

The Baptism of Our Lord
Matthew 3:13-17

You are slaves!

Jesus says that “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” (Matthew 6:24)

Jesus here clearly sets up a dichotomy. You're either serving God or mammon. There's no in between.

I really like how Luther describes it in “The Bondage of the Will:”

“In short, if we are under the god of this world, away from the work and Spirit of the true God, we are held captive to his will, as Paul says to Timothy, so that we cannot will anything but what he wills. For he is that strong man armed, who guards his own palace in such a way that those whom he possesses are in peace, so as to prevent them from stirring up any thought or feeling against him; otherwise, the kingdom of Satan being divided against itself would not stand, whereas Christ affirms that it does stand. And this we do readily and willingly, according to the nature of the will, which would not be a will if it were compelled; for compulsion is rather (so to say) ‘unwill.’ But if a Stronger One comes who overcomes him and takes us as His spoil, then through his Spirit we are again slaves and captives—though this is royal freedom—so that we readily will and do what he wills. Thus the human will is placed between the two like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills, as the psalm says: ‘I am become as a beast [before thee] and I am always with thee’ [Ps. 73:22 f.]. If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills; nor can it choose to run to either of the two riders or to seek him out, but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of it.” (AE 33.65)

Luther was responding to Erasmus who wanted to attribute some power to our will with regard to our salvation. Luther leaves no doubt that we cannot and can never contribute to our salvation.

And in the midst of his argument he paints this distressing picture of our slavery to either God or the devil. Just like Jesus, he sets up the dichotomy that we serve either God or Satan. There is no in between.

You see this in the Apostle Paul. In most of his letters, he introduces himself as a slave of Christ. Servent, bondservent and slave, which are the various English words Paul uses, all really mean slave.

We don't like that word. It's not culturally sensitive to use that word. But the Bible doesn't care about cultural sensitivity! Yes, slavery in America was an ugly time in our history. Did you know that there are more slaves today than at any other time in history? Slavery is ugly. But we will continue to have slavery in the world as long as it is filled with sinners. Slavery is an ugly word, and it is the perfect word to describe us. We are either slaves of Satan or slaves of God.

Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." (John 8:34)

We see this all around us and maybe even in the mirror.

Many are slaves to their appetites. They are enslaved by sex, or food, or alcohol, or pleasure of all sorts. They know it's bad for them and they'll suffer all sorts of unpleasant side effects, but they remain enslaved.

Many are slaves to distraction. They are enslaved by their phones, or televisions, or computer screens. They know they should actually do something with themselves and that being glued to their particular screen will cause them to be bored with everything and everybody, but they remain enslaved.

Many are enslaved by hate. They are enslaved to the powerful emotions of resentment and hate and let it ruin their relationships and lives. They know it's destructive to themselves and all around them, but they can't seem to stop.

It's a horrendous thing to be enslaved by anything. Paul takes this seriously. He says in 1 Corinthians:

“‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be dominated by anything!” (6:12)

Paul knows that it is so easy to be enslaved by our desires, whether it’s something as harmless as a snickers bar or something as disastrous as sex addiction. He will not give anything a chance to enslave him.

Jesus, however, is a slave to righteousness. We see that today in our Gospel reading:

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented Him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented.” (vv. 13-15)

John understands that Jesus has no need for baptism. He is perfectly righteous and, indeed, the spotless Lamb of God. Baptism is for the forgiveness of sin and Jesus has no sin. But He is a slave to His Father in heaven. He must do His Father’s will and speak His Father’s words. He is a slave to perfect righteousness.

He is a slave to righteousness so that He might free those who are enslaved by sin; that is, the world. We call this the blessed exchange. Christ exchanges His righteousness with our sinfulness and carries it to the cross to be crucified. The first thing He does in His ministry is to take on the mantle of our sin. He does this so that we might receive His righteousness in our baptism.

In our baptism, we are washed clean and given Jesus’ perfect righteousness. This is what the Bible talks about in the Gospels, Epistles, Revelation, Psalms, and Prophets, when it says that we are to be clothed in righteousness! We put on Christ and His righteousness first by being baptized, and then thereafter by remembering our baptism daily.

