

Jeremiah 28:5-9; Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18;  
Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

I was watching television the other night (I know – something new and different) when one of my favorite shows came on – "CSI – Crime Scene Investigation". I mean the first one, the one based in Las Vegas, not the one in Miami and not the one in New York. (I watch those, but I like the first one better. I like the actors better, I like the characters, I like the plots of those shows; they're not quite as gritty or dark as the other two shows.) Anyway, I'm watching the show and two of the main characters, Grissom (who is the overall boss) and Katherine Willows are talking. Now Katherine, for the last several seasons, has been working for Grissom, but she recently got a promotion. So Katherine is sitting at her desk talking to Grissom and she says to him, "You know, when I was your left hand, and your right hand as well, I always knew that when it hit the fan, you'd be the one to get dirty."

In other words what she was saying is that when Grissom was her boss, he was the one who was going to get the blame, no matter who it was in the department that messed up. Grissom, as the boss, dealt with the mess, got the blame, accepted the responsibility.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul is talking about a very similar thing. Now previous to what we just heard read to us from the last half of chapter 6 in Romans, in the first five and a half chapters, Paul's stating the case that all of us – no matter if we're Jew or Greek, Israeli or Roman, male or female – all of us are sinful. All of us need God's grace. It's not just that group of folks over there; it's not this little enclave over here; all of us are sinful and all of us need God's grace.

But that's okay, because as Martin Luther figured out in the outhouse one day (Martin Luther had constipation and he did a lot of his theological thinking in his outhouse. So if anyone ever complains that Lutherans have crappy theology, you can say that's right, we do!). Luther found the verse in chapter 3, verse 28, "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law". Justified by faith apart from works. That's a radical concept; it doesn't matter what we do, we are justified by our faith.

But wait, there's more. He goes on to say in the next chapter that, not only are we justified by faith apart from what we do; Christ goes the next step and reconciles us to God. And there is nothing, I repeat **nothing**, that we can do to bring about that reconciliation. But we don't have to. It's been done for us. Radical concept number two.

So the Romans are wrestling with these two points, and then Paul, in order to help them better understand the whole thing, tries to put an everyday face on these two concepts, and the whole next section (what we heard last week, the first part of chapter 6 and today) concerns walking in a "newness of life" (verse 4 of chapter 6) which is initiated by Christ and sustained by the Spirit. That's what this whole next section is about; he summarizes this in verse 12 of chapter 6, "Therefore do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions."

Now, we can't really capture this in the English, but in the Greek that word that is here translated as "dominion" ("kingdom" or "to reign") refers back to chapter 5 where Paul is also talking about how sin used to reign in our lives but now grace reigns. Grace reigns in our lives. And so Paul has set the stage to talk about to whom or to what we are obedient.

As we heard today in our reading from Romans, Paul starts to do these "compare and contrasts". Members presented to sin versus members presented to God. Instruments of wickedness versus instruments of righteousness. Slaves of sin leading to death versus slaves of obedience leading to righteousness. Slaves to impurity resulting in iniquity versus slaves of righteousness resulting in sanctification. Slaves of sin which bears the fruit of shame and results in death versus being enslaved to God which bears the fruit of sanctification and results in eternal life. In other words, the wages of sin is death versus the free gift of God, which is eternal life.

Maybe we're having trouble relating to Paul's everyday face on this because we're twenty-first century Americans, and we really don't want to talk about slavery. Slavery, though, was a very real issue in Paul's day and he was basing his examples on something that folks could relate to. And what we, as twenty-first century Americans need to remember, is that slavery was not unique to the United States in the 1800's. Nor was it solely for the Romans or even the Greeks. Every culture on every continent throughout history has had slaves and slavery. It's a fact. We need to accept that and go forward and try to understand the imagery that Paul is trying to convey here because he's making vital points with this. Primarily, the slave in servitude was always bound and beholden to the master. Yes, there were many different forms of slaves in Paul's day and throughout history; there were those slaves who were under the oppressive thumb of the master and there were also those slaves who could hold public office; it all depended on what their master was willing to let them do but still they were slaves; they were beholden to their master.

