

Slaves to Righteousness

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Father, would you speak to us and would we hear, not just with our ears but with our hearts, and would our hearts be open and tender to the way that your Spirit wants to mold us into the image of your perfect Son.

Convince us, Lord, that true freedom is slavery to you, slavery to righteousness. Would we delight in you as our Lord, you as our Master.

There is no greater Master, no one who has loved us like you have. Would you convince us of that even more deeply than we already think we might be convinced of that truth. Today we pray in the preaching of your Word, in Jesus' name. Amen.

[1 : 09] All right, so we are still in Romans and we're still in chapter 6 of Paul's letter to the church in Rome. And last week we looked at Paul's response to pretty much the biggest objection that his message faced.

And that objection goes something like this. If we are justified, if we are righteous in the eyes of God by faith and apart from our good works, then what's going to keep us from continuing in a bunch of wicked works?

Like, Paul, if the gospel you preach is true, how is this not a license to sin? And we heard last week that Paul answered this objection in the first 14 verses.

And he ends and he caps it off saying, For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace. But then today we find that he raises pretty much the same objection, right?

The same objection comes up again, verse 15, because he knows that what he preaches is so radical, so counterintuitive, so unlike anything anyone else has ever preached. Whenever the gospel is preached and the scandal of God's free gift of grace is heard, Paul knows that the question will arise again and again and again, like, how is this not a license to sin?

[2 : 23] So here in verse 15 we find Paul posing pretty much the same objection he just answered, but he puts it in a different way. Verse 15, But this time he applies, he supplies a second reason.

So we're going to look at that second reason today, whereas the first reason he gave pointed us to Christ's past work, the second reason he gave points us to our present identity.

The first reason he gave for why we should not go on sinning was our union with Christ and his death to sin. And now the second reason he gives for why the church should not go on sinning is our identity, our identity in Christ.

And notice how he describes our identity in Christ, though. Verse 16, what does he call us? We are slaves. Don't you know that when you offer yourself 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.

The number two reason Paul gives for why we should not sin, even when we are under grace, is because we are all slaves. Even if we've been freed from slavery to sin, he says, we are still slaves.

[3 : 39] And we're going to talk about that, what it means to be slaves to God, slaves to righteousness. But before we talk about that, I want to first bring your attention to the beauty of Paul's reasoning here. See, just like he refuses to motivate us by, you know, dangling a carrot like heaven or happiness or threatening punishment upon us like heartbreak and hell.

For Paul, and I think this is the heart of God himself, the main reason for us to not sin isn't about following rules or being good versus being bad. For Paul, it's always been about being real. It's always been about being authentic to our highest and our truest identities. And that's why he says, by no means. By no means. We aren't going to go on sinning, not just because it's bad for us, but because it defies the truth about who we are and what is real about us in God's eyes. In Christ, we are dead to sin. And that is why we cannot live in it any longer, he says. And here in verse 15 and following, he reminds us of another reality about who we are, and that is we are slaves of righteousness if we're united to Christ by faith.

As I heard one of our past pastors, Pastor Quinn, she used to say, you know, God is not interested in shitting all over us, all right? Like, you should do this, you should do that, you should not do this, you should not do that.

[4 : 56] No, time and time again, what God is most interested in speaking to us is who we are. Who we are, because everything else flows from that, from our identity.

So in Genesis 1, right, when God creates the heavens and the earth, he says to Adam and Eve, you are the crown of my creation. I have made you in my image, in my likeness, therefore, be fruitful, right?

Or to his own son at his baptism in the Jordan River, before he sends him out into the wilderness, before he sends him out to teach and to do all his miracles, what does the father say to his son at the Jordan River?

He says, this is my son whom I love. With him I am well pleased. See, it's only when we accept the reality of our identities before God that any of us will ever do the things we should be doing or stop doing the things we shouldn't be doing.

Again, God's primary task is not to should all over us, it's to tell us who we are to him and what we are to believe about ourselves if we would just see ourselves through his eyes in order that we might live accordingly.

[6 : 02] And that's why I left verses 11 through 14 in our text today, even though we went through them last week, because it's so important how we count ourselves. It's so important how we count ourselves, it's so important that we count, how God counts.