Jesus, in your baptism, freed you from slavery to sin and made you a slave to God the Father. You are now a slave of righteousness because you are baptized.

You will fall from your baptism. This is the great struggle that Paul talks about in Romans 7. It’s what Luther talked about in the quote I started with.

But to return to grace, or to return to being a slave of righteousness is nothing other than receiving the forgiveness of sin.

This is where private confession and absolution can be a wonderful thing. When you're forgiven, God "forgets" your sin, but your flesh and the devil do not forget. Your flesh or the devil will bring it up to try and afflict your conscience. Don't let them! A private word of absolution to a specific sin that is plaguing you is a powerful antidote!

The forgiveness of sins, however it comes; whether it's spoken by a pastor publicly or privately, or it's spoken by a Christian brother or sister, is a return to baptism. It washes you clean from all your sin and restores you again to being a slave to God instead of being a slave to Satan. This is serious business.

As I quoted above, Jesus warns us:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."

Jesus specifically says "practices sin" instead of saying "sins." There's a difference between slipping and sinning like we all do from time to time and continuing to sin and being consumed by that sin. It's a little silly, but it's kind of like the difference between slipping on your diet and eating a bag of chips one day and saying "to heck with diet" and eating a bag of chips every day and two bags on Sundays. If we don't immediately take care of the slip ups, we are in danger of becoming re-enslaved by that sin. That's why we remember our baptism daily.

There's some real wisdom in our Small Catechism with the daily prayers, and specifically Luther's morning and evening prayers. Now Luther didn't invent these prayers. They had been around for quite some time, but he did clean them up. You know how they go. (And if not, you have a homework assignment this week!)

In the morning when you get up, make the sign of the holy cross and say:

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Then, kneeling or standing, repeat the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. If you choose, you may also say this little prayer:

I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Then go joyfully to your work, singing a hymn, like that of the Ten Commandments, or whatever your devotion may suggest.

With this little ritual, you remind yourself that you are baptized and a slave of righteousness. You start your day with the right mindset. If you remember who you are and whose you are before you're in the midst of your day, you tend to act more like a baptized child of God instead of a child of the devil like you used to be before your baptism.

And at night, you do something similar:

In the evening when you go to bed, make the sign of the holy cross and say:

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Then kneeling or standing, repeat the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. If you choose, you may also say this little prayer:

I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have graciously kept me this day; and I pray that You would forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Then go to sleep at once and in good cheer.

This ends your day with the right, baptismal, mindset. You know you have sinned. You gladly admit this and ask God for forgiveness. And you know that since you are baptized, God promises to forgive your sins and forget them. If there's one that just keeps nagging at you so that you cannot sleep in good cheer, you find a close Christian friend or your pastor and confess and receive the absolution. But this nightly prayer reminds you who you are and whose you are so that you don't dwell on the past or live a life of regret.

One of the Epiphany things happen at the end of our Gospel reading today:

“And when Jesus was baptized, immediately He went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’” (vv. 16-17)

God the Father is pleased with Jesus because He chose to be a slave of righteousness. Jesus was not incarnated a slave to sin with the baggage of original sin that we are plagued with. Jesus actually had free will. He chose to enslave Himself to His Father so that He would free us from our bondage. In our baptism, we are freed from the bondage of sin and made children of God.

You are children of God with whom He is well pleased because you are baptized into Christ. The really awesome thing is that he doesn't destroy your personality when He sees you in Christ. When God sees you, He sees the righteousness of Christ, but He also sees you! And when you are freed from slavery to sin, your actual true, God-given personality starts to come out. Just as all the Bible writers wrote the Word of God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit and God didn't destroy their personality but used it in a God pleasing way, You serve God as you are carried along by the Holy Spirit and God doesn't destroy your personality but uses it in a God pleasing way.

So remember that you are baptized. A hearty “I am baptized” exclamation is a great elixir when you are tormented by the devil, your old sinful nature, or the world. You are freed from sin, death, and the devil. You are a slave of your dear Father in heaven!