

Exhortation to Resist Sin—The Wages of Sin and the Gift of God

Seventh Sunday After Trinity

Sermon on Romans 6:19-23

Author: Dr. Martin Luther (1483-1546) Year: 1526

Text

¹⁹*I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye presented your members as servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity, even so now present your members as servants to righteousness unto sanctification.* ²⁰*For when ye were servants of sin, ye were free in regard of righteousness.* ²¹*What fruit then had ye at that time in the things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death.* ²²*But now being made free from sin and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto sanctification, and the end eternal life.* ²³*For the wages of sin is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Romans 6:19-23)

Sermon

¹ The text properly should include several verses preceding. Paul has not yet concluded the subject of the epistle for last Sunday. There he urges that since we are baptized into Christ and believe, we should henceforth walk in a new life; that we are now dead to sin because we are in Christ, who by his death and resurrection has conquered and destroyed sin. He illustrates the power of Christ's death and resurrection by saying: "*For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under law, but under grace.*" That is, being in Christ and possessed of the power of his resurrection—in other words, having God's grace and the forgiveness of sins—you can now readily resist sin. Although you may not perfectly fulfill the letter of the Law in its demands, yet it cannot condemn you as a sinner nor subject you to God's wrath.

Good Works Not Forbidden

² Then Paul presents again the question raised by the obstinate world when it encounters this doctrine. "*What then?*" he asks, "*shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?*" It is the perversity of the world that, when we preach about forgiveness of sins by pure grace and without merit of man, it should either say we forbid good works, or else try to draw the conclusion that man may continue to live in sin and follow his own pleasure; when the fact is, we should particularly strive to live a life the very reverse of sinful, that our doctrine may draw people to good works, unto the praise and honor and glory of God. Our doctrine, rightly apprehended, does not influence to pride and vice, but to humility and obedience.

³ In affairs of temporal government, whether domestic or civil, judge or ruler, it is understood that he who asks for pardon confesses himself guilty, acknowledges his error and promises to reform—to transgress no more. For instance, when the judge extends mercy and pardon to the thief deserving of the gallows, the law is canceled by grace. Suppose now the thief continues in wrong-doing and boasts, “*Now that I am under grace I may do as I please, I have no law to fear*”; who would tolerate him? For though the law is indeed canceled for him and he receives not merited punishment, though grace delivers him from the rope and the sword, life is not granted him that he may continue to steal, to murder; rather he is supposed to become honest and virtuous. If he does not, the law will again overtake him and punish him as he deserves. In short, where grace fulfills the law, no one is for that reason given license to continue in wrong-doing; on the contrary, he is under increased obligation to avoid occasions of falling under condemnation of the law.

⁴ Everyone can readily comprehend this principle in temporal things; no one is stupid enough to tolerate the idea of grace being granted to extend opportunity to do wrong. It is only the Gospel doctrine concerning God’s grace and the forgiveness of sin that must suffer the slanderous misrepresentation that makes it abolish good works or give occasion for sin. We are told how God, in his unfathomable grace, has canceled the sentence of eternal death and hell fire which, according to the Law and divine judgment, we deserved, and has given us instead the freedom of life eternal; thus our life is purely of grace. Yet certainly we are not pardoned that we may live as before when, under condemnation and wrath, we incurred death. Rather, forgiveness is bestowed that we in appreciation of the sublimity and sanctity of God’s unspeakably great blessing which delivers us from death unto life, should henceforth take heed that we lose it not; that we fall not from grace to pass again under judgment and the sentence of eternal death. We are to conduct ourselves as men made alive and saved.

