

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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Sermon Title: Somebody's Slave

Sermon Text: Romans 6:15-23

Rom. 6:15 ¶ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

Rom. 6:16 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?

Rom. 6:17 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,

Rom. 6:18 and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

Rom. 6:19 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.

Rom. 6:20 ¶ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

Rom. 6:21 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.

Rom. 6:22 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.

Rom. 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Main Point: Every human being is a slave – either a slave of sin, or a slave of Christ. Slaves of sin receive their wages: more sin and death. Slaves of Christ receive the gift Christ gives: life and righteousness.

Outline:

1. Slavery as a Voluntary Way of Life
2. Slavery to Sin and its wages
3. Slavery to God and his gift

Introduction

When we think of something like “slavery” we tend to think of it mainly as a matter of chains, prisons, and forced labor. We think of the practice. The institution. We think of it as something external—something that happens *to* us against our will. But in the first century, right around the time Paul wrote this letter to the Romans, the Roman philosopher Seneca wrote something profound about the human condition. He said this:

“Show me a man who is not a slave; one is a slave to lust, another to greed, another to ambition, and all men are slaves to fear... no servitude is more disgraceful than that which is self-imposed.”

Seneca saw the problem. He saw that you could be a Roman Emperor... you could hold the power of life and death over the known world, and yet still be completely enslaved to your own temper or your own paranoia. He saw that slavery isn't just about who holds the whip; it's about what holds your heart.

Pagans like Seneca could diagnose the problem. In fact, even today this is something that unbelievers are very good at. They diagnose problems, but they give the wrong answers.

Seneca saw that we are all slaves to our passions, but he couldn't offer a cure. He couldn't offer a new Master in the place of the old one. And that is exactly what

Paul is doing for us in our text today. You see, Paul agrees that we are all slaves, but he shatters the illusion that we can ever just “be free” in a vacuum. He presents us with a choice not between slavery and freedom, but between two different masters.

And Paul tells us, there is an incompatibility between these masters. He’s saying, “we *will* serve somebody, but not both.” We are actually slaves to somebody. The question is, will we be God’s slaves? Or will we be slaves of sin?

There is no such thing as a life that is not devoted to any great thing or purpose. The idea of an indifferent neutral life that’s not devoted to anyone or anything is a fantasy, and Paul is exposing that here.

So today let’s take up Paul’s challenge. And I’d like to map out that challenge with three main points today. First, we need to reckon with our slavery as a voluntary way of life. Second, we need to deal with slavery to sin and its wages. And then third we need to take seriously the need for us to be slaves to God, and his gift.

So let’s understand our slavery from this passage today.

1. Slavery as a Voluntary Way of Life

First, Paul presents us with slavery as a voluntary way of life.

In verse 16 Paul says,

“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?”

Paul is giving us the real framework for thinking about our life, our service, our purpose. Everything, he says, ultimately stems from our slavery to someone whom we are obeying. Naturally, all of us are born as slaves of sin.

I’m using this term “voluntary slavery” on purpose. We are not enslaved against our will. We are absolute willing participants in our own enslavement. We have sold ourselves into slavery, and every time we sin, we do it because we want to. There are no unwilling slaves when it comes to what Paul is talking about here.

You can see that because he says “if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey.”

He's telling us, “If you devote yourselves to sin, then you are slaves of sin, and you do so because you want it.” I’m emphasizing this because we need to recognize our own complicity in our situation. Ours is an age of blame passing. Everything we do and experience can be blamed on someone else in our minds. But the truth is, we have each willingly put ourselves here because we want this. And we keep willingly participating in it.

I need to mention two aspects of this voluntary slavery.

The first aspect of this slavery is that it is unavoidable because slavery really is an unavoidable part of life. There is no neutrality. We give our allegiance to God, or the god of Self, but our commitment and allegiance is always somewhere.

When we hear the word 'slavery,' we usually think of chains, prisons, and whips. We might think of the sort of slavery in George Orwell’s *1984*—a boot stamping on a human face. But there was another 20th-century thinker, Aldous Huxley, who warned of a much more dangerous kind of slavery.

In *Brave New World*, Huxley imagined a future where people weren't forced to be slaves; Instead he feared a day when people were conditioned to *enjoy* it. Later in his life, he wrote this chilling prediction:

“A really efficient totalitarian state would be one in which the all-powerful executive... controls a population of slaves who do not have to be coerced, because they love their servitude.”

Huxley seemed to understand this part of human nature. He knew that the most effective prison isn't one with bars you can see, but one with pleasures you can't resist.

This gets us closer to the voluntary slavery Paul is describing in Romans 6. We aren't dragged into sin kicking and screaming; we walk into it because we want it. We present ourselves as slaves because, in the moment, we love the servitude.

