

Leaving Sin Behind
A Sermon on Romans 6:1-11
Proper 7
June 25, 2017

Introduction

Paul is a challenge for us today. He doesn't easily conform to modern sensibilities. He talks about sin and grace, topics that progressive churches think they have outgrown. He talks about resurrection and eschatology, which prompt us to look for metaphors to avoid the supernatural implications.

H. Richard Niebuhr framed our problem with Paul, writing in 1937 in *The Kingdom of God in America*: Niebuhr mocked liberal preachers in the Progressive Era. He said that they reduced the gospel to: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." Mary and I must plead guilty. We emphasize the sin of the culture rather than individual sin. We like to preach universal salvation. God wants to save everybody. God no longer judges people.

Paul brings us back to the gospel, whether it makes us uncomfortable or not. Today's text talks sin and death. They are the core of baptism for Paul.

First Move: Sin as a Power

Many Christians shy away from talking about sin because sin as a theological word has been hijacked by politically conservative Christians. They associate it with sexual sin: abortion is a sin, homosexuality is a sin, divorce is a sin. That seems to be the focus of the gospel for them.

People today also associate sin with a dark view of humanity. The political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, said in the 17th century that the natural state of man, before government, is a war of every man against every man. His famous quote is, "Life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." John Calvin talked about the total depravity of man. Sin is something inside us, an inward disposition that makes all human actions displeasing to God.

Paul talks about sin in a different way. Paul talks about Sin with a capital S. Not sin as in the sins a person commits, but Sin as a power. Sin is not something within us but something that rules over us. Sin is a domain, a sphere of influence that we live in. Paul says in the previous chapter, Romans 5, that sin reigns over us and

grace reigns over us. Paul essentially sees the world as a kingdom of Sin; Christ frees us to live in the kingdom of God.

Paul uses the word *sin* seven times in today's text. Three times he characterizes sin as a power that enslaves us: remain in sin, serve sin, be justified from sin or declared free from sin. Four times he talks of dying to sin or doing away with sin.

Sin as a power is similar to our modern understanding of addiction. It is an outside force that controls us. We are helpless before it. We are trapped in it. It requires an intervention to break us free from it.

Sin as a power is also how many people today see government or bureaucracy. Government and the system are beyond our control. They are unresponsive. They are run by the economic and cultural elites. You have to have a lot of money to have any influence on government.

The word that Paul pairs with sin is death. Death also is a power. Death is a form of slavery. Death is punishment for sin. Romans 5:12: "Death entered the world through sin." Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death." Death is the outcome or fulfillment of a life spent under the rule of Sin. There is no escape from sin except through death.

Paul uses the words dead, death or dying 13 times in today's text. Listen to how Paul talks about death:

Died to sin.

Baptized into the death of Christ.

Baptism into death.

Christ was raised from the dead.

Grown together with Christ in the likeness of his death.

The one who died has been justified from sin.

Dying with Christ.

No longer dies.

Raised from the dead.

Death no longer is master.

Dying to death.

Dying to sin.

Dead to sin.

Do you hear a theme? Death is liberation. Sin dies with death. Sin can no longer rule over us if we have died.

Sin as death is not the intended outcome for humanity, life is. Our dilemma is that we cannot enjoy life except by escaping the power of sin and death. We need help for that.

Second Move: Christ as a Power

Through the crucifixion, sin and death already exerted all their power over Jesus. Christ conquered sin and death through the resurrection. Sin and death no longer have any claims on him. God exalted Christ and made him into a power, more powerful than sin and death.

Christians participate in the death of Christ through baptism. James, Aveon and Kilek, you were in Texas two weeks ago when I talked about baptism as death, so I will repeat it for you.

The Greek verb, βαπτίζω, means to dip or immerse in water. Baptisms in the first century were performed in rivers. Swimming was not popular until the last 300 years. Most people didn't know how to swim before that. They were scared to wade into a river and be dipped under water. Baptism literally symbolized death for them. Paul says that through baptism we die to our old way of life and rise to new life in Christ. People don't get the same sense of gravity today; baptism too often has been reduced to something you do to join a church.

Paul tells us to think of baptism as our own death. We die to sin through baptism, just as Christ died to sin through the crucifixion. Sin has not died; we have died to sin.

Paul says we are baptized into Christ Jesus. That is exactly what he means: into Christ. We become part of Christ. Our lives are merged into his.

Paul emphasizes our participation with Christ by using four Greek words that begin with the prefix, συν. It means co- or with. We have been co-buried with Christ. We have become co-grown together with Christ in the likeness of his death. We have been co-crucified with Christ. If we have died with Christ, we also will co-live with him.

We no longer stand under the power of sin. We have become grafted onto Christ and are under his lordship, where grace reigns. We are part of the body of Christ and Christ is the head.