⁵ So Paul says in verse 16, “*Know ye not, that to whom ye present yourselves as servants unto obedience, his servants ye are whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?*” Meaning, Since you now have, under grace, obtained forgiveness of sin and are become righteous, you owe it to God to live in obedience to his will. Necessarily your life must be obedient to some master. Either you obey sin, to continue in the service of which brings death and God’s wrath, or you obey God, in grace, unto a new manner of life. So, then, you are no more to obey sin, having been freed from its dominion and power. Paul continues the topic in this Sunday’s epistle text, saying: GOOD AND EVIL “*AFTER THE MANNER OF MEN.*”

“I speak after the manner of men, because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye presented your members as members to uncleanness,” etc.

⁶ Heretofore he had been speaking, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in language unusual and unintelligible to the world. To the gentiles it was a strange and incomprehensible thing he said about dying with Christ unto sin, being buried and planted into his death, and so on. But now, since his former words are obscure to the natural understanding, he will, he says, speak according to human reason—“*after the manner of men.*”

⁷ Even reason and the laws of all the gentiles, he goes on to say, teach we are not to do evil; rather to avoid it and do good. All sovereigns establish laws to restrain evil and preserve order.

How could we introduce through the Gospel a doctrine countenancing evil? Though the wisdom of the Gospel is a higher gift than human reason, it does not alter or nullify the God-implemented intelligence of the latter. Hence it is a perversion of our doctrine to say it does not teach us to love

good works and practice them. *“Now, if you cannot understand this truth from my explanation,”* Paul would say — *“that through faith you have, by baptism, died to the sinful life, even been buried—then learn it through your accustomed exercise of reason. You know for yourselves that pardon for former transgression and release from lawful punishment gives no one license to do evil—to commit theft or murder.”*

⁸ It is a commonly recognized fact among men that pardon does not mean license. God’s Word confirms the same. Yet the disadvantage is that although reason teaches, through the Law, good works and forbids evil, it is unable to comprehend why its teachings are not fulfilled. It perceives from the results which follow dishonoring of the Law, that to honor is best, that it is right and praiseworthy not to steal and commit crime. But it fails to understand why, given the teachings at first, they are not naturally fulfilled. Nor, again, does it know how existing conditions may be removed or bettered. It resorts to this expedient and that to restrain evil, but it cannot attain the art of uprooting and destroying it. With the sword, rack and gallows the judge may restrain public crime, but he cannot punish more than what is known and witnessed to before the court. Whatever is done secretly and never comes before him, he cannot punish or restrain. The Word of God, however, takes hold of the difficulty in a different manner. It teaches how to crush the head of the serpent and to slay the evil. Then the judge and the executioner are no longer necessary. But where we may not control the cause of the wrong, we should, nevertheless, restrain so far as possible its manifest workings.

Now, the utmost reason can teach is that we are not to do evil even in thought or desire, and the extent of its punishment relates only to outward works; it cannot punish the thought and inclination to do evil.

⁹ *“But we preach another doctrine,”* Paul means to say, *“a doctrine having power to control the heart and restrain the will. We say you believers in Christ, who are baptized into his death and buried with him, are not only to be reckoned dead, but are truly dead unto sin.”* A Christian has certain knowledge that through the grace of Christ his sins are forgiven—blotted out and deprived of condemning power. Because he has obtained and believes in such grace, he receives a heart abhorrent of sin. Although feeling within himself, perhaps, the presence of evil thoughts and lusts, yet his faith and the Holy Spirit are with him to remind him of his baptism. *“Notwithstanding time and opportunity permit me to do evil,”* he says to himself, *“and though I run no risk of being detected and punished, yet I will not do it. I will obey God and honor Christ my Lord, for I am baptized into Christ and as a Christian am dead unto sin, nor will I come again under its power.”*

So acted godly Joseph, who, when tempted by his master’s wife, *“left his ‘garment in her hand, and fled, and got him out”* (Genesis 39:12); whereas another might have been glad of the invitation. He was but flesh and blood and naturally not insensible to her inducement, to the time and opportunity, the friendship of the woman and the offered enjoyment; but he restrained himself, not yielding even in thought to the temptation. Such obedience to God destroys indeed the source of evil—sin. Reason and human wisdom know nothing of it. It is not to be effected by laws, by punishment, by prison and sword. It can be attained only by faith and a knowledge of Christ’s grace, through which we die to sin and the world, and restrain the will from evil even when detection and punishment are impossible.

