

Slaves of Sin, Slaves of God: Romans 6:15-23
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Last Sunday I addressed the question of why the Bible does not directly condemn the institution of slavery. The key answer, I think, is that Christianity is not a religion of social revolution. The Bible primarily speaks to the issue of a person's relationship to God. And, consequently, that ought to be the primary focus of the church as well. We need to keep the Gospel of Jesus Christ central. And then as God changes lives through the power of His Spirit, our lives will most certainly have an impact on the society for good. But we can't get the cart before the horse. The church cannot bypass the spiritual truths of the Gospel in order to focus mainly on social reform. That is a social gospel, which is not the real gospel. The truths of God and sin and Christ and faith must be the substance of what the church preaches and teaches. And then inevitably, as God changes our lives from the inside out, we will seek to minister to the needs around us. That's the model we see in the Bible, and that sets the priorities for the church.

This morning I want to talk about the issue of slavery one more time, but I want to look at it from a different angle. Keeping in mind the things we learned last week about slavery in the first century, I want us to look at the way the New Testament picks up that imagery and uses it to illustrate a much more profound and important reality, namely, spiritual slavery. I want to talk about the fact that every human being is either a slave of sin or a slave of God. There are these two masters, and we all serve one or the other. And right now I want to ask each of you: Whose slave are you? Who is your master? Who calls the shots in your life? Whom do you obey? Which one of these masters are you looking to for satisfaction and protection and care? Whose slave are you?

Like last week, we're going to look at a few different passages again this morning. Last week we looked at the passages that speak about physical slavery. This week we'll read some passages that speak about the spiritual realities of being a slave to sin or a slave to God.

The world Jesus entered was a world filled with slaves. In many places up to a third of the population were slaves. It was everywhere. Slaves, masters, slaves who were being released from slavery, poor workers who were selling themselves into slavery. It was the backbone of the economy, and it was simply a part of life for those living in the Greco-Roman culture of the first century. Slavery was not something they read about in the history books or something they heard about happening in other parts of the world. It was a very vivid and present reality.

It was in this cultural context that the New Testament was written, and the reality of physical slavery was used to illustrate the deeper truth of spiritual slavery. We miss some of these allusions to slavery in the New Testament because in many places our English translations have decided to use the word "servant" instead of "slave." The Greek word *doulos* means slave. There are other Greek words for servant, but *doulos* means slave. And an interesting thing has happened in most English translations: the word slave is used to translate *doulos* when the Bible talks about slavery to something inanimate, like being a slave to sin, or to righteousness. Or when there's an antithesis between slave and free. Also, when speaking of physical slavery, like the passages we looked at last week, the word slave is used to translate *doulos*.

But in most of the other places where *doulos* shows up, it's translated by the word servant, or bondservant. Like when Paul calls himself a slave of Christ in Galatians 1:10 and Philippians 1:1. And James in James 1:1, and Peter in 2 Peter 1:1. And in other places as well. Why is it that English translations avoid the term slave? It's probably because of our general embarrassment over the issue of slavery, and also because of how the terms slave and servant have been understood through the centuries. And thus we're left with this tradition of using the word servant to translate *doulos* in many places. What we need to recapture, though, is an understanding of the master-slave relationship, because it's this image that the New Testament appeals to over and over again. And if we have in our minds a hired servant who works for an employer and then goes home and does whatever he pleases, we miss the point. That's not a *doulos*. A *doulos* is someone who is owned by the master. Someone who is completely dependent upon the master. Someone who owes everything to the master. Someone who has given up all personal rights and is utterly resigned to the will of the master. That's the picture of the master-slave relationship which Jesus and the New Testament writers use to teach us some profound spiritual truths.

Before we look at some of these passages together, I want to make a speculation about something. We often wonder why God allows bad things to happen in the world. We know that He is in control of all things, and whatever happens is precisely according to His plan. Yet we don't know all the reasons behind His plans. And therefore I speculate cautiously. But as we look at the grave evil of human slavery, I wonder if one of the reasons God has allowed this to exist in the world is because He wants to provide us with a very vivid picture of what is happening in our hearts. I don't think it's a coincidence that in Jesus' day slaves and masters were so common. And Jesus and the apostles use that common feature of their society to teach us about a slavery that is even more common. In fact, it's universal. Because every human being is enslaved either to sin or to God.

Let's look at how the Bible talks about this. I want to start in Romans 6:15-23.

Murray Harris, in his book *Slave of Christ*, gives a helpful definition of slavery that applies both to physical slavery and spiritual slavery. He says that a slave is "someone whose person and service belong wholly to another" (Murray Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ*, 25). For the slaves of Paul's day, they belonged wholly to their master. Not just their work, but their very being, was owned by the master. This is what makes human slavery so evil and degrading. We are all made in God's image, and therefore no person should be owned by another human being. But this was the status of slaves. They did not have personal rights. They did not have free choice concerning their work or activities. They couldn't choose what they wanted to do. They were completely subjected to the master's will.

In this passage we see that each one of us is subjected to the will of a master. There are two masters. On the one hand, there is the master SIN, also called "impurity" and "lawlessness" (v. 19). On the other hand, there is the master GOD (v. 22), or "righteousness" or "obedience" (vv. 16, 18, 19). What we need to notice here is that there are only two masters. And everyone is a slave to one or the other. There's nobody who is NOT a slave. There's no neutral position. If you think you're standing in the middle, without anyone or anything ruling over you, you're wrong! You are somebody's

slave, and there is not a more important question in the universe for you to answer than: “Who do I belong to? Whose slave am I? Is sin my master, or is God my master?”

Do you remember last week that I described the slave’s experience as being immensely dependent on the character of the master? If the master was cruel and abusive, the slave’s life would be unbearable. But if the master was gentle and loving and kind, that slave might even be envied by some freepersons. The difference between serving a cruel master and a kind master was like night and day. There is an infinitely greater contrast when we look at the two masters described in this passage.

Sin is a cruel master, and that is a massive understatement. How is sin cruel? Sin is the slave master who lies and deceives and manipulates in order to get you to do things that will destroy you. Sin says, Live this worldly lifestyle, and it will feel good. Watch TV instead of reading your Bible, and you’ll have more fun. Spend more money on yourself rather than helping others, because you deserve it and it will make you happy. Indulge yourself with sinful pleasures, because everyone’s doing it and the only reason God says no is because He doesn’t want you to be happy. These are the lies of sin. And then what happens? You obey the slave master, and you obey the slave master again, and again and again, and there are small, shallow rewards from time to time. But in the end, the slave master sin destroys you. That’s what the text says. Verse 16, “Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?” And verse 21, “But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death.” And verse 23, “For the wages of sin is death . . .” This is the cruelty of sin. It promises pleasure, and delivers on that promise in very small and shallow and brief ways, and yet it is destroying you all along and in the end condemns you to everlasting misery. Human slave masters have done some horrendous things to their slaves, but nothing compares to the eternal spiritual agony that is inflicted upon those enslaved to sin.

Contrast the cruel master with the gracious Master. Look at verses 22-23, “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Slavery to sin leads to death, but being God’s slave leads to eternal life in heaven.

There are many marvelous things to see in this passage, but for our purposes this morning I want to ask two important questions and then move on to some other passages. As we look at these verses in Romans 6, and we see the stark contrast between the two masters, the question we have to ask is: How does one escape the slavery of sin and become one of God’s slaves? We’re all born slaves of sin. Nobody’s neutral. Nobody’s in the middle. We’re all slaves of sin by nature. So how does one break free from that cruel slavery and become a slave of the gracious and kind God? The short answer is: nobody can. Nobody breaks free. Nobody devises a plan of escape and carries it out. And the reason is, nobody wants to. Those who are in bondage to sin are so deceived by their master that they truly believe they’re better off there than anywhere else. Sin has them so deceived that they think they’re free. Some of you here this morning may think you’re free, when in reality you are groveling at the feet of a cruel and deceptive master called sin.