Verse 11, in the same way count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. So in a sense we could say that a question underneath Paul's question here in verse 15, shall we sin because we are under grace?

Another question that Paul is provoking here is, well, who are we fundamentally? Particularly Christians, how should we count ourselves? What is our identity? identity?

And how might that actually be the key to all of our actions and our behaviors in the first place? You know, I have two girls, four and three, and my goal is to raise them to be beautiful women of God who are secure in themselves before God and in this world.

And so I tell them that that's what they are, that they are beautiful and that their only comfort in life and in death is that they belong to Jesus. Like more than telling them what to do, right, in order to be beautiful or what to do to belong, I tell them who they are to me and to their mommy and to God that they are beautiful and that they already do belong.

[7 : 20] I don't say to them, try hard to be beautiful or else, or else you won't belong. But you are beautiful and you do belong, therefore live like the beauty that you are.

Because I want them to have so deep inside of them, I want them to trust this reality in their hearts to know and believe the truth about themselves so that when those days come, when they are tempted to not believe that they are beautiful or that they don't belong to anyone of any significance. And those days have come, actually the days have already arrived. One of our daughters some months ago, she said this to us, she said, I wish I had my little sister's eyes because they're prettier than mine.

She said that, and you might think that this was just some minor sibling rivalry jealousy, but to me this was a lie from the devil himself, tempting my daughter to believe that she's not enough, that she's not beautiful enough, that she's not pretty enough, she's not desirable enough.

And is this temptation really so unlike what the rest of us face? No. My daughters need to know. We all need to know our true identities in the eyes of God.

[8 : 27] If we ever want a chance at living and experiencing the beautiful lives of belonging that God wants for us, we can see our identity, who we are, who we understand ourselves to be will ultimately dictate how we live.

But again, the question is, well, who are we? Who are we? And to this, Paul says, well, if you've been justified by faith and if sin is no longer your master and you are now under grace, guess what? You're still slaves, he says. You're still slaves and that's why you should not sin. He even gives thanks for this in verse 17, 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. No longer under the dominion of sin, but now under the reign and rule of Jesus Christ. See, for Paul, even for those who are under grace, you see, they are still under something. Yes, set free from sin, but now slaves to righteousness. For Paul, it's not a matter of whether or not we're slaves, but whether we're slaves to sin or to righteousness.

[9 : 42] Just as it says in verse 19, we are either offering ourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness or we are offering ourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. For Paul, there is no third alternative.

As Jesus said, you cannot have two masters no matter what we are slaves, he says, either slaves to sin or to righteousness, to the devil or to God. And now, maybe, you find this offensive, right? To speak of people as Paul does, as slaves to sin. Maybe you even disagree with Paul here because aren't people like more complex than that? For us to categorize them into just slaves to sin and slaves to righteousness.

But what Paul means here is not that some people can only do utterly wicked things and others, you know, Christians are the best and they can only do righteous things. We all know that's not true. No. What Paul is talking about are the two different domains and directions that people are in with respect to the Lord Jesus Christ.

See, slaves to sin might do some great things, feed the hungry, donate to charities, advance our society with technological innovations just like the descendants of Adam and Eve's wicked murderer son, Cain, right?

[10 : 51] They were the ones. Cain's descendants were the ones who what? They made music and they developed tools and they built cities and developed livestock, right? But the question is, for what and for whom and to what end?

Was it truly unto the glory of God, unto the glory of the kingdom of Christ, or was it to the glory of Babel? Let us build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens and let us make a name for ourselves, they said.

See, when Paul talks about slaves to sin versus slaves to righteousness, what he's saying is that apart from liberation in Christ, we are all slaves to sin. As Paul writes earlier in chapter three, quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures, there is no one righteous, not even one.

There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks God. All have turned away. They have together become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one. And listen to what he says at the end of this list.

There is no fear of God before their eyes. For Paul, you can do and achieve some pretty impressive and good things, but if there is no fear of God in your eyes, if you do not have a relationship with God, if you're living your life not in a Godward direction, for the glory of Jesus Christ, and I'm sorry, but as good as whatever it is you're doing is, it is still tainted by sin.

