

"Freedom Through Slavery" Romans 6:15–23

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning comes from Romans 6, verses 15 to 23. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law, but under grace? By no means.

! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient as slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

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.

I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, leading to sanctification.

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.

[1 : 07] 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.

So, here in Ottawa, 2026, we are very far removed from slavery. In fact, Canada, for all of our troubling historical faux pas, we are far from a perfect country, not sure if you knew that or not. We had actually a fantastic track record when it comes to slavery. Pre-Confederation Canada was very ahead of its time. Slavery was alive and well, raging in America and the rest of the New World. The slave trade was active. And yet, here in Ontario, or at the time Upper Canada, John Simcoe, the one who founded York, which would later become Toronto, he was instrumental in outlawing slavery.

He was an early English abolitionist, and he was also the Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, Ontario, what is now Ontario.

[2 : 24] And he signed into law the 1793 Act Against Slavery. And this was some 40 years before slavery was abolished in Westminster.

It's actually quite remarkable. Canada also had a very fantastic role that they played in the Underground Railroad. We should keep our heads held high when it comes to the history of Canada and the transatlantic slave trade.

So, it's troubling then, if we come to this text as Canadians that know our history and are proud of it, which we should be, at least in this area of our history, we come to a troubling passage where the Apostle Paul is going to liken the Christian life to slavery.

He's going to liken the Christian life to slavery. And he's going to use it to shed light on the doctrine of grace, which is very foundational to what it means to be a Christian.

He is a provocative preacher. He was then, and he continues to be now the Apostle Paul. But, as we go through chapters of the Bible, we don't just pick what Daniel wants to pick on a Sunday morning, because it's easier that way for me.

[3 : 55] We go through books of the Bible, so we come to a potentially difficult text. We don't walk away from it, we're going to walk towards it this morning. And we're going to try to grasp what the Apostle Paul is saying, and we're going to look at two contrasting pairings that he uses to help articulate what it means to live as Christians.

He's going to contrast slavery and freedom, first and foremost. And then, secondly, he's going to contrast sanctification and sin. Very theological, Christian-y words.

Slavery and freedom, sanctification and sin. So, just two points this morning. We're going to jump in the text shortly in verse 16. But first, I think it would help us to take a moment to understand a little bit about slavery.

Because we are, maybe not everybody, but I would venture to guess the majority of us are understanding slavery through chattel slavery, the transatlantic slave trade, the whole abhorrent act of stealing people and buying and selling them that the new world in many ways was built upon. But Paul is speaking to a similar but different kind of slavery that took place in the first century in Rome. You see, in the ancient world, in the ancient Roman Empire, it would be unthinkable to live without slaves.

[5 : 25] It was so baked into the economy of ancient Rome. Slaves made up anywhere from 15 to up to 30% of all of the population of the Roman Empire.

In fact, there's some estimates that slaves and former slaves were actually the majority of the population by the first century. Slavery, let's be clear, a terrible business.

If you worked in the fields, if you worked in the mines, you would wish death upon yourself. But being a household slave could afford somebody a better life.

If you were lower class, a lower class freed person, you might approach somebody to become a slave. I mean, you would totally be owned by somebody else, but you'd have food, you'd have shelter, you'd have a purpose, you'd have a job.

And in some cases, people could be doctors, they could be managers, they could be tutors, they could even own their own slaves as slaves. Nevertheless, slavery is still not advantageous.

[6 : 38] You're still owned by another human being. It's not great. You are property, not a human being. And especially in the church, slavery would have been very, very obvious.

The church in the early first century was full of slaves, primarily because the gospel proclaims inequality.

The Apostle Paul will later on, in a number of different places throughout the New Testament, will talk about, in Christ Jesus, there's neither slave or free, male or female, Jew or Greek, and you'll continue on.

Not that our identities become dissolved, but just that there's inequality before God. Why? Because we are made in God's image. This is like a foundational aspect of Christianity.

So therefore, the church would be a very welcoming place for slaves. Therefore, Paul is speaking the vernacular to this group of people. He is speaking their language.

[7 : 40] He is using a metaphor that they would understand. And by the way, it's not exactly like Paul is jazzed about this metaphor. Look with me in verse 19. It'll be on page 30 if you're using one of these scripture journals.

Paul says this, I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. Listen, this is not the best metaphor to use. Likening Christianity to slavery isn't exactly the best way to promote your faith.

Even for the most kind of upper class slaves, so to speak, you're still property. It's not the greatest situation. Nevertheless, it's an apt metaphor because the majority of the people would, potentially the majority of the people would be slaves, but everybody would understand what slavery was in the first century.

So, with that as a bit of a primer, so to speak, on what the Apostle Paul is talking about, let's read verses 16 to 19.

Nisa has read it already, but we'll read it again. Starting 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?

[9 : 00] 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.

