

Message: “What Will You Choose?”

The Holy Spirit nudged me yesterday and I shortened our scripture reading from Romans 6, changing it to verses 19-23. You're welcome.

It's been said reading the letters of Paul is like opening another person's mail. You may have felt this way as we read the lesson for today. After all, the letter was written in the year 50, not 1950 but 50. And it was written by an obscure Jewish rabbi to an emerging religious sect gathered in a few safe houses in Rome.

It's also not addressed to you or me. It's like a message in a bottle from another shore. You know, when something just doesn't connect. It's possible to understand every word in a letter and not have the faintest idea of what's going on.

For example, a family once found an old letter written by their great grandfather to his betrothed, their great grandmother. It contained this sentence: “Surely, Miss Laura, you are not insensible of the constraints which both nature and fortune have laid upon me in the matter of our mutual necessity.”

Can anybody help us with this? What exactly did 19th-century Americans mean by “mutual necessity?”

This is why I love the way Rev. Eugene Chapman captures the heart of our reading in The Message, *“But now that you've found you don't have to listen to sin tell you what to do and have discovered the delight of listening to God telling you, what a surprise! A whole, healed, put-together life right now, with more and more of life on the way! Work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death. But God's gift is real life, eternal life, delivered by Jesus”* (Romans 6:22-23, MSG).

This seems more helpful than the old language which says, *“become slaves to God, you have the consequence of a holy life, and the outcome is eternal life* (v22, CEB), doesn't it? You're free to choose.

What we do know is this: God wants us to have a whole, healed, put-together life. Real life. Eternal life. Full life. A life rescued by Jesus. As he said, *“I came so they may have life, and have it abundantly.”* This is the life Jesus came to give us. The life we were created to live. The life we were meant to live.

But it's not always the life we do live. Something gets in the way. It's something we call "sin." Paul teaches us, "*Work hard for sin your whole life, and your pension is death.*" So, how do we break free of this cycle, and gain the whole, healed, put-together life offered by Jesus?

Paul breaks it down into three steps.

First, Paul teaches us we need to understand the freedom of a Christian. Freedom is a hot topic this July 4th holiday. And freedom is an important concept in the life of faith, as we regularly see it in Paul's writing. But Paul's concept of freedom is very different from the world's idea of freedom. It's important to compare the two, before we look at how God helps us to live into the awesome gift of Christian freedom.

What's the difference between our world's understanding of freedom, and the Christian concept of freedom as taught by Paul?

I think it can be summed up in a single word. Paul tells us we've been freed *from* sin. Our world believes it is free *to* sin. And not only that, Paul argues, because we've been freed from sin, we're free to love and serve God and our neighbor.

We're free from fear, free from sin, and so we're free to live for God and for the people we encounter in our life. All too often, the world looks at this in the opposite way. Many believe we are free to sin, and free from any obligation to our neighbor, those around us, and those in our world who don't have the same level of freedom, financially, politically or socially.

As an example, look at the news on any day, and chances are you're going to find someone well-known who makes headlines because they thought they were free to sin. They weren't planning to be in the news. They just thought they could do whatever they wanted, without any consequence.

We hear about them and wonder, "Why they would do that?"

Why would they risk destroying lives by doing something like that?

The answer Paul teaches us is simple: When believe we are free *to* sin, we are wrong. Because everyone who sins eventually becomes unable to do anything differently.

Sin offers us a false freedom that eventually takes away our true freedom. Breaking free from sin begins when we recognize this. When we realize we're a captive of sin and can't free ourselves, then what?

Look at Paul's words again: *"Now that you've found you don't have to listen to sin tell you what to do and have discovered the delight of listening to God telling you, what a surprise!"* (v22)

If we want to be free of sin, if we want to stop listening to sin tell us what to do, we need to listen to something else, Someone else.

We need to listen to God. We all are listening to something, all the time. But what are we listening to? What are we filling our hearts and minds with? What message is guiding us through our day?

We don't have to listen to sin telling us what to do. Jesus sets us free from sin so we can listen to God, follow Jesus and truly love God and our neighbor. We don't have to serve our own needs and desires all the time. We can be free from these limits and bindings. Free to love and care for people, without any thought of what's in it for us.

What wonderful freedom this is!

Someone once said, "it's amazing how much you can accomplish in life if you don't care who gets the credit." I think this is helpful. It's how we live freely. Not worrying about who gets the credit. Not concerned about what's in it for me. Living a life of true freedom loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. This is the life Jesus came to give us. He gave up his freedom as the Son of God to give us this new and wonderful freedom. What a gift!

This brings us to a third pearl of truth in this passage from Romans. When we stop listening to sin and discover the delight of listening to God, we receive a *"whole, healed, put-together life right now, with more life on the way."*

The theological word for this is "sanctification." It's part of God's grace. Literally, it means we are made holy. Being made holy is a process, a journey really, into being more the person God has created us to be. To being controlled less by sin and aligned more with God.

Martin Luther describes this journey of sanctification:

“This life isn’t a being holy but a becoming holy. It’s not a ‘being well’ but a ‘getting well.’ It’s not a being but a becoming. It’s not inactivity but practice. As yet we are not what we ought to be, but we are getting there. The task is not yet accomplished and completed, but it is in progress and pursuit. The end has not been reached, but we are on the way that leads to it. As yet everything does not glow and sparkle, but everything is purifying itself.”¹

This is the journey of sanctification. The journey of becoming truly ourselves, as God made us to be. We receive God’s grace which helps us on the way. We aren’t yet what we can be, but we are getting there.

We’re all on this journey. But it’s a journey which we don’t take by ourselves. Not at all. It’s a journey we take with the God who created us, the Savior who redeemed us, and the Spirit who accompanies us. And it’s a journey we take with other believers, since it’s honestly too hard a path to travel alone.

I once heard someone say they go to church every Sunday because they can’t be a good Christian on their own for more than six days in a row. Whether in-person or online, we need it. We still need church.

And so, we give up a little of our precious time to worship God. We give up a little of our freedom, you might say, and turn back to our Lord, to listen, really listen, to God. And to be set back on the road leading to life, a whole, healed, put-together life.

This is the freedom of a Christian, someone who follows Jesus. We don’t just become the person God has *called* us to be. We also become the person we really *want* to be. Whole, healed. Set free. Free to live our lives for God, and for the world God so loves.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray ...

¹ <https://mypastoralponderings.com/2020/06/27/the-whole-healed-put-together-life/>

Romans 6:19b-23 (CEB)

Once, you offered the parts of your body to be used as slaves to impurity and to lawless behavior that leads to still more lawless behavior. Now, you should present the parts of your body as slaves to righteousness, which makes your lives holy. When you were slaves of sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What consequences did you get from doing things that you are now ashamed of? The outcome of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and become slaves to God, you have the consequence of a holy life, and the outcome is eternal life. The wages that sin pays are death, but God's gift is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6:19-23 (MSG)

I'm using this freedom language because it's easy to picture. You can readily recall, can't you, how at one time the more you did just what you felt like doing - not caring about others, not caring about God - the worse your life became and the less freedom you had? And how much different is it now as you live in God's freedom, your lives healed and expansive in holiness?

As long as you did what you felt like doing, ignoring God, you didn't have to bother with right thinking or right living, or right anything for that matter. But do you call that a free life? What did you get out of it? Nothing you're proud of now. Where did it get you? A dead end.

But now that you've found you don't have to listen to sin tell you what to do, and have discovered the delight of listening to God telling you, what a surprise! A whole, healed, put-together life right now, with more and more of life on the way! Work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death. But God's gift is real life, eternal life, delivered by Jesus, our Master.