

Days of the Bear
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

Romans 6:12-23

¹²Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Slaves of Righteousness

¹⁵What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶Do 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? ¹⁷But 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, ¹⁸and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

²⁰When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. ²²But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. ²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Introduction and Comments:

A devout cowboy misplaced his bible while he was mending fences out on the range. Three weeks later, a bear walked up to him as he was again mending fences carrying the bible in its mouth.

The cowboy couldn't believe his eyes.

He tentatively took the precious book out of the bear's mouth, raised his eyes heavenward and exclaimed, "It's a miracle!"

"Not really," said the bear. "Your name is embossed on the cover."

Sermon:

After Paul's experience with the resurrected Christ, he had to step back and re-access his own Israelite religious understandings. In his writings, Paul claims an irresistible, holy compulsion and commission akin to slavery to go to his fellow Israelites living among the nations. His compulsion was to give them an opportunity to hear and rightly understand what God had done on their behalf on the cross and in raising Jesus from the dead as the first fruits of the kingdom of God.

We can only imagine how the gospel spread to Rome. In the Christ-group, or as we are wont to say, the church in Rome, we gather that it was comprised of Israelites of a Judean orientation and those that held Hellenistic perspectives on their faith, along with some God-

fearing pagans. The Hellenistic Israelites were often referred to derogatorily by the Judean Israelites as Gentiles, those who lived as other peoples or as non-Israelites. Therefore, Hellenistic Israelites and the pagan God-fearers were frequently lumped into the general categories of Gentiles or Greeks. To call someone a Greek simply meant they were civilized and spoke Greek as their common language. At the time, there was no longer a Greece but Greek culture still dominated the Ancient Near East. A person who did not or would not speak Greek or conform to the dominate Hellenistic cultural perspectives was called a barbarian.

In addition, civilized people, including many Hellenistic Jews, would have seen the genital mutilation of their infant sons or of themselves as barbaric. I need to mention that at the time, circumcision was not the radical procedure it became after 150 C.E. under the auspices of the post-Temple rabbis that we know today. Adult males in the ANE at the time of Paul could and did, in some cases, have their circumcisions mended or altered. However, Hellenized Israelites would have considered themselves just as much a part of God's covenant people as those Judean Israelites, who as a rule did practice circumcision, especially during the Israelite Hasmonean dynasty a hundred or so years before the Common Era. Therefore, in general, the synagogues that Paul visits in his missionary journeys would have been comprised of both types of Israelites living outside the Holy Lands under Hellenistic influences; that is, those who would have been seen as living as the other peoples.

Why are these distinctions and background important? Well, they determine to a large extent Paul's understandings of sin within the context of the Roman Church as well as other Israelite faith communities outside of Palestine and maybe some within Palestine. Sin is a word derived from archery or spear throwing, meaning missing the mark in one's relationship to God and others, be that because of immoral or unethical behaviors or in one's religious life and compliances. For people of the more traditional or conservative Judean Israelites, Paul saw their overly conscientious law-keeping, especially regarding circumcision, minus compassion for other Israelites as missing the mark or ideals for God's people. Sin, for what we might call the more liberal Hellenistic Israelites as well as some of the pagan God-fearers, would have been seen as their participating in certain activities of the Hellenistic culture that were forbidden by Mosaic Laws. For example, nudity in the public baths or participating in athletic events, many of which were done in the nude. I remind us that the first thing that Adam and Eve did after eating from the forbidden tree was to cover up their nakedness; later God provided them skins to cover their nakedness. Also, violent and disparaging actions among these Israelite Christ groups over religious and cultural matters would have also been labeled as sin - missing the mark in covenant community.

So, let us hear Paul writing his letter to the Roman community from Corinth somewhere between 56-58 C.E. for several reasons. Paul obviously knew of Emperor Claudius' expulsions of some of the Jews and/or his severely restricting Jewish gatherings in Rome because of instances of civil disorder that centered around either the preaching of one Chrestus or the preaching about Chrestus.

Therefore, Paul wants to make his case for Christ from within the historical context of the Israelite faith, addressing abuses, misunderstandings, and ignorance on the part of all parties - Judean, Hellenes, and pagans. He does this not only for obvious reasons but also to show that contrary to any reports that may have reached the church in Rome, he is not some Jewish heretic or blasphemer.

