

“Whatever Became of Sin?”

The Rev. Gary Coffey, Grace Church, Asheville, NC 7/9/17

This morning I’d like to think with you about a struggle that each of us has in our lives as Christians and that all of us have together as a community of faith. This struggle that I am talking about is our struggle with sin.

A woman said to me recently that she didn’t hear much about sin in the Church anymore. I think she made this comment simply wondering and completely without judgment. Where sin used to be front and center in our thinking as Christians, it has been pushed far down the list of things for us to think about, far down the list below such things as loving one another, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and following Christ.

I think that person is right in her observation. For those of us who have been Christians for a long time, we just sort of assume that everyone knows about sin. After all, don’t we confess our sins together every week in worship? Doesn’t the priest or bishop then stand before the congregation and pronounce us forgiven through our Lord Jesus Christ. What else is there that we need to know and do about sin?

Well, actually there is a lot we need to know and do about the sin in our lives. Why? Because we need to know what sin is and how to avoid it. One good definition of sin is anything that we choose to do that interferes with our relationship with God. As the sin in our lives interferes with our relationship with God, it robs us of the abundant life that God desires for each one of us. Last week’s epistle from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans was an excellent beginning in our consideration or reconsideration of the subject of sin. I would invite you to turn in your pew Bibles to Romans, chapter 6, beginning at verse 12, and let’s look at this passage together.

The apostle Paul, who most likely dictated these words to a scribe or secretary, was a passionate man. He was especially passionate about his and others’ relationship with God in Christ. We are told that he most likely had a secretary and we can imagine him pacing up and down as he dictated these words in a letter that he was writing to the Church at Rome. Theologians tell us that his letter to the Church at Rome is his thinking about the faith at its very best and most developed phase. So, as I read these verses aloud for us, imagine St. Paul pacing up and down dictating this letter as he paces. (Read Romans 6:12-23.)

¹² “Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.

¹³ No 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.

¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. ¹⁵ What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but

under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ 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? 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.” (Romans 6:12-23)

As we read these words, isn't it true that the impression that we get is that what we have before us as believers, as followers of Jesus, is the simple choice between presenting ourselves to sin as instruments of wickedness OR presenting ourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life

St. Paul makes it clear that sin will no longer have dominion over us, that is, sin will no longer control us because we have been brought from death to life in Christ Jesus. In that sense, he says that we are no longer under the law, but under grace or God's favor given to us freely in Christ.

What this means is that if we DO sin, we are forgiven. He anticipates what we might be thinking as he says, “Well then, should we just sin all we want since we will be forgiven anyway?”

He answers his own question... “By no means!” Then he uses the analogy of being enslaved to something or someone. He says, “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 to sin, have become obedient from the heart to Christ's teaching and Christ's way of living, and that you, being set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

He goes on to talk about our former state, when we were enslaved to sin. He says, “When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you get from doing the things of which you are now ashamed?” In other words, how was that being enslaved to sin working for you? Not great, huh? “The end of those things is death.”

Now, listen again to those last lines and think about what they are saying. “But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification”, which means being more loving, more like Christ, in your lives. “The end of these things is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

So, what St. Paul has described here in Romans 6 is two very distinct paths, the path of obedience to sin, which leads to shameful behavior, and eventually which leads to death, and the path of obedience to Christ which leads to some peace and joy in this life and eventually to eternal life. Obviously, we as Christ followers want to stay on this path with and in Christ Jesus, that brings us some peace and joy in this life and eventually life with Christ forever.

It sounds like a simple choice that we have made, doesn't it? As we made the choice to follow Jesus in our lives. In today's reading from Romans from the next chapter, chapter 7, we hear from St. Paul, that living the Christ life, choosing the path of righteousness over sin, is anything but simple. It is a daily struggle.

Now before we listen again to what St. Paul says in today's reading, it might be important to remember who is doing the talking here. St. Paul is arguably one of the greatest Christian theologians or thinkers about the Christian faith who ever lived. He was educated first as a Pharisee in Judaism, taught at the feet of a great Jewish teacher named Gamaliel. For a while, he persecuted Christians, and then Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road, and asked him why he, Paul, was persecuting him, meaning Jesus? Paul was then struck blind for a time and led into Damascus where Jesus sent one of his followers to Paul to lay hands on him and restore his sight. After this, Paul remained in Damascus for a while learning everything he could about Jesus, and then became an apostle of Jesus who founded numerous churches or Christian communities and wrote more than half of the New Testament.

Of course, he didn't know that he was writing the New Testament at the time. He was simply writing letters to communities of faith that he had founded in an effort to help them as what we would call their bishop, and he also wrote to several individuals whom he was teaching to be disciples. He was imprisoned and beaten numerous times for proclaiming Jesus and eventually beheaded for the Christian faith. What I am trying to say here is if there has ever been a Christian who loved Jesus, it was St. Paul.

Now, listen to this Super Christian, St. Paul the Apostle, talk about his experience in living the Christian faith. Again, imagine him pacing the floor and dictating these words about the struggle. You can turn in your Bibles to Romans 7, beginning at verse 15, or you can follow along from this passage in your bulletin

(READ ROMANS 7:15-25A) ¹⁵ “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.

¹⁷But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.” (Romans 7:15-25a)

Beloved, I invite you to be encouraged by these words. They were written a long time ago by a fellow pilgrim who was trying to follow Jesus Christ as you are. He writes of the same struggle that each of us has. In our inmost self, we want to please God. We want to live that life of obedience to Christ, that life of love that brings peace and joy, but we often find ourselves doing otherwise. Who will rescue us from this craziness, from wanting to serve God, but often not being able to? Jesus the Christ, the Savior of the world has us covered. Thanks be to God.

So, be encouraged this morning, Beloved of God, and know that this struggle you are in is the struggle of every Christian, every follower of Jesus. The end of this struggle is life with Him forever in a new heaven and a new earth. But, until then, don't be discouraged, you are being rescued by Christ, but you are still in the struggle. Be encouraged by the words of your Savior as He says to you, “In the world, you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world!”