[12 : 07] And that's how the prophet Isaiah can say things like, all of our righteous deeds are like filthy, bloody menstrual rags before the Lord. And this is what it means to be a slave to sin, to not live Godward, to not live unto and under Christ, but with something or someone else as our master.

And if this describes you and you are not living unto or under Christ, he invites you today to at least consider what or who your master really is.

He invites you to consider a different yoke, a different bondage, a different master, slavery to righteousness, slavery to God through Christ. Now maybe for some others of us, it's precisely this slave to righteousness, slave to God stuff that sounds so offensive and unappealing, right?

And maybe that's what some of us either hate about being Christians or for those of us who are hesitant to become Christians, this is why. Like, see, I knew it. You Christians are always talking about how, oh, I can be free from my sin, but here you are just pitching another kind of slavery, so no thank you.

And honestly, I deeply resonate with this. Growing up, I've shared about my best friend, right? Both of us grew up in the church from the days that we were born. He was born just 10 days before me.

[13 : 24] Both of us grew up in the church. Both of us got baptized together on the same day as sixth graders. We went to the same Sunday school classes, the same Christian school from kindergarten to 12th grade.

Both of us went off to college and became involved in our churches very heavily. We loved theology. We loved apologetics. We loved studying the Bible, and yet I've become a pastor, and my best friend now lives a life apart from God, apart from Christ, in unbelief and skepticism.

And I've shared this before, but we used to play this game as kids, this game called, Man, If I Weren't a Christian, and he'd be like, Man, If I Weren't a Christian, I'd totally ditch church and Sunday school, and we'd be outside working on our jump shots.

And I'd be like, Man, yeah, that's right, man. And yeah, man, if I weren't a Christian, I'd have so much more money because I wouldn't be tithing, and that would be awesome. And we'd go on and on and on fantasizing about the happiness and the freedom that we'd enjoy if we were not Christians, if we were not slaves to God.

And you know, looking back and reflecting on where both of us are now today, I wonder if what has happened is that both of us rightly understood that Christianity does involve a kind of slavery, slavery to God, slavery to righteousness, a commitment to denying ourselves and following Jesus.

[14 : 48] But I wonder if what has happened is maybe one of us has had our eyes opened to the beauty of being a slave to God, while the other has yet to have his eyes open to the beauty and the true freedom that are found in slavery to righteousness, slavery to God, to being under the rule and reign of a good master and Lord, King Jesus.

Now, I get why you might be skeptical. Like, how is Christianity not just another power play on my life, just an extra external authority here to limit and restrict my happiness and freedom?

And honestly, you're not wrong that God wants you to be free. You're not wrong to want to be free. We all want to be free. God put this desire into us. But see, the real question, though, is what does it mean to be free? What does it mean to be free?

And I want to suggest, according to the scriptures, that the truest freedom, the highest freedom, is actually, is subversively only found in being a slave to God.

You see, our modern, secular, Western world will tell you that true freedom is the absence of all restraints. All restraints. That we are cheetahs whose most fundamental need is to get out of our cage and to be untamed, right?

[16 : 07] The modern Bay Area definition of freedom is that freedom is antithetical to any and every binding limitation. That freedom is freedom from all such restrictions and freedom to pursue whatever it is that we want.

And you're not free unless you can do whatever you want and no one can tell you what to do or what not to do. But is this truly freedom? Is it? To be able to do whatever we want.

To have every option in the world. Tell me, are you free when you turn on Netflix at home and you have a million options before you?

A million options of what you could watch but you spend half an hour, right, deciding what that is that you want to watch and even after you decide for the first five minutes you're thinking to yourself, do I want to keep going or do I want to switch back, right?

Is that freedom? In his book, *The Paradox of Choice*, this Swarthmore psychologist, Barry Schwartz, he actually is a visiting scholar here at Cal. He wrote, actually a greater variety of choices actually makes us feel worse.

[17 : 15] He actually advises, choose less and feel better. And you know, Paul would agree that sure, maybe this is a kind of freedom but is it the kind of freedom we want?