We don't get to convince ourselves that we're free just because we live unconsciously on default settings.

Just because we're not conscious of our slavery doesn't mean we're free. Much of our life is built around things we don't often consider much. The fact that we don't think about it does not mean we are free.

Ultimately Paul is saying, at the end of the day we really have one overarching, ultimate master that we live for. Is it God? Paul says, for the Christian it has to be. We will have ultimate allegiance to sin or to God.

The second aspect of this slavery is that we *choose* our master. We are voluntary slaves.

I think it's important to say that we do make choices. The Bible is full of people making choices: some of them good, but most of them quite bad.

Now, many people make a *lot* of the fact that we make choices. They say, "Yes. We make choices. And this means that no one is in charge of me, and I am the master of my own fate. Because I make choices, I am in charge."

The problem is, Scripture tells us that even in our choices, we are showing who or what we're serving. So what happens is, because we do make choices we deceive ourselves into thinking that the existence of choice means that at any time we are so free that we can do anything. But we will never make a choice that is contrary to our strongest desire at any moment. We make choices, but our choices are guided by and informed by our desires.

You see, our choices are not the full story. The real story is our heart disposition that is *behind* our choices. There's no question that we make choices. Of course we do. The question is *why* we choose the things that we choose.

And what the Bible says is that we love sin and because of that we choose sin. Our greater love – our heart disposition – gives rise to our choice. Look at this in Scripture.

- Proverbs 2:14 speaks of those "who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil."
- 2 Thessalonians 2:12 speaks of those who didn't just choose sin, but who "had pleasure in unrighteousness."

- Jesus says explicitly that people sin because they prefer it and love it more than God’s light. Listen to this from John 3:19: “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.”
- In John 8:34 he says, “Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.”

So you see, there is a greater love that drives and motivates our choices. When we choose sin, we’re not just making a choice, we’re displaying what we love. We’re actually showing our deepest heart commitments. Our choices are driven by our loves, our affections, and our real loyalties. Who is our master?

This is why I say, the slavery Paul is talking about is voluntary slavery. We are really *willing* to be enslaved.

In our next two points that remain we need to consider the two masters that Paul says we have to serve: one or the other. Either sin, or God. But not both.

2. Slavery to Sin and its wages

Let’s talk about the first master Paul want us to consider: Our second point is slavery to sin and its wages.

Paul paints a picture here that helps us to understand this. In verse 16, he says

“you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience which leads to righteousness.”

So he tells us what slavery to sin means. And then he says something more about slavery to sin in verse 21:

“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.”

And then the final piece of what slavery to sin means is in verse 23:

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Over and over, Scripture tells us that when we devote ourselves to sin, it doesn’t lead to anything good: it leads to death.

If you've ever been a parent, you know that your children would do totally self-destructive things if you weren't there to teach and direct them. They'd put their hands on the hot stove, they'd eat candy until their teeth fell out, and they'd probably walk out into traffic.

One of my very first memories as a little kid was that I was maybe 3 or 4 years old, playing in a fenced yard next to a busy road. I remember trying to climb that fence. My dad grabbed me and pulled me back, saying "Owie." He was showing me that just because I wanted out of the yard didn't mean it would make me happy; it would only get me flattened.

We remain more like toddlers than we'd like to admit. My dad was really showing me that just because I wanted something didn't mean that it was going to make me happy.

We're spiritual toddlers, and we need our Father to guide us. It's why he's given us his law. Paul says, if we won't have God as our master, we'll have a *destructive* master in his place.

So yes, our slavery to our appetites can feel good in the moment, but it's death.

I need to say, many people struggle with this, because if you just went to someone on the street and said, "Are you a Christian?" and they said "no," then if you told them, "Did you know that the Bible says you are in slavery to sin?" they will think you are being ridiculous. Why? Because most of them don't *feel* like they are in any kind of slavery. There's no one there telling them what they want to do. They're not aware of anyone or anything controlling them. But we saw this already: everyone is committed and serving something ultimate. Everyone has a master; they just don't think about it.

This is part of what is so insidious about this slavery: it is voluntary slavery, and so we're sort of strangely fine with it.

Here's a real-world example: Addicts are generally unaware of the bondage they are in.

We want it, but we don't feel like we're enslaved. If you have ever known anyone with a serious alcohol problem you might have heard them say something like, "I

can quit anytime I want. I just don't want to quit." They are being controlled by something, but they are also not really aware of their being controlled by it.

And this analogy is helpful, I think. People are just not aware of their slavery to sin because it's like trying to tell a fish what water is like. They live in sin, they serve it, they want it, they like it. It's a habit. They don't always like what it does to them or what it does to their lives, but they are doing what they want.

