

Sermon 43: Romans 6:12a: Applying Christ's victory in holiness

OUTLINE

The imperative is grounded in the indicative

The battleground of the body

The expulsive power of a new affection

INTRODUCTION

A red Indian grandfather was sitting by the fire with his grandson, and he turned to his grandson and said, 'Grandson, there are two wolves inside of me.' The grandson looked up at his grandfather and asked, 'Which is stronger.' He replied, 'The one I feed.' That little story captures very well the reality of the contradiction that a Christian continues to be, we are dead and raised with Christ with a new platform in our union with Christ to win the war against sin; yet we are also still dwelling in a body that is bent on self-fulfilment not God's will. Even though the final victory is guaranteed, every one of our bodies and lives is a battleground where the battle is raging very strongly. The question that lies before us is, how do we get the victory? We know that Christ has died and raised and He has united us to Himself, filled us with His Spirit and freed us from our former slavery, but how do we cast off the old ways and walk in that victory?

Paul has been answering why it is impossible that a true believer can continue to live in sin, it is because we are united to Christ and in that union we have died to our former citizenship in Adam and the reign of sin and death over us, being taken out of satan's tyranny into Christ's kingdom and employ. He has been showing us all that God has done in delivering us, just as He rescued the Israelites from Egypt. He has rescued us with a mighty hand, but now a conquest and many battles lie before us. We are going to take just verse 12 for our sermon today because it introduces to us some very important truths that we need to grasp. Paul in this single verse assumes the victory that we can have over sin, but also the fight involved in taking it. He tells us about the victory that is ours but the continuing presence of sin in our bodies that we now are to fight.

The imperative grounds the indicative

'Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.'

Let's analyse this very full verse. Firstly, we must give our attention to the word 'therefore'. This is a connecting word which means that his statement, this command rather, is a direct consequence of what Paul has been saying in 6:1-11. Once again we need to stress how important this is. This is a typical pattern for Paul. He always grounds the commands that we are to perform in the work that God has already done for us in Christ. He always grounds the imperative/command in the indicative/the state of affairs God has made to exist. If you look at the book of Colossians it is divided into two parts. The first part consisting of chapters 1-3 are all about what God has done for us in Christ, we call this the

indicative, it describes a state of affairs that God has brought about. Then in chapter 3 we see a turn in the way Paul speaks, now that he has finished describing what God has done he then and only then moves on to what we should now do in response and in light of God's doing. The imperative and the indicative are two moods that are used in the Greek language, and they perfectly summarise the methodology of grace and of Paul. The imperative is always rooted in the indicative. We cannot do unless God has first done for us, there can be no obedience to God's commands without God first moving towards us in grace and regenerating us to enable faith and repentance, in uniting us to Christ's life and death in order to free us from sin's tyranny, in filling us with His Spirit in order to produce the character of Christ in us. We can only do because God has done first, God's imperatives flow from God's indicatives. He commands, but we are only able to obey because He enables that obedience. This is exactly what we are seeing here in this word 'therefore.' It is only because of what He has done that we can do.

If you can get this thought it will revolutionise your mind and actions when it comes to holiness. Think for example about parenting. Our children are to be holy, as parents we give them many laws and rules, many imperatives; but do we ever point them to God's supply so that they can obey those rules. Do we encourage them to go to the Lord for strength to depend upon His Spirit. Do we teach them to be legalists who are to do things in their own strength and they should fear the consequences if they fail, or do we call them to obey God's commands but in God's power. I believe that this is part of what Jesus meant when He said, 'Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'" The only reason that the yolk is light is because we are yoked to Christ and He applies His strength when we make our efforts for Him in dependence upon Him. We are not left to do the whole thing on our own, His life and death by His Spirit are being applied in us even now.

Unfortunately many churches today do not understand grace, that grace is God commanding and supplying so that we can obey. Many churches do not point God's people to what God has done for them in order to enable them to obey, they just keep cracking the whip and tell them to be perfect, to be like Christ, to love perfectly, but offer no hope or help and leave all the results in our hands and not in God's provisions. That is just another form of legalistic bondage that steals our joy and ultimately gives God no glory.

