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Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

Whose Slave Are You?

Romans 6:15–23

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series: Romans: Unashamed • Undeserved • Unstoppable

Between Christmas and New Year's I flew to Colorado for a quick trip for a surprise 85th birthday celebration for my father. My sister put together a great party and four generations of Reids were able to be there. We had all written tributes to his life and they were bound together in a book. We got him to his party by telling him that he was going to meet at my sister's house so she could take him to the new *Star Wars* movie for his birthday. The surprise was total. We were afraid he was going to be disappointed because he didn't get to see *Star Wars*! He wasn't. The outpouring of love shown to him genuinely moved him.

As we reflected on this life, I remember when I was about 12 years old my dad left his corporate job and started his own consulting business. In my mind, I remember thinking, Wow! Owning your own business is true freedom. He will work for himself instead of a taskmaster for a boss. I remember my mom threw him a little party and invited our neighbors to celebrate the start of his new business. I was watching as neighbors brought all kinds of fun gag-type gifts. But one gift my dad opened left an impression on me. It was a tee-shirt and sprawled across the front was the word in big letters: SLAVE. Slave? No way, my dad used to be a slave, but owning his own business meant he was free. I didn't understand the joke until much later in life. People who own their own businesses work a little differently and success brings many blessings, but freedom is not one of them for most. It's as if we are all a slave to something.

This week I read about a time when Ray Stedman, pastor of Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, was asked to speak at the Church of the Open Door in downtown Los Angeles on Hope Street. During a break one evening Ray strolled down Hope Street and didn't get very far before he encountered an eccentric man with long, tangled hair, a scraggly beard, and clothes that looked like they needed a good wash. The man walked toward Ray wearing a sandwich board. Written on the front in bold letters were the words, "I am a slave for Jesus Christ." The guy would make eye contact with everyone that he passed by on the street. And as he passed, Ray turned to read the backside of the sandwich board. It read, "Whose slave are you?"

So the eccentric man with the sandwich board on Hope Street knew his Bible. We all serve something; that's the constant. The variable is, Who do we serve? As philosopher and theologian Bob Dylan titled one of his songs, *You Gotta Serve Somebody*, "It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you are going to have to serve somebody." And it was the greatest philosopher and theologian, Jesus Christ our Savior who said, "**No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be**

devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24).

Jesus tells us that everyone has a master. Maybe the idea of having a master doesn't rattle you that much. Okay, I serve somebody. But if everyone has a master, then doesn't that mean that everyone is a slave? That doesn't sound too hopeful, does it? But Jesus is telling us it's all in who your master is.

In this verse, Jesus tells us some are slaves to created stuff like money and the things money can buy. With just a surface look we can identify that some of us are slaves to our busyness, our work, our next achievement. We know something is out of balance, and we hope balance will happen in the future if we just get through the next project.

Some of us are enslaved to people. We mutate into whatever pleasing shape we need to gain the approval of someone else. If someone else affirms us we are thrilled and satisfied for the moment. If that someone else criticizes us our confidence is shattered. Our self worth drops off a cliff.

Some of us are slaves to those in authority who make promises to us they either can't keep, or have no intention of keeping because these authority figures don't have our freedom in mind. These leaders are happy to enslave us and have us dependent on them instead of on God. It's sad when some of us accept slavery in exchange for the promise of earthly security.

These slave masters relentlessly demand time, attention, admiration, and devotion. The only way to free us from this cruel master is to embrace another master. The only way to be free from this kind of slavery is to embrace the power of God's grace.

Remember last week, in Romans chapter 6 verses 1-14, we learned that Paul took on those who were skeptical of the power of grace. In fact some challenged his teaching asking, "If you are saved by grace Paul, why shouldn't you just go on sinning?" They didn't see Paul's logic. "Aren't you telling us that if we sin more then grace will increase more and more? So shouldn't we just dive in and increase our sin so that grace will increase?" But Paul showed us that these skeptics misunderstood grace.

