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Slaves of God

Romans 6:15-23

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I was reading this week that some schools in the Lower Mainland are introducing Internet filters that bar kids from accessing social media while at school. My first thought was, “Good luck with that!” When I was a computer tech I worked on Macs for several school districts and one of the things I was frequently asked was how the kids were getting around the school’s porn filters. They installed filtering software, but the kids quickly figured out how to bypass it. They upgraded or changed the software and the kids would just as quickly figure out how to bypass the new software. At least once a month a parent would bring a computer into our shop and complain that even with filtering software or a Christian internet provider that was supposed to filter out porn, her son was still managing to find it. I told them that there’s no perfect filter and kids are diligent and they’re smart. They *will* find the holes. If porn is a problem, don’t rely on software or a service provider to babysit your kids. Put the computer somewhere in the house where you can monitor it and then be there when your kids are online.

I couldn’t help but think of this as I was studying Romans 6 this week. In verse 19, Paul writes, “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.” In light of all this talk about being slaves to sin and then being freed by Jesus, Paul issues a challenge here. It should speak to everyone, but I think it speaks loudest to those who have come to Jesus as

adults and know what it’s like to live in sin’s slavery. Paul challenges us to think of all the ways we once applied ourselves so diligently to sin. Thinking about it, planning it out, figuring out ways to get around the obstacles that were in the way of it, making this or that sinful activity or this or that sinful attitude an integral part of who we were. We were sometimes just like those kids on the school computers, working diligently to access those blocked websites. And now, Paul asks, “Now that you are in Jesus the Messiah, are you putting the same amount of effort and diligence into God’s kingdom and seeing his purposes fulfilled?”

Paul’s challenge brings out the contrast between these two slaveries he’s been writing about. It also heads off another possible objection to it all. He began Chapter 6 answering the people who said, “But Paul, if you tell people that where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more, it’s just going to encourage people to sin.” Now, in verse 14, he just said that we are under grace, not law and he anticipates someone saying, “But Paul, if we’re not under the law, doesn’t that make us sinners?” Here’s Paul’s response in verse 15:

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

This would have made more sense to the Jews in the Roman church than it does to many people today. Remember that Jews considered themselves to be “under the law” and Paul has said that if we are in Jesus the Messiah, then we are *not* under the law, but under grace. This was aimed mainly at Jewish Christians. But to be a Jew and not be under the law was nonsense. To be under the law was what it meant to be a Jew. Not to be under the law was to be a “sinner”. “Sinner” was a technical term. Think of the Pharisees murmuring about Jesus, scandalised that he ate with tax collectors and *sinners*. Sinners were people who didn’t live according to

the law—people who were not “under the law”. Gentiles were “sinners” in that sense. So how could a Jew be “not under the law”?

What Paul’s been getting at here, in part and as he directs some of what he’s been saying specifically at Jewish Christians, is that Jesus opened the door to another way of being God’s people and of being Israel. And to live in the sphere of grace instead of the sphere of law—which is part of the old Adam solidarity or Adam kingdom—is the key. “So,” he writes, “No, no longer being under the law doesn’t make you a sinner, it doesn’t make you stop being one of God’s people, it doesn’t mean you’ve abandoned your Jewishness. It certainly doesn’t mean you’ve abandoned an upright and holy life. Not at all. Grace has simply introduced a new—and *better*—way of being God’s people.

As we read between the lines in Paul’s epistles, we can hear people murmuring that his teaching is going to make people think they can just do whatever they want, without the restraint of the law. It’s kind of ironic when you consider that today, people tend to see Paul as the strict killjoy of the New Testament. But in his own day, people were accusing him of just the opposite. But Paul’s point is that everyone in this world is, in a sense, a slave to something or someone. As he’s been writing, there are two humanities or two kingdoms. We’re all born into the family of Adam and, because of that, we’re slaves to sin and doomed to die. But, thanks be to God, Jesus has come into the world, he has died for us and in our place, and then when he rose from the dead he became the father of a new family—a family of people who are no longer slaves to sin and death, but a family of people who have died with him to sin and are now alive to God. Jesus’ family is a family of people who are in the process of being restored to our true humanity—the humanity that Adam gave up when he rebelled against God and gave death free reign of the world.

And that humanity, that vocation, was to bear God's image—to be his stewards or his representatives in the world.