The battleground of the body

Next we need to look at the words, 'let not.' In light of the fact that we are no longer puppets on a string; in light of the fact that we have been regenerated and God's law has been rewritten in our hearts; in light of the fact that God has filled us with the Spirit of Christ and is working an inner transformation to bring us into the image of Christ. In light of these truths we now know that we are able to not let sin reign. Once upon a time when we were not born again and we were dead in our trespasses and sins we were not able to quit sin, we may have had good intentions, and new years resolutions, but ultimately we were never able to love God and hate and thereby quit it, we would always resume our self-

enthroned ways incapable of freeing ourselves from self-worship and service. Even though we loved our families we would deliberately wound them in our selfishness, we would always put ourselves first. We were enslaved and unable to change, but not anymore. Since we have been united to Christ we have been freed and are now able to let sin not reign. Augustine described human nature in four stages. Stage one is Adam in the Garden of Eden, Adam was perfect man but able to sin; then after the fall and we all inherited a corrupt nature we became sinners by nature and not able not to sin; however, having become Christians we still indwelling sin in our bodies but we have been freed and are able not to sin—not perfection but progress. And one day in heaven we will be perfect and not able to sin.

So other words in this verse the words, 'make you obey' indicate this same reality. Sin can no longer make you obey, you are freed from sin. Now when you hear this you might think to yourself, but if I can't help sinning when I am an unbeliever can I be held accountable? Aren't I a victim and not guilty and cannot be judged, does this teaching take away our responsibility? And the key to understanding our true responsibility and guilt even though we are helpless slaves lies in the fact that since our sinfulness grips our wills, we are willing slaves to sin not unwilling. We choose the sin because we love it, and so we are still responsible. And when we become Christians there is a corresponding change in our wills. Because we are given new hearts with new impulses and desires we now love God and hate sin and have a new willingness to leave sin behind and a real earnest desire for holiness and service.

These words 'let not' imply that holiness is not automatic, that there is a part for us to play, that the sin in us is constantly trying to take the fort but we need to hold the fort. This is where we need to concern ourselves with Paul's view of the relationship between sin and the body. Paul's view of the Christian is that we are new, we are freed from the power of sin, however our bodies are not yet glorified and we continue to wrestle with indwelling sin. Having died with Christ we have not yet been perfected, although that is guaranteed, and so sin still remains in us. However, it is a defeated foe. Imagine that sin was once a dictator that sat on the throne in your life, you were its slave and carrying out its will. But then Christ came into your life and dethroned sin and is now the Lord of your life. Sin however, is like the Taliban in Afghanistan, they are an ousted power but they continue to do damage as they wage a war as guerrillas. Their authority but not their presence has been taken away. And in the case of Christianity there is no doubt that Christ has finally conquered sin there will be no toppling of Christ's throne by sin in our lives.

It is interesting that Paul talks about sin reigning in our bodies, instead of speaking about sin reigning in us/me, in a more personal way. You will notice as you read Paul that he sees the Christian decoupled from his body, that there is a disassociation. This does not mean that the body is bad, no God created it good, but it is infected with sin and depraved and has tendencies that are not in agreement with the new desires of someone who is born again. Paul sees the Christian as united to Christ and new creation more than he identifies them with their bodies and their sinful natures. Our union with Christ takes primacy over being a in our fallen bodies so that we see a conflicted view in Paul's writings about how a

Christian has a sinful body but because of our closer union with Christ there is a disconnect with our bodies, listen to what he says in 7:15-25: 'For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. 17 So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 23 but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.' Now in these verses he is not trying to shift the blame for his sins from himself to his body, but rather he is demonstrating the way in which the Christian finds themselves suspended between these two contradictory realities. We are both united to Christ and dead to sin therefore we long for God and hate sin, however, we still reside in our bodies and still experience all the old desires and a lingering love with sin and temptation and fall prey at times, bringing about the conflicted situation Paul describes in Romans 7.

The next thing Paul says about the body is that it is 'mortal'. Why do think Paul would describe the body in this way? Well, it is an encouragement because our fight against the sin in our members is not a perpetual one. One day our fight against sin will be over and we will receive perfect bodies, but until then we groan in the discomfort of the present, relentless war that wages within us. The description of mortal also underlines that any passions that we give into are futile for we are not working for eternal treasures but sowing to something that is fading and passing away.