Nobody who is a slave to sin decides to break free. The only hope is to be rescued. The only hope is for another Master to come and deliver you. And when that happens, your eyes are opened to see the cruelty of your old master and to see the kindness of the One who set you free. Before, all you wanted to do was sin, but the person who is rescued is given a new desire to obey God—to obey the new master, to be a slave to righteousness. There is deliverance from the cruel master in order to be enslaved to a new master.

Verses 17-18 show us how this works. Paul says, “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.” These verses show the dramatic change that takes place in a person when he or she is saved. We become obedient from the heart. Our behavior changes [we become obedient] because our heart changes. And this is all because we have been set free from sin. Meaning, God set us free. We couldn’t have freed ourselves, and even if we could, we wouldn’t, because we didn’t want to. But God came and set us free from that slave master, and He made us slaves of righteousness. He made us His own.

I love how Augustine describes his conversion, because it captures the change in desires that God effects within us when He saves us. Augustine says, in a prayer to God: “How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and took their place” That’s what happens when God sets us free from the cruel and deceptive slave master sin, and opens our eyes to see real beauty and to experience true pleasure. When He changes our hearts, we can see that the pleasures of this world are fruitless joys, and we need not fear to lose them. God drives those desires from us and replaces them with a desire for Himself, who is the true, the sovereign joy. To know Him is the supreme joy.

I also love the way Charles Wesley describes how God rescues us, in the hymn we sang this morning: “Long my imprisoned spirit lay, Fast bound in sin and nature’s night; Thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off; my heart was free. I rose, went forth and followed Thee” (verse 3 of “And Can It Be?). That’s what happens when God rescues us from bondage to slavery. And if you’re here this morning, realizing that the chains of sin are still binding you, then you need to cry out in repentance and faith, and plead with God to rescue you. Acknowledge that you are a sinner, and that your only hope of escape is the blood of Jesus Christ, who died in our place and then rose again on the third day in triumph over sin and death. Cast yourself on Him, and plead for mercy. And He will deliver you and make you His own.

Another question that we inevitably ask ourselves at this point is: What if God is my master, but I find myself going back and obeying my old master. That, of course, is the problem every Christian faces. We have been set free from sin, but we still sin. Romans 6 was written so that we might fight sin boldly and victoriously. Not perfectly: that will not happen in this life. We won’t have complete victory over sin in this life. But we can fight the fight of faith knowing that the victory is sure. We don’t belong to sin any longer. We belong to God. And what we need to do is understand who we are now (slaves of God), and we need to act and live accordingly. The indicative statement of truth in verse 18, that we have been set free from sin and have become slaves of

righteousness, is followed by an imperative in verse 19, “For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members [there’s the command, the imperative] as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.”

This is how the Christian life works. God saves us. He delivers us from the old slave master and makes us His own slaves. And then living the Christian life is the process of becoming who we, in fact, are. John Stott recalls the death of King Edward VIII in 1972. In a television program that chronicled this man’s life, there was an interview in which he was talking about his upbringing. He said this about his boyhood as Prince of Wales: “My father [King George V] was a strict disciplinarian. Sometimes when I had done something wrong, he would admonish me saying, ‘My dear boy, you must always remember who you are’” (Stott, *Romans*, 187-8).

If you are a Christian, if God has saved you from sin and given you the free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (as verse 23 says), if you are in Christ, then you are free from sin. You are God’s slave, no longer a slave to sin. So act like it. That’s the message of Romans 6. Remember who you are. And become who you are.

Now let’s step back and make some other observations about spiritual slavery. One observation is that the analogy of human slavery is not a perfect one. The idea of being God’s *slave* may be offensive to us, and it may put a negative image in our minds about what it means to be a Christian. No analogy is perfect, and the Bible’s use of the slavery analogy is no exception. It does provide us with a profound illustration of our slavery to sin, and then our slavery to God, but the parallels between physical slavery and spiritual slavery are not perfect. In verse 19 Paul says, “I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations,” which clues us in to the fact that this is not a perfect analogy.

