

Slaves Set Free: Romans 6:16-19

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A World of Slaves

The title of the sermon this morning is, “Slaves Set Free.” We’re going to look at the slavery metaphor which Paul uses in these verses, and what he’s teaching us about spiritual slavery. To give you a bit of background for Paul’s use of this metaphor, we need to understand that the world he lived in was 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 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 or something that happened in illegal, criminal operations. It was a very vivid and present reality which everyone saw on a regular basis.

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, 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 Romans 1:1 and 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. And thus we’re left with this tradition of using the word servant to translate *doulos* in many places. What we need to recapture 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 no personal rights and is utterly resigned to the will of the master. That's the picture of the master-slave relationship which the New Testament writers use to teach us some profound spiritual truths.

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. 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 in Paul's day, and, sadly, it is the status of millions of slaves in our day as well. They do not have personal rights. They do not have free choice concerning their work or activities. Not only their work, but their body, is owned by the master. They are completely subjected to the master's will.

Two Masters (v. 16)

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 no more important question for you this morning than: "Who do I belong to? Whose slave am I? Is sin my master, or is God my master?"

We have to remember the context of Romans 6. Remember the question Paul is responding to. The question shows up in verse 1, and again in verse 15. Verse 1 says, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" And verse 15 says, "Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?" Paul responds strongly to each question, with the exact same words: "By no means!" And why not? Why doesn't grace give us a license to sin? Why is it impossible for true believers to continue in sin?

Two weeks ago I made a point about our desires, our passions. Verse 12, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.” It’s those sinful passions, those sinful desires, that hold us in bondage before conversion. The unbeliever is a slave to those passions. But when God regenerates a person, when He resurrects someone from the dead spiritually, He gives that person new desires. And that’s why grace doesn’t spur people on in sin. That’s why true believers do not continue in sin. We don’t want to. Rather, we want to live holy lives. We now have the spiritual eyes to see how wonderful it is to follow Christ instead of sin.

The message here applies to unbelievers and believers alike. If you are an unbeliever, you need to know that you are living in slavery to sin. You may not want to admit that, but you are in bondage to certain desires, habits, fears. Your only hope is for God to redeem you from that slavery and purchase you as His own. So cry out to Him to do that. He has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on a cross and purchase redemption for all those who believe. Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.

For believers, this continues to be applicable, and this is Paul’s thrust in Romans 6. As believers, you are no longer slaves to sin, so don’t act as though you are still bound to that cruel slave master. Become who you are. Act in accordance with your identity. May this be a means of grace to us in our fight against temptation. When you are faced with a temptation of any kind, remind yourself (preach to yourself!) that to give in to that temptation is to give yourself over to bondage.

To click on that image on the internet is to say, “Lust, I will allow you to be my master. Bind me up.” To blow up at your spouse and spew all kinds of hurtful words is to allow sinful anger to be your master. To let your thoughts be consumed and your schedule be consumed with trying to get more stuff, more money, more attention, more power, is to allow greed and pride to be your master. But here’s the point, for believers: those things are no longer your master. So we are absolute fools to allow those sins any mastery over us.

He’s not your boyfriend

There’s a book that came out recently called, *The White Umbrella*. It’s written by a group of women who have worked in a recovery program for victims of sex trafficking. One of the things they have to work hard to convince these girls of is the reality that the man who had been controlling their life is not a boyfriend, but a pimp, a slave master. They tell the story of a girl named

Stephanie, who loved her “boyfriend” and felt a sense of belonging in the gang which he had initiated her into. Stephanie felt like this was her family, and she was helping the family with the income she was able to bring in. She was eventually arrested for prostitution and given the option of jail or this recovery program called Wellspring Living. She opted for Wellspring, but didn’t want to be there. She wanted to be back with her “boyfriend” and her “family.” She showed some positive signs of recovery for some time, but tragically, she eventually relapsed into her former lifestyle (pg. 76-77). She went back into slavery.