Again, we reference this. I'm speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, leading to sanctification. There's a lot there. I'm going to point out two important things that I want to draw your attention to. The first is this. Paul assumes that all human beings are slaves.

And not just that all human beings in the first century are slaves, that all human beings in every place and every time are slaves. In fact, this room, the Apostle Paul would say, is full of slaves. And he is making this case because we've seen in chapter 5, if you were here a couple weeks ago, that all human beings are connected in a very deep way to Adam.

[10:11] Adam, the character in the first two, the first three chapters of Genesis, where sin entered the world through Adam. That because of that, we all became slaves, and slaves from our birth.

No one is truly free in the sense of being completely and fully autonomous. Everybody serves something. Either we will serve death and sin, oftentimes it takes the form of us serving our appetites, our affections, our desire to be respected and loved, our pleasure, our money, our exhilaration, our desire for exhilaration.

We have a young man in our house that I think that will be his besetting desire, the thing that he pursues his whole life. Comfort, status, you name it.

We serve something. We will go after something. We are not fully autonomous. We are governed by the things we are pursuing. The scripture repeatedly calls this pursuit that is separated, unhinged, uncoupled from God, he calls it sin.

The scriptures call it sin. The apostle Paul calls it sin. We're good things, very good things. Pleasure is a good thing. Exhilaration can be a very good thing. Money, a wonderful tool.

[11:39] But when they become ultimate things, they are disordered and abused and tainted. Gifts are elevated above the one who gives the gifts.

It's a huge problem. And the apostle Paul says that we are slaves. We serve such things. Verses 18 and 19, he will say that such slavery is actually a slavery to impurity and lawlessness.

But when we are saved by God, when he extends to us this incredible gift of grace, salvation, and we receive it by faith in Christ, the apostle Paul says that we actually have a new master.

So it's not that we cease to serve or cease to be a slave of something. We are rather serving someone else. We are a slave of someone else.

We have a new master. This master is God. That is the first important consideration for us that I want to draw your attention to from this verses 16 to 19.

[12:45] The second part is that Paul states emphatically that we cannot have two masters. So on one hand, we cannot not have a master. On the other hand, we can only have one. We see this in verses 16 and 19.

We can either serve sin or we can serve God. We can either serve things that lead to death or things that lead to life. Jesus, likewise, teaches the same thing in his Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5 to 7.

In it, he makes clear that we can only serve one master. Why? Because we will only love one. And it will be at the expense of the other. We'll hate the other one. And in that case, he's speaking on money.

He ends that section of teaching by saying, you cannot serve both God and mammon. You cannot serve both God and money. Very apt for us here in our affluent day.

There is a very clear point that Paul is making. There's only two camps and you can only be in one of them. So this life of faith that Paul is then putting forward.

[13:55] It's not a life that we get to just enjoy whatever we want, but it's actually a life of surrender. It's a life of slavery. And this is, again, where we have to wrestle through with what Paul is saying.

Because he is going to say that we have to present our whole selves. He talks about members and in the original language, it's literally like your limbs, but it carries with it this idea that it's not just your bodies, but it is your desires, it's your mind, it's your affection, your affections.

It means we have to present our whole selves to God in response to what God has done for us.

Paul will write to the Corinthian church and tell us what God has done for us.

And what is that? He says in chapter 6 of 1 Corinthians that we are not our own, but that we were bought with a price. And that price is the shed blood of Christ himself.

So the big question that Paul wants to remind and exhort his listeners, and those listeners are us here this morning, what he wants to remind us of is a question.

[15:04] And here's the question. Who are you obedient to? Not if you are obedient to something or someone, but who are you obedient to? Is it any of the things I named just a minute or two ago?

Or is it Christ himself? A bit of an objection. And I think it might be a good one. Here's the objection.

It's not one of the big reasons we have the strife we have in the world because we have more religious fanatics, not less. I mean, we have an ongoing war in the Middle East right now because of an entire regime that is religiously hell-bent on the destruction of the West.

Isn't that the problem? Religious fanaticism. Don't we want more people to be balanced, to be regular? Whatever that regular is, by the way. Regular. Surely we need people who enjoy, yeah, good church service here and there, but aren't given over to a zealotry that may make them, you know, maybe not very respectable.

I want to, hypothetically, whoever is offering that objection, I would reply to them with a question. Are you sure that the secular person isn't actually the truly zealous one, the zealous fanatic?

[16:38] What do I mean? I do enjoy history. Obviously, talking about John Simcoe, I really love the history of Canada and the history in general.

But the more I read about history, the more I'm very happy to live in the 21st century. All right? I like a refrigerator that I can open and get preserved food and enjoy whenever I want, probably too often, but nevertheless, I enjoy a flush toilet, I enjoy a combustion engine.