Paul shows us through the example of baptism that we have become forever united with Christ, that we have been made dead to sin and made alive to God. Paul then says, "If this is true, how can we possibly continue to live in sin?" Through the picture of baptism we learned that our identity changed when we accepted Christ. By God's grace I became united with Christ. My sin was crucified to death on the cross, and my sin nature went to the grave with Christ, and now I am bound to Christ instead of Adam. And just as Christ was resurrected from the dead, I have

been resurrected with him into new life with him. I have been implanted with the capacity to no longer be ruled by sin because my identity and my future destiny are now tied to Christ instead of Adam. So why would I ever think that a life of sinning more and more is better?

We are seeing as we study Chapter 6 that Paul is moving his teaching into a new dimension of amazing grace. Grace not only saved me, grace is able to change my life right now. People saved by God's grace will be able to recognize signs of God's grace and power working in their lives. We love God and His Word more, and love our sin less. We see real change, maybe small changes, but real change where we look and act more like Christ in our relationships and priorities as we continue to follow Christ.

So starting in verse 15, Paul moves from the logic of baptism to the logic of our conversion to explain amazing grace. In today's passage Paul's critics pose another objection to his teaching on grace. They challenge him by saying, "if you say that the law of Moses is to be rejected as a way of salvation (this is exactly what Paul has said), won't more sin and more immorality follow?" Paul is saying the exact opposite will happen. Remember the limits of the law we have learned so far. The law cannot produce righteousness. It only has the power to expose our sin and then condemn our sin. The law can't cure our sin. In fact it's only when people turn away from the law as a means to salvation and turn to Christ and receive the grace he offers that true righteous change happens. Here is the skeptic's question and here is Paul's answer:

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!

Paul's question in verse 15 is quite similar to the question back in verse 1. In verse 1 the question was, "if we sin more and more won't we just experience more and more grace?" In verse 15 Paul's critics are asking, "since there is no absolute standard or law that defines holiness and sin hanging over us, can't we just be free to live any way we want because we are covered by grace." This is where Paul brilliantly uses the picture of slaves and masters to illustrate that if Christ is my master, then I am his slave. So if I am his slave, how can I possibly claim freedom to continue to habitually sin? Paul starts his defense of grace by telling us....

Everyone is a Slave to Something

Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? (v. 16).

My first thought is, this slave analogy doesn't work because slaves are forced into their slavery. I wasn't forced into my conversion to Christ. I was excited and I willingly came to Christ. To me slavery means someone captured, or bought and placed in slavery against their will. Paul's use of slavery here is a different kind of slavery. It's voluntary. Paul's Roman audience would understand this idea of voluntary slavery because up to half the people in the Roman Empire were either living presently as voluntary slaves or they had been a slave at one time in their

life. A person who was a voluntary slave was probably very poor and they chose to voluntarily self-surrender and give up their freedom to someone who was wealthy in order to receive food and housing in return.

Paul is telling us that spiritual slavery is the same idea. Spiritual slavery means that we self-surrender to one of two masters. Either we self-surrender to sin which leads to death, or we self-surrender to obedience which leads to righteousness. Paul uses an unusual phrase, "slave to obedience which leads to righteousness," or literally, life instead of death. He says, "obedient to obedience." It's a dramatic use of language that Paul uses to reinforce to us that obedience is the very essence of slavery. And this obedience leads to a present and future life with Christ and includes the opportunity for more righteous living in this life.

Remember when you turned to Christ and received him as your Savior. It was an act of self-surrender. When we accepted Christ, we converted to Christ. We surrendered and turned a new direction. We invited Christ to lead our lives and to become the controlling force of our lives. There is no moderate middle here. Jesus told us we cannot serve two masters. He said, "I am offering you grace so that you do not have to serve a master that will destroy you." I am offering you a new master.

So Paul's point is, why would I choose a master whose dedicated purpose is to keep me enslaved and ultimately kill me? Serving him is like helping him build the gallows where he will hang me. Serve this cruel master? What a stupid thought. Christians have been delivered from the control of this cruel sin master. This good news prompts Paul to break out into spontaneous praise. True Christians have exchanged slaveries.

Our Conversion Results in an Exchange of Slaveries

But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness (verses 17-18).

