

## ***Our Legal Addiction***

In the name of him who sets us free indeed, dear friends in Christ: there are many different kinds of bondage that people may suffer under and from which they might yearn to be set free. There is for example the bondage of physical slavery, such as the Israelites experienced in Egypt or that Black Africans were forced to endure in the colonial period of our own country. Then there's financial bondage in which the rich and powerful exploit the poor by keeping them under a crushing burden of debt and then they slant the playing field, so to speak, to prevent them from ever earning enough to escape. We could also speak of emotional or psychological bondage in which people find themselves unable to escape a dominating or threatening personality, such as what happens in what's known as battered women's syndrome. You get these situations where a woman who is being abused will repeatedly call the police and have her assailant arrested; but then fail to follow through and press charges. Instead, as soon as things cool down a bit, she feels sorry for the creep who's beating her and allows him to convince her that somehow the whole thing is her fault.

What all these forms of bondage have in common is that they are imposed on people by others who are in some way more powerful than them. And the key to getting such victims free of their bondage is to break the power their oppressors exert over them. If you can do that, they're free. But what I'd really like to talk about this morning is another kind of bondage in which the path to freedom isn't quite as clear. This kind of bondage is far more common today than anything yet mentioned and in many ways it's more insidious because the victims are enslaved by their own unhealthy desires and self-destructive appetites. I'm referring to the bondage of addiction. It happens when people are enslaved to mind or mood altering drugs. What's really tragic in these cases is that the oppressor and the victim are the same person. In order to get the person free, you've got to save them from themselves.

Now, some addictive drugs are illegal, as you know. You've got things like heroin and cocaine along with their many cousins and derivatives. Around here we've got the comparatively cheap and easy to make methamphetamine. What these drugs do is create an overwhelming feeling of euphoria or mellowness that the person taking them finds so desirable that they want to experience it again and again. That's how people become addicted: they crave the feelings that the drugs induce – so much so that they are willing to risk imprisonment or doing serious injury to themselves. Some of the drugs like heroin also produce a physical dependence in which the body of the addict suffers terribly if deprived of the drug for too long a period. And there's no doubt about it: these illegal drugs are a real scourge on society. They are the cause of untold suffering for families and individuals—that's why they're illegal and why our system of law enforcement exerts so much effort to try to stop the drug traffic. But that's also why there's sort of a natural cap that limits how bad the illegal drug trade can get. Most people are law abiding citizens and don't want to be involved in illegal activities. You tell them, "This is very dangerous. Stay away from it; and if you don't, you're going to jail", and that keeps most people from getting involved. Besides, it's pretty hard to try to be an upstanding citizen and also be an illegal addict. If the police see you hanging around a crack house, you're going on their list of suspects. Sooner or later, they'll pick you up. So, though it's still a big problem, the actual number of illegal addicts in the typical community is likely to be relatively small.

But that doesn't mean we're out of the woods yet because there remains what is even a bigger drug problem for every community. It's an addictive drug that far and away does more damage, takes more lives, and destroys more families, reputations, and careers than anything I've mentioned so far – and it's perfectly legal. Not only is it legal, it's cheap, readily available, and completely acceptable socially. In fact, in many circles it's considered socially mandatory. It's also very easy to hide this addiction from others. You can be completely addicted to this drug without people knowing about it. I'm talking about alcohol, of course. And don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that the use of alcohol is wrong or that it should be illegal. Used properly and responsibly it can and should be enjoyed by those who choose to. But therein lies the problem: there are lots of folks out there who can't or won't use it responsibly. They suffer from the legal addiction of alcoholism. Craving the buzz and mellowing effect of the drug they don't know when to stop. They always overdo it and abuse what is for many people a good thing. In the end, their legal addiction leads to lasting ruin.

But my purpose this morning is not to discuss the curse of alcoholism. Instead, I want to apply this concept of illegal and legal addiction to the spiritual realm. And on the spiritual side, we are all addicts. We all have an illegal addiction. We call it sin. Every moment of every day we are all involved in breaking the Laws of God. Sometimes we do it because we want to: it makes us feel good (at least in the short run). At other times we're doing it because we cannot stop ourselves. But that's what it means to be an illegal addict: from conception to death we are sinning either intentionally or unintentionally, and we cannot help it. And for our sins we justly deserve God's wrath and eternal punishment. Our illegal addiction would certainly land us in the everlasting torments of hell if it were not for our Lord's gracious intervention. Fortunately, we who are gathered here know that in his love and mercy God our Father sent us a Savior in the person of Jesus Christ, his own Son. We know that Jesus took the punishment we deserved on himself when went to the cross. There he literally saved us from ourselves – he freed us from our enslavement to sin; and we know that when we trust in him, God counts his perfect life as our own.

