

THE SIMPLICITY OF THINGS

Thoughts of Rom. 6:12-23 and Mt. 10:40-42, readings for June 29th

By Dr. J. Webb Mealy

Love is the key to the whole Christian spiritual path—love for your own life, love for the life of your fellow human beings, love for the common life of all things.

What is the “sin” that Paul talks about getting free from in Romans 6? Sin is a “falling short of God’s glory”, which means to say, anything that goes against love, the free and active desire for the well-being of self and other. Paul says that the “wages of sin is death”, or, in today’s translation, “sin pays death as its wages”. Isn’t the connection there obvious and inevitable? If you don’t love yourself, what inner motivation do you have that will stop you from doing things damaging to yourself—things that will eventually kill you? And if you don’t love the human beings around you or the living things around you, the same principle applies. The casual and thoughtless violence of our society on an individual and a corporate level stand as a kind of in-your-face testimony to this.

Paul says in Rom. 6:16-18 that you’re always obeying something, no matter how successful you are in throwing off external restraints. We may wish to break from complicity with the empire system and all corporate systems of injustice and violence, but if we want to find the strength to break out of bondage to them—and to oppose them appropriately—we are first going to have to commit ourselves to breaking out of our own individual bondages. Many of our personal traps are sponsored by the domination systems, but not all. We each have our own demons to expel too. For example, addiction is a kind of bondage—self-destructive and violent ways of being become grooves that we can’t get out of. Addiction theory says addictions are cunning, baffling, and ultimately fatal. Do we love ourselves and our world enough to run away from these black holes that we have been spinning around, and which ultimately threaten to suck us into nothingness? Despair, selfishness, and self-absorption can also become deep bondages—not just sex, drugs, gambling, and thrills of various kinds. Anything can become an addiction—even information, as I and some others can attest.

Paul’s message in Romans 6 is simple—sin is whatever puts you under compulsion and destroys you, whether slowly or quickly, whether physically, socially, mentally or spiritually. Determine to

run away from it, and offer your life energy to God. Put yourself in the service of God in love. Something is going to be your master, says Paul—so let it be the love of God, because that leads to the free gift of eternal life through the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. The deep issues of life are really pretty simple.

But what restraints do you buy into when you determine to serve love? Love presents a cutting critique of culture—all cultures. Ancient Palestinian culture, Roman Empire culture, feudalism, the Enlightenment, capitalism, American democracy, postmodernism, straight culture, gay culture, or any culture that can be named. Which has the primacy? When the principles of love conflict with current culture, do we consider ourselves excused from acting in love in our own case? Do we look the other way in the case of our friends? What happens when we do? Families and cultures equally operate on the basis of a silent agreement: Everything is ok as it is; just don't rock the boat, and everything will be fine. FALSE!! (Cue sound of phono needle yanked sideways off a record.) Then again, if you live by another set of principles, march to a different drummer from the beat of the common agreement, you're going to lose your cred—in whatever culture or family or group you belong to. Suddenly you're going to be pinpointed as a trouble-maker (against the status quo). You might well find that you face hostility—like Jesus. Which brings us to the gospel reading.

The Matthew passage, Mt. 10:40-42, also points to the simplicity of things—if not the easiness and conflict-free nature of things. Jesus came to announce two things: amnesty for the ways in which we have failed our calling as beings of love, and the free gift of the Spirit of Life to restore us to love and empower us into healing.

Certain people were very hostile to Jesus—because he made things simple, and they had made their public reputation by making things hard and then promoting themselves as experts. Jesus was putting them out of a job. Nowadays the religious experts are with us still. Like the religious experts of Jesus' day, they certainly act as though they think they're experts about all the things that you have to do and not do in order to be accepted by God (think if James Dobson, for example). But above all they're experts about all the minute things you have to *believe*. Do you really have to believe all the right things to be saved? Is it complicated to come into a right

relationship with God do you have to convert to a series of dogmas and become a religious expert?

Jesus says,

Whoever accepts you accepts me, and whoever accepts me accepts the One who sent me..
...Whoever accepts a person of integrity because they're a person of integrity will receive the reward of a person of integrity. The same goes for whoever offers a single cup of cold water to one lowly person here because they're a follower of mine. I'm telling you seriously, they will never lose their reward!

Our passage makes getting saved seem awfully simple—if a cup of cold water can do it. Once again, the context of this passage that Jesus is sending his followers out “as sheep among wolves” (Mt. 10:16), to announce the reign of God. They're being sent out with good news about the love and grace of God that cuts across the grain of the religious domination system, the empire system, and every system of human lovelessness in whatever manifestation. They are to announce the primacy of love and grace. Jesus says that if someone so much as recognizes the love of God in them and their message, and stands with them by welcoming them, that is a first act of accepting God. “Whoever accepts you accepts me, and whoever accepts me accepts the One who sent me.” Jesus can say this because Love is One. Love of your neighbor is love of God. Acceptance of the love of your neighbor is acceptance of the love of God. Standing up for the well-being of your neighbor is standing up for God. It's as simple as that. “God's love is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 5:5). God made us as beings free and able to love, so when we love, our love is real. Yet, at the same time, our love comes from and is a credit to God, the source of love, who made us. So when I affirm that “God is love” (1 Jn 4:16), I'm not saying that when we talk about God we're talking about the love that we generate in ourselves and experience together. That would be like a drop of water boasting that it made the ocean. We are tiny beings on a tiny planet, and although we are genuinely capable of love, we did not invent this love. Nor did Mother Earth, who loves us dearly, nor did it come from any limited being anywhere. It comes from God, the ultimate source of all life and all love. The good news is that we can meet that love in Jesus Christ and be healed into new life.