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Slaves of Righteousness

Romans 6:15 – 7:6

I just returned from an annual gathering of senior pastors of the largest churches in our denomination. It was such an encouragement to be with my brothers in Christ who really understand what large-church ministry is all about...and the chance to play a little golf in Orlando wasn't bad, either!

But as always, it's great to be back with my Sweetheart Church.

Last week we resumed our journey through Romans with the first half of chapter 6. Paul is responding to his critics. They don't like this thing called "grace" that Paul is preaching. He is teaching that, despite the fact that every human being is separated from God by a force called sin and there's nothing we can do about it, God has solved the sin problem by offering up his beloved son as a sacrifice for those sins. If we receive that gift by faith, then we are declared forgiven and invited into God's family.

This incredible kindness is called... GRACE. God's unearned, unmerited favor. Grace is the most sublime and uniquely Christian word in the religious lexicon. This idea...that God, out of his loving kindness, does everything necessary to restore us to relationship with him...is so wonderful...and almost impossible to believe? We Americans WANT to believe that we can help God out by our good behavior and tip the scales in our favor. **Our problem** is we don't want to need God's grace.

But Paul faced a different problem. He had a bunch of religious rule-followers who thought grace was dangerous. He states their objection in the first part of chapter 6. If when we sin, God is able to demonstrate his grace to forgive that sin...and if grace is as good as you say...then why not sin even more so that God can give more of his good grace? Remember the word for that? Antinomianism.

Paul's first response uses baptism as its illustration. When you were you were dunked under baptismal water, you were **united** with Jesus in his death and burial! And when you were raised OUT of the water, you are united with Jesus in the promise of his resurrection. Since your old sinful self has been crucified and buried ...why would you want to crawl back in the tomb? Why would you want to fiddle with dead things?

Orlando was warm last week but two weeks ago, even Florida was hit by that "bomb cyclone" that swept across the east coast. And it produced a bizarre condition: **Falling iguanas**. Iguanas, who live in trees, are cold-blooded. When the temperature fell below 40 degrees, their blood didn't move very well... and they started falling out of the trees. Florida neighborhoods resounded with the thud of reptiles hitting the ground. But don't make the mistake one man made. He decided to clean up this reptilian carnage. He collected the inert iguanas and threw them in the back of his station wagon. Guess what? The warm air revived them. What was "dead" was suddenly alive and he was surrounded by a passel of very ticked-off iguanas. It wasn't pretty!

Now if you saw that guy picking up those apparently dead iguanas and throwing them into his car, you might say, "What are you doing? Stop that! That's just stupid!" Paul says, "In the power of Christ,

your old sinful self is dead! Leave it that way! Don't pick it back up! That's just stupid!" But Paul isn't convinced he's made his case. So...in the second half of chapter 6 he moves to a different illustration to make the same point.

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 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... (22) 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.

In November, Cyndi and I traveled to Washington D.C. for business and the pleasure of visiting Rachel. My favorite place in D.C. is the Lincoln Memorial. On one wall is carved the text of Lincoln's greatest speech, his second inaugural address, in which he spoke of the not-yet-finished battle to eradicate slavery. I re-read it and then turned to face this beautiful sight as the sun set on the Washington monument. We were standing where Martin Luther King, Jr., offered HIS most famous speech. We know the "I have a dream" part. But there is another powerful section where King laments that, 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, the residue of slavery had still not been eradicated:

...one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In our passage, **Paul** dramatizes a shameful condition...this idea that grace is just an excuse to keep on sinning. And he uses the same imagery: Slavery. Slavery was integral to Roman society. Unlike our American past, slavery was not based upon hideous views of racial superiority. You might become a slave by being defeated in battle, for instance. And some even sold themselves into slavery to escape poverty and famine. Slaves had no legal rights, few civil rights and were considered inferior to the free citizen. A slave could be punished in any way that the master saw fit. Although some slaves who were granted freedom chose to remain in servitude to their good masters, in general, slavery was not viewed as a good or noble station in life. Few freemen aspired to be slaves and most slaves aspired to be free.

Paul uses the unsettling image of slavery to make his point about the great battle for our souls. He likens sin to slavery. Sin is a harsh and brutal taskmaster. But, he says, because of God's grace, you no longer need live under the tyranny of sin. Instead, he says, in Christ you are...**what?** Free? That's what we want it to say, isn't it? But that's not what Paul says. Look. Paul says that we are no longer slaves to sin...**because we have become slaves to righteousness.** We have exchanged one master for another!

This isn't what we expect...and it's not even what we like; the idea that we have traded one master--the sin of the devil--for another master--the righteousness of Jesus. The thing is, we humans don't want ANY master save one. Who? Ourselves? We want to be our own lords. It is at the heart of the very first sin in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve wanted to be like God. They wanted to decide for themselves what was right and wrong. THEY wanted to be their own lords.

We still do. The problem is...and this is at the heart of this passage...humans were not created for that kind of freedom. Our Declaration of Independence declares that we have unalienable rights given to us by our creator that include life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But actually, Paul would say, **liberty is not one of our rights**. At least not spiritual liberty. Bob Dylan wrote a song titled, "You Gotta Serve Somebody." In this case, you can serve the master called "Sin"... or you can serve the master called "Jesus." But you gotta serve somebody. The clear...and for some... shocking teaching of Paul is NOT that we exchange the tyranny of sin for liberty... **but rather that we exchange the tyranny of sin for the gracious tyranny of Jesus Christ**. We call it "lordship."

Last year I saw the movie "Bridge of Spies." It is based on a true story about a Soviet spy who was exchanged for American U-2 pilot, Gary Powers. The exchange took place on a bridge that separated communist and allied territory. Powers had a choice. He had to decide which way he wanted to walk: East or West. What he COULDN'T do was live in no-man's land; stop in the middle of the bridge and say, "I'll jst set up camp here."