We also see in two other New Testament passages that the slave imagery breaks down. In John 15:15 Jesus says, “No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.” In the relationships between human masters and slaves, there is distance. There are barriers. There is a lack of closeness and openness. But this is not true of our relationship with Christ. This is one place where the analogy breaks down. Being slaves of God and of Christ does not imply distance and alienation.

Another place where the analogy breaks down is shown in Galatians 4:7, where Paul writes, “So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.” Being a slave of God does not imply a lack of fellowship with God, as we saw in the last verse. And as we see here, neither does it imply a lack of sonship or a lack of inheritance. Yes, we are His slaves, but we are also more than slaves. We are His children, and we will receive an eternal inheritance from Him.

These passages that say we are not slaves do not contradict the other passages that describe us as God’s slaves. The various passages simply fill out the picture of what our relationship to God is like as Christians. We ARE God’s slaves, but that doesn’t mean that everything true of human slavery is also true of our slavery to God.

I want to close by looking at a three more passages very briefly that give us some practical application of our spiritual slavery. The first passage shows a manifestation of

slavery to sin, and the other two passages show ways in which our slavery to God translates into our relationships with other people.

The first passage is in 1 Corinthians 7, which I mentioned last week because Paul encourages slaves to gain their freedom when they are given the opportunity (v. 21). Then in verse 23 he writes, “You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.” It’s interesting how these two statements are put together. “You were bought with a price,” meaning you are a slave of Christ (previous verse). And therefore, since you are a slave of Christ, you should not enslave yourself to other people.

Some of you are enslaved to other people. You are enslaved to what others think of you. You’re enslaved to what others expect from you. You’re enslaved to the praise others give you, or enslaved in fear of the insults you might receive. And in this way other people control your life, rather than Christ controlling your life. You need to repent of esteeming people above Christ. This is one application for us, that we must not enslave ourselves to other people in this way.

In contrast to this, if we are slaves of Christ, how should we view other people? There’s somewhat of a paradox here, because being a slave of people can be a manifestation of slavery to sin. That’s what we just saw in 1 Corinthians 7:23. Being a slave of men is the opposite of being a slave of Christ. But as slaves of Christ we enslave ourselves to other people in a different way. Just a couple chapters later, in 1 Corinthians 9:19, Paul is defending his ministry and he writes, “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a slave of all, that I might win more of them.” So there IS a way that we ought to make ourselves slaves to others, in this case to unbelievers, in order that they might be drawn to Christ. We serve them and listen to them and try to understand where they’re coming from and present the Gospel to them. That’s how we make ourselves slaves to unbelievers.

And then, finally, we are also to be slaves to our fellow believers. This is the other way we enslave ourselves to others as a manifestation of our slavery to Christ. Do you remember when the mother of the sons of Zebedee asked Jesus to seat her two sons on either side of Him in His kingdom? This is in Matthew 20. And Jesus says, “You do not know what you are asking” (v. 22). And then a few verses later He says to all His disciples: “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant (*diakonos*), and whoever would be first among you must be your slave (*doulos*), even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (vv. 26-28). We are to follow Jesus’ example of humility and service. He took the form of a slave, Philippians 2 says, and we are to take the form of a slave as well, as we humbly serve one another.

Whose slave are you? Are you a slave of sin, in bondage to sinful pleasures and worldly aspirations and the shallow expectations and opinions of other people? Or have you been set free from sin to become a slave of God? And then out of the overflow of your joy, to be a slave to unbelievers for the sake of the Gospel, and to humbly serve your brothers and sisters within the body of Christ. If you are a slave of sin, repent of your sin and cry out to Jesus, believing that He can rescue you. If you are a slave of God, then become who you are, and “present your members as slave to righteousness leading to sanctification.”