasoning is pretty easy to follow, I think. But to my way of thinking, our reading this morning from chapter 6 gets a lot hairier. Phrases bounce around that, if they don't outright contradict each other, they sure come close. Paul says we are dead to sin and we are free from sin, yet we face a continual struggle to not sin. We have died to sin and have died with Christ, yet we are still very obviously much alive. We are free, yet we are slaves of righteousness. Then Paul slips in another big church word that we hardly ever use in everyday conversations - sanctification. What in the world is that?

Let's start sorting all this out by noting that Paul uses the word "sin" to mean two different things, but the only way you know which way he means it is by the context. Most often when we think of sin, we first think of it in a moralistic way - sins are actions that we do that are contrary to God's will. If we steal something, we sin. If we harm someone physically or verbally, we sin. In this understanding of sin as act, some people are greater sinners than others; that is, some do more sinful acts than others. Many people understand sin only in this way as "sins", individual acts, which explains why a majority of Christians, even a majority of Lutherans and Roman Catholics, do not consider themselves to be "sinners". They see themselves as law-abiding citizens who may make a mistake from time to time, but they don't consider themselves "sinners". I guess that term is perceived as too negative.

But this is not how Paul has been using the term "sin" so far in Romans. Paul speaks of sin as a condition, a power of destruction that holds humanity in bondage. From this perspective, all people are equally sinful. It's like being pregnant - a woman cannot be "just a little bit" pregnant. She is either pregnant or she's not. So it is with sin as a condition that binds every human being. In the rite of confession and forgiveness that we use to prepare ourselves for worship, we often begin with the words, "we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves." That is our acknowledgment of sin as our condition. Then we go on to our "sins" - the individual actions of disobedience: "We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed—by what we have done and by what we have left undone."

Both of these understandings of sin are found in this sixth chapter. When Paul says that we have "died to sin" or are "free from sin", he doesn't think that Christians no longer commit sins, sinful acts. That's why he says we should strive to not sin anymore. He is well aware that the struggle with sinful acts will be with us until our dying breath. But he can rightfully say that we are dead to sin because the power of sin has been broken. The Christian is no longer enslaved to it. After dying with Christ in baptism, Christians are free from the lordship of sin. For the first time, we can do something other than sin. We are free to do what God wants us to do.

Notice that I didn't say we are free to do whatever *we* want to do. That's called "libertinism" - doing whatever *we* want to do, and Paul anticipated that some would misunderstand him to be saying that. That's why he twice poses the question, "If we are free from the consequences of sin and know that God will always forgive us, should we not just go on sinning? If God likes to forgive us, shouldn't we give God more opportunity to do what God likes to do?" Paul gives an emphatic "No!" to that line of reasoning.

Though we are free *from* sin, we are free *for* something else. As human creatures, we are free only within the framework of some lordship - either of God or of sin. For us human beings there is no neutral ground. This is true whether we are baptized or not. We are creatures, not gods, and therefore our choice is not slavery or freedom in some absolute sense. Rather, the choice is slavery to which lord, to which ruling power. This is the crux of the matter in chapter 6.

"The situation is rather like that of one who is newly released from prison. One has shed an old regime (prison), but one has taken on a new one (society). The lack of freedom represented by [prison] has been replaced by freedom from those constraints. But one is not at that point somehow free from all constraints, as though at the moment of release one stood on some level apart both from prison and society. Such a stance does not exist. One passes from one regime and immediately enters another. One is therefore always under responsibility, whether forced to obey (prison) or free to obey (society).

“But that new state of freedom is not absolute. It has its limits as well. It is possible to slip back into the old ways that got one into prison in the first place, and in that case that is just where one will end up. Paul is explicit on that. Christians are now free for a new master, but it is still possible to fall back under the lordship of the old one, sin.” (Paul Achtemaier, *Romans*, p. 109-110)

There are two other ways of expressing what Paul is saying here that I have found helpful over the years. One is the distinction between being “freed from” and “freed for” – when we are *freed from* the power of sin, we are set *free for* obedience to God. We are *freed from* the lordship of sin and death so that we might be *freed for* the lordship of Jesus Christ.

A second way to express this is Martin Luther’s famous dialectic on Christian freedom. Many of you have heard me speak of dialectics before because Christian theology is full of them. A dialectic is two seemingly contradictory statements which are both true. It is an “either/or” choice that is answered with a “yes”. One does not resolve a dialectic by trying to find some middle ground, but one lives with the tension of maintaining the truth of both statements.

Luther states the dialectic of Christian freedom this way: “A Christian is a free lord of all subject to none.” That sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? We’re the boss. No one can tell us what to do. Total independence. The other half of the dialectic is this: “A Christian is a dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Ouch! That one’s tough to swallow. A servant of all? At the beck and call of everyone? This is exactly what Paul is getting at when he tells us we are no longer slaves of sin, but are now slaves of righteousness.

This photo is of a large piece of art that sits in the sanctuary of the Town Church in Wittenberg, Germany, the church where Martin Luther preached most often. An English translation is below. It conveys the truth of Luther’s dialectic of Christian freedom in a most interesting way. On the sturdy beam that supports the piece are painted abbreviated versions of what Jesus said are the two parts of the Great Commandment. At the top is “I am the Lord your God. (and by implication...) You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” At the bottom is painted, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” These two commandments are fixed in place. They don’t move. They are foundational for the Christian faith.

In the center is a board that turns, and on it is painted Luther’s dialectic: “A Christian is the free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is the dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” I love the way this describes the Christian life. We have our foundation, the commandments, which do not change. But as we try to apply them to our everyday life, we have this dialectic which is moving all the time, and our response to any given situation may vary depending on how we’re doing at holding that dialectic in a healthy tension.

For example, making time for worship. We are free to not worship God. God doesn’t love us more or less based on our Sunday morning worship attendance or our frequency of personal devotions or our financial stewardship. God loves us because we are his and because God is righteous, faithful to his promises. Yet at the same time, knowing that God loves us, how can we not respond to that love by giving God our worship and praise and showing our thanks through our offerings?

Or take the example of seeing someone in need. We are free to not help others. God doesn’t love us more or less based on whether or not we visit someone in a hospital or nursing home, or send them a note telling them we’re thinking of them, or donate to a food shelf. God loves us because we are his and because he is righteous, faithful to his promises. Yet at the same time, knowing that God loves us, how can we not respond to that love by helping our neighbor with their physical and emotional needs?

This brings us around to that big churchy word I mentioned at the beginning – sanctification. The word sanctification comes from the same Latin root word as does sanctuary: *sanctus* – holy. Sanctification means “the process of becoming holy, consecrated to God.” The concept of discipline is helpful in defining sanctification, discipline in the sense of having regular habits. We can be disciplined about getting regular exercise or eating healthy foods or practicing an instrument every day. Those habits help us reach a goal. A disciple is one who disciplines himself or herself, and the marks of discipleship are activities like weekly worship, regular prayer, sharing our talents and money, and serving others. These are the habits, the disciplines, of sanctification; the habits that help us become what Paul calls “slaves of righteousness” or “slaves of God”. Being in bondage to God is not a burden. It is a life-giving relationship and it is that relationship for which we were created. And so Paul ends the chapter with a summary statement that is a good one to commit to memory: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