We don't enjoy the resurrection yet. Our resurrection is still in the future. We trust that since we have died with him, we also will live with him.

Christ liberates us from sin to walk in the newness of life. We can now live to God instead of living to sin.

Paul has been describing our new status in Christ. He closes with the only ethical command in today's text: You should reckon yourselves to be dead to sin and living to God in Christ Jesus. Christ has liberated us for new possibilities. Now we can know real living instead of living under the power of sin.

James, Aveon and Kilek, if you take your baptism seriously, you will see your baptism as the death of your old self. Your old self has been crucified with Christ. You will rise up out of the water a new person. You will be free to serve God instead of serving sin. Your baptism will free you to live a better quality of life in the here and now.

You will still be tempted by sin and you will still sin occasionally. But you will not be controlled by sin. You will know that money and power are not the most important things in your life. You will be able to control your own selfish desires. You will see your new life as a gift of God.

Third Move: Christ Is Lord

Paul *is* a challenge for us today. That is a good thing. He talks in theological language instead of through stories. He is a deep thinker. He forces us to confront deep topics, like sin and death, the cross and resurrection. We have to deal with the reality of sin and death. We have to consider our place in God's plan.

Baptism is a turning point in our lives. Being baptized is the first step on a lifelong journey. When I am doing a eulogy for a funeral, I always talk about the person's baptism. I want to help the family and the congregation make sense of the deceased person's life by putting together the story of his or her faith journey.

Evangelicals too often reduce baptism to now you are saved and you will go to heaven. Baptism is more than that. Being baptized is a good first step but it is only a step. I hope that you will grow in faith the rest of your lives.

Paul only gives you one ethical command today: "You should reckon yourselves to be dead to sin and living to God in Christ Jesus." Other ethical commands will follow. Today it is enough that you recognize that you have a new identity: You are committed to following Jesus. You look at the world differently now. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:2: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Paul looks at the world through the lens of a crucified Christ.

Niebuhr complains that preachers shy away from Paul because he asks so much of us. Baptism is a matter of life and death. It changes the way we live.

Mary will ask you to make a confession of faith in a few minutes. Disciples of Christ make the same confession of faith that Peter made: "Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior."

Christ is a translation of the Greek word, Χριστός. It is a funny word in Greek. It means the Smearred One. It is a translation of the Jewish word, Messiah. The Messiah is the one who is anointed by God to lead the people. When the king took

the throne in ancient Israel, he was anointed with oil. He becomes a Smeared One. The oil is a sign of fatness. The king will bring fatness to the people. They will eat well. When we confess that Jesus is the Christ, we are saying that Jesus will bring fatness to our lives. Our lives will be full.

Jesus is the son of the living God. When Jesus rose up out of the water at his baptism, he heard a voice from heaven: “You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

You will undergo the same baptism as Jesus. When you rise up out of the water, you will have a new identity. You will be a beloved child of God. God is well pleased with you.

The God we believe in is a living God. In Jesus’s day, some Jews believed that God spoke through Scripture but that God stopped speaking with the last of the Biblical prophets. Jesus awakens us to a new understanding of God. God is still speaking. God still acts in our lives. The sacred is all around us.

We proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior. That was the earliest Christian confession: Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Lord not Caesar. Paul would say, Jesus is Lord not sin and death. Jesus as savior saves us from a life of sin. Jesus as savior liberates us from sin to live to God.

After your confession of faith, Mary will dip you in the water. While you are under water, she will say your full name, “I baptize you, James Mitch Lewis, I baptize you, Aveon Marquez Lewis, I baptize you, Kilek Aiden Lewis, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Your name is now joined to name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. People in the first century thought that to call the name of a god was to invoke the presence of a god. The Father, Son and the Holy Spirit will be present with you on your faith journey.

When you rise up out of the water, you will be part of a new family, the family of believers. All Christians stand under the Lordship of Christ.

Your baptism makes you part of this faith community. We all shared in the death of Jesus through our baptisms. We are on the same journey together.

All Christians strive to be disciples of Christ. That is the hope anyway. A disciple in Greek means a student, someone who learns under a master. We want to learn what Jesus taught. That is a lifelong process. If you leave this faith community, hopefully you will become part of another community that is committed to the Lordship of Christ and will help you grow in discipleship.

Conclusion

There are three billion Christians in the world today, but how many disciples? How many of them actually take the gospel seriously? Paul helps disciples confront the reality of sin and death. The cross and the resurrection are not just stories in the Bible for us as disciples, they are present realities that shape our identity. They change the way we live.

James, Aveon and Kilek, I hope you will remember this day. I hope you will take your baptism seriously. I hope that in your old age you will be able to look back on this day and see it as the beginning of your faith journey. I hope you will be able to say, I tried to follow Jesus.

I hope you also will see today as a day of new beginnings, of new possibilities. A new life lies in front of you. May God be with you on your journey.

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