

The Slippery Slope

(Romans 6: 12-23)

When I was in private practice in Tyler, Texas, I was hired by a young man who had been charged with a felony drug offense. Fortunately for him he was white and it was his first offense which made it easy to resolve with a deferred adjudication plea that meant if he successfully completed his probation the case would be dismissed without a final finding of guilt. Most folks would realize their good fortune in dodging a felony conviction, clean up their act, and engage in good behavior going forward. Not this guy. Apparently, he was so impressed with my ability to keep him felony-free, he approached me about the possibility of putting me on a permanent retainer so that he could call me at any time, day or night, he wanted whether he had gotten arrested again or needed advice on whether or not to engage in some questionable behavior, as in: if I do this what will happen and can you fix it? He was self-medicating with methamphetamine as the prescribed Ritalin he was supposed to be taking made him feel off. I could see that he was on a slippery slope trying to balance his illegal behavior while maintaining the semblance of righteous living, stating that it was under control and that he could stop anytime he wanted. And that's the thing with exercising free will. You can either exercise it for good or for bad, but you can't do both successfully for any significant period of time as it is a slippery slope with nowhere to go but down.

And that's what the Apostle Paul was talking about in his letter to the church in Rome as he addresses the belief of some that it was okay to commit small indiscretions as nobody would get hurt and you could always go back to God and seek his forgiveness. Kind of like wash, rinse and repeat.

Paul now addresses that slippery slope and says: *So then, don't let sin rule your body, so that you do what it wants. Don't offer parts of your body to sin, to be used as weapons to do wrong.* He's telling his readers and us that whether we want to admit it or not, the sin we are engaged in is in charge doing what it wants when it wants. It's a real mind game as the debate rages in our brains as to whether or not we should do it and, in the end, sin usually gets the upper hand playing upon our weaknesses. He gets to the heart of the matter when he bluntly states that we shouldn't offer up parts of our body to sin where ultimately it becomes a weapon to do wrong. What he's talking about is a slippery slope that once you lose your footing down you go and it ends badly with you not being able to climb out unassisted. For many people the lesson to be learned is to be more careful and not get so close to the edge. I recall that every once in a while, we'd get someone admitted into Drug Court who said their goal was to learn how to control their drinking or drug use so they would know when to stop or slow down so as not to commit the bad acts of lying, cheating, and stealing their addiction caused them to commit. That was always met with skepticism from those at the table who had already been there and done that.

As an alternative to trying to live at the edge of the slippery slope Paul says: *Instead, present yourselves to God as people who have been brought back to life from the dead, and*

offer all the parts of your body to God to be used as weapons to do right. He tells them that if they do then sin will have no power over them because they aren't under the Law but under grace.

To illustrate the seriousness of the issue of sin Paul likens it to slavery, which was something the early Romans would have understood. He says: *Don't you know that if you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, that you are slaves of the one whom you obey?* Essentially, what he is saying is that once you submit yourself as a slave you no longer have any control, you become a slave to the whim of the one to whom you have committed yourself and there is no getting free. And he says the same is true whether you serve as slaves of sin, which leads to death, or as slaves of the kind of obedience that leads to righteousness. And then, as a means of positive reinforcement, he says: *But thank God that although you used to be slaves of sin, you gave wholehearted obedience to the teaching that was handed down to you, which provides a pattern.* He's reminding them of their salvation, their free gift of grace from God that enabled them to break the original bondage of sin and slavery. He's saying that everyone is obedient to one or another master, either to sin leading to death or to righteousness leading to God.

He reaffirms to them that now that they have been set free from sin by the grace of God, they have become slaves of righteousness. He reminds them that it wasn't that long ago that they offered themselves as slaves to impurity and lawless behavior that led to still more lawless behavior, you know, the slippery slope, but now they should present the parts of their bodies as slaves to righteousness, which makes their lives holy. He reminds them that when they were slaves to sin, they were free from the control of righteousness, which is to say they were free to do what felt good, not worrying about the consequences or who got hurt. He rhetorically asks: *What consequences did you get from doing things that you are now ashamed of?* He's talking about those shameful past behaviors that haunt us in our dreams, that keep us awake at night. Those things we regret doing and would just as soon forget because we are better people now. I think they serve as a reminder to us who now are slaves to righteousness how easy it is to slip back into sin, to get too close to the edge of the slippery slope and maybe use that past experience as a basis for helping others avoid the pitfalls. Unfortunately, some people have to learn the hard way. Some of us know that by experience. Paul reminds us of the grace we have received when he says: *But now that you have been set free from sin and become slaves to God, you have the consequence of a holy life, and the outcome is eternal life.* And to make sure there is no question he bluntly states: *The wages that sin pays are death, but God's gift is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Paul understands the seriousness of the situation and how such an attitude could corrupt the church, so he gives it to them in the strongest possible language. Dabbling in the occasional indiscretion can be disastrous not only for the believer, but their family and loved ones, and their church. When it comes to choosing between sinful behavior or righteousness there is no middle ground. You can't have it both ways and you can't be neutral when you see someone else on the brink of the slippery slope.

As we present ourselves as slaves to righteousness, to God, God shapes, enables, and uses us as agents of His own righteousness, thereby continuing our sanctification. This new life brings new moral possibilities as we can now refuse to obey sin and its passions. Paul is exhorting the Roman Christians and us today who have been reborn in Christ, not to submit to the illegitimate rule of sin and allow our bodies to be weapons of injustice. He can see just how bad it can become if sin gets a foothold on believers and the church where we become the “weapons of injustice”. Paul is saying that things are bad enough out in the world, but when Christians become an active part of the problem it is intolerable and inexcusable. We’re seeing it in our lives today with people hiding behind their beliefs to justify abhorrent behavior aimed at the vulnerable and weakest members of our society, the ones Jesus spoke of in Matthew 25. We’re seeing it when evangelical preachers take to the pulpit and the airwaves to give cover to what authoritarian governments are doing in their countries to maintain a grip on control at the expense of the expendable. And we’re seeing it in our country and around the world with the re-emergence of White Christian Nationalism proclaiming boldly and unashamedly that God gives preference to white Christians above all others. In this arena Christians are called to take an active role in the battle, offering themselves entirely to God so that they may become weapons to do right. And when we do, we thrive in the rehabilitating jurisdiction of God’s grace. We become the somebodies that do something in Jesus’ name.

But on a more personal level, how can we keep this command to not let sin reign over us, to not give in to its desires? We can do so by taking the following preventative steps. We begin by identifying our personal weaknesses and then recognize the things that tempt us. We then do all we can to stay away from the sources of temptation and practice self-restraint. We consciously invest our time in good habits and service, and most of all lean on God’s strength and grace to see us through the darkness because his grace is greater than all our sin.

Now that we are bound to Christ, He is our Master and He gives us the power to do good rather than evil. In following Him we can enjoy our new unencumbered life and learn how to put all of our energies, time, talents, and resources to work for Him and not worry about the slippery slope.

Let us pray.

Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew, that I may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do. Yes, gracious and loving God have mercy on us your children as we find our way. Protect us from all that is out in the world bent upon harming those who follow your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Guide us by your Spirit during those times when we are at our weakest so that we may stay strong and reject the temptations that not only cause us harm but injure others. Through the freedom we have received by your grace may we grow strong and determined so that we may become your weapons of justice in the world. This we pray, in Jesus’ name, Amen.