

“X-Rated Scriptures” – Rom 6:12-23

I’m always slightly amused when someone – almost always not a church-goer – utters a mild oath in my hearing, and then they are all embarrassed, mumbling apologies and generally conveying the sense that they believe that since I am a clergy person that I’ve never heard such language. Quite apart from the fact that my first career was some twenty years in the mining industry where I’ve heard just about every curse word there is in a number of languages, anyone who really knows and understands the church already knows that clergy with a quarter-century of experience have also been well introduced to the frailties of human nature.

And so I was delighted to reread the passage from Paul in his letter to the Romans that we heard this morning. The earthy language he has used here is far removed from the artificial purity of a Victorian era sitting room!. The English translations soften it down a bit, translating the Greek ‘mele’ as ‘members’ but even with that term the fact that he is not using the word in the sense of ‘church members’ comes clearly through. When you recall that prostitution-based religious cults, or at least orgy-like behaviour thinly disguised as religious observances were apparently quite common in Rome, the subject or object of Paul’s admonitions about ‘members’ becomes, I think, a little clearer. Not that this is the only section of our scriptures that gets somewhat earthy or even X-Rated, and there are many other expressions that have been softened through the filter of translation.

So, why was Paul getting “down and dirty” in a manner of speaking? It seems he was trying to counter not only accusations that his assertion of salvation through faith was a form of “cheap grace” in which any behaviour could be forgiven, but also actual practices by new Christians who were living out such a belief. Paul counters both these positions with two sections, both of which begin the same way, with Paul’s direct and distinctive question, “What then?”, followed by a rhetorical question, “shall we sin?”, answered by a strong assertion, “may it never be!”, and then expounded upon with a long explanation. Why are these sections so similar? Is one merely a different version of the other? What was Paul trying to say? So many questions! Let’s go back a bit and see if we can answer them.

Paul has been trying to bring his readers along with him through an argument that everything has changed with Christ’s death and resurrection. Writing to a group of new Christians who are either still strongly connected with their previous Jewish faith or who are being challenged by those who continue to practice their Jewish faith, Paul argues that faith in Christ provides a whole new way to be reconciled with God – justified, sanctified, “saved” if you will, brought into a right relationship with God. His argument is that this justification is through Christ’s death on the cross, and is freely available to and given to anyone who believes. Paul declares at some length that to receive this grace from God it is sufficient merely to have faith – that it is no longer necessary to be obedient to the law given through Moses.

Needless to say, there was a lot of opposition to Paul’s declaration of grace and salvation through faith and faith alone. More surprising, however, is that there still is a lot of opposition to that tenet of faith – and even more surprising is that that opposition comes from some of the most ardent of Christian believers! Both groups – Jews and Jewish Christians in Paul’s day, and conservative fundamentalist Christians of today – argue that strict observance of God’s laws is necessary. Those from two thousand years ago argued that such observance is necessary to receive salvation, and those from today imply that one’s salvation is so tenuous and fragile that it can be annulled or revoked for the slightest infraction of God’s laws. And of course those who hold such views pick and choose, having their favourite infractions that will cause such revoking and conveniently ignoring those that they enjoy doing.

At the heart of these arguments against Paul's understanding of grace and salvation by faith alone is the claim that such a belief leads to moral relativism, or in other words a sense that "anything goes." Some obviously went so far as to claim that a belief in grace and salvation by faith alone would lead to even more sinning. How do we know? Because Paul argues here in his letter against a claim that "the more we sin the more grace we receive." Earlier in his letter he claimed that our faith in Christ – especially in our baptism – draws us into participating in Christ's death, and more importantly in Christ's resurrection, and that in that participating we have become new people, that in believing we are made new.

There are two key questions that immediately arise if we are indeed made new through our faith. Just ahead of this reading Paul's posed and answered the first of those questions: the question, "OK – now what?" where he addressed the question with an outline of how we are to live, what we are to do as we live out being new people in Christ. And now we're looking at Paul's posing and answering the second of those questions, which could be phrased, "OK – now why?"