¹⁰ Now, such doctrine is not to be learned from human reason; it is spiritual and taught of the Scriptures. It reveals the source of evil and how to restrain it. Since, then, we teach restraint of evil and show withal a way higher and more effectual than reason can find, the accusation that we prohibit good works and license sin is sufficiently answered and disproved. But Paul would say to the

Romans, *“If you cannot comprehend our superior doctrine as to the questions raised, then answer them according to the teachings of your own reason, for even that will tell you—and no man will dispute it—we are to do no wrong. The Word of God confirms this doctrine.”*

¹¹ The apostle says he will speak of the point they raise, after the manner of men. That does not mean according to corrupt flesh and blood, which are not capable of speaking anything good, but according to natural reason as God created it, where some good still remains, for there are to be found many upright individuals who make just laws. I speak thus *“because of the infirmity of your flesh,”* Paul declares. As if he would say, *“I have not yet said as much as reason, the teachers of the Law and the jurists would demand, but I will go no further because you are yet too weak spiritually, and too unaccustomed to my manner of speech, for all of you to understand it. I must come down to your apprehension and speak according to your capacity. Now, I want to say, ask your own statutes, your own laws, whether they authorize the prohibition of good works; if they license evil, though they may not be able to prevent it. Thus I convince you that such a pretense regarding our doctrine is not to be tolerated.”*

The Teachings Of Reason

“Even reason teaches that your lives must conform to your business; each is in duty bound to obey him whom he serves. As Christians you are obliged to render another service than that you gave when under the dominion of sin, and obedient to it; when you were unable to escape its power and to do any work good before God. You have now come out of bondage and are relieved from obedience to sin, through grace, having devoted yourselves to the service of God, to obeying him. Therefore, assuredly you must change your manner of life.”

¹² Truly, Paul here argues reasonably and within the scope of man’s natural understanding. We preach the same truths, but, presenting them in the form of Christian doctrine, we necessarily employ different language and a loftier tone, lest it be offensive to the world. We may say that theft, murder, envy, hate and other crimes and vices are transgressions, yet we cannot remedy the evils by the mere prohibitions of the law. The remedy must be effected through God’s grace, and is accomplished in the believer, not by our power, but by the Holy Spirit. But when we so explain, the stupid world immediately blurts out, *“Oh, if it be true that our works do not remedy evils, let us enjoy ourselves and not bother about good works!”*

¹³ That their implication is false and a wanton perversion of the true doctrine is manifest from the fact that we exalt and endorse the command of God, and also the doctrine of reason, that teach us to do good and avoid evil. Indeed, we assist reason, which is powerless to remedy evil. If reason were itself sufficient, men would not permit themselves to be deceived by their own visionary ideas and false doctrines about worthless and vain works, as are followers of the papacy and of all false worship. No doubt such error has its rise in the principle that we are to do good and avoid evil. The principle fundamentally is true, and accepted by all men; but when it comes to the theories we build upon it, the speculations as to how it is to be put into practice, there is disagreement. Only the Word of God can show how to accomplish it.

Reason is easily blinded on this point and deceived by false appearances, being led by anything merely called good. Even when it has performed all it believes to be right, it is still uncertain of acceptance. Indeed, it perceives no fruits, no benefit, to result from its teaching; for at best its achievements extend no farther than outward works—the object being to make the doer appear

righteous and respectable before men while inward sinfulness is unrestrained and the soul remains captive to its former life, obedient to the lusts of sin. And the motive of such a one is not sincere; he would conduct himself quite otherwise were he not restrained by fear of shame and punishment.

Gospel Higher Than Reason

¹⁴ We present a higher doctrine—the Gospel. The Gospel teaches first how sin in ourselves is, through Christ, slain and buried. Thus we obtain a good conscience, a conscience hating and opposing sin, and become obedient to another power. Being delivered from sin we would serve God and exert ourselves to do his pleasure, even though no fear, punishment, judge or executioner existed.

With this point accepted—with the settlement of this minor subject of controversy as to how we are delivered from sin and attain to truly good works, we unite once more on the fundamental principle that good is to be done and evil avoided. Therefore, we immediately conclude: Since we are free from sin and converted to God, we must in obedience to him do good and live no more in sin.

¹⁵ Thus does Paul make use of the Law, and of human reason so far as it is able to interpret the Law, to resist them who speak falsely and pervert the right doctrine. Evidently, then, the doctrine of the Gospel does not oppose the doctrine of good works, but transcends it. For it reveals the source and inspiration of good works—not human reason, not human ability, but the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Now Paul deduces the point:

“For as ye presented [yielded] your members as servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity, even so now present [yield] your members as servants to righteousness unto sanctification [holiness].”

Body Not To Serve Sin

¹⁶ Even reason teaches that, being no more subject to sin and unrighteousness, you are no longer to serve them with your body and members—your whole physical life. And further, having yielded yourselves to obey God and righteousness, you are in duty bound to serve them with body and life. To put it concisely and clearly, Let him who formerly was evil and lived contrary to his own conscience and to God’s will, now become godly and serve the Lord with a good conscience. Or, as Paul says, *“Let him that stole steal no more.”* Ephesians 4:28.

¹⁷ Formerly, he tells them, their members—eyes, ears, mouth, hands, feet—even the whole body, served uncleanness. For “*vice*” he uses this term “*uncleanness*,” readily intelligible to reason and inclusive of all forms of sin. “*You permitted your members to serve unrighteousness*,” he would say, “*and devoted them to every sort of unholy life, every wicked work, committing one iniquity after another and exercising all manner of villainy that can be named.*” Now reverse the order. Reasoning according to your own logic: while before you willingly witnessed, heard and uttered things shameful and unchaste, and sought lewdness, lending your bodies to it, let impurity now be distressing to your sight and hearing; let the body flee from it; be pure in words and works. All the members of the body, all its functions, are to be devoted to righteousness.

Thus your members, your whole bodies, are to become holy—to be God’s own—and given over solely to his service. The longer and the more ardently they serve, the more cheerfully will they honor and obey God, being devoted to all that is divine, praiseworthy, honorable and virtuous. The instructions God has written upon your own heart would teach you this principle, even were there no Word of God. It is useless for you to protest: *“Yes, but you have taught that good works do not*

save,” for that doctrine is not inconsistent, but beyond your understanding. Indeed, it is the true light whereby you may fulfill the teachings of reason.

“For when ye were servants of sin, ye were free in regard of [free from] righteousness.”

¹⁸All these expressions Paul uses *“after the manner of men,”* adapting them from the laws and customs of the times concerning slavery, service and freedom. Then servants were bondmen, purchased by their masters, with whom they must abide until set at liberty by those owners, or otherwise freed. His allusion to a former service of unrighteousness and a present service of righteousness implies two conditions of servitude and consequently two conditions of freedom. He who serves sin, the apostle teaches, is free from righteousness; that is, he is captive under sin, unable to attain to righteousness and to do righteous works. Even reason can comprehend the principle that he is free who does not serve—who is not servant. Again, servants of righteousness means service and obedience to righteousness, and freedom from sin.

Fruits Of Two Kinds Of Service

Paul now puts the matter a little differently, contrasting the experience of the Romans in the two forms of service. He leaves it with them to determine which has been productive of benefit and which of injury, and to choose accordingly as to future service and obedience.

“What fruit then had ye at that time in the things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. But now being made free from sin and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto sanctification [holiness], and the end eternal life.”

