

“Don't Park Your Brain At The Door” – Rom 6:12-23

We are, of course, familiar with the reality that the majority of Canadians no longer attend or even associate with church. One of the most common criticisms they hold of the church is the accusation that religion asks – if not demands – that people set aside their reasoning powers, that they are not permitted to think for themselves. I have to admit that there is some basis for these accusations because some branches of the church do indeed do just that. Extremists in many parts of the church at large, whether in branches that are rigidly hierarchical or those that arise from DIY enthusiastic evangelism, do indeed call for people to stop thinking and simply behave as they are told. Of course the foundation for this is an untoward exercise of power, and such abuses can and do taint the church as a whole. I am happy to say that for the most part we in the Reformed branches of the church do indeed call upon believers to exercise the intelligence that is a gift from God, and I hope that you will do so as we look at what Paul says in today's reading.

I can excuse you if you're feeling like this is a moment of “déjà vu”, that you thought you heard this morning's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans already last week, because the reading this week not only immediately follows last week's reading but is similar in both theme and structure. Both of these sections from Chapter 6 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 two sections here in his letter? Why are they 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, calling upon the intelligence of his readers, has been trying to bring them 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 and thus 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 this 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 that? Because Paul argues here

in his letter against a claim that “the more we sin the more grace we receive.” In our reading two weeks ago he claims 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, in believing we are made new.

There are two key questions that immediately arise if we are indeed made new through our faith. In last week’s epistle reading Paul posed and answered the first of those questions: the question, “OK – now what?” and his answer provided an outline of how we are to live, what we are to do as we live out being new people in Christ. Now we’re looking at Paul’s presenting and answering the second of those questions which could be phrased as “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, namely that we do choose to sin or not to sin. (We do need to note here that such a belief omits or ignores situations of pathological disorders such as sociopathic behaviour or psychotic breaks, in which rational thought or behaviour is simply not possible. Remember, however, Paul here is making rational arguments with rational people about rational behaviour.) Again, Paul’s arguments are based on the premise that we are called to think about what we since we have some choice about sinning.

We also need to take a moment here and review or clarify what we mean by a sin, or sinning. The easiest way to define sin – and 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 identify that which is not consistent with that kind of living, we have to understand what kind of living God calls us to in Christ Jesus. Probably the most succinct way to understand that kind of living to God is encapsulated in Jesus’ new commandment – love God with all you are and love your neighbour as you have been loved.

Easy to understand and yet 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”. (I often have some fun with Elizabeth over this very expression: so often people are presented with 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 and 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! Just the same, one could 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 hate 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." It seems to me that obedience from the heart is a different kind of obedience from the head. Obedience from the head can often be very much rule based, drawing upon laws and regulations, the letter of the law behaviour. Obedience from the heart is by contrast behaviour that is motivated by love, by the spirit of the law, by care and consideration of others and their well-being. The difference seems to me the same kind of difference 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. This does not mean that we are not to think but rather that there is a need for a balance between what our head tells us and what our heart tells us.

One last word to think about relates to the benefit, the outcome, the reward for choosing 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 but I think it 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 "crop" 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."

So what then? Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! When we think about it we realize we can 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.