

Homily for the 7th Sunday after Pentecost, July 12, 2026

Text(s): Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death

One of the challenges in hearing what the Apostle Paul is saying in his Epistles, especially one like his Epistle to the Romans, is coming to a real understanding of what Paul is talking about when he uses words like “flesh” and “sin.” Which are certainly key words in all his writings, and especially what we hear today.

The great 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich, wrestled with what Paul was talking about in speaking of sin, in his sermon “You Are Accepted,” written at a time when the world was plunging into the darkness occasioned by the rise of Nazi Germany (Tillich was German). This sermon has been a source of renewal and Christian insight for many who have read it in subsequent years.

Tillich writes in part:

Have the people of our time still a feeling of the meaning of sin? Do they, and do we, still realize that sin does not mean an immoral act, that “sin” should never be used in the plural, and that not our sins, but rather our sin is the great, all-pervading problem of our life? Do we still know that it is arrogant and

erroneous to divide people by calling some "sinners" and others "righteous"? For by way of such a division, we can usually discover that we ourselves do not quite belong to the "sinners", since we have avoided heavy sins, have made some progress in the control of this or that sin, and have been even humble enough not to call ourselves "righteous". Are we still able to realize that this kind of thinking and feeling about sin is far removed from what the great religious tradition, both within and outside the Bible, has meant when it speaks of sin?

Tillich continues:

I should like to suggest another word to you, not as a substitute for the word "sin", but as a useful clue in the interpretation of the word "sin", "separation". Separation is an aspect of the experience of everyone. Perhaps the word "sin" has the same root as the word "asunder". In any case, sin is separation. To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation. And separation is threefold: there is separation among individual lives, separation of a man from himself, and separation of all men from the Ground of Being. This three-fold separation constitutes the state of everything that exists; it is a universal fact; it is the fate of every life. And it is our human fate in a very special sense. For we as human beings know that we are separated. We not only suffer with all other creatures because of the self-destructive consequences of our separation, but also know why we suffer. We know that we are estranged from something to which we really belong, and with which we should

be united. We know that the fate of separation is not merely a natural event like a flash of sudden lightning, but that it is an experience in which we actively participate, in which our whole personality is involved, and that, as fate, it is also guilt.

Separation which is fate and guilt constitutes the meaning of the word "sin". It is this which is the state of our entire existence, from its very beginning to its very end. Such separation is prepared in the mother's womb, and before that time, in every preceding generation. It is manifest in the special actions of our conscious life. It reaches beyond our graves into all the succeeding generations. It is our existence itself. Existence is separation! Before sin is an act, it is a state.

What Tillich says about sin here helps make more sense of what Paul has written concerning sin, and I would maintain, helps us to make more sense of our own lives, indeed, make more sense of the most common experience of our life.

It is our sense of separation (or alienation) from God, our separation or alienation from each other, our separation and alienation from this cosmic abode in which we dwell, manifested by our exploitation and abuse of it, and our separation from our own truest identity as those created in the image and likeness of a loving and just God, that lie at the root of all the things we do that might be lumped under the category of "sins."

What Paul does is call those who have been baptized into the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ to fully receive, embrace and live out the restored and renewed human identity that has been given in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul calls us who are baptized in Christ Jesus to lead all humanity to come to know what real life is.

And real life, by the way, is not some disembodied, immaterial existence that we have after death,

When Paul speaks of ‘the likeness of sinful human flesh’, that is not saying that the body, our bodies, are categorically bad because they are physical and material, with all that goes with that.

Christian faith is not an “escape from the body into some kind of Nirvana” kind of religion.

Time and again, the New Testament speaks of “the redemption of our bodies.”

Paul, in First Corinthians, speaks of the body as the “Temple of God’s Spirit.”

Christianity does not counsel chastity out of shame for the body, or even shame about sex, but because in Christ we are called to

honor the body, ours and each other's bodies, because our embodied-ness is fully apart of our bearing God's image and likeness in this creation.

Christians are not called to condemn the body, or material things in general, but rather, we are called in Jesus to bring Spirit and body back together again, as was intended for human life from the beginning.

To be baptized as a Christian is not to get our "ticket punched" to go in some desirable destination at the hour of our death, but to have the totality of our lives: body, mind, and spirit, renewed and reconsecrated, so that through us God's holy and loving purposes will be carried through, on earth as it is in heaven.