Did you notice Paul doesn't say believe from your heart? He says obey. Why? Because true conversion is more than intellectual belief that the gospel made sense and then we accepted it. True conversion is also more than an emotional connection. Yes, we remember when the gospel message touched us personally and connected to our need to be saved like nothing else could. True conversion is also what Paul says here in verse 17, that God is asking for a commitment to obey. In other words, true Christians understand that God asks for a commitment to obey from the heart. In verses 16 and 17, Paul uses the word obey/obedience three times. The idea is that when God made us into a new spiritual creation through our conversion, he put us into a new mold that loves God and loves being filled up with His Word. Its mold is completely different from the world's sinful mold that we were delivered from.

Do I still sin? Of course, but sin is no longer my God. I am different. I desire to obey and when I sin I feel bad about it. Instead

of feeding the sin in me, I now want to starve it. I'm at war with it. Because we are Christians, our new master is Christ. Sin is no longer our master. So stay in the new mold. Let God shape you into the image of Jesus.

So if I am a slave to righteousness as verse 18 says, why would Paul go on to also say that we have been set free? Isn't that a contradiction? How can we be set free and at the same time be slaves? One commentator I read, James Montgomery Boice, said, "True freedom is not the ability to do anything I think I want to. True freedom is the ability to fulfill my destiny as God intends." And I will add, "True freedom means being set free from the entanglements caused by slavery to sin, and being set free to do what is right."

Paul's main idea in this passage is distilled down into one of the great Christian paradoxes of the ages: We have been freed from the slavery of sin to become a willing slave once more, but this time to a loving and compassionate God. Paul's big idea here is this: Slavery to God is the greatest freedom a human can ever know.

I don't know about you but I am having trouble with his analogy of slavery. I get what he is saying, but slavery just makes my mind go negative. I think this negative perception of slavery is why Paul says what he says in verse 19.

Slavery Progresses into More Enslavement

I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness (v. 19).

Notice how these two slaveries don't stay static. They are either retreating or advancing. So just as a life of sin leads to further wickedness and deterioration, so a life of righteousness leads to further holiness and transformation. Everyone is either moving forward or backward morally and spiritually.

The word for holiness is most commonly translated "sanctification." It's used here and again in verse 22. Sanctification is a major theme in chapters 6-8. Sanctification means the process of becoming more holy and pure. I love how Martin Lloyd Jones weighs in on what the sanctification process looks like as grace works in our lives: "As you go on living this righteous life, and practicing it with all your might and energy, and all your time... you will find that the process that went on before, in which you went on from bad to worse and became viler and viler, is entirely reversed. You will become cleaner and cleaner, and purer and purer, and holier and holier, and more and more conformed to the image of God." God's purpose for redeeming us from sin is not so we can do as we please. It's so we can do what pleases God, which is to live righteously.

Next, Paul gets us to look inward to reflect on all of this. He asks, in effect, "When you were trying to meet those God-given needs by pursuing sin, how did that work out for you? You know, those physical, emotional and spiritual needs that you and every other human has." You tried different stuff to meet those needs and it actually felt satisfying at first, it actually felt like freedom in the

short term, but then the sin master required more and more and seemed to offer less and less in return.

Slavery to Sin Leads to Death

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! (verses 20-21).

Slavery to God Leads to Holiness and Eternal Life

But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (verses 22-23).

If a person wants what he deserves—eternal death—God will give that to him as his fair wages. And if a person wants what he doesn't deserve—eternal life—God offers that as well in the form of a free gift that only comes from Christ Jesus our Lord. So as we put all this together here are a couple of statements we need to consider.

It Is Possible...

To be a slave to sin and think you are free

This is the predicament of those outside the family of God: Slave-like service to something they hope will bring fulfillment and eliminate their problem. We know and love people that sadly sacrifice everything to keep their god alive. We know and love people who are full of fear over the thought of this false god being taken away from them. And more amazing is the blindness to comprehend the extent of their slavery. We shouldn't be amazed, our enemy is a master deceiver.

For the person here today who has not yet received God's call and self-surrendered to Christ, the verse for today is Romans 6:23. "**For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our LORD.**" Choose life. Receive the gift of God that is eternal life in Christ Jesus. It is also possible....

