

“United in Death...”

“You also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God” (Romans 7:4).

“Till death do us part.” This phrase first appeared in 1549 as part of the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer. Since that time, “Till death do us part” has become as ubiquitous as phrases like, “In God we trust” or “Play ball!” However, this cultural cliché also suggests that marriage is more than a social contract. It is, in fact, a covenant created by God, and Jesus affirmed this when he proclaimed, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” These words also remind us that every earthly marriage occurs in a world where death is still a reality. A husband and wife may promise to love each other through every season of life, but inevitably, death does come, and death does part. And this is where today's reading from Romans comes in.

Today, Paul uses marriage as a metaphor to speak about the relationship between Christ and His Church. And in this section of Romans, he introduces a surprising twist to, “Till death do us part.” You see, for God's people, death does not simply part. Through Christ, death also unites. To put more clearly, the death of Jesus parts us from our old life under sin. And, in our Baptism, we are joined to His death and resurrection, and united to a new Bridegroom and a new life and identity in Christ.

To help us understand this, Paul begins with an illustration from marriage. A bride, he says, is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But when her husband dies, she is released from that bond, and she is free to marry another man. Then Paul applies this image to us: “You also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to Him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.” Now, this doesn't mean that God's Law is bad. No. Paul makes that very clear when he says, “The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”

The problem is not the Law; the problem is sin. You see, sin is not merely a list of bad choices or bad habits that need correction. No, sin is a tyrant. It is a master that claims us, rules us, deceives us, and finally seeks our death. Earlier in Romans, Paul tells us that we are slaves to sin. Sin does not serve us. It does not make us free. It uses us. And the uncomfortable truth is that we are not always dragged unwillingly into sin. We are often very content with it. In fact, we frequently defend it, we excuse it, and, at times, we even cherish it.

We embrace our anger because it makes us feel justified. We love how pride makes us feel superior. We employ envy that causes us to measure ourselves against someone else. We cling to the secret sin that promises comfort, escape, or control. And all the while, sin tells us the lie that this is freedom. But it is not freedom. It is bondage that leads to death. Paul says, “While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions... were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.”

And this is where the Law of God enters the picture. Paul asks, “What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means!” The Law is good because it reveals truth. It says, “You shall not covet” and in this command, the disordered desires of the heart are exposed. The Law of God tells us that our anger, our lust, our greed, our selfishness, and our indifference are not trivial matters or guilty pleasures. They are rebellion against the God who made us.

We have a fantastic screened-in porch on the side our house, and during the summer, we sit out there every chance we get. But in the morning, as we enjoy our coffee on the couch, the sunlight breaks through the tree that shades the east side of our porch, and when this happens you can see all the dust that covers the coffee table. And the Law is like that morning sunshine. The light does not create the dirt and grime; it simply reveals what was already there.

And yet, even with the light of Law leaving no doubt about the sin that covers us, sin is so deceptive that it even takes God's good Law and twists it for its own purposes. Sin uses the commandment to stir up rebellion within us, and then, after it has led us into sin, it uses that same commandment to accuse us. That's how sin works. It lures us in, and then immediately condemns us. It promises freedom, and then it destroys. The Law reveals this for what it is. It exposes sin's true purpose. It makes us see that the old life cannot give us what it promises. And that is a total mercy, because until we see the chains binding us, we will not long to be free. Until we see that sin leads to death, we will not thirst for life. Until we see that our old master is cruel, we will not rejoice in the One who truly loves us.

This is where the Gospel comes in. Paul writes, "You have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another." Jesus did not come merely to offer us good advice about how to improve our lives. He came in a real human body. He took our flesh. He placed Himself under the Law, He fulfilled it perfectly, and then He carried the judgment of the Law to the cross. There, Jesus bore the full weight of our sin. He pleaded guilty to every accusation, He died the death earned by our sin, and in the moment of His death, the old curse and claim of sin was broken.

The Law's accusation against you has been answered in the crucified body of Jesus. The debt has been paid. The curse has been borne. The sentence we deserve has been carried out. And because you have been joined to Christ, His death is yours. That is what happened in your Baptism. You were not simply given a spiritual "start over." You were joined to Christ's death and resurrection. The old Adam, bound to sin and death, was drowned. A new person was raised, and you were freed to belong to Another.

And this is where Paul's marriage metaphor is so powerful. Paul says that you belong "to Him who has been raised from the dead." You belong to the Risen Christ. You belong to the One who conquered death. You belong to the One in whom there is no sin or deceit, no cruelty or manipulation, no abandonment, and no burden. You belong to the One who loved you enough to give Himself for you. And this new union changes everything.

Paul says that we belong to Christ "in order that we may bear fruit for God." This means that the former slave of sin learns to live as a child of God. This means that the one who once was ruled by anger, now shows compassion; that the one consumed by selfishness, now demonstrates generosity; that the one who lived for approval now has courage, and that the one burdened by bitterness and guilt now learns to give and receive forgiveness.

"Till death do us part." In earthly marriage, these words remind us that death will one day bring separation. But in Christ, death also unites. And when your final day comes, it will not separate you from Him. Instead, it will bring you into the fullness of joy in His everlasting kingdom, which has no end. You belong to another. You belong to Christ. And in Him, you are forever free. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold