

Slaves of Righteousness

Romans 6:15-23

November 19, 2017

¹⁵ *What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!* 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?* 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,* ¹⁸ *and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.* 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.*

²⁰ *For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.* 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.* 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.* ²³ *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Romans 6:15-23 (ESV)

Many of you will be happy to know that after today we are going to be taking a break from our series on Romans, as next week we have a Thanksgiving message and the following Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent. It seems like a nice time for a break, perhaps even providential.

Paul begins our passage this morning with almost the exact same words that he began our passage last week: “What then, are we to [keep on] sinning because we are not under law but under grace?” And his answer is the same, “By no means!”

Then he talks about “slaves,” which is a difficult word for many to talk about today, and rightfully so. As a nation we are still trying to come to grips with our very dark past which included hundreds of years of enslaving black people.

At the beginning of my message this morning it is important that we define some terms. Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines:

Slave – ¹Someone who is legally owned by another person and forced to work for that person without pay; ²a person who is strongly influenced and controlled by something; ³one that is completely subservient to a dominating influence.

Being a slave to God (vs. a slave of God) is out of indebtedness. Indebtedness meaning owing something (such as money or thanks) to someone; owing gratitude or recognition to another.

This morning’s message is really a good lead in to this week of Thanksgiving. As we enter into this week the most important question we need to ask ourselves is “who are we giving thanks to, and what are we really thankful for?”

Righteousness – morally good: following religious or moral laws; acting in accord with divine or moral law; free from guilt or sin; morally right or justifiable.

But as with many words, our English definitions are not the same as the biblical definitions, or it is often limited. In the Bible, the New Testament word that we translate in English as righteousness means ¹the original moral state or condition of man prior to his fall into sin; ²the state of being in proper relationship with God; and/or ³the act of doing what is in agreement with God's standards;

There is a right way to be “slaves of righteousness” or “slaves of God” and there is a wrong way. Jesus spoke of a false righteousness which is found in those who trust in themselves as righteous or justified because of their own moral accomplishments and/or behavior, but he taught that the truly righteous are those who acknowledge their sin and trust in God for forgiveness and His righteousness. The Pharisees were those who were “slaves of righteousness” in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons. We need to be careful that we don't do the same things.

We become “slaves to righteousness,” “slaves to God,” out of gratitude, out of indebtedness to God for what He has already done for us through His own Son, Jesus Christ. By God's great mercy He has offered to all humankind this wonderful gift, this gift which is beyond compare. The question is not just are you going to accept the gift, but how are you going to respond to the gift?

While the different translations of the Bible often interchange the words “slave” and “servant,” most often the original meaning was “slave.” Jesus most often used the word that in its original meaning meant slave. In his parable of the talents in Matthew 25, in almost all of the contemporary translations the word “servant” is used, but the more appropriate translation of the word Jesus used is “slave.”

You ask, “what is the difference?” Well, we like the word “servant” better. It doesn't seem to be as subservient or harsh as slave. We often sing the song, “Will you Let Me Be Your Servant,” why not, “Will you Let Me Be Your Slave?” There are some other differences between the two. When we think of a “servant” we think of a person who has agreed to give part of his or her time to their master, receiving a certain wage for doing so. Within that agreed upon time frame the servant is at the master's disposal and command. But when the time ends, he or she is free to do as they like. Not so for a slave, especially in the time that Jesus spoke and Paul wrote. A slave had no time that belonged to himself, every single moment belonged to his master, he was his master's absolute and exclusive possession.

Paul is almost apologizing for having to use the term slave, but he doesn't know how else to get his point across. “I am speaking here in human terms, because of your natural limitations” (v. 19). Paul apologizes because he doesn't like to compare the Christian life to slavery but he wants to make the point that a Christian can have no master but God.

As William Barclay points out in his commentary on Romans, “A Christian cannot give part of his life to God and another part to the world. With God it is all – or nothing. So long as a man keeps some part of his life without God, he is not really a Christian. A Christian is a man or a

woman who has given complete control of his or her life to Christ, holding nothing back. No man or woman who has ever done that can ever think of using God's grace as an excuse for sin."

Paul begins with the same words or question in our passage this week as he did last week's because he wants to get the point across that as Christians we really only have two choices, we can continue to offer our body to sin or we can offer it to our Lord and master Jesus Christ for His glory, honor and righteousness.