Paul will make a beautiful case for the Mosaic Law, although like Jesus, not for the rigorous interpretations and practices of the Law and Purity Codes by the Judean Pharisees, which victimize and exclude fellow Israelites. He will make the case that the Law of Moses is to be kept out of love of God and neighbor, not simply for salvific compliances. Paul will make

some profound cases for the forces of evil at work in this world, what he sees as humankind's fallen nature, and one's eternal acceptance before God through faith in what God has done and is doing in Jesus the glorified Christ just as Abraham was granted immortality through his faith in God's promise of many offspring. Paul maintains that people should keep the moral and ethical constraints of the Law and be sensitive to some of its social constraints. Thus, having shown he is not some kook, Paul will later seek the community's support as he sets his sights on evangelizing Jewish communities in Gaul.

To say that the Apostle Paul understood human behavior and the universe differently than we do is obvious. However, the willful and pathological dimensions of human behaviors that Paul addresses in his letter to the Romans, which he calls sin are much the same as today regardless of ancient or modern paradigms. The corrective to these behaviors are obvious - a person is to take responsibility for doing what is right and good for the right and good reasons. This begs a question that Paul is addressing; which is, do people always know the right and good thing or must they be taught, shown, and supervised in matters of morality, the good, and their underlying divine principles. Thus, Paul although writing to a highly religious and for the most part a morally conscious group of people nonetheless believes he must give his insights and instructions to the various Jewish factions and the God-fearers on matters of religion, morality, and their underlying, divine principles.

Before addressing this topic, first, let me clarify Paul's use of the word "sin" in the letter to the Romans. Paul understood Adam and Eve violated a prime directive in their relationship to God and creation. Given certain Israelite understandings, Satan, a heavenly being, had already introduced opposition to God into the heavenly plane of existence, but Adam's and Eve's choice to violate God's prohibition became the portal through which that unearthly opposition entered this world and corrupted the human condition and all created reality. For Paul, Adam and Eve in effect handed over their tenancy and stewardship of this world to Satan. In so doing, the results of Adam and Eve's choice were that life would be hard, their unmediated, personal relationship to God was severed, and eventually they would experience physical death, implying all of this was not God's original intent.

As scripture tells us, God would have been fully justified in avenging the divine honor and wiping out Adam and Eve. However, as in the case of Satan, God in keeping with matters of the divine integrity, again deferred that satisfaction and did not destroy or leave humankind in a state of hopelessness. God lovingly, through special people, gave humankind moral laws and ethical precepts that served to guide people into righteous behaviors along with divine blessings in this life and later a hope in death. Yet, these laws had a downside - paradoxically, they made people more aware of what they were not supposed to do than they could handle. Furthermore, human pride being what it is, the Law itself became an enslaving end for many instead of a divine means for holy relationships and was even turned against people for the benefit of others. Sin infected even the Law.

The manifestations of sin in this world we know all too well. However, Paul, as did Jesus, concluded doing things required by Law for the wrong reasons or without love and compassion as also missing the mark in God's will and ways. For Paul, sin's results are the corruption of all reality, concluding the physical and the spiritual sin is anti-life and justly deserving of God's judgment and wrath.

Let me insert at this point that the topic of sin, either as a cosmological force or as individual behaviors, is not a popular concept among some mainstream Christians today. This is because many believe the biblical understanding of sin as a cosmological force or sin as immoral behavior does not give adequate considerations to our modern understandings of physics, astronomy, biological, sociology, psychological, and cultural influences at work on a

person's choices or behaviors. Said another way, among many, sin or sins has more to do with uncontrollable social and psychological forces than character and personal choices. That is, if I look hard enough and long enough, I may be able to blame my sins on something or someone other than myself. Like Adam's response to God, when God came to him in the Garden of Eden after he and Eve had eaten the apple and asked him what they had done, Adam said, "Hey, look it was the fault of the woman that you gave me." In short, it wasn't my fault it was yours and Eve's fault.

For many of the Israelite sages and prophets, it became obvious, when even the laws of God had fallen under the power of sin, something radical had to be done if humankind was ever to be fully reunited with God in relationship and purpose.

For Paul, that divine and restorative thing, contrary to many expectations, was to be found in Jesus, the Christ, the Son of Glory come to earth, who willingly took upon himself the responsibility to appease God's honor on the cross, breaking the power of sin over this reality. The cross becomes the portal through which the power of God's grace and unmerited favor that was in the beginning is made more immediately accessible through faith, not law keeping or ritual observances.