Is it? Verse 20, look at verse 20. In verse 20, he begins to describe and remind his readers of what it was like when they were once slaves to sin and lived to make all the God-free choices that they pleased.

And he recognizes that it was a kind of freedom, a freedom from control but freedom from whose control? Verse 20, when you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness.

Paul says, yes, there is freedom apart from God but he says, is this the kind of freedom you want to be free from what is right and good and pure and true and beautiful. And then he asked his readers to consider the fruit, the fruit of that kind of a freedom from the control of righteousness.

Verse 21, what benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death. He's basically asking, where did that freedom from all restraints, where did

that lead?

[18 : 20] What did it produce? What kind of a person did it make you? Someone who is proud of themselves or someone who is ashamed of themselves? I'm listening to this audio book right now, this book on Audible, it's a New York Times bestseller called Tweak, it's by someone here from the Bay Area, Nick Sheff, and it's a memoir of his life and his struggle with addiction to meth.

And even as a very gifted person, someone from a very privileged background, you know, they had a house in the city in San Francisco, they had a weekend house up in Point Reyes, his family loved him, he had a great life.

And I'm only a few chapters in, but it's really, it's a riveting, wonderfully written memoir. And basically, it's Nick's sober retelling of the stronghold of meth on his life.

A retelling of how ashamed he is of his many decisions as someone under the control of meth. And early on in the book, he recounts how not long after his first stint in rehab, he comes home again, but he's suffering from withdrawals, right?

And so, the first chance he gets, he gets out of the house away from his parents and he leaves and he finds himself all of a sudden unconscious again. And so, he tells about how, yeah, he has no idea what happened that week, but all of a sudden he wakes up from his blackout, he's back in his parents' home, and what wakes him up, though, is this commotion that's going on in the house, a commotion between his little brother and his little sister.

[19 : 45] His little brother is crying, where is it? Where is it? Where is my five dollars? You took it, he's saying to the little sister. And she says, no, I didn't take it, and they're both crying and this wakes Nick up. This wakes him up and in that moment, Nick says, I didn't remember taking the money, but I knew I had.

So, he begins to pack his stuff up, he heads toward the door, he can only look down at the floor in shame, but his parents stop him. His parents stop him and they're all red in the face, their heart broken, and they block his exit and they confront him.

They say, where are you going? Nick, we know you're using again. And Nick says, yeah, I'm not coming back. But they slam the door and his dad says, you can't just leave with tears running down his face, you can't just leave, we'll get you help, Nick.

And Nick says, no, I have to, I have to do this, I have to leave. And at this point, his dad says no and he tries to physically stop Nick from leaving the door, but Nick pushes his dad really hard and Nick says, what the hell are you doing?

Jesus Christ, you people are suffocating me. you people suffocate me. And in this moment, Nick is basically screaming to his parents, let me be free, get out of my way, untie my bonds from this family that loves me so I can be free to do what I want, so I can be free to do what I know that I need.

[21 : 06] But you know, he's writing in retrospect, right, this is a memoir, and as he recounts this moment, he also writes in his memoir, the truth was, I didn't want to stop. It's not like I enjoyed stealing or hurting my dad, I was just so scared of coming off the drugs.

It was like this horrible, vicious cycle, the more I used, the more I did things I was ashamed of, and the more I had to use so I never had to face them. And my question for us is, was Nick truly pursuing freedom when he accused his parents of suffocating him?

Was he free the moment he left the house and started getting out on the streets, driving around, shooting up again and again, hiding in bathrooms, missing veins, blood running down his arms, hanging out in filthy hotels with stained mattresses and trash all over the place?

Was Nick free when he fled the alleged suffocation of his parents? Or was he fleeing from their love, trying to free himself from their love, free himself from true liberation?

You know, the reason Paul celebrates our slavery to God and to righteousness is because freedom from any and all restraints and authorities and commitments isn't freedom at all.

[22 : 18] It's just another kind of bondage. I mean, and think about it. Is the freedom we seek apart from God not actually a greater burden, a heavier yoke than the one Jesus invites us to take up alongside of himself?