And that's great news—there's none better; but a word of caution is necessary, because even believing this we're not out of the woods quite yet. Just as we all have an illegal addiction to sin, we also have a legal addiction to something that can act a lot like alcohol. It's socially acceptable—even mandatory in some circles, it's readily available – especially here in the church, and it's very easy to hide this addiction. And it's a killer. In the church it's the cause of more spiritual deaths and has led more people to eternal ruin than anything else. What is it? It's the Law itself. It really is a *legal* addiction. You see, for we who trust in Jesus for deliverance from sin, the danger comes not so much from those things we do that are obviously wrong (though make no mistake: they still are a danger if we wallow in them and refuse to repent); but rather the greater threat to us comes from those things we imagine that we are doing right. Why is that? It's because to the extent that we think we're good and doing what God commands that we aren't trusting in Christ who is our righteousness before God. And left unchecked, this craving we have for the law and to imagine that what we do is good and pleasing to God will crowd out trust in Christ completely. We'll end up trusting in our goodness rather than in his

It's this problem that the prophet Isaiah is addressing in today's Old Testament lesson, and not coincidentally he uses the picture of alcohol and drunkenness to describe it. The passage begins by referring to two different wreaths. One represents the glorious achievements the people of Ephraim have done with their own hands. And understand that in this passage Ephraim represents all of God's people. Their wreath is a picture of the things they've done of which they are so proud and that they think God should be pleased with. But he's not. He calls their wreath a fading flower that's fit only to be trampled underfoot. That's the way our works always are before God. He's got no use for them. Our works are always tainted by our sin. Elsewhere Isaiah describes them as filthy rags before God. And having described the people's works in such terms, Isaiah then holds up the true wreath and crown of God's people that the Lord himself provides them. This we know is the righteousness that is given to us by faith in Christ.

But you see how the people respond to Isaiah: like a bunch of drunks. The priests and prophets – the spiritual leaders of the people – are all intoxicated. Their minds are clouded and they're stumbling all over themselves. From out of their mouths comes the nonsense that they're teaching the people and vomit – which from the Lord's perspective is the same thing. But they're not drunk on alcohol; they are drunk on the Law. This is clear from what they say to Isaiah: "Who are you trying to teach? You think we were born yesterday? No, we are the ones with the knowledge. We are the religious experts. We know how to please God. It goes like this: do and do; rule on rule; here a little, there a little." And something we miss here in the translation is that in Hebrew the chant of these priests sounds exactly like the mindless babbling of people who are drunk.

But that's the way the law works: like alcohol to an alcoholic. He imagines that a drink will make him feel better. In the same way, we who are legally addicted think that if we do something good, the Lord will look on us as righteous people. Then we can be proud of what we've done and feel good about ourselves. What the alcoholic discovers though is that a drink doesn't make him feel as good as he thought it would, nor does it last. So it is also with us: even our best works are flawed; and on top of it, they don't last. So what's the answer? For the alcoholic it's have another drink, and another, and another. For those with a legal addiction,

it's have another thing to do, another law to obey, a little something else to make God happy – but whatever it is, it's never enough.

This is what Isaiah calls the covenant with death. It's the false hope of thinking it's possible to escape God's coming wrath and judgment by what we do. It's a losing proposition. And mocking the people who have thus placed their hope in themselves, Isaiah tells them that what they're really saying is, "We have made a lie our refuge and falsehood our hiding place." That's not a good place to be.

And it's imperative that we understand this. Because we all have this legal addiction, there is always the threat that faithful people such as ourselves will be seduced by it. We see it over and over again in the history of God's people. We know that it happened to the Israelites already in Moses' day, fourteen hundred years before our Savior's birth. It obviously happened to God's people in Isaiah's day, some seven hundred years later – that's why he's addressing it. We see it again in today's Gospel reading yet another seven hundred years later. Speaking to people who *had* believed in him, Jesus tells them that unless they continue to hold to his teaching (that is, trust in his Gospel), they will not be free – and this infuriates them. "How dare you say that we aren't free!"

