

The Problematic Bible and How it Breeds Violence

Romans 7: 4-13, 8:1

In the same way, my brothers and sisters, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. ⁶ But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are enslaved in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the written code.

What then are we to say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin that was working death in me through what is good, in order that it might be shown to be sin, so that through the commandment sin might become sinful beyond measure... Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

For the fall this year, you have been invited to write down what your favorite bible story or section or anchor passage has been and I will then do my best to preach on it. Since no one has signed up to do it yet, I thought I'd share with you a text that completely changed how I understood scripture's role in my life and my faith from St. Paul who until then I just saw as some arrogant guy who was forcing his religious opinions down our throats. So here goes nothing...

Once listened to a podcast of a woman who grew up in a hyper religious alt. right cult. She said she was groomed to be a housewife who gave birth to babies, cooked and cleaned the house. She said she bought fully into the political ideology of nostalgia, anti-immigration, and white supremacy. When she tried to leave, she fell into an existential crisis, because everything she had—her family, her possessions, even her children—were being leveraged and used to control her. She said, “I hadn't realized how utterly trapped and miserable I was, how toxic my ideology and life were, until I was on the other side of it.” Her story is an example of what I think St. Paul is trying to get at. He's looking back on his life to times before his mystical conversion with Christ. To a time when he was inside a hyper religious bubble, which he realized once he was on the other side of it, that what he thought was life was death.

Have you ever looked back on a moment or season of your life, realizing that what we thought was right or faithful or true ended up being something that was wrong, unfaithful, or false? My guess is we probably all have those stories. I remember in my youth going to a big megachurch

for youth group. While I grew up catholic, I still liked the social scene where all my friends went. The place was packed with young teenagers my age, had all the loud music and activities, and the pastors all wore jeans instead of robes. Everyone there was told innocently enough that Jesus loved them. But also, that Jesus didn't approve of certain things—most of which are not actually in the bible—and that hell was real and if we didn't believe that Jesus was the *only way to salvation* we were doomed to be hell's permanent resident as well. It was also my job to get others to believe in this version of Jesus so they could be spared eternal damnation as well. Sound familiar? I remember leaving those worship services feeling awful about myself because I couldn't help doing or thinking about some of those things Jesus didn't approve of. And that fear led me to believe that I had to trade in who I was for the false security of belonging. And it wasn't until I was on the other side of it, what I thought was right or faithful or true wasn't right or faithful or true at all.

St. Paul knows what it is like as well. Remember St. Paul, or Saul at the time, was a zealot Pharisee. He graduated top of his class with all honors. He spent his life studying God's law, obedient to God's law, and an enforcer of it. Except, after having a mystical encounter with Christ, discovered what he thought he knew about God was entirely upside-down. So he says, "When we were flesh, the passions of sins aroused through the law were working in us to bear the fruit of death." Now in order to understand what St. Paul is getting at we can substitute some words here: flesh = humanity's tendency toward rivalry and violence. It is not our physical bodies, but the assortment of ways we manifest violence toward each other. We can also substitute the word "Law" for "bible." So now it reads, "When we were of violence, the passions of sins aroused *through the bible* were working in our members to bear the fruit of death." And it is here, as he reflects on his former self, he discovers that it is entirely possible to follow the bible, quote the bible, and know the bible while ultimately using the bible in such a way that it becomes an instrument of death instead of life. Actually, he says that it, "becomes sinful beyond measure." Because there is no greater cruelty—no greater sin—than a violence that is justified in the name of god and ordained by the word of God. St. Paul knew what it was like to be that guy.

Well, good thing that doesn't happen anymore! But here's the thing: what St. Paul is saying is the bible on its own isn't the problem. We don't need to throw the baby out with the bathwater, because it is how we use the bible that matters. Do we use it like a canvas to create something beautiful and meaningful and for the life-giving welcome of all people, or do we use it like a cage to trap others inside an insecure ideology which breeds violence, manipulation, and destruction? One is about liberty. The other is about authoritarianism. Which means that even our faith can become some form of authoritarianism with a Christian label.

You see, the sickness of authoritarianism, whether it be religious or political, is its need for dominance and control. God dominating over us, creates men who dominate over women, rulers dominating over subjects, and everyone dominating over the rest of creation. And so it is really no surprise that those who believe in an authoritarian god will put their belief an authoritarian leader—religious or political. The playbook hasn't changed throughout history: they believed the leader when he said foreigners were a disease that poisoned the nation. They believed their leader when he said the truth-tellers were false prophets and the media was lying about him. They believed him when he told them their traditions were under siege and that he is the only thing standing between them and collapse. And they did it all while singing hymns and quoting

scripture. It worked in Rome. It worked in Germany. And it is being run page for page in America.

Scripture from Isaiah 6, where God asks “who shall I send?” Originally was a question asking who would be willing to stand up to dictators and speak truth to power, is currently being twisted to recruit ICE agents with a \$50k sign on bonus, to stick immigrants in unmarked vans while claiming they are doing God’s holy work. They chant with fury that “one is too many” when it comes to immigration, but then send quiet thoughts and prayers when children are bleeding on a church floor. They tirelessly work to cancel DEI programs—and send retribution on those who don’t follow suit—but little do they know that “dei” is the Latin word for God! We are the *imago dei* or the *image of God*! And we all know: nobody can cancel God! St. Paul knows how authoritarianism works! He was that guy! Whether religious or political its nature is the same.

So then he starts testifying there is another way—the true way! “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ—not through the bible—but Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ, I have been saved!” He’s been saved from his bigotry. Saved from his supremacy and racism. Saved from an authoritarian god who demanded blind obedience and sacred violence and trapped him in a cage of insecurity. Thanks be to God!

Because what tyranny won’t ever admit is that sending military troops into our cities doesn’t solve crime. It doesn’t build opportunity or create jobs. It doesn’t raise the minimum wage or make us feel any more secure. If we want to know what actually solves crime, builds opportunity and makes us more secure, it’s dignity. Schools funded instead of starved. Wages that sustain us rather than degrade us. Communities of hope rather than of poverty and food deserts. Offering people dignity is what will help stop crime, because dignity is what sets us free. Thanks be to God for this church, which keeps fighting for it—both politically and religiously.

Because while it seems easier to cheer tanks than demand dignity from our leaders, what they are doing is destroying the very same freedoms they claim to champion. They are applauding the destruction of the constitution in the name of saving it. They can’t see that taking away funds for disabilities will cripple us all. The same concept holds true for our churches as well. They crucified God in the name of god. They quote the bible while not actually following it. They say they are saving children by putting prayer in schools and that they are protecting children from being brainwashed by controlling history, all while brainwashing our children and doing nothing to actually protect them from another mass shooting. Now is it just me or is that the fruit of death St. Paul is talking about, aroused by the bible, which has become sinful beyond measure.

But thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ, that we can be set free from our insecurity. That we know when authoritarianism rules, liberty dies. That God cannot ever be cancelled, and for that matter, neither can the *imago dei*, which is our dignity.