

Romans 6:12-23**Abundant Grace**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever heard the phrase, "It's easier to ask forgiveness than to get permission"? Its origins are a bit murky, like all good proverbial sayings, but the oldest quotations come from a royal marriage that was objected to by the Pope. There was some doubt as to the groom's allegiance to the Church of Rome, and so the wedding did not receive the Pope's blessing. Normally this would mean no wedding, but a Cardinal advised them to go ahead with it, and just deal with the Pope after that fact. "It's easier to ask forgiveness than to get permission."

Have you ever taken this approach in life? Knowing that if you asked for permission it would get denied, so you just go ahead and do it anyway, hoping the fallout will be manageable. It's even easier to do this when you know that forgiveness is a distinct possibility. It might encourage you to never ask for permission because it doesn't really matter.

St Paul takes this one step further in Romans chapter six, where he asks the rhetorical question, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" After proclaiming that we are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption found in Christ Jesus, he is concerned that some would use that as an excuse to sin. They might say, "God is ever-loving, full of mercy and grace, and so it doesn't matter what I do." Or even, "since God loves to forgive, I'll give him even more things to forgive".

It sounds absurd when we take it to that extreme, but it does happen. Our sinful self will take any excuse, even that of abusing God's forgiveness. But St Paul concludes this chapter with a stark warning, "the wages of sin is death". No matter how you convince yourself that it's okay, no matter your excuses, what sin earns you is eternal death.

The commandments that God gives us in the scriptures are not there because God happens to like squashing people into a particular shape whether or not it's good for them. The commandments show us which road to avoid because it ultimately leads to our destruction. If you choose to live in certain ways you are choosing behaviour which is, in its own character, destructive both to those who practise it and to those whose lives are affected all around. It's not that God gives some arbitrary standard which declares that such behaviour is wrong and deserves punishment. Sinful behaviour already shows the signs of its destination. It has the smell of death already upon it.

The ultimate punishment is not arbitrary, like putting someone into prison for failing to pay a tax bill. It is much more like what happens when someone drives recklessly over a cliff and falls to their death. The outcome is intrinsically tied to the behaviour. The opposite is also true. When people behave in the patterns set out in the scriptures, there are signs of life already at work. The life of the age to come is not an arbitrary reward, like someone being given a medal for rescuing a child from drowning. It is much more like the reward that a father receives when the child he has rescued is his own. Their life together continues, and that is reward enough in itself.

Not only is the contrast between death and life but also between earning and giving. Sinners earn what they receive. By obeying the impulses of sin, they are storing up the reward for sinning. Their payout, in the end, is everything they have earned along the way. But when believers follow the Spirit into acts of righteousness, they earn nothing. They have already received the gift of eternal life, which comes by faith through Jesus Christ their Lord.

So, when we labour for God in faith there are no wages that we can measure, especially not by earthly standards. And our living a life of holiness that Paul refers to in verse 22 is not the path to earning eternal life, but part of the gift we already have. The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. And Paul has already explained that we have been baptised into Christ Jesus. Because of this, we have life in him now, and this life is eternal. He also says we have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God. The point of being set free from sin is that a person is no longer under its power. And once out from under its power it is possible to fight against it.

It is precisely because sinful behaviour continues that Paul admonishes his readers to persevere in faith and obedience. In his other letters to the various churches, he calls believers to examine themselves, which implies that imperfections and transgressions occur in the life of the believer (1 Corinthians 11:28; 2 Corinthians 13:5). He also says that they should not be overconfident in their own strength or wisdom (1 Corinthians 10:12). Not be judgmental or denigrating of others (Romans 14:10). Not be envious of one another (Galatians 5:26). Not repay evil for evil (Romans 12:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:15).

The difference is that those who are slaves to Christ know they are slaves and can rejoice in the fact they belong to him, even as they struggle with sin. Those who are slaves to sin don't even know they are slaves and instead think they are free because they can do whatever they desire. But as people who now belong to Christ, who have been freed from bondage to sin and death, let us continue to live this new life we have. May we rejoice that we have been set free by the abundant grace of God. May we welcome God's correction in our lives, as he keeps us from heading down the path that only leads to destruction. May we seek God's forgiveness for the times when we do fall into temptation. And may we thank and praise our Lord and Saviour who has taken the wages of our sin upon himself, that we may instead live in his righteousness forever. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.