

*All Roads Lead Here: Victory*  
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*Psalm 123:1-2; John 8:31-36; Romans 6:12-23*

Friends, our final Scripture reading today is from Romans 6:12-23. Listen now to God's holy Word. "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey -- whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

One of the greatest words in the English language is "victory." I've been playing a video game that Jackson bought recently, and whenever I get through a tough match and the announcer says, "Victory," it just makes me all happy inside. The word "victory" has an ancient, noble sound to our ears. We celebrate great victories. For a long time, we celebrated V-E and V-J Day – victory in Europe and victory in Japan after WWII. From 1961 to 1998, we watched ABC's Wide World of Sports, which promised every Saturday afternoon to show us the thrill of victory, as well as the agony of defeat (and that poor skier who wiped out every single weekend.)

But the word victory implies something else. To have victory, you have to have been in a competition, a fight, a war. You have to be in a battle of some sort where the other side experiences defeat. Victory implies overcoming a foe. For you to experience victory, you must have overpowered a force, overcome an adversity, triumphed over an enemy. There is no victory without a showdown. There is no victory that comes at no cost.

Today's passage gives us confidence in victory over sin. It gives us courage to defeat sin. And it challenges us to do and know certain things that will lead to that victory. Because sin – our disobedience to God's ways – is our chief enemy in life. It constantly threatens us; it wants to defeat us, to throw our relationship with God in disarray; it wants to leave us in a state of worry and confusion; it wants to undermine our thoughts and our actions. But we can win. And we're going to see a few things we can do today.

The first thing we have to do is know our enemy, and so we've got to recognize something super important: *sin is a real, physical reality to overcome*. Paul puts it this way: "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness."

This sounds a little weird – the parts of your body. But there's a point behind it. A long time ago, in the 1980s, Wendy's was selling their boneless chicken breast sandwiches for the first time. In their commercial, they compare their sandwich to the nuggets at other fast food joints. And when the guy ordering the nuggets asks where they come from, they say, "That's like when they take a lot of chickens and assemble the respective parts. What parts? Parts is parts!" The point Wendy's was making was, the parts that we use matter.

And in the same way, what we do with our physical bodies matters. Our parts matter, and what we do with them matters. Listen to what Proverbs 6:16-19 says – "there are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers." Did you hear that five of the seven mention specific parts? Eyes, tongue, hands, heart, feet? There's a physical reality to the way that we sin.

Or consider James 3, where James makes an analogy. He writes, "Take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body."

What we choose to do with the parts of our bodies makes a spiritual difference in our lives. Now maybe to you, this seems obvious. But here's one of the key problems with sin: it's sneaky. When we do things with our bodies, our mind has a way of playing tricks on us. Our mind doesn't think about what we've done the way it should. It excuses things. It's almost as if the mind can convince us that we haven't done the things we've done or that they don't matter. We sometimes think about sin in the abstract. No, we don't like sin; we don't want to upset God or damage our relationship with Him. But this thing I did, I explain away. I separate out my mind thinking about it from the action I took.

But sin is real. Disobedience is real. It takes on physical forms. We try to abstract it, we try to separate it out from reality. But the consequences of sin are real and physical too. We play around with sex and diseases get spread. We lie about someone, we slander them, and we watch worlds unravel as the lie plays out, as people believe it and stop associating with them, start talking behind their backs. We get angry and pretty soon, we see the physical scars of abuse. Sin may start by thinking the wrong things about God and what He expects, but it winds up with concrete consequences in our world. And ultimately, the consequence of sin is physical too. Romans 6:23 tells us, the wages of sin is death. What we earn from our physical actions of disobedience is the eventual physical death of our bodies.

What's the point of all this? We've got to realize that sin is not a concept, not an idea, not a notion. It is a reality that we face. We can't just think about it. We've got to put everything into reverse; we need to begin thinking differently and then acting differently. And that leads us to the next thing on our road to victory: *the path to victory lies with offering our actions up to God.*

In the ancient Roman empire, slavery was different in a few ways from what we think of in American slavery. The primary difference was that except when someone was captured as a prisoner of war, individuals had the choice to sell themselves into slavery, and they chose who to sell themselves to. Those decisions were often very difficult; if you were doing it because you had debts and were threatened with prison, you may have chosen anyone willing to take your services. But you could choose your master. Once that happened, though, you were under their command. You did what they told you when they told you. You were no longer your own. You could disobey, but that came with harsh penalties.

When we were slaves to sin, Paul writes, "you were free from the control of righteousness." Before we became believers, God wasn't calling the shots in our life. We were living as we wanted. We suffered from those choices, but we kept making them. In fact, because we were enslaved to sin, all we could do were the things that master called us to do. We couldn't be righteous. We didn't have the ability to disobey the call of sin.

But here's the great news – as Paul writes, "thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness." We have a new master now. God, who loves us, who cares for us, who only disciplines us for our good and our growth, He is the one we get our marching orders from.

And there's another difference, which is why Paul writes this in the first place. Once we become believers, we have the ability and the opportunity to choose to do what is right. God chooses us not because we are good but out of His mercy and grace. He brings us to faith in Himself. When we do good works now, it's not to save ourselves – it is our free choice to obey the master who gave His life for us so that we could actually become like Him.