In Paul's understanding, initially an Israelite and later any follower of Jesus, begins his or her exodus out of slavery to the forces of this world by passing through the waters of baptism. Through baptism, the ultimate effects of sin as it relates to one's physical death is expunged and the believer becomes a new creature in Christ. A person no longer needs to be driven by their anxieties and fears of life and death due to their limited abilities to address such things because those in Christ can be at peace with self, nature, creature, and Creator in God's grace.

Paul makes this clear in his analogy of slavery, while telling his readers not to push his analogy too far. Paul says that once they were slaves to the force of sin; that is, they were trying to achieve power in or over life and death through the limits of human knowledge, including self-serving religion, against the backdrop of the sovereignty of God over all life and death. In obedience to the force of sin, humankind's pride, passions, and appetites became ends unto themselves and thus became anti-God. Now through faith in God's revealed will and nature in Christ, the believer has placed themselves under a new master as it were, the law of grace as a choice.

Paul will indicate that as finite, contingent creatures, we are always going to be subject to forces beyond our control, including the penchant to go contrary to divine ways of life, but now we see such things as the natural consequences of our nature through the lenses of God's grace. Paul further makes it clear that the force of sin no longer determines a believers' destiny as being cut off from God and God's eternal life and blessings in death. Although we may still be prone to acts of sin and sinfulness, the overarching consequences or the wages of sin, as Paul calls them, are gone, paid off, because we live under the umbrella of grace. That doesn't mean that Christians can run around willfully committing acts of sin with immunity under God's grace. God will justly sort out such matters without denying the believer the gift of grace.

In this vein, Paul says that those in Christ must struggle to subordinate their old physical natures with its proclivities to sin if they are to fully experience the power and effects of grace in their life. I would liken this to a person having once suffered a progressive, crippling disease and being healed of its cause yet the crippling effects remain, minus the disease's progression or lethality. In summary for Paul, Christ and the cross not only satisfies God's offended honor, allowing God's unmerited favor to freely flow through its portal, but

reveals God most clearly as gracious and compassionate, as opposed to solely a God of wrath and judgment.

However, how do we modern believers understand Paul's views of sin and grace? I think we should understand them the same way the Apostle Paul understood them - human nature and the universe haven't changed. Folks, there are enough examples of sinful human behaviors that do not fall into the bins of modern scientific, sociological, or psychological explanations to justify Paul's insights. Furthermore, if we are honest, each one of us struggles daily to live by the ways of God. We are often tempted to live our lives solely out of our own sense of self-sufficiency, our passions, our desires, the way we were raised, the effects of developmental trauma, and the pursuits of our own will and ways at the expense of God's ways.

However, let us not be too hard on ourselves. This is just the way we humans are. As the old saying goes, "Some days the bear gets us; some days we get the bear, and on other days we are just happy to call it a draw." Sometimes our lower nature wins; sometimes, maybe with the same hour, we are especially conscious of God and living in the power of the Spirit and the good and right win, and at other times, we are glad that no great temptations come along because we are spring-loaded to jump ship.

However, the heart of Paul's message is that the followers of God in Christ need to know that as powerful as the lure of sin is, as concerted as the forces of evil appear, and the frequency of our failures, those who honestly struggle against the desires and proclivities to sin, whether immorality, unethicalness, or seeking idolatrous certitude in religion, need have no fear of a hopeless death. Rather, God's grace empowers us to be faithful in our struggles as fully human so grace may grow in our life and abound on the earth. That's it - you and me, being the best human beings we can be through the ways and means of God without the burdens or anxieties of trying to gain acceptances before God through our own efforts, either through religion or good works. Furthermore, in our worst of moments if we shut our eyes; close our minds to the chaos around us; face our shame and regrets, we can feel a sense of God's presence come over us regardless of what we may have done or may not have done.

Thus, let us hear Paul tell those Jesus-confessors in Rome of whatever ilk - Judean, Hellene, or pagan God-fearer - as well as all those across the ages that God's grace comes by faith in what God has done in Christ, not a person's religious conservatism, liberalism, or whatever-ism. In Christ, we are not given a license to sin, but in sin we are free from the fear of God's wrath, because we are held in God's love.

Karl Barth said that the resurrection of Christ teaches us that our enemies - sin, the curse, and death - are destroyed. They may still behave as though the game were not decided, but ultimately, they can cause no more mischief. We still have to reckon with them; but we need fear them no longer.

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