

VII TRINITY 2014
SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH
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ROMANS 6.19



Slavery...is a topic that makes 21st Century Christians justifiably uncomfortable to talk about? Most of us cringe just thinking about the existence of slavery in our own American history.

In this morning's Epistle reading the word "servant" is misleading...it should more properly be read as "slave". People who work in households as butlers, cooks, drivers, and gardeners, earn their living...their wages...from the work they do. And they get time off...time for themselves. Slaves...do not earn a living...they do not get wages...they do not get time off...even for good behavior

Slavery as an institution was a fact of life in the ancient world. Saint Paul was confronted with the reality of slavery everywhere he went. Like Jesus, Paul draws upon his everyday experiences in the letters he writes to the Church. Paul talked to them in language and about things they understood, to get them to sit up and take notice...to pay attention.

What got Paul's attention was his awareness of his own weaknesses. He asked himself why this was so. He knew his encounter with Jesus on the Road to Damascus had changed his life. He knew God's free gift of grace empowered him to do good works. So why do we sometimes backslide and keep sinning?

The simplest answer to Paul's question has to do with free will. God has free will to do as he pleases and so do we. God gives us an abundance of his grace to help us say and do the right thing. But he will not force us to do what is right. He wants us to come to the conclusion on our own that resisting his love and grace ultimately leaves us in a mess.

Paul equates living a sinful life to being a slave without any freedom. Sin is what separates us from God. Slaves have no control over their lives. By being a slave to sin, Paul means sin controls us and prevents us from having a right relationship with God. Sin make us slaves to death...and that is not what we want...we need forgiveness...we need to be set free...so we can live!

It is not possible to fully enjoy God's forgiveness and grace unless we first admit we have said or done something wrong and need to be forgiven. We must then make a sincere effort to makes changes in our lives, so we don't get trapped into thinking God doesn't see what's in our hearts or know what we're thinking.

Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that accepting God's forgiveness without making any effort to change was nothing more than "cheap grace". To quote Pastor Bonheoffer...*"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ."*

Grace is God's free gift that helps us say and do the right things. Sin is the great lie that says we don't really need God's grace. That kind of thinking is dangerous and spiritually fatal...it got Paul's attention...and it should get ours. Jesus' death on the cross was our ticket on the Freedom Train...but it does come with a price. The price of the ticket for us is letting God's grace go to work in our lives so we remain free and don't get trapped in the sin game.

Our freedom from sin and death are not things we earned. Material wages are what we earn...the paycheck for the work we do. We try to do our jobs well so we can continue to work, put food on the table and have all the other material things we need to live comfortably. Even on the days we don't feel much like going to work we must, if we expect to see that paycheck.

The spiritual paycheck we earned for our bad behavior was stamped "void" by Jesus when he died on the cross so we could live. Instead we get a new spiritual paycheck...the one that says "Pay to the Order of Us"...God's free gift of eternal life in union with Jesus is paid to us now and forever.

Our job during this lifetime is to use our free will to avoid those things that keep us slaves to ourselves. God gives us his grace to help us...we just have to ask for it...and do our very best to follow through in our commitment to say and do the right thing.