Tricia is another girl, who, through a series of sad events, ended up in the clutches of an abusive man. He forced her to take drugs and used her for his pleasure and his financial gain. Then, one night, a remarkable thing happened. She was picked up by the police, but instead of taking her to jail, they introduced her to the producers of a CBS program called *Street Intervention*. They offered her a thousand dollars, a nice hotel room for the night, meals, spa treatments, and offered to connect her with those who could help her, if she would let them interview her for the program. She agreed. The next day a couple of the ladies from Wellspring pleaded with her to leave her lifestyle and come to the safe house. But Tricia refused. In her own words, she said later, “I was so entrenched in my ways, so ready to give up on myself like everyone else in my life had, that I didn’t see a way out even when offered one.” (pg. 138)

That is the deception and bondage of sin. Fortunately, this story has a happy outcome. It was a couple of years later, when Tricia was finally trying to get help, that she remembered those ladies from Wellspring and reached out to them and started the road to recovery.

I share these stories because they so vividly illustrate the struggle with sin, the bondage of sin, the deception of sin. Whether it’s sexual sin, materialism, ungodly ambition, greed, pride, bitterness—whatever different forms it takes, it is like those girls who think the pimp is her boyfriend. He’s not your boyfriend. He’s a slave master who couldn’t care less about you. He’s using you. He’s abusing you. He’s taking advantage of you.

Paul says in Romans 8:12, “we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.” As believers, we have to say to sin and to the flesh, “You are not my master. I don’t owe you anything. You don’t control me anymore. I have a new master, who loves me, and I will follow Him.”

We have to realize that sin lies to us, manipulates us, brainwashes us. And if you listen to those lies and obey sin, obey the flesh, there may be small, shallow rewards from time to time. But in the end, the slave master sin destroys you. That's what our text says in 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.

The Israelites

This makes me think of the Israelites in the wilderness, after they had been miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt. But they complained, even looking back with fond memories of their time in Egypt as they complained about their present situation. In Numbers 11 some of them cried out and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." What a ridiculous way to think. What a dangerous way to think. What a seductive and subtle temptation to look back to your former life and think that you had it better when you were a slave. "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing." You think it cost nothing! That's a very rosy way of looking at it, a demented way of looking at it. You have conveniently overlooked the fact that you were a slave!

And we do the same thing if we look longingly at the life of unbelievers and think, It would be nice to just go and enjoy some of the those worldly pleasures without the feelings of guilt and without the conviction of the Spirit and without the rebukes of Christian friends. I wish I could just go back to Egypt for a while. Oh, don't go down that path, brothers and sisters. That's not a path of freedom. It's a path of bondage. Don't be deceived.

See the contrast between the cruel master and 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—pleasures forevermore.

Thanking God for Redemption (vv. 17-18)

This is a joyful prayer of thanksgiving at the beginning of verse 17. And why does Paul thank God? Because He’s the One who saved us, redeemed us from our slavery to sin, gave us new hearts, and made us His own. Don’t ever think that you freed yourself. That’s impossible. Sin imprisons us, and there’s no way out, except by the powerful, freeing grace of God. Sinner cannot free themselves. No sinner will ever even attempt it, because no sinner desires freedom from sin. There is a lack of ability and a lack of desire.

Until God does His sovereign work of regeneration, which is alluded to in verse 17, that you “have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed.” Now that you are changed, now that you are dead to sin and resurrected to walk in newness of life, now that you are slaves of God, you desire in your heart to obey Christian teaching. You want to follow Christ and obey His commands. You want to live a holy life. You want to walk in righteousness. That’s evidence of regeneration. That’s evidence that you have a new heart and a new master. And you thank God for that! Thanks be to God, that though I was once a slave to sin, I am now a slave to God and desire from my heart to walk in obedience to Him.

Then Paul elaborates on this in verse 18, “having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.” Do you remember what I said last week about the power of grace? We were looking at the contrast between “under law” and “under grace.” And the fact that we are under grace does not mean merely that we are forgiven of our sin, as wonderful as that is. It also means that we are empowered to fight sin. And that’s why being under grace does not lead to more and more sin, as some might suspect. Verse 15, “Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!” Why? Because being under grace means that you are set free from sin, as we just read in verse 18.