Finally regarding the body Paul talks about the body's passions. Once again he is not merely talking about the passions as God created them, then they were good and right, but rather passions as they are distorted by sin. Paul gives various lists of passions that we were once controlled by, Col. 3:5-9, 'Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices.' The thing with sin is that it creates nothing new it only hijacks God's original and perverts it. Since we are made in the image of God, we have many faculties that reflect something of God's own character. God has anger, He gets angry at sin but we get angry and murder. We allow righteous anger to overspill its bounds and result in rage, violence, hatred and bitterness. God is jealous as He is due His worship but we commit adultery and give our attention to things instead of Him who made these gifts for us. However, our jealousy is a possessive thing that seeks to control. God hates sin and we too have a capacity for hatred but sin turns hatred not toward anything that is contrary to God's

will but those things that are contrary to our will. If anyone crosses us, or resists us, or hurts us then sinful hatred is what flows.

Not only that there are various good appetites that God gave us as His creatures that we might have a full and happy life experiencing good things and being grateful to Him for His gracious supply. We have taste buds that are able to savour all the varieties of flavours from sour to sweet, mellow to spicy. But sin takes over this vehicle for God's praise and makes it object of obsession and we become gluttons who overindulge and binge to excess. Then God gave us the gift of sexual pleasure, this was intended to be God's gift to a married couple to be opened on their wedding night but now it has been taken over by sin and we see many men and women who are addicts in pursuit of total satisfaction through this one area of their lives. A good gift becomes an obsession and ends up enslaving you. This is something that you need to be aware of, this is how the sin in you takes you deeper into sin. It takes the good things of God and hijacks them, so that when you are enjoying the gifts legitimately sin is always at your door and its desire is to carry you off into excess.

For this reason we see Paul has a certain approach with his body, he holds it under so that it never takes over. He eats but doesn't give in to gluttony. He has friendships but does not make an idol of any relationship. He drinks but does not give into excess. He describes it like this, 'Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26 So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. 27 But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.' His body is described as an unruly horse that needs to be kept on a tight bridle. He lives in a type of perpetual fast. An athlete eats but is always aware that there are foods that will undermine his training, that will add excess weight, or that will have a negative effect in making him feel sluggish or not provide enough energy. An athlete drinks but only that which will help with the training for the race, and only in amounts that are helpful.

Here is where sin has its greatest opportunity. When we are unguarded with those things that we know are good and from God. God gives us the money we earn as reward for our labour, but sin is looking to take advantage and make you covetous in serving your selfish desires for more. It wants you to imagine all things you could do for yourself with all your money not thinking about your role as a steward. It does not want you to think money or anything else selflessly but selfishly. Humour, art, music, entertainment, leisure, rest, holidays, hobbies, technology, houses etc. All of these things are wonderful gifts and can be used selflessly, but sin is seeking to take every single one of these things and turn them into selfish passions. Do not let it.

So we have it, Paul tells us not to let sin reign, sound simple? Then why is it so hard to say no to sin when Christ has made it possible? It is exactly because of this remaining sin in us that continues to work against us that we feel a continual lure to sin. We are still in these old bodies that do not forget their old lovers. There is a famous sermon preached by Thomas Chalmers, called, 'The expulsive power of a new affection.' And in this sermon he tells us that the only way to fall out of love for sin is to fall more in love with Christ. It is the

true and mature love for Christ that will overcome our infantile obsession for sin. Idols of the heart can never be removed only replaced. If we tried to remove the idol of self-love that we once served, it would not be long until we had filled its place with another self-serving idol. Perhaps we would exchange an immoral idol for an immoral one, the idol of promiscuity for the idol of security. The only way to fall out of love for sin is not to sweep the house clean but to fill it with Christ.

Friends it should not be hard for us to love Christ more. Think on what we have been studying. God commands us to be holy, and then He ensures that we die with Christ, are freed from sin, are regenerated in our hearts, are filled with His Spirit, are instructed in the truth of what He has done, can we withhold love when He has given so much so freely to us who are so undeserving. We have the guarantee of victory before us and the certainty of help in the fight. And even now we are beginning to taste the fullness that Christ is for us. We need clothing, and God makes Christ to be our righteous garment. We need food, and God makes Christ to be the bread from heaven. We need water and Christ is made to satisfy our thirst. We need light for our blindness and Christ is the light of the world. We need holiness and Christ is made to be the vine from which we the branches draw His holiness as the Spirit applies it to us. We have all in Christ, He is our all sufficient saviour, every need is filled to overflowing, can we love Him more? We have an eternal saviour to consider who has eternal blessings to give and who gives us fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore. This is how we let not sin reign by falling more in love with Christ.