

Slaves of Righteousness (Romans 6:12-23)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

As Christians, how can we be slaves? We are freed from the ceremonial Law of Moses, after all. Free at last! We hear television commercials saying “Have it *your* way!” (Burger King) As Americans, we are in favor of freedom, of independence. Each of our homes, we identify as our castle. We don’t want to be bound to another person. We are Americans, we want to do what we want. It is the “American Dream” after all. Another slogan, “Be all that you can be!” (U.S. Army) relates to this view.

Slaves of righteousness? What does that mean?

Today, as we make our way through the Bible in two years, we find ourselves in Romans 6. In this section of Scripture, the Apostle Paul with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit writes, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions” (verse 12). He later writes, “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves to 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” (verses 17-18).

What is Paul meaning by “slaves of righteousness”? William Barclay, who wrote a commentary on Romans has a good answer. He wrote, “When we think of a servant, in our sense of the word, we think of a man who gives a certain agreed part of his time to his master and who receives a certain agreed wage for doing

so. Within that agreed time he is at the disposal and in the command of his master. But, when that time ends, he is free to do as he likes. During his working hours he belongs to his master, but in his free time he belongs to himself. But, in Paul's time, the status of the slave was quite different. Literally he had no time which belonged to himself; every single moment belonged to his master. He was his master's exclusive possession.¹ This explains why Paul begins his letter to the Romans with, "Paul, a slave (servant) of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle." Paul understood that he had to give his whole life to Christ.

It is difficult being a Christian today. The world says one thing, and the Word of God often says the opposite. A prominent person is quoted as saying, "Today nothing is so common as turning right into wrong and wrong into right by employing all sorts of clever expedients and strange tricks." This prominent person was Martin Luther. I'm sure for many of you, the idea behind Luther's quote has been on your mind. We are confused. We have been told that two wrongs can't make a right. But in today's culture, it can be seen that way.

Luther had much to say regarding to sin. He saw sin as prominent during his lifetime. He said, "This is the sin of the devil: he not only sins and is disobedient to God, but what he does is to be considered well done. There God cannot come to forgiving sin. This is why punishment must come upon Germany, for sin and shame have turned into honor. Why, even heathen philosophers have said that matters stood bad in a country where what was formerly considered vice has become virtue. Then the country is lost. As long as immorality is still considered vice and sin, help and remedy are possible; but when it is regarded as right, one

¹ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, 89.

cannot help. It is as if a man were lying on his bed mortally sick but were nevertheless to insist that he is well. In that frame of mind he will ask for no remedy, and he cannot be helped.”

Sin can take ownership of you and me. The devil is always looking to corrupt Christians. We were all born sinners. Then when we were baptized, God—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—killed our old self and we became right with God. From that moment on, Sin and the Devil have been going after us, to corrupt us. Throughout this Scripture, Paul is emphasizing the believer’s response by urging a refusal to allow sin to regain its reign.

Going back to Paul, he clearly says, everyone serves a master. Is your master sin or Jesus Christ? We are bound to slavery, because everyone has a master. To be fair, our owner is not like how we would interpret slave owners in the old American South or in modern day Africa or Middle East. Paul is turning the notion of slavery upside down. Instead of being in a state of slavery which then leads to coerced obedience, he now speaks of a choice to listen and then respond to one of two masters, which *then* results in becoming a slave of one or the other. This freedom of choice is available only to baptized believers. Unbaptized believers are slaves to sin and are compelled to respond to its whims.²

But again, you may be asking yourselves, what does it mean to be slaves of righteousness? We have slave figured out – it’s a person held in servitude. Now what does it mean to be righteous?

² Michael P. Middendorf, *Concordia Commentary: Romans 1-8* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House: 2013), 498.

I'm sure that most of us, if not all of us, have seen the movie "Finding Nemo." I'm sure pastor and his family have seen it dozens of times. Well, toward the end of the movie, the main character Marlin (a clownfish), who is searching for his son Nemo, meets up with a group of sea turtles. One of the turtles he meets is Crush. He then rides Crush through a current on the way to Sydney, Australia. As they enter the current, Crush shouts, "Righteous! Righteous! Yeah!" You see -- at that moment -- everything is awesome, genuine, and excellent. That is how we are to live. We are to be genuine. But, we can't do that on our own. Crush couldn't do that on his own, he had to ride the current. We have to know that Jesus Christ did it all for us. We are poor sinners and at the same time, we are saints. We become righteous before God and are saved only through faith in Christ, and therefore Christ alone is our righteousness.³

Jesus Christ came down from heaven because He first loved us. He loves the world, but the world hates God, because the world wants to be God, as the Gospel according to John writes. Again, we are saints and sinners at the same time. We aren't perfect. We were slaves to sin and bound to eternal death. Because of this, Jesus came to save us by giving his life on the cross and rising for us to let the world know that He is God incarnate. Freed from sin, we can now serve God. However, this does not give us permission to sin or that we are free from sin's attempts to reign over us once again. Only when we are slaves to God will we have the freedom to be the people He created us to be and have eternal life with Him! Amen! Now, you are the body of Christ, each one you—part of it! Amen!

³ *The Book of Concord*, "Formula of Concord: Article III. Concerning the Righteousness of Faith before God," (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).