Are you going to offer your actions up to God? Are you going to be a good servant or a disobedient one? That's the question we face. How our lives work out is largely based on how we answer this question. Think back with me to the Israelites on their way out of Egypt. God has just brought them out of 400 years of captivity with incredible signs and wonders. The Egyptians, out of their fear and respect of their God, has given them all sorts of valuables. God promised their ancestors the land of Canaan, and it's nearly time for God to make good on that promise – and really, the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan is not very far at all. God has been with them the whole way, as a pillar of wind during the day and a pillar of fire at night that the whole camp can see. God has chosen them out of all other people to be His; no one else on earth at this point knows as much about God as they do. They reach the mountain where they are to worship the LORD. God gives them His initial instructions, and then Moses goes up the mountain to meet with the LORD. He receives graven copies of the Ten Commandments and instruction on the Law he is to give to Israel.

What happens? After Moses is up on the mountain 40 days, the people start freaking out. Is he coming back? Is God still there and paying attention, or did He strike down Moses? They want something to worship, so Aaron, Moses' brother, the high priest, has a golden calf made to represent YHWH their God. God's only given them a few commandments so far, and they're already breaking them. And when Moses comes back down the mountain, he's steamed. Here they are in the midst of a huge, raucous party worshipping an idol. This is the very thing that they aren't supposed to do.

So what happens? They get a time out. They march around the mountain, march around in the wilderness for a while. Some of the people complain and they die in the wilderness. They're walking, walking, walking. Finally, ah, we're done, we're on the outskirts of the Promised Land. Spies go in to take a look at the land and the people and what all is there. And it's amazing. There's plenty of the best things, more than enough for the Israelites. Oh, but there's a problem, the spies say. The people are huge; we look like grasshoppers in comparison to them. And while Caleb and Joshua are like, if God says we can take it, we can take it, the rest start gossip among all of Israel, and there's a rebellion. They want to replace Aaron and Moses and get new leadership.

So what happens? They get a much bigger time out. God says, "If you don't want to into the land I promised you, don't. Your children will, but you won't." And what do they do? They wander back, wander back to Mount Sinai, wander back to the holy mountain, they camp, they circle, they walk. Along the way another rebellion happens, more people die, then people die of old age, still walking, walking, walking in circles in the wilderness.

Now you might wonder if I'm just trying to get my exercise this afternoon. But here's the real question for us: how long are you going to circle around the mountain of your sin? How long are you going to walk around it and think about it and offer yourself to it? Because here's the thing – where did the Israelites get in those 40 years? *Nowhere!* As Paul describes it, "What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!" Are you going to keep circling the mountain hoping that this time, your sins will seem sweeter? Because sin is a garbage dump. Have you ever been to a landfill? Worse smell in your life. And it doesn't smell any better the more garbage they dump. How long will you keep circling it?

Because here's the truth: when you believe in Jesus, you are free. You can offer yourself as a slave to God, as a slave to His righteousness; you can do what's right. Let's do what's right! In comparison to that endless circle, Jesus offers us what He calls in Matthew 7:14 "the small gate and the narrow road that leads to life." It's not an easy journey, but it's a journey in the right direction, the direction we need to head. And the way to that road is through actions that are pleasing to God.

Is it hard? Yes! I struggle against sin, as I expect you do. And it takes putting a leash on those things that would drive us to sin. Daily turning our lives over to God so we don't use our tongues to slander, our ears to listen to gossip, our minds to plot ways to get rich, our eyes to gaze at others with lust. It is difficult because the more we do it, the more we realize we need to do it more. But we can. God has made the way for us to act in ways pleasing to Him.

And that leads us to the final point today: *whether we sin or we obey, practice makes perfect*. Paul says it this way: “Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness.” We are always increasing in our actions, whether our wickedness grows or our righteousness and holiness.

When I started playing guitar when I was 18, it hurt. A lot of people give up on playing the guitar and other stringed instruments because when you first play them, it’s like someone’s taking a tiny knife and cutting into the skin of your finger. And in a sense, that’s exactly what’s happening. Until you build up callouses on your fingers, it hurts a lot. And yet, over time those callouses make it a lot easier to play. I am not a great guitarist by any stretch of the imagination because I don’t have much time to practice, but I play better than I did at 18. I’m a better bookkeeper for Compassion than I was six months ago. And I know the same is true for you. You’re better at your work now than you were before. With so many things, the old saying is true. “How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice.”

And how you live your life becomes second nature, old hat, after a while. Sometimes we build up really good habits. Sometimes we get really bad ones. But in both situations, the longer we do them, the harder it is to break them. Every now and then we’ll see some documentary piece about somebody dying of lung cancer who still smokes a few packs every day. They just can’t quit. On the other side, when I think about authors and songwriters, I think about how many of them create their best work decades after they started. They’ve honed their craft.

Friends, if there are sins that trouble you, things that you don’t like that you do but you do them anyway, today is the day to turn around and hand them over to Christ, to offer that up to Him. Start the new habit now; kill the old habit now. Because sins that were hard on me at 20 that I didn’t really deal with are much harder to deal with now at 43. But some sins I dealt with well when I was 20 are things where I can encourage others now. We become what we practice over and over again.

And like the young musician picking up an instrument for the first time, changing your way of life is going to hurt, and it’s going to hurt for a while. Don’t give up on it. Keep at it. If you have a foul mouth at home and you let one loose, don’t let that be your excuse to stop working at speaking in ways that don’t demean your Lord. If you fall back into an old habit, fall back out of it. The only way you will succeed is to keep at it.

We who belong to God no longer live for ourselves but for God. He has hard work for us, but the best work possible – becoming like Him. And here’s the truth – victory is not only possible, God will give it to us as we seek Him. Jesus has already defeated the power of sin and death. As Paul says, “the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.” So stop visiting the grave of your old sins, stop doing tours around the mountain of your trash heap of former disobedience, and keep following God’s lead. And you will see Him and know Him in your life both now and forevermore.