The "what" and the "why" are of course closely related – what do we choose to do, and why do we or should we choose to do it? Both refer to sinning, and both arguments are based on a belief that we are sinners, that we cannot live a pure a blameless life. But both arguments are also based on a belief that we have some choice in the matter, that we do choose to sin or not to sin. While rare disorders such as sociopathy or psychotic breaks are exceptions, Paul's rational arguments to rational people are based on the premise that we do have choice about sinning.

So what do by sin, or sinning? The simplest way to define sin, although perhaps the hardest way to live without sinning, is to understand sin as any action that is not consistent with "living to God in Christ Jesus." Sounds easy if you say it fast enough, doesn't it? But to recognize what that means we have to understand what kind of living God calls us to in Christ Jesus, namely that identified in Jesus' new commandment – love God with all you are, and love your neighbour as you have been loved.

Easy to understand, but so tough to live. It's tough because to live this way we have to think. In order to live this out we need to be aware of all that we do, and critically examine our actions against the touchstone of loving God/loving others. That's hard work! More than that it is often painful work, as we discover just how unloving our actions can often be.

So then, back to the question of "why?". Paul argues here in this second section that essentially we have only two choices: to be in slavery to sin, or to be in slavery to obedience to God. As much as we might want a third option, there is no "Option C". People are often presented with only two choices in life, but continue in agonizing indecision and often suffering because they really want a third option that doesn't exist. My mantra in these situations is, "There is no Option C." For Paul there also is no Option C here – the choice is between slavery or slavery: slavery to sin or slavery to obedience to God. What doesn't come through very well in the English here is an interesting play on words in the Greek – and Paul was a master at such double meanings. The word *doulos* that is translated "slave" can be – and often is – translated equally well as "servant." In English these two words, slave and servant, have significantly different connotations, implying that a servant had some choice in the matter. In New Testament Greek, not so much! And so we can legitimately rephrase Paul's options as between being a slave to sin or a servant to God. While in this age and culture of supreme independence people are loathe to admit to any kind of bondage, for Paul – and perhaps to us as well – it is abundantly clear that freedom for the Christian is not freedom to do whatever one wants, but freedom to obey God.

So, is this just a different kind of law that Paul is proclaiming? I don't think so, and there's a little key phrase in verse 17 that stands out for me as the essence of his argument "why?" That little key phrase? "From the heart." "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." Obedience from the heart is a different kind of obedience than that from the head. Obedience from the head is very much rule based, drawing upon laws and regulations, the letter of the law behaviour. In sharp contrast, obedience from the heart is behaviour that is motivated by love, by the spirit of the law, by care and consideration of others and their well-being. Is that difference not what Jesus spoke of when he condemned the Pharisees for putting huge burdens on the people but not lifting a finger to help them? The answer Paul provides here to the question "why behave a certain way as new people in Christ?" is clearly a motivation to serve God not from fear, but in love from the heart.

And the lure, the outcome, the reward for choosing from the heart to serve God as opposed to being in slavery to sin? Our reading translates the word *karpon* as "advantage" to contrast the results of sin with the results of service to God, which I think is better translated with its literal meaning of "fruit." "Advantage" has a modern connotation of one-upmanship, of gaining an edge in competition, while "fruit" or "crops" still holds a sense of reaping what has been sown, of gleaning the results of careful tending. So I would express verses 21-22 of our reading as "So what did you reap from sowing wild oats? That crop is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and are in service to God, your harvest is sanctification, and the crop is eternal life."

The answer, or more correctly the answers, to the question, "What then? Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?" is clearly articulated by Paul. We echo his answer, and affirm with our lives: "By no means! We joyfully choose from our hearts to be in service to God, and celebrate receiving the free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Thanks be to God that we have the choice to make through Christ's gift, and through the strength and guidance of the Holy Spirit, One God now and forever.