Okay? I love the modern world that we live in. I do. I do not want to go back to horse and buggy no matter how idealistic it might seem when we read children's books or watch movies.

I don't want it. Okay? I like my creature comforts. But one thing I do not like in our 21st century, and it's precisely because I am so infected with it, is the religion of our age.

What do I, what am I referring to? The one thing that has marked the modern world and especially the post-modern world, the moment we live in, is something called expressive individualism.

[17:52] What do I mean? It's not a term that I coined. I'm okay in my intellect but not terribly smart.

Carl Truman, he's a philosopher and a professor and a pastor. He wrote a big book on just this very thing. And he defines expressive individualism as meaning, quote, that each of us finds our meaning by giving expression to our own feelings and desires.

And he continues on anything that gets in the way of that, it is that we have, sorry, let me try that again. Anything that gets in the way of that, however, it is that that we have defined it is an offense to our very person.

That which hinders my outward expression of my inner feelings, that which challenges or attempts to falsify my psychological beliefs about myself and thus to disturb my sense of inner well-being is by definition harmful and to be rejected.

And that means that traditional institutions must be transformed to conform to the psychological self, not vice versa. What he is essentially saying is we get to decide what makes us us.

[19:16] What makes us have true meaning, the purpose in life. It is not an outside reality that is put upon us, but it is an inner reality that we force the world, individuals or institutions, to conform to.

Does this not capture our current cultural moment? Is this not the prevailing religious structure of our time, the thing people are most passionate about, which is oftentimes themselves?

Is it something that rings true for you? It rings true for me. I hate to admit it, it does. I'm a very selfish person. I like things going my way. And if things get in the way of the way I have curated it to be in my mind, it's frustrating.

My initial reaction isn't, I should change. That needs to change. You see, the lie of expressive individualism is that it is the only way we can truly be free.

That is what it sells us. But the fact is, it is a form of slavery. In fact, I would put forward to you that it is the form of slavery. For it is a slavery of the mind.

[20:31] Okay? The mind. Okay? We become beholden to our desires and our appetites. We have no power to truly think about the well-being of others.

We are totally obsessed with the self. Even when we do charity or show kindness to a neighbor, it is done with an air of self-satisfaction.

We feel good about ourselves. That's kind of why we do it in the end. And by the way, it is really good to help people out even if your motives aren't great. Give money, give food to the food bank. They do not care what your motives are. Okay? It's still great to do it. Nevertheless, if we're talking about true charity, true love, true selflessness, forgiveness, even in our self-giving, we find that we are self-absorbed.

It's a problem. We find ourselves overindulging. We often treat others as the means to our ends.

[21 : 42] We also end up living with a whole boatload of shame. And oftentimes we experience emotional and relational and a kind of spiritual death.

In fact, the only freedom that this expressive individualism offers is a freedom from freedom. A freedom from righteousness. Paul says that in verse 20.

But consider a life in Christ. Slavery to Christ as Paul calls it. What does it result in? Verse 16. Righteousness. Which is to say a right way of living.

Freedom from sin. Verse 18. And then ultimately it leads to eternal life. Verse 22. So we have a paradox on our hands here. We have freedom from God being very clearly Paul shows it that it's very clearly slavery to sin and to death.

While slavery to God is freedom from impurity lawlessness and sin. Bit of a paradox here. So returning to Paul's opening question in verse 15.

[22 : 54] Let me read it for us. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means. Returning to Paul's opening question.

Since we are free from the law and under grace are we to sin? we find ourselves with a question that is not asked from a truly free person but from somebody seeking license to do what he or she knows is wrong.

And I would say license to do something is a whole lot different than freedom to do something.

Such a question comes from a heart not set free from the law by grace but one deeply enslaved to sin.

It also reflects the presumption upon the grace of God which fails to understand the gloriousness of God's grace of his kindness of his undeserved merit towards us.

The grace of God indeed makes us free but here's the million dollar question what does it make us free to do? How should we live in light of that freedom?

[24 : 03] This leads us to the second point sanctification and sin. We need to first recognize that our origin story is one of sin. We talked about that in our first point.

We you who were once slaves we were once slaves it is our origin story. The slavery that we have is deep it's in our bones it goes to the very core of who we are.

But again at conversion we become something different. Verse 17 I'll read this again. 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.

We have become something different. So we are born a certain way but then we have become something different. This becoming is a result of what does Paul say?

An obedience from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed. A lot of ink spilt on how to translate this. I just go by the smartest person I read and I think it boils down to basically this.

[25 : 17] Paul says you have received the gospel. The proclamation that Christ Jesus has died on your behalf he has died in your place for your sins you have been united to him given new life in him you have heard the gospel you have believed it in your heart and that this new belief has led to a commitment to an ongoing belief and then action.

