

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 1:17-19  
SECOND LESSON: Romans 6:12-23  
June 28, 2020

**“Who’s Your Boss?”**  
Sermon © Lisa C Farrell

True story: A company routinely held “Lunch and Learn” seminars for employees during lunchtime. These dealt with a variety of physical and mental health issues. If the seminar time allotment lasted beyond the normal lunch hour, employees were supposed to get managerial approval to attend. So, it was a question and answer all in one when this flyer came around: LUNCH AND LEARN SEMINAR: WHO'S CONTROLLING YOUR LIFE? (Get your manager's permission before attending.)

We all serve somebody. Even the independently wealthy are not really independent, because if they’re at all human they still want the approval and acceptance of others. Paul’s entire argument today is about who we serve—sin, or God. There’s no middle choice. Our reading begins rather abruptly because it is in fact mid-stream in Paul’s argument. He is rather urgently telling the Roman Christians to not let sin reign in their physical bodies, to not let them be used as instruments of wickedness. *What on earth is he talking about?* Most likely, prostitution.

We learn right and wrong from our society. If the society we live in condemns something, it’s wrong. If it is accepted, it’s right. But what happens when the society of which we are a part accepts evil as normal? What was normal in Nazi Germany was in no way right in God’s eyes. Prostitution was a very normal and accepted part of society in the Roman Empire. We can tell how prevalent something is by the number of words there are in a language used to describe it, and there were over 25 different words for prostitute! It was expected and normal that men, all men, married, single, young and old, could avail themselves of prostitutes. Of course, that was not true of respectable women. They could be stoned to death for doing the same thing.

Added to this was another brutal fact of life in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman Empire. Girl children were not valued in the same way as boys. We’ve all seen what this has done to China, a nation that now has 34 million more men than women. India is now in the same situation for the same reason. The girls are aborted and the boys live. What happened to these unwanted girls in Roman society was that they were abandoned on garbage heaps. If not killed by wild dogs, they were picked up by brothel owners and raised to be prostitutes. It was therefore always possible that the customer could be abusing his own daughter, granddaughter, niece or sister. What an awful world! But just stop and think for one moment. Did not the same kind of abuse once happen to enslaved women and girls on plantations in this very nation?

Paul was talking about sin that we commit with our own bodies and he was directing his comments primarily to men, because they were the ones who had the agency to do whatever they wanted to a woman's body. And he was clear. This is sin. It is flat out evil and wrong. But this idea would have stretched credulity in the average Roman. How can something so common be wrong? It's not that the Romans didn't know about self-control. They did. But how could God be against something that was just a fact of life?

So, Paul switches gears in his argument and uses another analogy that was a norm of life back then—slavery. Paul doesn't use the concept of slavery because he approves of it. He uses the idea because everyone would know what he was talking about. One in three people in Italy and one in five in the Empire as a whole were slaves. Paul even says, "I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations."

His point was this—you're going to have to serve somebody. You will either be a slave to your own lusts, that is a slave to sin, or you will be a slave to God and free from your own compulsions. **There is no middle road.** The idea that WE have that we are "free" and that God is some kind of a divine bully demanding obedience might be popular, but it's not true. Once sin takes root in us it takes over. Neutrality is not possible.

The payout for a life given over to sin is death. A life lived according to the broken standards of self-indulgence and self-centeredness is a useless life. But Paul had to shine a light on those things in order to wake people up to the fact that what they were doing was wrong. We don't live in a culture where it is thought acceptable and normal for women, girls and even boys to be bought and sold, their bodies used and abused. It still happens, but at least we disapprove. We know it's wrong. It horrifies us. But here is the point, because it wouldn't have horrified the ancient Romans. They would have wondered what all the fuss was about. And there are many, many aspects of our societal norms that are sinful, but we can't see that they are, because "everyone" does them.

