

## *We Belong to the Lord*

### **Romans 14:1-12**

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There was a guy in one of our previous churches who was quite a character. Even though personal computers didn't come along until he was late in his life, he quickly learned his way around a keyboard and the internet. He used to find fun things and then send them out by email to all of his friends. His name happened to be Guy, and he called his emails "Guy's Pickins". Some of the emails he forwarded have now been around a long time, so you might have heard them. But the first time I read what he sent I couldn't help but laugh at them, like the one called "Kid's views of the Bible."

- Adam and Eve were created from an apple tree.
- Noah's wife was called Joan of Ark.
- Lot's wife was a pillar of salt by day, but a ball of fire by night.
- The seventh commandment is that thou shalt not admit adultery.
- Joshua led the Hebrews in the battle of Geritol.
- The people who followed the Lord were called the 12 decibels.
- The epistles were the wives of the apostles.
- St. Paul cavorted to Christianity. He preached holy acrimony, which is another name for marriage.
- A Christian should have only one spouse. This is called monotony.

Another time he sent me this joke. An old drunk stumbled on a revival down by the river. The pastor saw him listing and leaning, and asked if he wanted to find Jesus. The drunk said yes. Immediately, the pastor thrust him under the water. He pulled him up and asked, "Did you find Jesus?" The drunk said no, and down he went a second time. Again the pastor pulled him up. "Did you find Jesus?" Shaking his head the drunk sputtered, "No." The third time he went down, way down deep. Finally the preacher yanked him up and shouted, "Did you find Jesus?" The drunk looked lost and forlorn. He asked, "Are you sure this is where he fell in?"

When I look back on things, Guy's pickins and emails often had a religious bent. That makes sense. Guy was a preacher's kid. His dad was a Presbyterian minister. I bet he had learned lots of funny things listening to his dad at the dinner table over the years. Guy could certainly find humor in just about any situation. Guy talked with me once about growing up as a preacher's kid. He said he went to Sunday school and youth group. But when he went away to college he said he fouled things up pretty good. He flunked out of school and got in some trouble. What he did next was pretty sweet. He showed me a book of his dad's sermons. He

had collected them and had them bound. I don't know if it was those sermons or some other experience, but Guy got his life straightened out. He got back on track with God. And when he died in 2003 he didn't leave instructions for us to read any of his funny emails or jokes at the service. Instead, he asked us to read one of the questions and answers from the Heidelberg Catechism. The catechisms are a series of questions and answers that are used to help people learn about their faith. Question one in the Heidelberg Catechism asks:

**What is your only comfort, in life and in death?**

The answer to the question is the following:

*That I belong-body and soul, in life and in death-not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.*

The things we ask to have included in our funerals and memorial services say a lot about what has been important in our lives. I give thanks for friends like Guy who wanted it be known at his death that he belonged...body and soul...in life and in death...not to himself but to his faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. I hope you noticed that the catechism doesn't just say we belong to Jesus Christ in our death. The catechism says we belong, in life and in death to Jesus Christ.

That is exactly what the Apostle Paul is trying to convey in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of the letter he wrote to the church in Rome. "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." (14:7-8) I wonder how it is that a person like Paul the Apostle, or two thousand years later Guy the preacher's kid, I wonder how it is that Paul the Apostle and Guy the preacher's kid came to the conviction that they belonged to the Lord. Not just sort of belonging or kind of belonging but completely belonging, belonging in such an all-consuming way that they say things like, "Whether we live or die, we belong to God," or as Guy learned in the catechism, "My only comfort in life and in death is that I belong-body and soul, in life and in death-not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ."

How do people get to the point where they say I belong not kind of and not sort of and not partly and definitely not barely, but I belong completely, body and soul, in life and in death to Jesus Christ my Savior? Do you get there by a ladder? God sent a ladder down to Jacob. Jacob had trouble with his brother Esau and was running for his life. He came to a lonely place one night, took a stone out, and put that stone under his head and lay down to sleep. While he slept he had a dream and in the dream he saw a ladder, and the ladder went from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth. Angels were ascending and descending on the ladder. At that moment, when Jacob was fleeing in fear from his angry brother, he needed to hear God say what God said, “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised.”

Jacob awoke from his dream and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” He said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.” He put a stone up to mark the place. And then he made a declaration of faith. “If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father’s house, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you...a tenth.”

I wonder how God felt about that. Okay, I watch over you, I give you food to eat and clothes to wear, I bring you back safely, and if I do all of these things you will give me...a tenth. Ten percent? I guess God filed that away...ladder to heaven...10 percent return.