There are some exceptions to this. Some people do hit rock bottom, and sometimes in those moments, they will occasionally get glimpses of light and recognize, "I'm doing things that are hurting me. I'm doing things that are destroying me. Why do I want such horrible things, and why do I keep hitting my head against the wall?"

This may especially happen with addicts, or just with someone whose sin has really frightened them.

The mistake is in thinking that it's only the extreme cases where people are enslaved. No. In reality, those extreme cases are just showing what all of us live like to some degree: bound to our desires and appetites, serving ourselves rather than living for God and his glory.

You see, regardless of how we feel about it, or whether we really perceive it to be so, it is objectively true that all people who are outside of Christ are slaves of sin.

Now, Paul draws attention to what we get for our life of slavery. Slavery to sin does pay, actually. It's an odd form of slavery where you get something for your devotion and your work. What do we get for our indentured servitude to sin? Paul says that the answer is "death."

A person who spends their entire life living for themselves, indulging themselves, serving themselves, following their every selfish instinct... when they get to the end of it all, it is truly a wasted life. An empty self-serving existence that is satisfied only by its own appetites and no greater or higher purpose.

So what sin does is, it tugs at us and lures us toward meaninglessness, momentary pleasure, and personal satisfaction. But it's a road that dead-ends. Literally.

Everyone is a slave. Some are aware of it, some are not. We are either a slave to a horrible master, or we are a slave to a wonderful and loving master.

3. Slavery to God and his gift

And that's why our third point is the far superior Master that Paul is pressing all of his readers toward, and the reason why he says we should not sin. "Slavery to God and his gift."

You know, he's already said, "If you present yourselves to sin, you are its slave," but then in verse 17 he keeps going to something far happier:

"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, you have become slaves of righteousness."

And then he says even more in verse 19:

"Just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and lawlessness leading to lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification."

I want you to see that Paul is showing us real freedom here. To be in Christ means that the bondage to sin is broken.

And notice carefully how Paul puts it in verse 23. He breaks his own pattern that it seems like he's setting up. See, he told us the wages of sin is death, but he does not say "the wages of righteousness is eternal life." It might drive you a little crazy if you have a little OCD running through your blood or whatever. But if he said that, it would mean our obedience earns heaven. He doesn't do it, and he won't say it. Instead, he switches the word entirely: the free gift of God is eternal life. We *earn* death; God *gives* life.

Paul refuses to say that your obedience leads to justification; instead he says it leads to *sanctification*. Paul never compromises on the Apostolic conviction that our growth in holiness and obedience does not contribute even one bit to our justification. But—he does say—it leads to sanctification. It leads to holiness. We

will become more holy as we obey and live as slaves of righteousness, but we won't be more justified. Paul has already been very clear on that.

Here's why I'm making a big deal of this: If our hope of justification depended on our performance, we would have a very shallow, fleeting, and insecure kind of hope. It would be a hope that always depends on us. We would constantly be wondering if we've done enough, and could never actually do enough to give ourselves real peace. We really would have no peace.

God's answer is unmatched: *all* of our peace is founded on Christ and his perfect work. Our obedience makes us more holy, but not more justified.

So when we do obey, we do so from a place of security and peace, not uncertainty and fear.

We've had all these metaphors and illustrations from Paul getting this across that faith and union with Christ motivate obedience, not sin. How should we think of ourselves? As dead to sin and alive to God. As slaves of a good master who loves us, and who reject the old master, sin.

There simply is no middle ground. Jesus says in Luke 16,

“No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will love the one and despise the other.”

No middle ground. We don't get to straddle multiple loyalties. Will you have God as your master? If you won't, then sin really and truly is your master. Sin is pulling your strings, and you aren't free at all.

You don't get to have just a part of Jesus. We either receive Christ by faith or we don't. Scripture repeatedly tells us, we're either united to Christ by faith or we're not.

Conclusion

As we conclude, I want to address two groups.

First, if you are not yet in Christ by faith: it is urgent that you face your reality. You are a slave of sin, accumulating its wages. The answer is here: Turn to Jesus Christ.

Admit your need, repent, and open your hand to receive his mercy. He came to seek and save the lost.

Second, to those who are Christians: John Chrysostom once said, *"If even the recollection of your former slavery makes you ashamed... think how much you have gained by being set free."*

We are like Israel, rescued from Egypt. It's good to remember where we came from. To remember our slavery. But why go back to Pharaoh? We're free now! Why go back to sin when all we ever got from it was death? Now, we have the freedom to live the good life.

So instead of looking back at the old life, or dwelling on the shame of our former slavery, let's rejoice in what God is doing in us now, and look forward to the day when the chains will be lifted completely, and we will never again feel the pull of anything other than true righteousness.

Let's pray.