

Instruments of Righteousness

Romans 6:12-23

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.

Last week in the first half of the sixth chapter of Romans we learned that we have been buried and resurrected with Christ in our baptism and with the help of the Holy Spirit we can walk in the newness of life. In today Paul wants Christians to understand our sanctification, the process of regeneration by which a sinner becomes not just counted as righteous, but actually transformed for holy living. But remember that righteous living is not the condition of reconciliation with God, but the content and consequence of that reconciliation. Our sanctification is a free, joyful response to God's prior gift of justification, or declaring us "not guilty" and in right relationship with God. Because God has reconciled us to Godself and all creation, we can and do pour out lives of praise, service, and witness. God justifies, and we come to sanctified life in response.

As people walking "in newness of life" Paul's announcement is in our baptism we are transferred from the dominion of sin to the dominion of grace. This happens through the power of God. We make our statement of faith in what Jesus has done and God gives us a new identity and new life; we become instruments of righteousness. **Ted A. Smith**

So, what does it mean that we are instruments of righteousness? The great idol of the modern age is personal independence. In the United States, we want health care without restrictions, wages without taxes, cell-phone plans without limits. We are heavily invested in the illusion that we think for ourselves, choose for ourselves, and do for ourselves. In this light we find today's passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans both offensive and essential. It is a word we need to hear.

Paul says we will be instruments of sin or wickedness or instruments of righteousness. Another way of saying this is we will be slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness. Naturally these are strange words to our ears since slavery in this country ended over 150 years ago. But Paul lived in an age where the relationship between slave and master needed no explanation; it was understood and accepted by all. In our day and age, the word "slavery" calls to mind 300 years of social sin and evil, and we want nothing to do with it. What Paul means when he says we are slaves is the idea of ultimate allegiance, loyalty, obedience, and service. To be a slave, as Paul understands it, is to surrender your life to the control of another. When slavery is defined in this way, it turns out we are all slaves of one sort or another.

One commentator says she has a friend who is a slave to fashion. We all know that fashion is a fickle master indeed. Every season brings a new set of requirements, new clothing and accessories to be purchased, new trends to be adopted. Sometimes her friend looks fabulous; other times she looks ridiculous;

sometimes she looks uncomfortable. Nevertheless, she has pledged her allegiance to *Vogue* and takes her orders from its editor.

Some people are slaves to physical fitness, arranging their lives and relationships around trips to the gym and rigorous workouts. Some people have pledged their allegiance to personal wealth and are guided by the whims of Wall Street. These people have a difficult time every time there is a down-turn in the stock market. If you want to know who your master is, pay attention to what occupies your thoughts and how you spend your time and money. We are all serving something or someone. This passage invites us to ask the question, whom do you serve? Or, of what are you an instrument?

Paul sees only two possible masters: righteousness (God) or sin (everything else). He sees nothing wrong with having a master—everyone has one. It is *whom* you serve that makes the difference. New Testament scholar David Bartlett describes it this way: "There are loyalties that liberate." The only way to win is to surrender to God. As an old hymn says, "Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free."

Last week's commentator who told us about her little boy with the spilled milk says when she was a teenager, she had a creative way to keep herself out of trouble. When friends would call and ask her to do something, she knew was questionable, she found a way to say no without losing face or popularity. She would ask her mother's permission, but add, "I need you to tell me no." Her mother would say no, so Rev. Monroe could say to her friends, "My mom won't let me go." As a teenager, surrendering control to her mother allowed her to do the right thing without a struggle. This is the strange yet wonderful logic of Paul's understanding of salvation. God is on our side and has our best interests at heart. If we devote ourselves to God's will, God will lead us to abundant life.

From Paul's point of view, God is our Lord and Heavenly Parent who only wants the best for us. We are not independent players in this game; we have all declared for a team: "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). Through baptism, we have become one with Christ. Our allegiance is to God, who stands with us precisely because God stands over us.

Paul calls us to be instruments of righteousness and have a living faith. This means living what we say we believe. Paul is encouraging Christians to walk the walk, to live for Christ, since we are now dead to sin. This is not something that happens automatically. It is a choice we have to make day by day: "No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present ... your members to God as instruments of righteousness" (v. 13). Through baptism into Christ, God has created the possibility of our doing the right thing, but every Christian must choose whether or not he or she will do it. Our actions reveal our true allegiance and character. Paul puts it this way: "you are slaves of the one whom you obey" (v. 16); or in the words of humorist Dave Barry, who once said, "A person who is nice to you, but rude to the waiter, is not a nice person"

Human nature is such that men and women cannot help but be enslaved to someone or something—to a slave owner, to a theological or philosophical concept, to cosmic forces of evil (see Rom. 8:38-39; Eph. 3:10; 6:12; Col.1:16; 2:15), to powerful passions and desires (Rom. 6:11-14, 19), or, in a positive sense, to righteousness and the service of the living God (6:6, 14, 18-22). Another way for us modern Christian to understand this is in terms of obsession, compulsion, or addiction. Until we exchange negative addictions for positive ones by the power of the Holy Spirit, they cannot truly live.

We need to face the fact that the payoff for serving or being the instrument of sin is always death; but the reward for being an instrument of righteousness is eternal life in Christ Jesus the Lord. **Earl S. Johnson, Jr.**

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