

Trinity 4, 2026

Sermon: “Whose servants are we?” (Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I grew up in a Christian family where Sunday was referred to as the Lord’s Day, and attending church on Sunday morning was non-negotiable. Just as I went to school from Monday to Friday, and then later went to work from Monday to Friday, on Sunday I went to church.

Church-going on Sunday is a life-long habit for me no matter where I am in the world. And I remember that it was in 1999 in Geneva ... I was sitting in church when today’s passage from Romans was being read aloud, and all of a sudden, I wondered, “**why** is the wages of sin death? Why **death**? Why not a harsh talking to? Or a slap on the wrist? My mulling over that question was the beginning of a theological journey that led to much rumination, as I wrestled with hard passages in the Bible and delved into Christian doctrine and spirituality in a desire to know and understand and live my faith better. I enrolled in a Bachelor’s degree in theology and enjoyed it so much that I continued with a Masters in theology.

I served as a Lay Reader for many years and then answered the call to ordination, and I find myself preaching today on this passage from Romans. I will return to the “why is the wages of sin death?” question. But first, let me ask you to consider **another** question, one that is simple yet reflective: **To whom do we belong?** Or, put another way, **whose servants are we?**

Paul instructs the Roman believers: “Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies ... Present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life.”

Paul understands that every human life is shaped by allegiance. We serve something or someone. We may imagine ourselves completely independent, accountable to no one but ourselves, but Paul says that is an illusion. The real question is not **whether** we will serve; the question is **what or whom we will serve**.

Paul presents two options. One is slavery to **sin**, a life directed by selfish desires, pride, greed, resentment, and all the other forces that pull us away from God. The other is slavery to **righteousness**, a life surrendered to God’s purposes. One path leads to death; the other leads to life.

The language of slavery sounds harsh to modern ears. It’s not politically correct, but Paul is making a point about commitment and direction. **Sin** promises freedom but leaves us captive. It tells us to follow every impulse, yet those impulses eventually control us. God, however, offers a different kind of service – a relationship in which obedience does not lead to bondage but to true freedom.

But back to the the question that got me going all those years ago: Why is the wages of sin death? This is Paul’s pithy but profound theological summary of the human condition. **Death is not an arbitrary punishment.** People may imagine God saying, “If you sin, I will punish you with death.” While Scripture does speak of divine judgment, Paul’s language is nuanced. He does not say, “The *punishment* for sin is death”. He says, “The *wages* of sin is death.”

A wage is something that is earned. A labourer receives wages because he has worked. Similarly, Paul is saying that death is the natural consequence of sin. Sin carries death within itself. Death is not imposed from outside but it grows out of sin's very nature.

Sin is separation from the source of life. The biblical story begins with God as the source of life. In Genesis, we read that humanity lives because God breathed his very life into Adam. Human existence is sustained by communion with God. He is not merely a being who gives life. God **is** Life itself. Remember Jesus' words to Martha, "I **am** the resurrection and the life."

Sin is not simply about breaking a set of rules. At its deepest level, sin is turning away from God. When humanity rebels against God, it separates itself from the source of life. A branch cut from a tree dies because it is disconnected from its source of nourishment. A fish removed from water dies because it is taken away from the environment for which it was created. Similarly, human beings were created for communion with God. Sin is a rejection of that communion. Death follows because separation from life can only produce death.

This is exactly what God warned Adam and Eve when he told them not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil: "In the day you eat of it, you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). Interestingly, Adam and Eve did not physically die the moment they sinned. But death entered their existence as we see fear replacing trust, shame replacing innocence, alienation replacing intimacy, and conflict replacing harmony.

Spiritual death began at once, with physical death following later. Since that time, the entire human race has been living under the power of death. Scripture sees physical death as the outward manifestation of a deeper spiritual rupture.

Sin is self-destructive. Another way to understand Paul's teaching is to recognize that sin destroys what God created. Sin damages life: Pride disintegrates relationships, greed diminishes generosity, lust undermines fidelity, hatred divides community, envy shrinks contentment, violence destroys peace. Sin is parasitic as it consumes and corrupts.

I used to say to my kids that God is not a party pooper, and he would like his children to play nicely in the sandbox of life. God's commandments are not arbitrary restrictions. They describe the way life flourishes in God's creation. When we violate God's commandments, we act against the very grain of harmonious life.

But Paul directs us to our Christian hope: "The wages of sin is death, **but** the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Notice the contrast. Sin pays wages. It gives exactly what is earned and the result is death. God, on the other hand, gives a gift. Eternal life cannot be earned; it is received through grace.

This brings us to the Gospel reading.

Jesus tells his disciples that whoever welcomes them welcomes him, and whoever welcomes him welcomes the one who sent him. Then he gives an unusual example: "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones ... will by no means lose their reward."

A cup of cold water, that seems insignificant. It's not a grand miracle, nor a dramatic sacrifice, nor a public act of heroism. It's a tiny act of kindness. Yet Jesus says it matters deeply because such acts reveal where our allegiance lies.

Paul speaks about presenting ourselves to God. Jesus shows what that presenting looks like in everyday ordinary life. It is found in welcoming others, showing hospitality, offering kindness, and caring for those who may seem unimportant in the eyes of the world. The Christian life is not merely about avoiding sin; it is about actively embodying God's love.

Many people think sanctification or holiness consists only in saying no, no to temptation, no to wrongdoing, no to destructive habits. And certainly it includes all that. But holiness is also saying yes. Yes to generosity. Yes to compassion. Yes to service. Yes to seeing Christ in our neighbours.

The connection between our two readings is this: when we belong to God, our lives begin to reflect God's character. The person who has received God's grace becomes a person who extends grace. The one who has been welcomed by Christ learns to welcome others. The one who has been given the gift of eternal life becomes willing to offer even a cup of cold water to someone in need of it, in Christ's name.

And that cup of water matters. The world often measures significance by size, influence, power, wealth or visibility. God measures faithfulness. A small act done in love can carry eternal significance. A word of encouragement, a meal shared with someone lonely, a visit to the sick, a listening ear, a quiet prayer – these may seem ordinary, but in God's kingdom they are precious.

Sometimes we feel powerless because we cannot solve every problem. We cannot heal every wound or meet every need. But Jesus does not ask us to do everything. He asks us to be faithful in what is before us. A cup of cold water. A simple welcome. A small act of mercy. These become signs that we belong to Christ.

As we reflect on today's texts, we might ask ourselves: What am I presenting to God each day? Am I giving my whole self, or only a portion? What habits or desires seek to rule my life instead of Christ? How can I show Christ's welcome to someone this week? Where is God inviting me to offer my own "cup of cold water"?

The good news is that our service to God begins not with our effort but with God's grace. We have been brought from death to life. We are not striving to earn God's favour; we are responding to a gift already given. Because Christ has welcomed us, we can welcome others. Because Christ has served us, we can serve others.

May we present ourselves to God, not as servants of sin, but as servants of righteousness. And may our lives, in both great and small ways, bear witness to the One who has given us the free gift of eternal life. Amen.