

Romans 8:12-17 – July 16, 2017

You may or may not be aware that the modern day notion of prisons is a fairly recent invention. Less than 200 years old. Now, of course, prisons and jails have been around for a long time. Almost as long as written laws have existed.

But for the vast majority of human history, being a prisoner was a fairly temporary situation. You didn't get put in prison for years on end as a punishment. You were put in prison only while you waited for something else to occur.

Maybe you owed a fine and you were waiting for your family to come up with the money. Maybe you were a drunk or a public nuisance and had been locked up to keep you out of trouble. Maybe, like St Paul often was in his letters, you were on trial and awaiting your sentence.

Whatever the reason, your time in prison usually wasn't going to be especially lengthy. And yet, there needed to be a punishment for the types of offenses for which we usually put people in prison. Something between a monetary fine, for minor offenses, and death, for serious offenses.

And in ancient Rome, that middle punishment was slavery. In fact, slavery was considered to be a form of imprisonment. If you owed a fine or restitution or back debts and couldn't pay them, you would be sold as a slave. If you were guilty of assault or rape or burglary, you would be sold as a slave. If you were captured after a military battle and were a prisoner of war, you would be sold as a slave.

You would be stripped of all your possessions and your head shaved. Maybe you would have a metal ring put in your ear or nose as a mark of slavery. If you tried to run and were caught, you would have a large F branded onto your forehead. F for “fugit.” A Latin word that means “he fled.”

For St Paul, slavery and imprisonment were basically the same thing. The fact that one was in a cell and the other in someone's home or farm or business was irrelevant. They both meant that you were guilty of a crime and had permanently lost your right to freedom as punishment.

And he demonstrates this in our Epistle lesson for today. He begins this passage by saying that we are debtors. Debt was one of the most common reasons to punish someone with slavery. After all, you kill two birds with one stone. You punish the person who took on far more debt than they could pay back. And you also pay back the debt with the proceeds from selling the person. It's a win-win.

So we are debtors. Criminally in debt. But who are we in debt to? Our flesh? No, no, we don't owe our flesh anything. We've already given the sinful desires of our flesh everything of value in us. No, we're in debt to God. Because we've lived according to the flesh and not according to His Law.

And every time we sin, every time we live according to the flesh, we go deeper into debt. So we're like a person sold into slavery for his gambling debts, who keeps gambling even in his slavery. We didn't learn our lesson the first time. Or the second. Or the third. We just keep going deeper and deeper into debt.

Such that there is absolutely no way we will ever pay back our debts with our work as a slave to God's Law. There's nothing we can do to pay back this debt. All that's left is for the judge to drag us back into the courtroom and say, “You'll never learn. Put him to death.”

We are slaves to our flesh. Slaves to the debt of sin. Slaves to the Law. And that's the good news. The bad news is that because of that huge debt, we're also under a death sentence. *“If you live according to the flesh you will die.”* Every one of us lives according to the flesh. And every one of us will one day die. And there is nothing we can do about it.

But there is a way out. We can still live. If by the power of God's Spirit, we put to death the deeds of the body. All of them. Good, bad, and in between. Set aside this entire life that has put you into this debt. Push it aside. Kill it and bury it, in fact. And put Christ's life in its place.

Sounds easy. But it's not. It's not easy because it means giving up our entire identity apart from Christ. Everything we ever had pride in. Gone. Everything we ever looked at as an accomplishment. Erased. Every goal we ever had. Every hope we ever hoped. Every dream we ever dreamed. Thrown out and replaced with the hopes, dreams, goals, and accomplishments of Jesus Christ our Lord.

An entirely new identity in Christ. Not of debtors or slaves. But of His identity as a son of God. *"For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."* In other words, this has already happened. Through baptism and His Word, God already looks at you and sees His son. The only thing left for you to do is to act like it.

And that means giving up your spirit of slavery. Slaves live in fear. They live under the constant threat of punishment. Of being beaten or chained or humiliated. They work because their master holds the whip. They work because the law says they must work. Or they'll be put to death.

But we have received a spirit of adoption. We are children of God. We are not slaves anymore, living in fear. Our relationship with God has fundamentally changed. A slave is a slave because the law says he is. A slave does what he does because the law says he must. But a son is a son because his father calls him a son. And a son does what he does because he's a part of the family.

A few years ago, I did a funeral for a member of my congregation. It was after the funeral service was over. And I was driving over to the graveside in the hearse with the funeral director. And we were going over what would happen for the burial. And she made a comment. "You know, you do something that I've always liked. When you pour the dirt on the casket, you always do it so that it makes the shape of a cross on the top."

And I told her that I was glad she noticed. But that it wasn't really my idea. It's actually an instruction in my little service book to do that. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it really is a good practice.

Because there are two key times in your life when the pastor makes the sign of the cross over your heart. At your baptism and at your burial. At the beginning of your spiritual life and at the end of your mortal life. And, interestingly, both times, he does so, and then immediately turns to those gathered and says, "Our Father, who art in heaven."

We are marked as those redeemed by Christ the crucified. And then we turn to God and we say, "Our Father." We turn to God and we say, "You are our Father. This is your son. This is your daughter. This is your child. He is not a slave to be put to death. He is a son. Who has been promised an inheritance."

We cry out, "Abba! Father!" We cry out "Our Father, who art in heaven." And the Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we children of God. And if children, then heirs. Heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ... provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him.

Which is a tough thing to hear. And a tougher thing to do. Suffering and dying is not a pleasant experience. But we don't do it alone. And we don't do it without hope. We suffer and die right alongside our Lord. No Christian ever dies alone. We are always dying on a cross next to our Lord.

And, thanks be to God, we will always hear him say, "Today you will be with me in paradise." That is our great inheritance. It was the inheritance of Jesus, proven to us on Easter morning. And it will be our inheritance as well. So yes, we suffer. But we suffer with Christ. And so we suffer with the hope and promise that we are fellow heirs with him.

You are not a prisoner anymore. You are not a slave anymore. You are not a captive to sin and the Law anymore. That is not your identity. That is not who you are.

You are the baptized sons and daughters of God. You are heirs of the glories of eternal life. You have the great privilege to cry out to God in the most personal way possible, "Abba! Father!" And know without any fear that just as he raised his own Son from the dead and lifted him to the heights of heaven, so he will lift you up as well. That is who you are. Amen.