Paul struggles to find the words to express just what this means, but the story of the Israelites and their exodus from Egypt works well as an analogy. The difficult thing is that it forces us to talk about both spheres as slaveries. On the one hand there's slavery to sin, which leads to death and on the other there's a new "slavery" that leads to righteousness—to being vindicated by God, to being declared to be in the right, and ultimately to the life of the age to come. It can be hard to wrap out heads around his argument. It's easy to think of sin's grip as slavery, but how is life in Jesus slavery? That's where Paul's analogy starts to break down. He actually apologises for this in verse 19, but this analogy is the best he can come up with to make the point that freedom doesn't necessarily mean no restraints or just doing whatever we want. Again, consider that what Jesus restores us to, this life of the age to come, isn't just a life of eternally floating around on clouds or an eternity of just doing whatever we want, but a restoration of our original vocation—a vocation of service to God. And it's a joyful service, because it's what we were created for and it's where the desire of our hearts is fixed. An analogy that works well today is to think of driving a car. We often think of having a car and being able to drive as giving us a sort of freedom. Teenagers can suddenly be free to go and do things on their own once they can drive and, conversely, it's often hard for older people to give up driving, because it so often means a loss of freedom and having to rely on others. Being able to drive gives us freedom. But consider that that freedom doesn't mean that we can get in our cars and drive wherever and however we want. You have to follow the rules of the road. Without those rules—if everyone were free to choose which side of the road to drive

on or how fast to drive down Fifth Street or whether or not to stop at stop signs and red lights, no one would be free to drive at all. And, now, just so with life in Jesus. Paul goes on 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?

There are two possible masters out there. We can obey sin as master, be separated from God, and inevitably die. Or we can obey obedience, as Paul puts it. It's a funny way of saying it, but "obedience" is his shorthand for obedience of Jesus to God's plan of redemption. If we submit to "obedience", to Jesus, to this whole sphere of grace, God will declare us to be his people, to be in the right, and he will vindicate us in the final judgement. You see, this is what the Jews were after when they submitted themselves to the law—to being God's people. But Paul's pointing to a better way. Submit yourselves to Jesus.

Of course, this is what the people in the Roman church had already done. It's just that they hadn't grasped the implications. Again, much of what Paul's addressing in Romans is what it means to be Jews and Gentiles in Jesus the Messiah. They're not under law, but under grace. Why, because that's what happens when you submit to Jesus as they had. This is what he's reminding them of in 17-19:

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.

This point is so important, Paul makes it twice and from two different angles. They were slaves of sin, but now they've become obedient to "the standard of teaching". And then he says it from another angle: Having been set free from sin, they've become slaves of righteousness. (And he adds this apology for the limitations of his slavery analogy. It only works to a point, but it's the best he can come up with to get this through their thick heads.)

So, first, he reminds them that they have submitted or become obedient to this standard or pattern of teaching and that they've done so "from the heart". Paul probably has a baptismal affirmation in mind—the same thing he brings up in verse 9 of Chapter 10. He writes there about the "word of faith", which is confessing that Jesus is Lord and believing that God raised him from the dead. It's an affirmation that by his death and resurrection, Jesus has become God's King. And that fits perfectly with this idea of slavery that Paul's talking about. Whereas sin was once our master, we have now, in faith and through our baptism, submitted ourselves to the lordship of Jesus the Messiah.

And when Paul writes about their—our—having done this "from the heart" he's referring to the work of the Holy Spirit. This was what God had promised through the prophets. Israel had failed to keep the law, but God was going to do something new. He promised to send his Spirit to transform hearts of stone in to hearts of flesh and he would put his law in the hearts of people, enabling them to do what they had never been able to do in the past—to fully love and live for God. It also ties in with this idea of the law. The law put the focus of the people on external obedience, but the Spirit changes the heart. Before, you might not kill your neighbour, but you might still be murderously angry with him—you might still hate his guts. But because of the Spirit, a

transformation has happened. Jesus' people actually love their enemies, they pray for them, and they do good to them.

From the other angle, Paul talks about being set free from sin and made slaves of righteousness. I've sometimes heard people say that this means we're slaves to virtue now—slaves to right behaviour. But Paul's point goes much deeper than that. Right behaviour—holiness—is the result of being slaves of righteousness. When he writes about righteousness here, it's Paul's shorthand for God's kingdom and the sphere of grace. Remember again the theme of Romans: God's righteousness—his faithfulness to his covenant promises—is revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. By faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, we are made his people, we submit to him as the world's true Lord and as the one who is making all things new, and in return he pours the Holy Spirit into us. He makes us dead to sin and alive to God.

