

4th Sunday after Pentecost: What fruit is there in sin?

A sermon by the Rev. Fr. David G. Subu
Delivered on July 9, 2006

EPISTLE: Romans 6:18-23

Brethren, ¹⁸And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. ²⁰For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. ²²But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. ²³For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Christ is among us!

Now that we have entered the season of Pentecost, the feast in which we celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit that leads the Church into all truth, the Church appropriately turns her attention to the reading of the epistle of St. Paul to the Romans. Just as in the dome of the main reading room in the Library of Congress the Romans were accredited with contributing the gift of administration to the world, so the Epistle to the Romans appeals to the legal and administrative mind by clarifying what the relationship is between the New Testament to the Old, the Law of Moses. Step by step, St. Paul builds his case in an inspired rhetorical style. Today, we read the last verses of chapter 6, coming to its conclusion on the effect and purpose of Christian baptism. At the heart of it is the issue of freedom.

In the beginning of Romans 6, St. Paul establishes that baptism is an image of death and burial, that to be baptized means spiritually to die to our sins and our passions and to rise again in Christ: “⁵For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, ⁶knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.” Of course, the reality of life is that even though baptized, a Christian must still struggle with sin. Temptation does not go away. Often, it even gets worse. The key is to be found in our relationship to it.

Before baptism, we were slaves of sin. We were slaves to sin. What does it mean to be a slave of sin? Of course there is the element of serving sin with no freedom of doing anything else. The other

element is ownership. If we are slaves to sin then we belong to sin, and to its author. In Baptism, we are set free from sin but not necessarily set free entirely. Some one still owns us: that is the Lord. But His ownership is greater still in that he exchanges our servitude for friendship, our slavery for an inheritance. When we become slaves of righteousness, sin still tries to capture us but we no longer have to feel compelled by it. We no longer need to see ourselves as beholden to sin, its hapless victims. We now have the freedom to live to God.

The Bible does not give us the option of freedom for ourselves. We are all like the centurion of today's Gospel, a man himself under authority but with others under his authority. We are either under the authority of sin or of righteousness in this life. Our *members* of which Paul speaks, including our hands and feet, as well as our senses and all of our bodily organs, are the servants under our authority, which heed our commands and do as we direct, and we present ourselves through them either as slaves of righteousness or slaves of sin. And the two options do not effectively coexist. St. Paul says, “²⁰For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.” This might be better understood not in the terms that when we are slaves of sin God considers us free to do whatever we like, but rather free from righteousness in that we have none to speak of! When we are slaves to sin our members are paralyzed from serving righteousness, for all of our attention is given to the passions of the flesh.

To be free for our selves would be a delusion, because then we would be slaves to our own selfishness and therefore once again to sin, of “lawlessness leading to more lawlessness.” Indeed, freedom of the self is perhaps the premier trap which sin uses to ensnare us in the first place. We are never tempted with an offer of enslavement: “Here, enjoy this cigarette, this drink, this fornication—build a habit and watch your youth, health, and prosperity slowly burn away into addiction.” Rather we see the freedom of personal choice, of independence, of popularity and a false sense of maturity.

Thus St. Paul asks the Romans and us pointedly: “²¹What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.” What fruit means what benefit, what profit, what value, what joy, what peace, what true pleasure? For sin provides us with nothing lasting, nothing of true value. It leaves us no peace or joy, for it only leaves us hungry for more. In the end, we

have nothing to speak of but the grave, nothing to show for our life but unpaid bills and credit card statements, and if we are lucky, a few souls who will mourn for us. But righteousness bears fruit not only in this life: fruits of patience, joy, peace, love, fellowship, confidence, character, beauty, and every truly good and noble virtue; but extend even beyond this world unto everlasting life. This is the fruit of holiness, unto sanctification. This brings us to our conclusion: “²³For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Most of us already know like the Centurion that we are not worthy for Christ to enter under the roof of our house, or as St. John Chrysostom, says in one of his pre-Communion prayers, the roof of our souls. We sense that sin has taken hold of us and limited us from becoming the kind of human beings, not to mention Christians that we want to be or at least know we should be. Yet most of us perhaps do not realize the way out of this predicament. We hope to somehow work it out before it is too late, get our act together, make a genuine and lasting repentance. Then and only then will we trouble the master, the Lord Jesus Christ, and call upon His name. But there is no peace or joy or hope in this path. Let us therefore learn the lesson of the centurion. Even though he knew and confessed himself as unworthy, he still did not lose faith and fear to ask that the master free his servant. Let us not doubt the compassion of the Good Master and ask him to set free our members from that which limits and paralyzes them from doing righteousness. Let us ask Him to set our wills and our good intentions back on level ground, able to pursue holiness unhindered. Let us walk with the faith that even made the Lord marvel that He can heal us and restore us by word alone, even by nothing more than the power of His name. In this prayer of faith, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us!