To be free and think you are a slave to sin

Booker T. Washington, a famous figure in American history, was a former plantation slave who upon being set free, helped educate thousands of Americans by founding schools and colleges. In 1863, at the height of the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation. Booker was nine years old when news of the emancipation reached his plantation in southwest Virginia. He wrote about that day in his autobiography titled *Up From Slavery*. "The most distinct thing that I now recall was that some man who seemed to be a stranger (a United States Army officer, I presumed) made a little speech and then read a rather long paper. After the reading we were told that we were all free, and could go when and where we pleased. My mother, who was standing by my side, leaned over and kissed her children, while tears of joy ran down her cheeks. She explained to us what it all meant, that this was the day for which

she had been so long praying, but fearing that she would never live to see."

So the word was out: Slaves are free... at least officially. The practicality of freedom was another matter. Charles Swindoll writes in *Insights on Romans*, "The wild rejoicing on the part of the emancipated people lasted only a brief period, for I noticed that by the time they returned to their cabins there was a change in their feelings. The great responsibility of being free, seemed to take possession of them. It was very much like suddenly turning a youth of ten or twelve years out into the world to provide for himself. In a few hours the great question with which the Anglo-Saxon race had been grappling for centuries had suddenly been thrown upon those people to be solved. These were the questions of a home, rearing of children, education, and citizenship. Was it any wonder that within a few hours the wild rejoicing ceased and a feeling of deep gloom seemed to pervade the slave quarters? To some it seemed that now that they were in actual possession of freedom, it was a more serious thing than they had expected to find. Some of the slaves were seventy or eighty years old; their best days gone. They had no strength to earn a living in a strange place and among strange people. Deep down in their hearts there was a strange attachment to the "old master". Gradually one by one the older slaves began to wander from the slave quarters to the big house to have a whispered conversation with their former owners as to the future."

History tells us that most of the former slaves returned to their fields to continue their servitude as "sharecroppers." Though officially free to go anywhere, little changed for them in a practical sense. Turning their legal status as free men and women into actual experience would require some kind of internal transformation. Those who found this freedom too daunting chose to return to slavery. They chose to return to the familiar even if it was uncomfortable.

Doesn't this appear foolish to us who have never known that kind of slavery? Yet wouldn't it be fair to say that counseling offices are filled with Christians who remain low-grade frightened sharecroppers? Sharecroppers who struggle to accept the fact that they no longer must serve imaginary gods. Sharecroppers who struggle to believe that they could be free from compulsive sin. Sharecroppers who struggle because they live two lives, one that's projected to others and the other tucked away hidden in shame. We don't need to live like the sharecropper. We don't need to live as defeated people unable to live freely in Christ.

I want us to answer this question: This week, when we feel the tug of sin, the tug of that old master drawing us back, what will help us to choose obedience to our new master, Jesus Christ? I

have found that the best thing we can do is remember and declare often the new identity we have in Christ.

Remember Who We Are in Christ

This means that we are to know the truth, and we are to remind ourselves of the truth often, and we are to declare the truth whenever the sin master attempts to enslave us with his lies. Why would we go back to what we have been delivered from? We are emancipated sinners saved by grace. We have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I want to end our time today with what I have found to be a powerful exercise over the years. I want everyone to stand. We are going to declare out loud with authority together who we are in Christ. Each truth we declare is a truth to know and remind ourselves of often.

I am Accepted in Christ

- I am a child of God (John 1:12)
- I am Christ's friend (John 15:15)
- I have been justified through faith in Christ (Romans 5:1)
- I have been bought with a price, I belong to God (1 Corinthians 6:20)
- I am a saint (Ephesians 1:1)
- I have been adopted as God's child (Ephesians 1:5)
- I have been redeemed and forgiven of all my sins (Col. 1:14)

I am Secure in Christ

- I am forever free from condemnation (Romans 8:1-2)
- I am confident that the good work God has begun in me will be perfected (Philippians 1:6)
- I am a citizen of heaven (Philippians 3:20)
- I am born of God and the evil one cannot touch me (1 John 5:18)

I am Significant in Christ

- I am the salt and light of the earth (Matthew 5:13-14)
- I have been chosen and appointed to bear fruit (John 15:16)
- I am God's workmanship (Ephesians 2:10)
- I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13)

(Adapted from Neal Anderson, Freedom in Christ Ministries)

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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