Paul will begin his second half of his letter to the early Christians in Rome, Romans 12, hopefully that which we will get to at some point next year, with these words:

Therefore, I urge you [I implore you], brothers and sisters, in view of God's Great mercy [what he has done for you in Christ Jesus], to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. Romans 12:1-2a (NIV)

I hope and pray that Ohio Supreme Court Justice, Bill O'Neill who wants to be the next Governor of Ohio, doesn't proclaim himself to be a Christian, especially after his Facebook posting this week where he seemed to be bragging about giving his body over the past 50 years to more than 50 different women. There certainly didn't seem to be any sense of remorse or repentance in his posting. If you have any questions recently about where we are as a nation regarding the "Righteousness of God," when it comes to sexuality, power, violence, or race (just to name a few areas), read the paper, watch or listen to the news, go on the internet.

In all of Romans, chapter 6, what Paul is trying to communicate here is the interplay between what God has done for us and what we do. It is the difference between the "indicative," where we already stand before God because of our faith in Jesus Christ, and the "imperative," how God calls us to respond based on what He has already done.

So in the former he says, "we have already died to sin" (v. 2), "our old self was already crucified with him" (v.6), "we are dead to sin but alive to God" (v. 11), "we have been brought from death to life" (v. 13), "you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of righteousness" (v. 18), "you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God" (v. 22).

But Paul intersperses the indicatives with the imperatives that point out that we too have a role in winning the battle against sin: "Do not let sin reign" (v. 12), "do not offer the parts of the body (or its members) to sin . . . but . . . offer yourselves to God" (v. 13), "offer the parts of your body as slaves of righteousness leading to sanctification (holiness)", (v. 19).

The theological problem throughout all of human history is how do we hold those two together – what God has done for us and what we do? The answer is that the indicative – "what God has done," has to always come first. Our response has to always be based on the recognition of what God has already done for us. Throughout human history God has been the one who always takes the initiative. In grace God acts to help His people and then He asks His people to respond.

To use the phrase of other theologians over the years:

“Being Precedes Acting”

“Christians are called to become what they are”

“Becoming what we will be”

“Justification by faith and sanctification by struggle”

The apostle Paul knew who he already was in Christ (his standing before God) and who he was called to become (and knew he would never get there during his time here on earth).

²⁴ Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; ²⁷ but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (NASB)

As Christians we are called to live out of our position in Christ, we move from our position to practice, a practice which looks different than how the rest of the world lives, whether that be in some third world nation, or in Iraq or Afghanistan, or Israel or Palestine, North Korea or South Korea, Russia or the United States of America.

Being “freed from sin,” does not mean that we will ever be completely free from sinning during our life here on earth. All of us are still capable of sinning. But we should no longer be enslaved to sin and it should no longer have free reign in our bodies. Hopefully we are moving in the right direction, or as Eugene Peterson says, our Christian journey is a “Long Obedience in the Same Direction.” Sometimes we take two steps forward and one step back. Some believers are more faithful and obedient than others but all true Christians are equally freed from the bondage to sin and equally enslaved to God, equally granted sanctification and equally granted eternal life. The climax to this part of Paul’s letter comes in v. 23, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Jesus Christ is the only way from sin to righteousness, from eternal death to eternal life. The Apostle Paul said it. Jesus’ representative disciple Peter said it in Acts 4:12, “there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved.” And most importantly, Jesus himself said it, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). If we want to know what biblical “righteousness” looks like, we need to look no further than Jesus Christ, his teachings and his life.

German Pastor and Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned for several years by the Nazi’s and was executed just before the end of World War II. His most famous book is entitled *The Cost of Discipleship*, and one of the main themes of the book is what he called “the gospel of cheap grace.” It is the same theme which the apostle Paul is trying to convey in our passage this morning:

“Cheap grace amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs. Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin . . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.

“Costly grace on the other hand is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him . . . When Martin Luther spoke of grace, he always implied a corollary that it cost him his own life, the life which was now subject to the absolute obedience of Christ.

“Happy are they who, knowing that grace, can live in the world without being of it, who by following Jesus Christ, are so assured of their heavenly citizenship that they are truly free to live their lives in this world.”

Or more contemporary, John MacArthur writes in his commentary on this passage:

“Jesus Christ calls to himself those who are willing to be inwardly transformed by Him, who desire an entirely new nature that is created in His own holy likeness. He calls to Himself those who are willing to die with Him in order to be raised with Him, who are willing to relinquish slavery to their sin for slavery to His righteousness. And when men and women come to Him on His terms, He changes their destiny from eternal death to eternal life.”

Our response song this morning is entitled “No Longer Slaves” which it seems like we have sung quite a bit recently. In it there is much truth – as Christians we are no longer enslaved to our fears, no longer enslaved to our sin, no longer enslaved to the Law, but because of what God has done for us in the gift of His Son Jesus Christ, we are enslaved to Him, His righteousness, His way, His truth and His life.

As we enter into this special time of year may each of us take time to pause and reflect on what we are most thankful for and what the many gifts of God mean in our lives, especially the gift of Jesus which came first as the baby in the manger some 2,000 years ago.