Paul's main point throughout here is our *status*, but he can't talk about that without coming back to the practical upshot of it: We've been transferred from one kingdom to another. We have been given a new citizenship. We need to live out this new reality that we have in Jesus. This is his point in the second half of verse 19:

For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

Paul takes us back to Chapter 1, where he talked about our core problem: rebelliousness, idolatry, and impurity. We were slaves to it all. The result was that we lived he says, to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness—we progressed from one sin to another, digging ourselves into

sin's slavery further and further. But if we are in the Messiah, that life is now dead to us. We've been crucified with him and raised to the life of God—so we need to live that way. We need to present our members—our bodies, our hearts, our minds to the sphere of righteousness, which he says, leads to sanctification—to holiness, to the state that allows us to enter the presence of God. It's a term from the days of the tabernacle and the temple. Nothing unholy was allowed into the temple without first being purified and that's just what's happened to us through faith in Jesus.

Again, our submission to Jesus, to holiness, to grace is slavery, but it's not as though it's an equal and opposite slavery to that of sin and death. It's a matter of joyfully giving our allegiance to the God whose faithfulness to his promises has rescued us through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Finally, in verses 20-23, Paul brings us back to where he started this line of thought in 5:20-21. The law allowed for sin to be sort of concentrated in Israel, but because sin abounded, God was able to pour out even more grace. Sin reigned in death, but now grace reigns through God's covenant faithfulness and, through Jesus, leads to the life of the age to come. Now he says essentially the same thing, but puts in terms of bearing fruit:

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. (Romans 6:20-21)

It's an odd thing that sinners are often oblivious to their bondage. They look at Christians and think we're silly for serving God and holding ourselves to a standard of holiness. But Paul says to look at the fruit—look at where things are headed. Sin may look good

today, but the end is death. Life is with God and sin leads in the opposite direction. And it's not like sinners themselves can't grasp this. When was the last time you heard someone say that being angry or being greedy or being sexually immoral, stealing or hating or drunk led them closer to God? We know, even if we won't admit it, that sin leads us away from him, that it hurts others and hurts our relationships, that it drives us away from true humanity. Even when we didn't know Jesus, we felt the shame of sin as we saw the disintegration it caused around us. Deep down we all know that sin leads to death.

In contrast, Paul writes in verse 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.

Labouring under the slavery of sin produces the fruit of death, but laboring for God's kingdom produces sanctification—it makes us holy and fit for his presence, and the fruit it bears is the life of God's age to come. At this point Paul's still talking in terms of two kinds of slavery, which may not sound very exciting. Why would we want to be slaves to anyone? Why is one better than the other. Well, here's where he turns a corner. The fruit is certainly better if we are slaves to God. But then in verse 23 Paul explains that these aren't equal-but-opposite slaveries. He goes from putting it in terms of fruit to putting it in terms of wages and gifts. The wages of sin is death. You work for sin, you earn death. Adam and Eve rejected God, they were cast out of his presence, and they began to die. They were cut off from the life that exists in God's presence. In Genesis and Revelation that life is represented by a tree, first in Eden and then in the New Jerusalem. Whether there was or

will be a literal tree of life—who knows—but the point of the image is that the tree *represents* the life to be had in and only in the presence of God. Adam and Eve were cut off because of their sin. But Jesus, by his death and resurrection, has created a new people of God and begun the work of restoring Creation—and humanity—to what it was intended to be in the beginning. When he rose from the tomb, he inaugurated the age to come. He is in the process of making all things new.

And yet, Paul stresses here, finally: while sin earns death, the life of the age to come is God's free gift. And this is the big difference between these two "slaveries". One truly is slavery. Sin is a cruel master who leads us only to death. But if we will, in faith, give our allegiance to the Lord Jesus—even though we were all first his enemies—he will lead us back to the life of God. We didn't earn it. We *earned* death. But grace has reached down into sin's slavery, pulled us out, and has restored us to life. It's a gift given to those who don't deserve it. In Jesus, then, we have an obligation towards holiness. It's not a chore, but a joyful duty, because holiness is the very essence of God's life and God's kingdom. Holiness today prepares us to receive the gift when it finally comes in all its fullness. Holiness is what it means—and has always meant—to be God's people. All the way back to the law, in Leviticus, God's call to his people was: "You shall be holy, for I am holy." It wasn't something we could manage. Israel failed miserably. We all fail miserably. But God's grace, given through Jesus in our baptism, has washed away the failure and implanted in us his Spirit, finally making us holy from the inside out and, in the process, preparing us for the life of God's age to come. There's a common perception that Christianity is about some arcane or arbitrary list of dos and don'ts, but that's not it at all. Christianity is about being made

new by Jesus and the Spirit in a way that prepares us, that makes us fit for life in God's new Creation. And this is why, Brothers and Sisters, Paul calls us to throw ourselves into this new life, serving God and pursuing holiness with all our might. We were once wholly committed to serving sin, which leads only to death. How much more committed ought we to be to Jesus and to holiness, which prepare us for God's gift of life?

Let us pray: Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift alone your faithful people offer you true and laudable service: Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*