As children how many of us have tried to use the argument with our parents that "everyone is doing it." And of course, what we usually hear back is something along the lines of, "If everyone is jumping off a cliff should you do it too?" But the power of "everyone" is strong. There are a lot of things that are part of normal life for us that God hates. We have been conditioned not to question these things. And we have been taught a specific *modus operandi* that effectively preserves the status quo—the "it's not my business" response. I see a child being abused, but *it's not my business*. I see a theft taking place, but *it's not my business*. I see a wife living in terror of her abusive spouse, but *it's not my business*. I know that my employer is racist and is actively discriminating against minorities, but I am not one of those minorities, so *it's not my business*.

"It's not my business" is a potent tool. It's also very convenient because "if it's not my business" then I don't have to take any of the risks involved in speaking up. I don't have to risk becoming a target myself. After all, I'm just respecting people's privacy, right? Otherwise I'd be meddling.

The difference in the protests sweeping our nation today is that for the first time white people are waking up to devastating and all-encompassing nature of racism, and they are not saying, "it's not my business." But racism is a sin that is so deeply entrenched it is going to take a very long time to dig out. By now we have all heard about the three police officers in North Carolina recently fired because they accidentally left their record button on when they had a conversation in which one of them said that a civil war was coming and he could hardly wait to just go out and slaughter black people. His language was so foul I can't repeat it. He's been in the force since 1998. **But how many conversations just like this have not been accidentally recorded?**

America is a violent culture. But we are so immersed in it we don't see it. Those looking in from outside see it. We refuse to enact gun legislation. The rest of the world thinks we're insane! We allow people to own weapons that should only be used in times of war. We use violence and intimidation against minorities, women and even children if they happen to be of the "wrong" race. The only good thing about the coronavirus is that so far it has cut down on mass shootings because people have stopped gathering in large groups! And all of this violence, this love affair we have with guns and death, **is sin**. It is pride, arrogance, hate and fear all wrapped up in self-justification. God is not concerned about our Second Amendment rights. God is concerned about those who are being killed.

We have made prostitution illegal, but we have done nothing to combat the social conditions that produce it. We have not addressed poverty, injustice and hopelessness. We have not provided anything like adequate treatment for addiction. We have failed to properly educate and train people so that they can provide for themselves and their families. And we have ignored the squalor of many of our inner-city neighborhoods.

And of course, while all the tele-evangelists out there are pointing the finger at sexual sins, which many times they themselves commit, this is just a smokescreen for the true and grievous sin of greed. Pastors with private jets and mansions . . . It is sin. But America is addicted to "more." And we flaunt the accumulation of wealth before those who will never be able to achieve it, and then wonder why there are looters. We have created a system of haves and have nots and absolutely convinced ourselves that the way to happiness is through THINGS. Our very economy is based on it.

Paul says that "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." The new Christians living in Rome did not know that much of the way that they had been living was sinful, because for them it was normal. It had to be pointed out. And then they were given a choice. And many of them did choose. Those abandoned baby girls and disabled boys left to die on garbage heaps were deliberately sought out by Christians and rescued. They invented the orphanage, replacing the brothel. Whenever possible they bought the freedom of slaves. They turned their backs on the glorification of violence, often at the cost of their own lives in martyrdom. And they sought to live a simple life, sharing their possessions with those in need. They chose who to serve. It is a choice that we, too, must make every day, to serve God, or to serve sin. Amen.

Isaiah 1:17-19

**17** Learn to do right; seek justice.

Defend the oppressed.

Take up the cause of the fatherless;  
plead the case of the widow.

**18** “Come now, let us settle the matter,”  
says the Lord.

“Though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be as white as snow;  
though they are red as crimson,  
they shall be like wool.

**19** If you are willing and obedient,  
you will eat the good things of the land;

Romans 6:12-23

**12** Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. **13** Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. **14** For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

**15** What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! **16** Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? **17** But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. **18** You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

**19** I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. **20** When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. **21** What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! **22** But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. **23** For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.