Today, as you know, we celebrate the Reformation. And what we're celebrating is the fact that the truth and freedom of which Jesus speaks were restored to the Western Church after having been lost yet again. And that begs the question, "How do they keep getting lost?" The answer, to use the metaphor of legal addiction, is one drink at a time. It happens like this: God's Word goes out to sinners. They are convicted of their guilt and they fear God's judgment. Then they hear the Good News that for Christ's sake God forgives sin. By the power of the Spirit they believe and come to saving faith. So far so good. Ah, but then things can start to get messed up. People start thinking, "Is that all there is to it? Surely now that I've saved, I should be living a better life", and in one sense, that's true; but soon this quest to live a better life begins to take on a life of its own. The law becomes less a mirror to show us our sin and therefore how much we need a Savior, and more of a measuring stick by which we determine how far we've come. At some point we convince ourselves that we're not as sinful as we used to be. Now strictly speaking, that's not true. We're still just as sinful; but what we've given up are the more obvious outward sorts of sins. It looks like we're better, and we deceive ourselves into thinking that we are. Then someone comes along who adds an extra-biblical rule. "A real Christian should do this" or "To be truly faithful, you should give up that." Then it becomes a game of one-upmanship and the rules really start multiplying. At some point they becomes institutionalized like they were with the Pharisees at the time of Christ with all their rules and regulations, or like happened in the Medieval Church in Europe that was telling people that to be a really good Christian you had to enter a monastery or a convent and live a celibate life praying and worshipping all day every day, or go on a pilgrimage, or buy an indulgence, or adore the bones of this or that saint, or whatever.

And since human nature hasn't changed one bit since the fall of our first parents, and because this sort of legal addiction has so often in the past captured so many people who sincerely but wrongly believed that they were being faithful should warn us to be on our guard because it's still a very real danger for us today. We are predisposed to legal addiction, and because of it we are easily led astray by legalistic thinking. And it's all around us. For example, you'll hear the old slogan that being a Christian is about "Deeds not creeds". And that sounds good; it has a nice ring to it – until you realize that what it means is *works* not *faith in Christ*. That's the opposite of Christianity. Just the other day I heard a pastor say that you're not really a Christian if you simply believe in Jesus as your Savior. No, he said, to be a real Christian means making Jesus your Lord and submitting yourself to him. Or to say it another way, it's not your faith in Christ; but rather your obedience to him that makes you Christian. There's a radio ministry that I listen to sometimes and which tends toward this sort of legalism on which several times I've actually heard some of their pastors quoting part of this morning's passage from Isaiah in a favorable light. Using a slightly different translation, they say that growing as a Christian means piling precept upon precept and rule upon rule. They don't understand that when Isaiah wrote it, he set it forth as *the wrong way* to approach the faith. And a final example: there's a popular book that has remained a best seller in Christian bookstores for the last three years that is all about pushing believers to do more good works so that they can earn a better seat for themselves in heaven. It's all about what you should do, not what Christ has done for you. And all these are symptoms of legal addiction in the Christian Church.

The big problem here is that we want to treat the Law of God as a means to sooth our guilty consciences or as a way to make ourselves more righteous. We think, like an alcoholic, one more drink will make me better. But the law hasn't got that power. And it wasn't given to make us better. It was given to make us miserable. Returning to the text, Isaiah describes the law as bed too short to stretch out on, and a blanket too narrow to wrap around you. And if you've ever tried to sleep on too small a bed with an inadequate blanket in a cold room, you understand. It's impossible to get comfortable. *That's* what the law is supposed to do: make you toss and turn until you just can't stand it anymore. That's what leads you to seek relief – the relief that God our Father gives in the Savior who provides rest to souls weary of trying to find peace and righteousness through their own efforts.

By celebrating the Reformation, we are celebrating the rock solid truth that our Savior has set us free from the law and its consequences. And in so doing, we are also reminding and warning ourselves not to be led captive again by our inborn legal addiction. So may God our Father give us the grace to remain free, to resist the urge to take that first drink of law, and to stand firm always and only on the cornerstone he has laid for us: the righteousness which is ours by faith alone in his Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***