First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

July 2, 2023

The Key

Romans 6:12-23

12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies, so that you obey their desires. 13 No longer present your members to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, 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? 17 But thanks be to God that you who were slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted 18 and that you, having been set free from sin, have become enslaved to righteousness. 19 I am speaking in human terms because of your limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and lawlessness, leading to even more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, leading to sanctification. 20 When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 21 So what fruit did you then gain from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. 22 But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the fruit you have leads to sanctification, and the end is eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let’s talk about sin…. Dum, Dum, Dum! Webster’s dictionary defines sin as: 1) an offense against religious or moral law, 2) an action that is or is felt to be highly reprehensible, 3) an often serious shortcoming, 4) a transgression of the law of God, 5) a state of human nature in which the self is estranged from God.

Now, these definitions are pretty clear cut, but what’s not so clear here, is what counts as sin. You see, what constitutes “sin” has shifted over the centuries and what was once considered to be sinful is now often accepted as perfectly normal. And things that we now consider sinful, were perfectly normal centuries ago. Let me give you one example:

For thousands of years, it was considered perfectly acceptable for a man to have multiple wives, as well as concubines, which is just a fancy way of saying mistresses. Some of the greatest figures in the Old Testament, Abraham, David and Solomon, to name a few, all had more than one wife and multiple concubines. While polygamy is still practiced in some Middle Eastern and African societies, in our western twenty-first century context polygamy is considered to be morally reprehensible and wrong. I’ll add here, that I have to laugh when I hear some of our fellow Christians using the Bible to trumpet the notion that marriage has always been, and always should be, defined as only between one man and one woman. Unfortunately, this lack of understanding regarding Biblical context has caused, and continues to cause, much division and pain within society and the church. There are, of course, many other examples of the shift in what constitutes “sin,” and we won’t have to look too far in order to come up with our own lists.

In today’s reading, Paul is teaching a group of newbie Followers of the Way. As an aside, that the phrase “Followers of the Way,” is how early Christians were referred to right up to the time when the Emperor Constantine coined the phrase “Christians” when the church became the official state religion of the Roman Empire.

So, Paul is instructing these newbies about the ways of Jesus. These new converts had been followers of the various pagan religions practiced by the Romans, and their former religious practices were incompatible with the teachings of Christ. And while the slavery language is difficult for us to hear, it would have been easily understood by Paul’s listeners. Slaves would have had absolutely no freedom, or say, over their lives whatsoever. Verse 16 makes this very clear: *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?*

What I believe Paul is saying here, is that we have a choice to be slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness. Before I go on, let me go back to Webster’s definitions of sin. The one that resonates with me is number five, which defines sin as a state of human nature in which the self is estranged from God. I’ll take Websters definition one step further and say that sin is any word, thought or action that we take which causes us to be separated from God. We are assured that God’s grace is always present, so it’s our own actions that cause the separation. To put it another way, we walk away from God, not the other way around. This leads to a spiritual death and that’s what I believe Paul means when he talks about the wages of sin are death. I also believe that we have the key to turn that state of affairs around.

In verse 22, Paul writes, *22 But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the fruit you have leads to sanctification, and the end is eternal life.* That word “sanctification,” is one of those churchy words that doesn’t get used in day to day conversation, unless you happen to find yourself in a group of pastors/theologians, so let me see if I can help with the understanding of what this word means. The Biblical definition of sanctification is to be set apart for God’s glory. Sanctification is what happens to us, by God’s grace, when we decide to center our lives on being disciples of Jesus Christ. It is that life of discipleship that sets us apart, and gives glory to God. And here’s the really wonderful thing: when we allow ourselves to be transformed in this way, we are able to begin to transform the world around us.

It all comes down to making that choice. We can either allow ourselves to be transformed by following the ways of Jesus, or not. If we do, we are promised eternal life. If not, we will die spiritually or physically.

The promise of transformation, comes with a caveat, though. We can’t make the choice to accept God’s grace and then not share that grace with those around us. Letting go of those things that separate us from God, doesn’t give us license to claim that we’re better than someone else. God’s grace isn’t just for a few, but is available to everyone who is willing to accept it.

Siblings in Christ, the key is Paul’s reminder to us found in verse 21 which reads, *“What advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death”.* Walk the walk, Paul is telling us. Live for Christ, now that you are dead to sin. Sanctification, and the transformation that results from being set apart for God’s glory, isn’t something that happens automatically; it’s a choice we make day by day, sometimes moment by moment.

Here’s the thing, folks. Yes, we are called to let go of all if those things that separate us from God. Yes, we are called to walk the walk of discipleship, extending the same grace that God has so freely given us to everyone we come in contact with. No, we are not called to see ourselves as “better than,” simply because we’ve stopped being imprisoned to whatever it is that has caused us to be separated from God. And because of these things, we have a choice. We can choose to continue to be separated from God or not. It’s really that simple. Make the day to day, minute by minute, choice to be set apart for God’s glory and in doing so, go out and transform the world. AMEN