You know, all around us in the Bay Area, we are advised, we are even commanded, right, to be true to ourselves. True to ourselves, right? But in his book, You Are Not Your Own, which I highly recommend, Alan Noble writes, how can you ever be sure that you are being true to yourself?

How can you ever know if you are being authentic? You are utterly alone in your judgment, sovereign, but alone. And to make matters worse, you cannot trust yourself.

The human mind is capable of tremendous self-deception. Maybe you are least true to yourself when you are trying to be like yourself. And he writes, the freedom of sovereign individualism comes at a great price.

Once I am liberated from all social, moral, natural, and religious values, I become responsible for the meaning of my own life. With no God to judge or justify me, I have to be my own judge and redeemer.

[23 : 26] This burden manifests as a desperate need to justify our lives through identity crafting and expression, but because everyone else is also working frantically to craft and express their own identity, society becomes a space of vicious competition between individuals all vying for attention and meaning and significance.

So you see, the freedom that so many of us are pursuing apart from God is far more burdensome than we realize, even leading to death. Like, what if a fish said, I'm not free unless I can get out of this water and get onto dry land?

How would that turn out? Horribly. Horribly, right? Because a fish seeking to be liberated from the ocean onto dry land is a fish that's denying its own God-given identity and purpose.

But what God wants for us is to be liberated fish. Dolphins. He wants us to be dolphins. Alright? Swimming free in the vastness of His ocean. God's word is saying to us that there is a better freedom, a better slavery, one that leads to wholeness and holiness and eternal life.

Verse 22. 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.

[24 : 50] God wants this slavery for us. I know this sounds daunting and scary and restricting, but what if freedom is not what you thought? What if freedom is not the absence of all restrictions but life within the right, proper, God-given restrictions?

What if true freedom was the freedom to be who you were meant to be according to your maker? Freedom to be your best and most ideal self. Freedom from every other alternative path other than the narrow road that Jesus wants you to follow Him in.

What if freedom was not found in being unbound by God, but in being bound within a holy and loving relationship with this God? See, the essence and the beauty of love is not liberation from one another, right?

It's being bound to one another. I officiated a wedding yesterday. Two people became one. They covenanted with each other to belong to each other. And this wasn't sad, right?

It was beautiful because the truest intimacy, the truest intimacy and experience of love and delight, the truest sense of purpose and calling that you will ever experience is only ever going to be in a binding relationship that requires your commitment.

[26 : 02] And see, this is the antidote to the paralyzing paradox of unlimited choice. It's covenantal commitment. And that's what God wants for us. That's what God wants for us when He calls us to be slaves to righteousness.

He's calling us to something good, to something pure, to something holy, something liberating and delightful all at the same time. Take my yoke upon you, Jesus says. Take my yoke upon you.

And yes, it's a yoke. But what if the point is not that our necks are under a yoke? What if the point is not the yoke but who we are yoked to? What if the point is that we've been invited, we can be yoked right up next to Jesus, the Son of God Himself who's willing to bear our burdens.

And see, this is the gospel. This is the gospel. This is the good news that while every other master pays a terrible wage, there is a better master, a loving Lord, who promises not to pay you what you deserve, but who wants to give you a free gift at His own expense.

Verse 23, for the wages of sin is death. But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

[27 : 18] So Christ Church, choose today. recognize that we're all slaves and what matters more than anything is who we are a slave to. A master who pays us the wage of death or a Lord who dies for us, a Lord who's risen again, a Lord who offers us the free gift of eternal and abundant life, a life free from freedom for freedom's sake and bound within the loving arms of God.

For really, what's better? What is better? to be forever free from our maker, sustainer, and redeemer or to be permanently and inseparably bound within His warm embrace?

Will you pray with me? Father, would you convince us that it is better to be bound within the loving arms of Jesus than free from Him?

Show us the beauty of who you are as a loving Lord and Master. And oh God, thank you that you are not a master who pays us the wages that we deserve, but you are a master who wants to give us a gift and the ultimate gift of yourself, of eternal life, abundant life with you in Christ forever and ever.

Make us a people who treasure that and who live out of that identity that we belong to Jesus. It's in His name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.