### “Slaves to Righteousness” Steve Finlan for The First Church, July 2, 2023

**Romans 6:15–19, 23**

15 What 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, once the slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, 18and that you, now 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 . . . so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. . . 23For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Matthew 10:40–42**

40“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; 42and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Greetings to all of you today, as we also greet the beginning of summer weather. This week we celebrate the beginning of our country’s independence. We will also celebrate the Last Supper with our communion service, in which all are welcome to join.

Let’s look at these intriguing Scriptures. Paul’s message in Romans is very similar to what Bob Dylan wrote many years ago: “You gotta serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you gotta *serve* somebody.” It’s a real decision everyone needs to make. Paul describes the conversion from serving sin to serving a form of *teaching* that has been heard. . . which directs people toward righteousness.

When we make a decision to participate, then we work jointly with God. So what are important for Paul are both the relationship with the new master, God, and the teaching one has heard. As Paul sees it, the teaching is our foundation, our path to follow, to work God’s will here on earth. Salvation is both relational and doctrinal, for Paul.

But failing to make this conversion, staying attached to sin, is a choice that leads to real death, to soul extinction. For Paul, there is no punishment in the afterlife, no flames or unending thirst. One either rises to be with the Lord, or one suffers extinction. In Romans 2:12 he says that sinners “perish.”

Sin is associated with death in Romans 5 (5:21). He repeatedly calls those who reject the message, who turn away from God, “those who are perishing” (1 Cor 1:18; 2 Cor 2:15; 4:3). Living according to the flesh results in corruption. As Paul says in Galatians: “if you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh, but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit” (Gal 6:8).

He seems to be saying that sinners die with the deaths of their bodies; they inherit corruption, but believers are given eternal life from the Spirit. Strong words. Paul is being very serious about making decisions that have eternal import. One decision results in being lost, the other opens the door to life everlasting.

In First Corinthians, Paul goes into greater depth about the resurrection of believers. He insists that “Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies . . . What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. . . It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body . . . Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 15:39–40, 42, 44, 50). But none of this happens for those who live according to the flesh. This means for those who willingly choose to turn away from following Jesus, and reject God’s will, there is no afterlife. The wages of sin are death: extinction.

In addition, Paul, in our Romans passage, puts the emphasis upon whom one is serving: Is one serving death and the powers of death, or the Son of God and the powers of life? In the gospel passage there is a different emphasis. It concerns kindly actions. If you are respectful and good to a prophet, you will get a prophet’s reward. If you are influenced by a disciple to give even so much as a cup of water to a little one, then you will not lose your reward. The spiritual motive of the giver will ensure a spiritual reward. It says nothing about beliefs at all. It does say something about respect and motivation.

If you give that cup of water “in the name of a disciple”—that is, if you give it to a disciple or to someone else because of the testimony of a disciple—then you have the right motive, and it will be rewarded. Swiss scholar Ulrich Luz says that it refers to supporters “who remain at home” and provide aid or hospitality for travelling evangelists (Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* [Cambridge University Press, 1995], 56).

I see even more than that in this passage. To me, it indicates that God recognizes *every* example of good will, and wishes to save *everyone*. Even one who just gives a cup of water is worth saving. Good deeds matter. A motive that God recognizes as spiritually worthy, is the key to the kingdom. God saves every soul that aspires to goodness, regardless of their belief structure. And this probably also applies to those who support the evangelists. Some of the villagers offering a cup of water might not have been Jewish; they might have been Syro-phoenicians or other kinds of pagans. But if they offer that water, they will be saved. And that is good news indeed!

Jesus is highlighting God’s generosity and will to save. Paul also stresses God’s desire to save. He calls it “the free gift of God” (6:23), and he speaks of “sanctification” (6:19, 22), which means a process of spiritual perfecting and correcting, resulting in a “harvest of righteousness” (Phil 1:11). God transforms us “to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29). Or, as Jesus put it, referring to this transforming process: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). It will take an eternity for this perfecting to be accomplished. As anyone who has tried to polish a stone will know, polishing to perfection can take a while.

Paul says present your whole body and all its members to be servants of righteousness for the sake of this sanctifying process. This process may take forever. As he says: “The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (6:23). So, to use modern terminology, put your whole self into participation with Jesus, to follow God’s will. Keep polishing, seeking perfection. In time we will all shine like diamonds with our spiritual radiance.

In the meantime, we are fallible beings living in a fallible democracy. As James Madison said, “A well-instructed people alone can be permanently a free people. . . To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea” (<https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/james-madison-quotes>). That’s my Fourth of July ingredient in the sermon: Madison’s observation that we need to have virtue in the population.