

Your Sin, or Your Soul?

Many of us were awed, sobered, inspired, and a little sickened when we heard the story of Aron Ralston. He's the young man who disappeared in April while canyoneering in Utah. He was discovered by some tourists five days later, covered in his own blood and missing one of his hands. His story stunned the park rangers who were called in to help, and staggered the rest of the nation.

Mr. Ralston had gone into the canyons alone on Saturday, April 26, 2003. After parking his truck where the roads ended, he rode his mountain bike fifteen miles further into the wilderness. While he was rappelling across the wall of a small canyon, a boulder (later estimated at 800 pounds by rangers) shifted suddenly and pinned his right hand. He was trapped in the wilderness with nobody near and no way to call for help. He tried to move the rock himself, but it wouldn't budge. He tried makeshift systems of pulleys with his climbing ropes and equipment, all to no avail. He shouted for help, but nobody heard. He was stuck, and if something didn't happen, he was dead.

By Tuesday, when he ran out of water, it became clear to him that he was faced with a simple choice: his hand or his life. So he began cutting his forearm in two with his pocket knife. The plan was working until he hit bone; the little knife was unable to penetrate that. Seemingly frustrated in his attempt to save himself, he stopped and waited. By Thursday, he realized that it might be possible to break the two bones of his forearm clean in half, and thereby free himself. Twisting and straining, he managed to get just the right leverage, and first one bone then the other snapped in two. People have asked him what the pain was like, but he refuses to talk about that. He applied a makeshift tourniquet, cut the major artery that remained, rappelled down the canyon wall one-handed, and walked five miles back toward his truck. He encountered the tourists about a mile from where it was still parked.

So what is Mr. Ralston's story doing on a church web site? If that's not obvious already, then I'll just say it. The stark, ruthless reality of the choice with which he was faced – his limb or his life – ought to remind us of what Jesus said:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." (Matthew 5:27-30)

Good friend, a stark, ruthless reality faces each one of us. You must choose between your sin and your soul. So must I. Jesus said so.

Yes, I know that preachers and teachers have found a thousand ingenious ways to explain – or explain away – what Jesus said. I have my own Baptist and Reformed understanding of the theology behind the saying, as well. But I find that the more I explain the words, the less I actually experience them. The more I try to get the precise implications of these words, the less I really feel the full force of them. So please just hear Jesus. He says it's very simple: your sin or your soul. Which will you choose? Once you've decided, you'll be ready for the next page.

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Of course I realize I can't just leave it there. I know an explanation might dull the razor sharpness of our Lord's words, and leave some people in a state of false assurance of a salvation they've never really had. I pray that doesn't happen. Yet I also know that there are some dear saints who are in a constant (and unwarranted) fluster over the state of their souls, and can easily be plunged into a totally unnecessary despair. So for their sake, I'll attempt an explanation.

My basic assumptions are these. Just about any understanding of these words is going to have to put some kind of spin on them, to be able to fit them into a broader understanding of all that Jesus and His apostles taught, which we have recorded for us in the Bible. But no interpretation that simply exempts us from our Lord's words could possibly be the correct one. He clearly intended that folks who hear these words be concerned about the connection between their sin and their salvation. There's no way any honest reader of His words could miss that. So we're faced with the jarring reality of an unnervingly clear choice: our sin, or our souls. Now how does that flesh out in real life?

It's like this. No, Christians are not sinless. But yes, they do in fact sin less – less than they used to, and less and less as they go along. To put it another way, every true Christian wars against sin in his own life. Sometimes he wins. Sometimes he loses. But he fights the good fight of faith. Every Christian does. Those who simply surrender to sin without a fight, or those who treat the war as a minor struggle, and don't seem to care whether they win or lose, are also giving up any reason for thinking that they are anything more than make-believers. True believers, armed with this chilling warning from their Lord, will spare no effort in the fight. For them, it's total war.

For example, take the sin of lust that Jesus raised in His warning. What will a Christian man do to rein in lust in his life? If some things on the Internet prove to be too strong a temptation for him, he'll perform an amputation, and get rid of his Internet access. If he's wise, (and married), he'll be sure to make love with his wife more often. It'll help him to stay pure, and she'll probably appreciate the change. If he's really wise (and especially if he's unmarried), he'll find a brother or two he can trust to keep him accountable. He'll see the matter as an extreme danger, calling for extreme measures.

Or what about the Christian woman who finds herself becoming enslaved to the shopping channels, and ends up pouring all God's (and her family's) money down the drains labeled "Master Card" and "Visa"? If she's wise, and cares for her soul, she'll lop off a limb. That is, she'll learn to keep her card under her refrigerator, or frozen in a block of ice, or somewhere else where she can't get to it easily. She'll even cut all her cards up, or get Comcast out of her home entirely, if that's what it takes. (Yes, an enslavement to shopping is a sin issue, and yes, any significant and long-standing enslavement to sin is a reason to question the reality of your faith. Read all of Romans 6 carefully, and you'll see what I mean. This truth is not in the Bible to make us doubt our salvation, but to make us live out our salvation. The only professing believer who needs to live in doubt is the one who's living in sin.)

Whatever it takes to deal with the sin we find in our lives, we'll do, because we're Christians. We know that credit cards and cable television and the Internet are not the real problems. We know that our own hearts are our real problem. Nobody was ever literally "caused to sin" by his hand or eye or computer or television set. Jesus says in Mark 7 and elsewhere that it's the heart that's the problem. In Matthew 5, Jesus was using a well-known figure of speech called hyperbole to make an unforgettable point about the seriousness of sin, and the absolute necessity that we wage total war on it. It's the heart, not the hand, that matters most, because what the hand does is the visible proof of where the heart is.

But we also know this. Our hearts often betray us, so that we desire what we don't desire to desire. We live in Romans 7. And although an outward solution will not fix an inward problem, it will show us where our deepest desires truly lie. "Cutting off the hand" (tossing out the tube, cutting up the card, whatever) shows where your heart is. In some measure, it even has the effect of tearing your heart away from what is ugly and unholy, and focusing your soul on what is beautifully holy. In that regard, it's a lot like the discipline of fasting. What we do with our choices and habits both reveals and reinforces what we have in our hearts. And when our hearts are torn between righteousness and sin, what we choose to do with our bodies even has power to help redirect our hearts.

So what do you need to amputate? No, it's not a body part! But the point stands, and so does the question: what in your life needs amputation? What's worth more to you – your sin, or your soul? Think it over.