

## SERMON FOR THE 9<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

(Cape Town - 13 July 2008)

**Text:** <sup>19</sup> I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. <sup>20</sup> When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. <sup>21</sup> What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! <sup>22</sup> But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. <sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom.6:19-23)

I would like to draw your attention to a very special service we will be celebrating next Sunday. The Johnston family, Shawn, Christy and their children will be joining our congregation officially. But even more special than that is that their two twin daughters, Mari and Aimee, will also be baptised next Sunday in the name of the triune God.

Maybe it isn't a coincidence that our sermon text leads us to reflect on this. Romans, chapter 6, of which our sermon text forms that last few verses, is a lengthy exposition on the topic of baptism. It concludes, as we heard, with the words: *“The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”*.

In the early part of this chapter, the apostle Paul makes it clear, that the gift of eternal life is given to us in baptism. Baptism maybe seen by some as a small and rather insignificant act. There is bit of water and God's Word is spoken over the water. But the result of this act, is immense. The moment a person is baptised, that person is rescued from sin and death and is given eternal life in Christ. And the good news is: Adult or child, you cannot earn this gift. It is something given to us freely by God.

Now, the emphasis in this sermon text is, that at the moment that we receive this gift of eternal life, we are also set free from the “Law of God” - meaning: The Law of God can no longer condemn us. It can no longer condemn us, because through baptism we are taken out of the sphere of the Law and we are placed in the sphere of Christ. If the devil therefore comes and says: “You have committed a sin against the Law of God. And the wages of sin is death - you are doomed!” God comes along and says: “This baptised child, although having committed a sin, belongs to me and has forgiveness through Jesus.”

Next week Sunday Mari and Aimee will be baptised. They are still small children and won't completely understand what is happening to them and what it means to be set free from the Law.

But as we get older, there is sometimes an interesting shift that takes place. When as a teenager or later in life, we hear that through baptism we are saved by grace and set free from the Law, we often conclude: “If the Law no longer condemns me, I can do whatever I want to”. In certain extreme cases, you might find Christians who cheat, or lie, or drink too

much, or even engage in immoral acts and say: “It doesn’t really matter. If I am saved by grace alone, who cares what I do!!”

On a more mild note, Christians may say: “If I am free from the Law, there is also no need for me to remember the Sabbath Day - to listen to God’s Word and receive Holy Communion.”

But this is where the snag lies. Or to put differently: This is where we are being deceived by the devil. You see the Word of God and the Sacraments of God are God’s “means of grace”. In other words, we *receive* God’s grace through God’s Word and Sacrament. If I stop using God’s “means of grace”, I lose his grace.

This is in most cases a very slow process. Initially I commit a sin and feel bad about it. But after a while, no longer threatened by the Law that condemns me, I get used to committing certain sins. I tell a small lie, and don’t regret it. I begin to steal like so many others, and I am not sorry. I get drunk, but it doesn’t bother me anymore. When I sin, I excuse myself by saying: “I am saved by God and God forgives me anyway.”

**“The wages of sin is death”** - Paul says. We need to see both sides: On the one hand, we need to see the magnitude of God’s grace. No sin is too terrible for God to forgive. In the Gospel of John there is this woman that committed adultery, punished by stoning in ancient Israel. But when asked by the Pharisees to condemn her, Jesus forgives her. Peter denies knowing Jesus. Jesus forgives him. That is grace. But on the other hand, we also need to see how deadly unrepented sin is. Judas betrayed Jesus - a sin no worse than Peter’s denial. But he never found the way back to God. The unrepentant sin, obscured his vision for God’s grace.

The very nature of sin is that it draws us away from God. It is just like walking away. Eventually God and his grace are like a distant small dot on the horizon. And before I realise it, I have become a “slave” of sin - not free at all. Telling small lies to get out of trouble, becomes a life style. Cheating to make progress, becomes a habit.

We see this in our country. When small transgressions of the law are not nailed immediately, they become an accepted norm. The other day it was said on the news that 80% of South Africans have accepted that we live in a corrupt society. This means: We are beginning to condone it. It is alright to pay a bribe. It is alright to tell a lie. We just become indifferent towards sin.

Paul says, “No!” Sin not repented, leads to death. Lying is in God’s eyes a serious matter. Getting drunk week after week, is damning. And it is damning, because it is a sign, we have been dragged away from God’s grace.

What marks a true Christian is, that he or she is “horrified” by sin. As a baptised child of God I am not immune to committing sin. But when it happens, I repent.

In his Small Catechism Martin Luther asks the question: What does such baptising with

water indicate? In other words, if someone is baptised, how do you see it? Or, where does baptism lead to? And he answers: It leads to “daily contrition and repentance.” Every day, I repent of what is wrong.

Next week, when we baptise Mary and Aimee they will not stop sinning. But as in the weeks and months and years thereafter they listen to God’s Word and grow in the grace of God, they will repent more readily.

This is the reason why parents are asked to make a pledge when they bring their children to baptism. As the child is baptised parents are asked, whether they will insure that their baptised child will become an active member of the church. After baptism children and adults alike are to be exposed regularly to the “means of God’s grace”. As they listen to God’s Word and receive Communion, two things happen: They become aware of their sins and are drawn to God’s forgiving grace.

This is why the Law of God, including the commandment to remember the Sabbath Day, remain valid, even though the Law no longer condemns us. If I miss a church service, I am not immediately condemned by God. But then again, this is the place, where I experience God’s grace. This is the place where God reveals to me what is threatening my relationship with him. And this is the place where he shows me the cross and what Jesus has done for me.

As long as we live in this world, we will always carry with us the deadly and horrifying disease of sin. But that is why we must always receive the medicine, which is the grace of God in the Blood of Christ.

So let us live in God’s grace, there where it is found - in his Word and his Sacrament. Here we bend our knees in sorrow over our sins. Here we learn not to downplay sin. We see sin as it truly is: horrifying, serious, and deadly. But all the more this is where we learn to rejoice in the gift of God that he bestows on us through his means of grace.

We have just started a new quarter of the year. Maybe it is a good time to renew our vows and say to God: “God, I am going to seek your kingdom first. I want to focus on your cross first. I want to listen to your Word. And I want to worship you with my fellow believers. And I want to rejoice in your grace every single day.” Amen.

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