

The Wages of Sin

Paul can be a real pain in the neck. Listening to the portion of his Letter to the Romans this morning could be confusing and difficult. This is particularly true because he uses some terms we are not familiar with and some others that have different meanings for him and us. Maybe the easiest thought to take away from this passage is that by God's grace we are loved and sinning is bad and we should not do it. But that is a gross oversimplification of what he is driving at.

As I always say, the mantra in real estate is location, location, location, and when reading scripture, it is context, context, context. This emphasis on context is not so that we can do exegetical study like biblical scholars do. Rather, it is so that in this case we can understand who Paul is talking to and why, and then how that makes a difference to us.

To begin, you might be surprised that Paul is writing to the church in Rome, because Paul had not been to Rome. In his other letters, he is writing to a church he planted, such as in Corinth or Ephesus. The church in Rome does not know him, although they do know about him. His reputation as an evangelist of the Good News of Jesus Christ had spread far beyond the places he had visited in person.

We should also be clear that when we speak of the church in Rome or any other place at that time, we are not discussing an established group with buildings and hierarchical leadership. The church in Rome was made up of groups of people who gathered in each other's homes. They kept a low profile. Rome, being the seat of the Empire and home of the emperor, was not particularly open to religions that ruled out the worship of the traditional gods and the emperor. If you worshiped them and brought offerings to them and wanted to have your own god, that was fine. However, the followers of Jesus were not willing to do that, so they were suspected. Jews were too, but they were tolerated by Rome to some extent.

Also, the Roman church was isolated from the outposts that Paul had planted. However, it was a trading center, so they would hear from travelers, merchants, and soldiers who had been converted. That is part of our context for Paul's letter. He is writing to an unknown group in a city he does not know to encourage them and perhaps prepare them for a visit from him.

Now we must understand his topic of sin, grace, and the law. Let's start with sin. What do you consider sin? There are no wrong answers, just let me hear. One definition is that sin is rebellion against God's will. Another is that sin refers to free choices that harm and break our relationship with God and with others. Another is simply "missing the mark." How about "sin is described as a twistedness within the heart or the active rebellion and breaking of a relationship"? What I find interesting about this one is that it does not specify

the relationship with God. Here is a definition I find compelling: “sin isn’t just about breaking rules, but rather building one’s identity and life around anything other than one’s creator.” You might say that it is easy for a priest but not so for others. Sin is an issue that may be hard to pin down; it is nonetheless an important aspect of Paul’s letter that we must wrestle with.

Turning to the law in Paul’s letter, it may be easier to think of the Law with a capital L because the Law Paul is writing about is not the civil legal code of the Roman Empire or any society. He is talking about the 613 laws in the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures (i.e., Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). Paul was trained as a Pharisee. Remember that the Pharisees were portrayed in the Gospels as being very rigid about the Law of Moses. They could not tolerate it when Jesus cured people on the Sabbath, or his disciples plucked grain on the Sabbath, or when he ate with sex workers and tax collectors. Following the Law was the way to righteousness. Too many people had become lax in their religious practices. The Pharisees were trying to bring them back to orthodox practice. The problem, as Jesus saw it, was that the Pharisees were more focused on the rule of the law instead of the spirit of the law.

Paul sees Jesus’ death and resurrection as changing everything. The Mosaic Law is no longer the be-all and end-all. Now there is a new concept called grace. Grace is the love of God available to everyone. We gain grace through faith alone. We cannot earn it by following Laws, morals, or ethics.

Then Paul addresses what seems to be a problem in more than one church. That is, if we are made righteous by grace, then we can do as much sinning as we want because we are forgiven. I can see Paul pulling his hair out if he had any. We can hear him shout from the page “NO! NO! NO!” Grace frees us from the effects of sin; it does not free us to commit as many sins as we want. Paul’s letter did not make the argument go away. Our desire to sin has also not gone away. I have also had this discussion with people going back to my youth.

Then comes the most uncomfortable discussion for modern Americans—slavery. We do not like that word. We go to great lengths to avoid saying it or acknowledging that it happened. No one wants to be a slave. Even when we have something as evil as girls, boys, and women being enslaved for sex, we feel more comfortable calling it trafficking. A priest friend of mine who has been doing the work of freeing women from prostitution for more than twenty years said to me, now that we have a sanitary term like trafficking, it is OK for middle-class people to get involved. How about, instead of saying we are enslaved to sin, we say we are in bondage to sin? Does that make it easier to hear? Regardless, St. Paul is using slavery as a metaphor. He is saying that sin enslaved us before we received the grace of God.

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Paul is going to turn around and say that now that we are no longer enslaved or bound to sin, we are to be enslaved or bound to God through grace. So, if we do not want to be enslaved to God, let us say we are bound to God. We are bound to other parts of our lives. A club, college, wine, gourmet food, sports team, running, model making, family, and any of several other things. If someone can be a slave to fashion, why not be willing to be a slave to God? Fashion may get you noticed and admired, but being enslaved to God will save your life and the lives of others.

Yes, Paul can be a pain in the neck, especially with the circuitous rhetoric he uses. We can tell he was dictating these letters. It is more like the way we talk than the way we write. That said, he is right that God's grace has freed us from sin and leads us to righteousness. We are not free **to** sin; we should avoid sin at all costs so that we can work towards a righteous life. If we don't know whether we are about to commit a sin, take a beat and ask how our action will look on the other side. If you must go back to those Ten Commandments for a primer on what sin is. Then do so. Paul would approve. Because his goal is to free us from death, which is payment for sinning, and to open us to the gift of God, which is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.