We now have a new master we are under new management new management. You know management matters it does it matters in our own lives it matters in the world that we inhabit years and years and years ago when I was home from university basically worked like a dog Thursday doing landscaping Thursday would come and we play basketball in the evening and then we go to this pub called the Mad Hatter and it was awesome because my metabolism was unbelievable I would eat big giant poutine and have a Guinness like a giant blender of chemicals in my belly and we had a great time we had great friends everything was great and then one summer I came back and the Hatter became an oyster bar gross and it wasn't fun and everything was ruined and within like two or three years it was changed back to the Mad Hatter but the ship had sailed management matters it does the scriptures make it clear

Paul is making it clear that we have come under new management we are no longer enslaved to our previous slave master which is sin but now enslaved to Christ we have been made holy in God's sight however the process of growing into what we are is ongoing and requires his empowerment even though we are in Christ again no longer in Adam you can read about that chapter 5 and therefore we are free to live righteously we often don't we struggle the apostle Paul will really dive into this in chapter 7 when he says that we do the things that we do not want to do

and we don't do the things we do want to do nevertheless there's a growth in what we are right God has made us holy but then we have to grow in holiness and the apostle Paul will call this sanctification we see this in verses 19 and 22 let me read them for you verse 19 verse 22 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 three important things to consider before we wrap up the first is that action begets more action verse 19 if you look at it our behavior has a dynamic nature to it as we engage with either lawlessness or righteousness that behavior will grow conversely if we starve that behavior it will begin to shrink having a fire where we stoke it with wood and it continues to grow and grow and grow but we remove the heat source or the fuel source or the heat the oxygen the fire triangle is broken that fire will begin to dissipate there's momentum with our actions this is a big plug for spiritual disciplines that help us to get in the habit of doing what is right according to what God has commanded us but it's not an overnight thing it takes time it is like a muscle that you have to work therefore the apostle

Paul is saying that there is hope for victory over sin and for growth in our ability to live selflessly to love God with all our heart soul mind and strength and often what we'll see the most of is to love our neighbor as ourselves to love selflessly like Christ to serve others and be used by God to bring his peace and blessing to our homes and our work and it will soon we'll find become a joy and not a burden the second thing is that we must consciously choose to walk in this righteous life again verse 19 Paul says that we are to present our members our entire selves our appetites our desires everything that makes us us we need to present these to our new master and it's an ongoing action that we need to do thirdly such action finds its end or its telos or its ultimate objective in heaven which means that the things we do for christ the righteous actions that we embrace the things we say yes to that are holy and good that turn the turning from sin and the turning to god it has eternal significance we spend our time in this life working to curate the best possible life that we can have to have the best experiences the best enjoyment but this life is fleeting i said in the early service earlier this morning i'm not sure my children know my grandfather's name i don't think they do and the likelihood is in four generations they might not know your name your children your nieces your nephews the next generation life is fleeting okay life is fleeting it's here today it's gone tomorrow and yet we spend all of this time in it paul is saying that it's actually the life to come is what we need to think about because the things that we say yes to the righteous life will pour into eternity just consider this for a moment in christ a new reality has been given to us that frees us from a life of selfish ambition and conceit a life in which god himself gives us strength to grow in holiness and righteousness so that what we do in this fleeting life will have eternal significance is this not what we're after expressive individualism promises it but it never delivers no amount of money or job security style prestige a self curated identity can deliver eternal life eternal happiness you see that kind of freedom is indeed slavery and it's an anti sanctifying slavery it does not make us more holy but less we do not become useful to god or a blessing to others rather we become a hindrance and a liability let's end with this sin will cost us everything if we continue to engage in it it promises us significance but it robs us of the opportunity for eternal significance we are duped into thinking we will be useful and necessary and we end up using others to bolster our sense of worth it promises a free reward but pays us a wage of death and friends sin always pays on time and in full but consider slavery to

Christ on the other hand we have this wonderful offer of being enslaved to Christ but it's very clear here that Paul says it is freedom it leads to sanctification it leads to our growth and righteousness and holiness and ultimately leads to eternal life and it cannot be enjoyed apart from Christ okay we find that the promise is not linked to an idea but to a person and that person has gone before us and we will be with him forever and ever and ever he is the one who purifies us so that we become in this life what we will be for eternity it's quite the offer and it's all because what we've seen in the previous chapter is that God in Christ unites himself to us he doesn't say hey listen climb the endless ladder to heaven and then you can be united with me he comes down and he scoops us up into himself and all of this friends is a gift it is grace itself let's read this last verse verse 23 for the wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ

[34 : 41] Jesus our Lord it is a gift that God gives and it is a gift given because of love for love's sake it is a source of truth and goodness and the very soil upon which beauty can be planted and grown there could be no clearer choice no clear dichotomy to choose from so friends come to Christ and present your whole selves to him as servants as slaves and then enjoy freedom not just in this life but for eternity so