Notice, it doesn’t say we’re set free *to* sin. That was the false assumption of those objecting to Paul’s teaching about justification by faith alone. If you’re under grace, if grace abounds, then you’re telling people they’re free to go on sinning. That assumption doesn’t understand grace. Real grace, God’s grace, amazing grace, is the grace that forgives and empowers.

And to be set free *from* sin means that we are no longer under the reign of that cruel master.

Hosea

The book of Hosea in the Old Testament presents a powerful, real-life story of redemption. It's the story of the prophet Hosea and his unfaithful wife, Gomer. Their relationship is a picture of the relationship between God and His people. The Lord told Hosea to go and take a wife of whoredom and to have children with her, which he did.

But then she returned to her former life, and in Hosea 3 the Lord tells Hosea, "Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins." So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley. And I said to her, "You must dwell as mine for many days. You shall not play the whore, or belong to another man; so will I also be to you." (Hosea 3:1–3, ESV)

That is a vivid picture of the bondage that we all find ourselves in until we are redeemed. We are each born into this world enslaved to sin. And we live in that bondage. The shackles may look different on each individual, but the slavery is just as real.

The mention of the raisin cakes highlights the silliness but also the seriousness of our bondage to sin. It's stuff as petty as raisin cakes that holds us in chains. In C. S. Lewis's book *The Screwtape Letters*, the demon Screwtape writes letters to his nephew Wormwood, instructing him in the art of tempting mankind. In one place Screwtape tells Wormwood, "an ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula [to want something more and more, even though your pursuit of it and even your attainment of it in some measure is bringing you less and less satisfaction]. It is more certain; and it's better *style*. To get the man's soul and give him *nothing* in return—that is what really gladdens our Father's heart."¹ And when he refers to Our Father, he means their father who is Satan.

The cravings increase even as the pleasures decrease. And ultimately that road leads to losing your soul and having absolutely nothing to show for it. The bondage of sin is real and serious, and there's no way out of it except by redemption through Christ.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Bles, 1942), IX.

What makes this bondage so absolutely devastating is that we don't even want to be free from it. That's the picture we have of Gomer. It wasn't like she was even asking to be freed. She was pursuing her lovers and continuing to spiral downward in her life of rebellion. And that's us, until God redeems us.

We need God to come and buy us out of our slavery. We need Him to come and get us and take us home with Him. But in order for Him to do that, He must pay a great price. Hosea paid fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley. God the Father pays with the blood of His own Son.

The Cost of Redemption

Paul writes in Titus 2:13-14 that we are "waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works."

And in 1 Peter 1:17-19 we read this, "And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed [redeemed, freed, purchased] from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot."

God gave up His beloved Son, Christ gave Himself up, in order to pay the price for our release from captivity. He paid it all, so that we can be free and so that we can be with Him forever.

A Gospel Command (v. 19)

We close with the command of verse 19. It's a Gospel command. It's not an oppressive, joyless, condemning command. It's a life-giving, joyful, encouraging command to become who you are. It's an imperative that flows from glorious indicative statements made earlier. Thanks be to God that you are no longer slaves to sin but slaves to righteousness. Therefore, don't act like slaves of sin, but act as slaves of righteousness. That's what verse 19 says, "For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now [in light of what has happened to you, by God's grace] present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification." (Romans 6:19, ESV)

I read of a man who had battled against same-sex attraction, and finally he felt like he couldn't fight this temptation any longer. He went to his pastor and told him that he planned to go out to a gay bar that very night. The pastor told him, "I don't think you're going to do that, because that's not who you are."

That's great advice. That's a great exhortation. That follows the same Gospel logic that Paul presents so powerfully in this chapter. Don't give in to sin, because that's not who you are anymore. You're dead to sin. You're no longer a slave to sin. Therefore, live to God, because you're His slave now, meaning you are free! You are free, indeed!

Oh, friends, don't you want to be free? I want to be free! I want to know the freedom of following Christ. I want the happiness of holiness. I want the pleasures of growing in righteousness. I want to be sanctified, so I can have more and more delight in God. I want to live as a slave of God, and I want to live increasingly as one presenting my life to Him in every aspect of my existence. Because to be a slave of God is to experience true freedom. And that's what we'll talk about more next Sunday as we conclude this chapter.