

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Epistle, Year A

WHOM DO YOU OBEY?

Romans 6:12-23

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Bill White

12 Therefore, 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? 17 But 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, 18 and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. 19 I 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.

20 When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 21 So what advantage did you then get 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 advantage you get is sanctification. 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.

DIAGNOSIS: OBEYING PASSIONS

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Obeying One's Passions

Paul knows the Christian life is a constant battle with sin. He knows that the Roman Christians, all Christians for that matter, are continually tempted to obey their sinful passions. These passions are real and very strong, so strong in fact that some will be tempted to rationalize that it is okay to give in to their sinful passions because, after all, they will be saved by the grace of God anyway. They believe, teach and confess they will still be saved even if they continue unrepentantly to obey their sinful passions instead of obeying Christ.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Obeying Sin

Even worse, justifying their continued participation in these sinful passions reveals a deeper problem. Original sin. As Luther says in reference to verse 14, "What sin? Actual? No, original sin. For this kind of sin has dominion over us first, as Titus 3:3 shows: "For we ourselves were once, etc." Original sin dominates their perspective and their mortal bodies; they have no true fear, love and trust in Christ. Original sin deceives them into believing they have faith in Christ when in reality they have only a false faith in the Christ of their own devising, a Christ who allows them to continue unchanged. Paul knows those who would continue to sin because they believe they will be saved by grace anyway are in reality obeying sin, not Christ. They are still slaves to sin and under judgment, not judgment by the grace of God, but judgment under the Law of God.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Obeying Sin Leads to Death

Worse still, continuing in the things that lead to death (v. 21b), e.g. continuing to obey their sinful passions bears witness to their continued slavery to sin. As Paul says you are slaves of the one whom you obey, and if you are a slave to sin, slavery to sin leads to death (v. 16a). Judged under God's law, "...the wages of sin is death" (v. 23a)!

PROGNOSIS: OBEYING THE OBEDIENT CHRIST

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Christ's Obedience Leads to Life

But God chooses an alternative to being judged by God's law, namely, being judged by God's grace. The righteousness of God has been revealed clearly apart from the law through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:21-28). Christ was obedient to God's will and plan, even to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8). By his own suffering, death on the cross, resurrection, and ascension, Christ trumps the power of sin (original and otherwise) and brings believers from death to life (v. 23b).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): True Faith in Christ Empowers Obedience

Even better, this "free gift of God" is for any and all who receive it. The "free gift" is God's gift of faith in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. This faith trumps the power of original sin to dominate the believer's life; sin has no dominion over the believer (v. 14). This faith empowers obedience that leads to righteousness (v. 16b). As Paul says, "But 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, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness" (vv. 17-18).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Obeying Christ

Better still, this true faith in Christ sanctifies the believer and gives eternal life. True faith in Christ empowers a life lived in obedience to Christ. "But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life" (v. 22). Paul wants us to know that God did not give us the gift of saving faith in Jesus Christ in order to make it easier for us to sin. Rather, the saving faith God gives empowers us to battle sin daily and be obedient to Christ—an obedience that leads to righteousness—this, instead of succumbing to the temptation of ongoing obedience to our sinful passions. In other words, we don't "got to" strive to obey Christ, we "get to" strive to obey to Christ.