¹⁹Rather recall your manner of life when you were free from righteousness and obeyed only the urgings and enticements of sin. What pleasure or gain had you in it? None, except that for which you are now ashamed. Further, had you remained in it you would at last have found death. Only these two grand results—shame and death. Nothing better have you earned in its service. Munificent reward indeed for him who, choosing freedom from righteousness, lives to his own pleasure. He is deceived into thinking he has chosen a highly desirable life, for it gratifies the fleshly desires, and he thinks to go unpunished.

But gratification is succeeded by two severe punishments: First, shame—confession of disgrace before God and the world. Thus Adam and Eve in Paradise, when they chose to violate God’s command and, enticed by the devil, followed their desire for a forbidden thing, were made to feel the disgrace of their sin; they were in their hearts ashamed to appear in the presence of God. The other and added punishment is eternal death and the fires of hell, into which also fell our first parents.

²⁰Is it not better, then, to be free from the service of sin and to serve righteousness? So doing, you would never suffer shame nor injury but would receive a double blessing: First, a clear conscience before God and all creatures, proof in itself that you live a holy life and belong to God; second and chief, the rich and incorruptible reward of eternal life.

²¹In all these observations Paul is still speaking after the manner of men; in a way comprehended and accepted by reason, even without knowledge of Christ. It is universally true in the world that evil-doers—thieves, murderers and the like—are punished in addition to the public disgrace they feel. Similarly, they who do good receive, in addition to the honor of men, all manner of happy reward.

“For the wages of sin is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

²² It seems a strange saying, that evil-doers are to receive wages, seemingly implying right and deserving action on their part. Ordinarily the term “wages” signifies a good reward, given to those who acquit themselves righteously and bravely. Paul uses the word to discomfit them who pervert his teaching. For they say, “*Ah, Paul preaches of grace alone, yet he promises wages to sin.*” “Yes,” Paul would respond, “*boast as you will, you will receive a reward—death and hell-fire. You must confidently expect it if you interpret the Gospel to teach that God shall reward you who serve sin.*” With the convincing words of the text, Paul would undeceive those who advocate, or suffer themselves to believe, that man can serve God in sin and can receive a happy reward. He chooses words familiar to them. “*Yes, if, as you maintain, wages must be the reward of every service, you will of course receive yours—death and hell. These any may have who desire them and regard them precious.*”

²³ Paul says further, “*The free gift of God is eternal life.*” Observe his choice of words. He does not here use the term “wages,” because he has previously taught that eternal life is not the reward of our works, but is given of pure grace, through faith and for Christ’s sake. So he speaks of it as a “*free gift of God, through Christ Jesus our Lord.*” The soul possessing eternal life is furnished with power to crush the serpent’s head, and none can deprive him of his priceless blessing. He has also power to avoid sin and to constantly crucify his flesh. These are things not to be effected by any law, any human ability; faith is requisite. Through faith we are incorporated into Christ and planted with him in the death of sin, unto eternal life and truly good works.

History

The Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise (1463-1525), requested that Martin Luther write a collection of sermons for each Sunday of the year for the benefit of ministers and the common people—those that have the Spirit—to exhort them in sound doctrine but also to convict the gainsayers who oppose the Word and true faith.

This sermon originates from what is commonly called Luther’s *Church Postil* collection. He wrote most of the sermons between 1521 and 1527, then supervised editorial assistance with Stephan Roth (1492-1546) until 1535 and Caspar Creuziger (1504-1548) until 1544. During that entire period over seventy-five editions of the collection were published. Many more editions were published after Luther’s death in 1546. This sermon can be found in the 12th volume of the Walch and St. Louis Walch editions and in the 9th volume of the Erlangen edition of Luther’s works. It was translated into English by John Nicholas Lenker (1858-1929) and published in 1909. Except for his catechisms, Luther’s postils were his most influential writings for believers. |

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