

25th June 2023

Romans 6:1b-11

LIVING IN JESUS!

It's a debate or discussion which has probably been around for as long as people themselves. If you are currently, or have previously, raised young children it is certainly something you have often thought about, talked about, and probably tried different approaches to. And that is the question of: what is the best way to change or alter another person's behaviour, by the threat of punishment, or the promise of reward? Most of us would say, I think, that both approaches have their place, and so the answer is actually a balance between the two. The big debate then, is where that balance falls. Sometimes it's called the difference between the 'carrot and the stick'; meaning does the donkey move forward faster because he's trying to reach the carrot in front of him, or because someone is beating him with a stick from behind? We see this debate regularly played out on our news and among politicians; in response to the current 'youth crime crisis', is the better approach to lowering the crime rate to bring in more police and harsher penalties, so that wrong doers are deterred, or is it to have diversion programs and engagement activities, better education and support for families, so that young people are encouraged and supported to make better life choices for themselves and others?

As parents we go through this all the time when we are raising our children. It is finding that balance between praising and rewarding good behaviour, and scolding and rebuking bad. All parents have their different balances with this, and in my experience as a parent that balance changes very regularly over time, as you try to find the approach which works best for each child at different ages. Without even thinking about this we regularly weigh this up in our heads as parents; to change a certain behaviour in my child, do I here use the praise and reward of the carrot, or the rebuke and punishment of the stick (not literally physical punishment here, of course)?

Punishment or reward? Are people more likely to do the 'right thing' because they are afraid of the consequences if they don't, or because they want to receive the reward if they do?

It is a very human, and natural, way of thinking for us to think about the right balance between these two things. That's probably why what we are taught in our Christian faith, and specifically in Paul's words

here today, is hard for us to get our heads around. And that is that: when we are joined to Jesus through faith and our baptism, the punishment has been paid, and the reward is already ours. That's what it means to be living in Jesus. This morning we have seen another young child baptised into this faith and life. I love the baptism of a young baby, because it is such a great example for us all that what happens there is God's work, not ours, as God loves and accepts that child long before the child can even think about God. God gives the promise to that child that in remaining in the faith of their baptism they both die with Jesus to the power and effects of sin in their life, and are also raised to new life with Him.

On the opposite end of life's journey, yesterday in our church we had a funeral service. To help the connection the man whose life we celebrated then, Allan Lutze, is the person who for many years has made the wooden baptism candle stands we give each child who is baptised here, including today. The words we have in this reading are said at the beginning of our funeral services: 'Don't you know that all who share in Christ Jesus by being baptized also share in his death? When we were baptized, we died and were buried with Christ. We were baptized, so we would live a new life, as Christ was raised to life by the glory of God the Father. If we shared in Jesus' death by being baptized, we will be raised to life with him.' (v. 3-5) They are words of promise, of comfort. As someone is baptised, no matter how young or old they are, they are words of promise that God will never go away from them; His love, His forgiveness, His acceptance and gift of new life both now and forever, are there for each person whenever they turn to Him. They are words which are there to strengthen and guide us through our life. And they are words, which are there, as they were for Allan, when we approach the end of our life, a time we can really look to God to find the hope, peace, and comfort we need.

Jesus dying on the cross paid the price, the punishment for our sin and rebellion against God: the punishment of being separated from God in this life and the life to come. Jesus rising again on Easter Sunday means that He overcame both the power of sin to separate us from God, and has opened the way for us to have new and eternal life. Through our baptism we are now joined to Jesus' death and resurrection. But how does that happen? Why does baptism accomplish this? A question I am sometimes asked is: do you use special water for a baptism? No, the water just comes straight out of the tap, and not blessed or anything like that. Does the amount of water matter? In our Lutheran Church we normally use three splashes of water from a font, and that's probably more for practical reasons than anything. I have baptised a day-old baby in a

humidicrib where I was allowed to use just a bit of water on my finger, and I remember seeing one drop of water slide down his face. When I was the pastor at an Indigenous boarding school in Alice Springs I baptised three teenagers in a swimming pool, because being baptised by going fully under water was something which was personally significant for them. In all of those baptisms God did what He promised, so it's not the amount of water that does it. I can tell you personally that it's not the perfectness of the pastor which makes the baptism effective. And it's not the faith of the person, because many of us can't remember our baptism, and certainly weren't thinking about faith then, and yet our baptism is still with us throughout our lives.

What gives baptism the power Paul talks about here, are the words of Jesus. One of the final things Jesus said to His disciples, was the command to: 'Go to the people of all nations and make them my disciples. Baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to do everything I have told you. I will be with you always, even until the end of the world.' (*Matthew 28:19-20 CEV*) 'Baptise the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.' It's those words, which we heard used in a baptism again this morning, which the Holy Spirit works through to join us to God's love and bring us all the promises and blessings God offers in Baptism. Again, not the work of us as people in any way, but totally the work of God.

It's from our baptism that we are now living in Jesus, where the price of punishment has been paid, and reward is already ours. And that means, first of all, that we can now live the new life we have, not just when we die, but now. It means that we know God forgives us, that we can hand our guilt over to Him. It means we know God cares for us, that we can give Him anything worrying us or bringing us down. It means that when we face the end of this life, we know that God offers us new life with Him, and that this brings comfort, peace and hope both for ourselves and our families. Living in Jesus means we can now freely live our lives in His love and forgiveness each day.

But the problem with this, is that we can look at it and think, 'well, where's the punishment for doing the wrong thing? And where's the reward for doing the right thing?' Those things are there in a human sense, what we do still has earthly consequences, quite rightly. But for God, they are gone. Because again, Jesus died to pay the price for our sin, and rose again so that new live with God is ours, now. Kinda goes against our thinking, doesn't it?

Going back to beginning of this reading, we see that what Paul is writing is about our struggle with this issue, so he says: 'Should we keep on sinning, so that God's gift of undeserved grace will show up even better? No, we should not! If we are dead to sin, how can we go on sinning?' Living in Jesus is not about using Jesus' death on the cross as an excuse to do what we want, but to move us to doing our best to live as who we are; people who are dead to sin and so now try to live like Him. For us, as the motivation to have a good relationship with God and to treat others right, it's no longer about punishment or reward, but about response. It's how we respond to what God has done for us in Jesus and all He offers us. As adults, most of us don't do many of the things our parents taught us to do, often without thinking, because we are either scared of their punishment or we want their reward, but because knowing they love us we want to please them, and knowing they love us we know they tried to teach us what is best for us and so our response is to do that. God's love and forgiveness, and the reward of new life we already have, isn't an excuse for us to throw that back at Him by doing whatever we want, but it now leads us to try each day to show that love back to Him and to everyone who is in our lives.

Living in Jesus, being joined by our baptism and our faith to all He has done for us, means that everything He offers through this is now ours. We pray that we and all people will in faith remember and hold on to the gifts He gives us, and in response try to live each day showing out the love to God and to others which He always shows to us. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION:

- Think about that concept of punishment versus reward. Which is normally a motivator for you to do what is right? If you have raised children, what worked best with them? Which do you think works more effectively in tackling crime in society?
- Consider how different that human thinking is to how God works. Have a look at the words of this reading. What does God promise you in your baptism? What do you have to do to receive what He promises?
- What does your baptism mean to you now? What do you receive through it in your life?
- How are you called to live through your baptism? Do you always live as someone who is, 'dead to sin and alive in Christ? Bring to God any areas of your life in which you struggle to do this.

Pray: thank God for all the good gifts He gives us in our baptism. Ask Him to help us live as those who are dead to sin and alive in Jesus. Amen.

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