What about those verses that served as our call to worship this morning? They are taken from Exodus, immediately after the Israelites walked right through the waters of the Red Sea on dry land. There is singing and dancing and shaking of tambourines. God gave signs and wonders in the land of Egypt and led them through the Red Sea on dry land. How would they respond to that? Well that was Exodus chapter 15. In chapter 16 God does even more for the people, giving them Manna from heaven, daily bread, and the gift of the Sabbath, a day of rest each and every week. What kind of return would God get for that? Chapter 17 finds the people quarreling with God. The next stop on their journey is called Massah and Meribah because the people quarreled with God and tested the Lord.

A ladder from heaven gets the response of 10 percent. Signs, wonders, the Passover, the Red Sea, bread from heaven and the gift of the Sabbath lead the people to respond with quarreling and testing. When you start to look through the pages of the bible to see how people respond to the Lord, you really do start to wonder, “How do people get to the point where they say I belong to God, not 10 percent, not with a heart filled with quarreling and testing, not kind of, not sort of, but I belong to God completely, body and soul, in life and in death.

If the ladder didn't do it, and if the signs and wonders of Exodus didn't do it, maybe some dramatic act of forgiveness would do it. What if someone owed an enormous sum of money, not hundreds or thousands but millions and millions? What if someone owed just an amazingly large amount of money, a debt they could not pay, and the person they owed the money to simply said, “Your debts are forgiven.” Would that get a person to a place where they would say, “I belong completely...” As important as forgiveness is, Jesus tells us a parable that says it is possible to be forgiven a very large amount of money, and yet not be drawn closer to God, certainly not completely. The parable Jesus tells in Matthew 18 is stunning for what it doesn't accomplish. One man is forgiven this huge sum, forgiven without any strings attached in terms of repaying the debt. But as soon as the one forgiven meets someone who owes him a paltry few dollars, he shakes him down, wrings his neck, and casts him off to debtor prison.

What is God to do? He sends down a ladder and Jacob says, “Hmmm, let's see, in response I'll give you ten percent.” He trots out the locusts and frogs and the Passover Lamb and opens wide the mouth of the Red Sea and rains down bread from heaven and says put your feet up and take a Sabbath rest and Israel's response is quarreling and testing. He forgives a man his staggering debt and that man turns around and beats down the poor fellow who owes him pennies on the dollar. God worked in numerous ways through countless acts of kindness and displays of power and those stubborn human beings showed no inclination to say, “I belong completely, body and soul, in life and in death...”

Even though humans were slow to respond, and when they did respond it just didn't come anywhere near saying I belong completely to the Lord, even though humans were slow to respond, God did not give up. Perhaps of equal importance is the fact that God did not settle for less. God did not settle for ten percent. God did not settle for a relationship marked by quarreling and testing. God did not settle for ungrateful hearts that won't pass on the gift of forgiveness. God did not settle for anything less than complete devotion. God truly does want to be in a relationship with his children where there is wholehearted devotion, where there is an undivided heart, where the children love God with all their heart and all their soul and all their mind and all their strength. God's desire is that each and every person he has placed on this planet would get to the place where they say with Paul,

“Whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord.” God wants all of beloved children, all of his Sunday school students, all of his confirmation class members, all of us, all creation, he wants us all to come to that place where we can recite the catechism: *“I belong-body and soul, in life and in death-not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”* When we get to the end of our journey, when we stand before the throne of God, when we approach the judgment seat, God’s deepest desire is that every knee would bow and every tongue confess that we belong...not kind of, not sort of, not 10 percent, definitely not quarreling and testing...no, that just isn’t how it works. God’s deepest desire is that when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that our confession would be, “Whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord.”

- To get us to that place God threw aside the ladder and he jumped right into the swirling mass of humanity. God made his home with us. The Word of God, Jesus Christ, became flesh and dwelt among us.
- To get us that place God recast the Exodus story in a whole new light. Jesus Christ became the Passover Lamb whose blood marks the doors of our hearts and assures us that we survive the judgment of God unscathed...because our beloved Lord took the judgment upon himself. The waters of the Red Sea become waters of baptism, where heaven is opened to us, the Holy Spirit descends upon us, the Father in heaven speaks to each one of us and says, “You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased.” Those words were spoken to Jesus at his baptism, but we now possess his righteousness, a righteousness that is given to us as a free gift. Though it is free, it came at a great cost, as Jesus suffered and died on the cross. When we hear a parable like Jesus told of one who is forgiven an enormous debt, we realize God doesn’t simply erase our debt. God pays for our debt through the atoning offering of Jesus Christ. He covers our sin in a dramatic act of service and sacrifice.
- To get us to that place where we say, *“I belong-body and soul, in life and in death-not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ,”* God proved his love for us by sending Jesus Christ to live, to die, and to rise again, so that we would know our lives are not our own. God sent Jesus Christ so that we would know we have been bought at a price. We have been redeemed. God did all this so we would know we belong to God...not kind of...not sort of...but completely.

