

Musing #55—Romans 6:19–23

In our last Musing, Paul reminded his readers in verse 18 that “we are free from sin.” He points that out again in verse 23. He wants his readers to know that we were headed for an eternal death, but now we are headed for eternal life with our creator God. Most of us felt we were not really bad people. But he wants to make clear the differences between “sinners” and “saints” —the difference between actions and identity. Sin is like drowning in the sea. We can drown in seven feet of water just as easily as we can drown in seventy feet of water. He reminds us that God changed who we were in our deepest person. He goes on to encourage us to learn to “act” like who we now are. Our obedience is now to faith, based on what He has revealed to us.

19-20 I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented the parts of your body as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in *further lawlessness*, so now present your body's parts as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. For when you were employed by sin you owed no duty to righteousness.

James, through his writings about learning to endure temptations, referred to this same reality. **Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.** James 1:14-15

Those without Christ sink deeper and deeper into sin, drawn by the power of sin and self-centeredness. Today's culture of immorality has everything coming out of the closet. But the driver of it all is the same—sin and self. I did psychological testing on most of my wife's and my clients, often with clients of other counselors. Over the past 30-plus years we saw an observable and marked increase in the Personality Disorder called “Narcissism”—a sense of entitlement, self-absorption and self-love.

In its base form, it is not something new and our scriptures show us that God reprimanded the people of Israel many years ago for their stubborn self-absorption.

Jeremiah 8:5-13 (Select MSG) So why does this people go backward, and just keep on going—backward! They stubbornly hold on to their illusions, refuse to change direction.... Not a single “I'm sorry” did I hear. They just kept at it, blindly and stupidly banging their heads against a brick wall.... My people know nothing, not the first thing of God and his rule. How can you say, “We know the score. We're the proud owners of God's revelation”? Look where it's gotten you—stuck in illusion. Your religion experts have taken you for a ride! Your know-it-alls will be unmasked, caught and shown up for what they are. Look at them! They know everything but God's Word.... So here's what will happen to the know-it-alls: I'll make them wifeless and homeless. Everyone's after the dishonest dollar, little people and big people alike. Prophets and priests and everyone in between twist words and doctor truth.... Do you suppose they are embarrassed over this outrage? Not really. They have no shame. They don't even know how to blush. There's no hope for them.

They've hit bottom and there's no getting up. As far as I'm concerned, they're finished. —God has spoken.

We have to be realistic. We will reap what we sow. Believers are called to manifest the fruit of the Spirit. But “self” often gets in the way.

Galatians 6:7-8 — Don't be under any illusion: you cannot make a fool of God! A man's harvest in life will depend entirely on what he sows. If he sows for his flesh his harvest will be the decay and death of his flesh. But if he sows for the Spirit he will reap the harvest of everlasting life by that Spirit. Let us not grow tired of doing good, for, unless we throw in our hand, the ultimate harvest is assured. Let us then do good to all men as opportunity offers, especially to those who belong to the Christian household.

21-23 Yet what sort of harvest did you reap from those things that today you blush to remember? In the long run those things mean one thing only—death. But now that you are employed by God, you owe no duty to sin, and you reap the fruit of being made righteous, while at the end of the road there is life for evermore. Sin pays its servants: the wage is death. But God gives to those who serve him: his free gift is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Natural Man can rise no higher than his own powers can lift him. He obeys the devil... and easily serves sin. I “blush to remember” things in my past. I was a servant of the world, flesh, and devil.

In the church the Carnal Man can be saved... but still dominated (in part) by the power of sin and self. He or she wants God, but serves the flesh. This is particularly difficult in our culture which has influenced the entire world with movies, TV, greed, sex, immorality, and subtle corruption. One example is what is going on in marriage: In ancient times, marriage had an economic basis. It was connected to material realities and needs. In the early 1700's the evangelical movement connected marriage to faith. The idea of marriage took on a companionship role... which was, and is, still mildly self-centered. Today in most cultures, marriage is seen as purely hedonistic. It's largely about what gives the most pleasure and self-fulfillment. As soon as marriage becomes something that's not fulfilling, then the marriage becomes useless, and easily ended. That's why it's seen as an option today to have different models of marriage. In the hedonistic view, marriage doesn't have any other social benefit or purpose. It has been largely reduced to “pleasure.” As a nation we are beginning to reap what we have sown. The further we get into hedonistic living, the further we get from having our real needs met. God created us with physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Originally, those needs were filled through a close relationship with God. But after the fall, humanity turned to sin to meet needs.

Verse 21 — is basically the Apostle saying... **So what benefit did you get at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed (pursuing sinful pleasures)? None! For the outcome of those things is death!**

Most sin is often the result of trying to fill a God-given, legitimate need in illegitimate ways. Needs such as...

**Acceptance / Approval / Encouragement / Respect
Support / Comfort / Appreciation / Security**

Think for a moment how we often depend on selfish acts to fulfill those needs, even as believers. One phrase had a very deep meaning for Paul who faced his needs head-on. The phrase appears 84 times in his letters—13 times in his letter to the Romans. That phrase is just two words — **In Christ!** We are to be fully identified with Jesus Christ...

His experiences become our experiences (temptation). His blessings become our blessings (grace and mercy). His power becomes our power (enduring and overcoming). His eternal life becomes our eternal life (hope rewarded). We have everything, by virtue of our being **“in Christ.”**

Chuck Swindoll notes— **First, it is possible to be a slave to something and think you are free—the predicament of the lost. They easily serve something they think will bring them fulfillment or eliminate their problems. Money, career, sex, relationships, adventure, power, recognition, education, achievement, even addictions. The lost have no ability to comprehend the extent of their slavery. They refuse the good news out of the fear that submission to Christ will take away their freedoms!**

Second, it is possible to be free and think you are enslaved. As tragic as the first problem. Counseling offices are filled with Christians who struggle to accept the fact that they no longer must serve imaginary Gods. They remain shackled to compulsions, shame, and guilt, unaware that they now worship a God who doesn't demand, but empowers. The remedy for both problems is the same: truth! Unbelievers need to know that the freedom they experience is an illusion designed to draw their attention away from the fact that sin is robbing them of everything they value and will eventually drag them into eternal death. Believers, on the other hand, must learn to embrace their freedom and recognize temptation for what it is. Each opportunity to sin is an invitation to submit our mind, emotions, and body to Christ. Temptation always asks: “To which master will you submit for the next few moments: your compulsion, which always leaves you feeling emptier than before... or to Christ, who always affirms your value as a child of God?”

It's remarkable how practical the scriptures are for everyday life—6,000 years ago, 2,000 years ago, and today. Need issues are basically the same for all of mankind, and the solution is equally the same for all of mankind. It is always available — **In Christ!**