John H. Elliot in a book with a title about this long<sup>1</sup>, writes about this whole kind of relationship; he calls it the "patron-client" relationship, which takes in the slavery relationship as a "fundamental and pervasive form of dependency relations, involving the reciprocal exchange of goods and services between socially superior 'patrons' and their socially inferior 'clients' . . . [that] shaped both the public and private sectors of

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<sup>1</sup> The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation, R. Rohrbaugh, ed., Hendrickson Publishers, 1996.

ancient life as well as the political and religious symbolizations of power and dependency." In other words, slaves report to their masters; those masters report to wealthier masters; and the wealthier masters report to the emperor. Somewhere there is always somebody who is more socially inferior to us and somebody who is socially superior to us. It's as true today as it was in Paul's time. No, we may not call them "clients and patrons" or "masters and slaves" now; maybe we call them "sales associates and managers" or "farm hands and owners" or "factory workers and office workers". Or maybe we call them "blue jeans and suits". Or how about "teacher and student" or "hospital and patient", "sports personality and fan" – it doesn't matter what we call them, we got 'em now, Paul had 'em then. And even the free persons in Paul's day knew something about the necessity of having to serve somebody if they were going to survive and thrive in a social order.

Regardless, Paul uses this illustration to remind us that just as in our job, in our employment, in our daily living, we are answerable to someone, so too in our faith life. In our life of faith, we too are answerable, because remember, we can't do it ourselves. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

And it's that "sin" thing that I think we struggle with. When we look at "the wages of sin is death", we understand the "death" part; it's the "sin" thing that we tend to struggle with. The law of Moses tried to be very helpful with this concept. We get these wonderful long lists in Leviticus (I'm sure you've all read that thoroughly during nights when you can't sleep) these lists of things not to do, of behaviors to avoid, of rituals that we should perform, and all those are and were and remain good things, but what we have discovered over time is that, no matter how closely we follow those rules and regulations and all of those ordinances, we still sin. Because sin is all of that "stuff" – all of our thoughts, or relationships, the things that we own or the things that we want, the activities – all of that "stuff" which messes up our relationship with God. Sin is whatever gets in the way between me and God. And maybe the real kicker is that "sin" is not the same for me as it is for you.

I'm not all that concerned about alcohol and getting drunk, because I really don't care a whole lot for alcohol. But if you take out the word "alcohol" and replace it with the two words "Mountain Dew", I'm in a boatload of trouble. Sin is insidious. It changes from person to person and even for individuals, it can change from day to day. It's whatever gets in there and messes up my relationship with God.

Maybe you like to play internet poker. Maybe you're really good at it and you like to play it a lot and stay up until 3:15 in the morning playing it. Well that, in and of itself, isn't necessarily all that bad. Maybe you're not betting the mortgage. Maybe you're even making some money at it, but if you stay up that late and you're groggy at work the next day, so you're not putting in an honest day's work, or if it slows down your reflexes as you're driving and could possibly cause an accident, then maybe staying up until 3:15 in the morning is part of that sin that gets in there and messes up our relationship.

I can't tell you what the sin is in your life. I could tell you what the sin is in my life – I'm not going to, but I could. You know what it is that's messing up your relationship. You know what is causing those "wages" to be in your life.

Now remember when I started talking about CSI with Katherine Willows and Grissom, where Grissom used to catch the blame? Katherine is talking to Grissom because she has now been promoted, and she's had something go wrong in her department, and she was learning the hard way that it didn't matter that the fellows who reported to her messed up, she was the one, now, as the new shift leader, who got the blame.

Jesus, as the free gift which brings eternal life, takes away all of that sinful stuff, all of the things that mess up our relationship, and more importantly, Jesus is the One to whom we are answerable. Christ is the one who steps in to take the blame for my mistakes, for my failures, for your mistakes and your failures. For us, it's not a matter of "if" it hits the fan or "when" it hits the fan, because for us, as humans, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; for us, it already has hit the fan. And Christ took it for us.

Sin is pervasive. It's everywhere, all of the time, no matter how much we try not to, for us, though, none of that matters. Because sin isn't this overwhelming force that shatters us completely, because of Christ, we are reconciled with God. And though the wages of sin be death, we are reconciled to God by the free gift of eternal life, eternal life in Christ Jesus who took it for us, so that we wouldn't have to.

Amen.