

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

Slaves, One Way Or Another

Romans 6:12-23

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8)

Analysis by Ron Starenko

12Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. 13No 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. 14For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. 15What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! 16Do 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 are 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 impurity, 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.

Introduction: Slavery, we might say, was before our time, historically speaking. We've all heard or read about the institution of slavery in the ancient world, our country's southern version of apartheid, or the slave labor camps of recent centuries. Within our time, we are also aware of the existence of sex slaves or even a slave market that is disturbing to all of us, to say the least. What is common about all these forms of slavery is that these bonds are, by definition, against the will of the enslaved. There are slaveries, however, much as we do not wish to acknowledge, that we actually will, such as our addictions to food, drink, work, our possessions, our obsessions with order and appearance. On the spiritual level, however, this lesson from Romans makes it quite clear that we are slaves, one way or another, which may come as a surprise, as we like to think that we have free will. In the one case we have no freedom because it is a slavery that is earned; in the other it is something that is freely given and thus freely received.

DIAGNOSIS: Enslaved Under Law

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *The Dominion of Slavery*

Speaking for God, St. Paul has our number here. For example, he refers to the “dominion” (vv. 12, 14) we are under, the things we are enslaved to, as “passions” and “sin.” The corporate confession in The Lutheran Book of Worship begins with the acknowledgment that “we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” Despite what we might want or prefer, we will

ourselves to be slaves. That is our original sin, that we cannot will otherwise. Not only are there evil powers that hold our bodies, minds and wills captive, we choose to serve these powers by our drives, desires, ambitions, goals, and needs. Our slavery is reinforced, writes the apostle, because we live “under the law” (v. 14). The commandment not only requires that we avoid sin, as though we could will what is good, it exercises dominion over us by increasing our rebellion and compelling us to break what we are helpless to keep (7:11), leading us to “greater and greater impurity” (v. 19).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *The Slavery of Disobedience*

In our slavery what we are really unable to do is to fear, love, and trust God above everything, and to love our neighbors more than ourselves. The word that Paul uses for that inability is “disobedience” or faithlessness. Without faith we are obedient to the powers that enslave us. Without faith we cannot please God, so we are doomed to please ourselves, to please the evil powers that dominate our lives. Disobedient “from the heart” (v. 17), we live out our lives in the service of sin, as Paul reiterates, “for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (14:23).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Enslaved to Death*

The payoff that our slavery earns is death. That’s “the wages of sin” (v. 23), as Paul put it. As slaves we work against ourselves, in fact, we kill ourselves, something we cannot not do. We are under death, and the harder we try to escape, the more we become enslaved. The deeper truth is that wherever God’s wrath wears us down, God works against us. As slaves of sin and death under the law we cannot have life in any form. Jesus drives this home: “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household...” (John 8:34, 35).

PROGNOSIS: Enslaved Under Grace

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *The Slave From God*

But Jesus is quick to add, what we are in desperate need to hear, that “the Son has a place forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:35, 36). What better news could we, the enslaved, have? Our Lord Jesus Christ, God’s Son, became God’s Slave by obediently carrying out his Father’s will, “born under the law” (Gal. 4:4), “in the likeness of sinful flesh” (8:3), “setting us free from the law of sin and death” (8:2). God’s Slave enters the dominion of the enslaved and is put to death on the cross where he breaks the bonds of sin and treads Satan underfoot, “so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death (Heb. 2:14, 15). And God raises him from death, blessing his servanthood, his slavery; so now we are “under grace” (v. 14).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Obedient Slaves*

As a result, all the enslaved are raised to God, as Jesus has become our obedience. In his salutation to the Romans, Paul began by proclaiming that through Jesus Christ “we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith...” (1:5). What we could not do before under the law we are now able to do under grace: to fear, love, and trust God, and by such faith to please God. As Jesus was a slave to God by his obedience, we become slaves to God by our obedience. “Do you not know,” writes the apostle, “that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?” (v. 16). Believing the gospel is an action of the Spirit by which we are no longer slaves to sin, but are now slaves to God, to the righteousness that is ours in

Jesus Christ.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Slaves of Righteousness

We become obedient, faithful slaves in the way we live our lives. “But now,” Paul writes, “that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification” (v. 22). Underway now is the new life of presenting “our mortal bodies...to God as instruments of righteousness” (vv. 12, 13). The point he is making is that what we already are in Jesus Christ, forgiven and therefore as righteous as he is, we get to be righteous in our daily lives, as Christ grows in us, as God’s righteousness grows on us. And how else do we relate to the world, to others, other than through our bodies, “temple(s) of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19)? As slaves under grace, we get to seek the welfare of our neighbor, to build up our partners, and pursue the common good of our communities. We are slaves, not of our own desires or of our culture, but of our Lord Jesus Christ, in service to one another, in service of the gospel.