

**Pastor's Sermon**  
**The Fourth Sunday of Matthew**  
By V. Rev. Timothy Baclig July 05, 2020

In today's reading we hear about a Roman soldier (a "centurion") who's Faith in Christ was demonstrated in direct relation to his role as a military man and his personal conduct and character. The centurion's training and discipline, being a person who was under authority, caused him to look to Christ with faith and expectation as his Lord. In his own words, he said, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed."

There are numerous examples in the New Testament of the discipline of soldiers, also athletes. It was part of the world of first century Palestine. Today's lesson, however demonstrates the power of the spoken word. The plea to the Lord that was made by the centurion was for his "servant," who in his day was quite possibly his slave.

In his request to the Lord, the centurion said, *"For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."* (Matthew 8:8b-9)

Slavery, along with various kinds of unchristian conduct was also commonly practiced in that day. Some of these practices included: witchcraft, prostitution, political distortion, and homosexuality. In fact, the New Testament clearly provides us evidence that some of those who were Christian converts were among those who were formerly involved in such behavior. The New Testament scripture speaks of it in terms of a spiritual bondage.

First of all, among the many newly established communities by the Apostles, many converted from various religions and sinful lifestyles. Second, something that cannot be overstated is that for a believer to confess Jesus as Lord, and to be baptized was a very serious thing. It was the sign of a radical transformation of one's life, and it was not taken lightly. For some, it meant martyrdom. Moreover, by the fourth century, conversions did not always occur over a short period of time. Many catechumens were catechumens for a number of years because the church was very concerned that there was no inconsistency to one's life and profession.

Many of the issues that the Christian church struggles with in today's society with politicians, celebrities, and various other kinds of public figures are precisely what the early church guarded itself against. In fact during the early period of the Church, baptism was postponed for many whose profession and way of life was not consistent with Christian teaching.

In writing to the Romans St. Paul says: *“You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness.”* (Romans 6:18-19)

The Apostle Paul regarded himself in the same way. He begins his epistle to the Romans: “Paul, a slave [Greek: *doulos*; or “bondservant”] of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, who has been set apart for the Gospel of God...” In his epistle to Philemon, he begins, “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus...”

While the notion of being a “slave” or a “prisoner” of Christ sounds negative, with all of the connotations of one's loss of freedom, very ironically, it was for St. Paul and the disciples quite the opposite. The early believers and followers of Jesus considered their Christian experience and identity as a liberation and a life of freedom from what was for them a very vain and debilitating life; a life that was self-centered and demoralizing. That freedom, however, was never understood to include disregard or respect for authority.

Self-discipline and “being under authority” therefore, were key elements of the Christian way of life. For the members of our armed forces the definition of “self discipline” according to their leadership is: “...doing what is right when no one is watching.” It must also be said, however, that while self-discipline and “being under authority” are important to the life of a Christian, equally important is the fact that, ultimately, everyone is accountable to **God's** judgment.

Who are those who you are obedient to? What ways do you find yourself being obedient to others? Why is it important to you? Do you consider yourself a “slave” to those you are obedient to? Would your medical doctor, therapist or physical trainer be among those you are obedient to?

What about your financial or legal advisor; or your employer; maybe your teacher or coach? How is what you do in following their advice or instructions different, if at all, from the guidance that is provided by the Church?

What does being a Christian for you today cost you? What sacrifices do you have to make? For many of us it begins with setting aside time to be in church. Hopefully it includes much more. Our sacrifices begin with all that we do to maintain and preserve our lives as Christian husbands, wives, and parents. It should also extend to those places where we spend our time: at work, who and where we find fellowship.

We live in a time when few are held to be accountable for their actions. Choosing to practice the Christian way of life today may not cost a person very much. Today, personal behavior can be explained as one being a victim of circumstances, genetics or “the system.” The lines between right and wrong are marginalized, and all too often one’s reasoning is the “ends justify the means.” This occurs when the foundational elements of Christian behavior and conduct are either diminishing or absent altogether. They are lacking when they are not reinforced and supported by an environment that educates and demonstrates its meaning. This is the greatest challenge for all of us in our day.