Of course the analogy isn't perfect, but you get the idea. Or you might think of it as the kid in the projects who HAS to join a gang for his own protection. Being on his own is not an option. The difference here is that we exchange the authority of a dark Lord who hates us and is working for our destruction for the authority of the Lord of Light who loves us, died for us and offers to us the gift of eternal life with our Heavenly Father.

This is Paul's second answer, then, to his critics. The first reason we don't mock God's grace is that in Christ, you are DEAD to your old sinful self; why would you want to crawl back into the tomb? The SECOND reason you don't mock God's grace by your sinful behavior is simply this: You do not belong to yourself. You belong to a new master, Jesus. He is gracious and good. He purchased you from your former tyrannical master, sin, and that is a wonderful thing. But in a sense, you have exchanged one captivity for another. You now belong to Jesus. You are a slave to Christ. And what is the one cardinal virtue slavery? Obedience!

As slaves of Jesus Christ, we have freedom...but a certain sort of freedom. **Not the freedom to live as we want...but the freedom to live as we ought**. For the first time, in Christ, we have the power to break free from our sin. For the first time, as servants of Christ, we have the power to live holy lives, to cast off the chains of addiction and anger and abuse. That doesn't mean we won't occasionally stumble and fall. But it DOES mean that the trajectory of our lives is different. We no longer live in persistent rebellion against God. Rather, we are on a track to become better and better. For the first time in your life, in Christ you are FREE to obey the right and to resist the wrong.

Verse 16: "You are slaves to the one you obey." And here's the thing: the more you obey, whichever the master, the easier it is to obey. If you quickly respond to the temptations of the enemy...you begin to develop patterns. Habits. Augustine called it your "disposition." When you make a decision in one direction...you actually build electrical patterns in your brain that make it easier the next time to make that same decision... to move in that same direction. It's like ruts in a road. We have a place in Sprague where we love to hunt go four-wheeling. But in the rainy season, the roads become so rutted that ONCE you are in the ruts, it's VERY hard to get out.

The first time you click on porn, it is difficult and guilt-inducing. The next time is a little easier. And each time after that until finally, your disposition is set. You are rutted. The same is true of smoking a joint. Or sleeping with someone to whom you are not married. Or comfort-eating. Or binge-spending.

Or using bad language. Every time you obey a master in one area, your brain is shaped...bent in a certain direction...and it becomes easier to do it more and again...and harder to do it less.

Here's the great news, though. In Christ...by the power of His spirit...you CAN get out of the ruts. You CAN for the first time choose to obey a new master. And the very same synapses you were imprinting with your bad behavior now begin to bend your disposition in a new way. A life-giving way. You become a better and better person. Paul calls this "sanctification." The first time you choose NOT to sleep with your boyfriend, it's tough. But every time you repeat that decision you reinforce it. You bend your disposition. The first time you got to Alpha. Tough. Scary. Next time, less so. And so on...until you realize you have found a new and safe circle of friends that give you life. The first time you pray with your spouse. Scary. Do it again and you start forming life-giving ruts! The first time you tithe. Impossibly scary! Then you see how God blesses you and how good it feels to give and you build new habits of generosity. Or the first time you step into CR to get some help breaking free from alcohol. Hard. But persist and the Spirit bends your disposition in a new way

Listen again to 16: "You are slaves of the one whom you obey. Either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience which leads to righteousness." Living under grace means that we have freedom FOR obedience not an excuse for disobedience. (JE 170-171) But we must be crystal CLEAR about this: we do not obey in ORDER to be saved...we obey BECAUSE we have been saved. Our obedience is not a condition of our salvation but the FRUIT of our salvation. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things that I tell you?" Luke 6.46. Or when he said "You are my disciples if you obey my word." John 8:31

"You are slaves of the one whom you obey." I have just such a story. I didn't coach the guy you are about to watch. Listen to the language he uses about his own salvation.

"I was a slave to alcohol and sexual impurity for 40 years of my life...but now I serve Jesus instead of my addictions..." Isn't that a perfect illustration of what Paul is talking about? We love to think of ourselves as living in complete liberty. That is an illusion. You have a choice of one of two masters. You can work for Sin...or you can work for Christ. And by the way, each has a retirement plan. Paul reminds us in 6:23: "The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

A wage is what we earn...what we deserve. If we choose sin as our master...the pay we deserve is death. A life that is ultimately unfulfilling and miserable and an eternity that is separate from God in a place the Bible calls hell. That's one choice. Notice the benefits of the other. No more language of wages. What do we receive if we make ourselves slaves to the benevolent Christ? A free gift! Of eternal life. And what's another name for such a free gift? Grace! And we come back full circle to the beginning of this chapter. It all starts with this incredible, incomprehensible gift of God's grace.

So...could I ask this? How does this sit with you? If you think of Christianity as an eternal fire-insurance plan and God as a spiritual 911 operator who is there for you in times of trouble ...but otherwise, you are free to call your own shots and lay out your own course... then I don't think this will sit at all well with you. If you CLAIM that Jesus is the Lord of your life...but never thought of it in terms of slavery--- that is, that YOU are God's slave and that you owe him absolute allegiance and absolute obedience--- then Paul's description of what it means to be a Christian will be tough for you to take.

But if this helps you understand in a new way that Jesus is your benevolent Master...that he loves you...that everything he asks you to do is for your very best, even when it appears otherwise...and yet, that he demands absolute obedience...THEN it will help you to begin to live into the salvation that you have claimed in your baptism. "You are slaves of the one whom you obey." Who IS your master?