Karl Barth wrote *The Church Dogmatics*, a set of books that explore in great depth what God was doing when he sent Jesus Christ into this world. *The Church Dogmatics* stretches to 13 volumes and more than 8,000 pages. In reading *Church Dogmatics*, you would read a long time, through the first six volumes, through more than 4,000 pages, and then you would come to a section that both breaks your heart and brings you to the deepest places in your soul. Barth writes about the

obedience of the Son of God. God did not simply send Jesus. The eternal Son of God went with obedience, and the eternal Son of God became human because of God's great love. There is a section in the Dogmatics that describes *The Way of the Son of God into the Far Country*. The title alone evokes images of the Prodigal Son, but now instead of a son who leaves his father and wastes the family wealth, we have a Son who in obedience goes to the far country himself, to rescue and redeem God's precious children.

It is when we explore the incredible good news of a God whose love is so strong for us that the Son of God goes willingly into the Far Country to rescue us that we begin to understand the full impact of what God is doing through Jesus Christ. According to Barth there comes a moment, a moment of faith, a moment of awakening, a moment of surrender, where the child of God looks at everything God has done, the great faithfulness, the great sacrifice, the great love, and realizes it was all done as Barth puts it, "Just for him."<sup>1</sup> Christ Jesus became a servant "Just for him." It was just his place Jesus took on the cross. Jesus died "Just for him." It was just his pride, just his fall which was overcome. And it was just him that was filled with the Holy Spirit. He even says Jesus did not will to be Jesus without being just his Jesus. Salvation did not come to this world without just this man, this particular man, finding salvation. The whole occurrence of salvation was not to take place but just for him.

In Romans chapter 14 Paul writes about disagreements that were occurring in the early church. Some ate only vegetables, some ate meat. Conflict. Division. Some thought certain days were special, some thought every day was the same. Conflict. Division. Paul doesn't get down in the weeds, although he seems to recognize that people being people there will be differences and disagreements. But he can't understand division. Why? Because there is something so central to this new life in Christ, something so powerful that has come through new life in Christ, so rich and so deep in this new life in Christ, that it trumps all other things. Indeed, it inserts itself into every relationship in such a profound way that instead of asserting rights and privileges and demanding that one's viewpoint be accepted, this incredible wave of mercy and grace and understanding and love for one another takes control. Christians find they can overcome their differences and disagreements, because what they have in common is a bond that cannot and will not be broken. They no longer belong to themselves and their own ideas and practices and rituals and behaviors. They belong to Jesus Christ, and now there is nothing, absolutely nothing in their lives that is more important.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics IV.1, The Doctrine of Reconciliation, p. 754.

We spent a week in one of the poorest parts of Mexico with 7,000 high school students. It was an amazing experience. For many of the young people it was that moment when they realized their life had no meaning, no purpose without Jesus Christ. They came to believe they belonged to Jesus Christ, body and soul. I will always hold sacred the night our group was trying figure out how it is that God changes us from sort of and kind of to completely loving him and giving our lives to him. A young girl waited until we came to a quiet moment in the conversation. Then she said, "It's like this for me. It's like a song my parents taught me." And then in a sweet and soulful voice she began to sing.

***He paid a debt he did not owe, I owed a debt I could not pay, I needed someone to wash my sins away. And now I sing a brand new song, Amazing Grace all day long, Christ Jesus paid a debt, a debt he did not owe.***

Whether we are young students in high school on a mission trip or old men like my friend Guy putting down a few thoughts for his upcoming memorial service, or like the Apostle Paul who got zapped by a bright light and a voice from heaven, I hope all of us get to that place where we say, "*I belong-body and soul, in life and in death-not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.*" And having said that, having believed that, let us live for Christ not kind of, not sort of, not barely, not grudgingly, but let us life for Christ completely, with abandon, with passion, and wholehearted devotion.