

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. ¹⁸ You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

¹⁹ I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. ²⁰ When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. ²¹ What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:15-23)

Don't be a Slave to Sin!

It's hard to talk about slavery in the United States because of the horrible history our country has with it. Even though slavery officially ended a hundred and fifty years ago, it's still a very emotional issue. But the Bible often talks about slavery. Now, I'm not interested in defending slavery as a practice in any form, but the slavery that existed at the time of the Apostle Paul was very different from the institution that existed in the US before the Civil War. Roman slavery was not race based and it was a fairly flexible institution. There were paths out of slavery and even into the highest realms of society. So the Bible often uses slavery to talk about our lives. But our difficulty as American Christians is more than just our history: the Greek word that means "slave" also means "servant." Which meaning do you use? Was St. Paul thinking of a situation where someone owned someone else—that would be slavery, or just a situation in which someone owed someone else obedience – that would equate to being a servant. Slavery as the Romans knew it plays a huge role in St. Paul's words to us today. Our Bible uses the word "slave" all the way through. Paul's point is who owns and controls us. You can sum his words up to us very simply: **Don't be a slave to sin!**

I.

St. Paul says something very challenging here, something that goes against the way we Americans think. He says that we are all slaves, slaves of sin or slaves of righteousness. Martin Luther, who had a way with words, said that we're all donkeys. The question is who's riding us, God or the devil? Now, we might not like to think of ourselves as donkeys or slaves. But God says we belong to him or to the devil. He says we have to obey one or the other. Since Paul is talking to us, believers, he tells us to live like free people. **Don't be a slave to sin! That's what we all used to be.**

Paul said, **"You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."** Now, most of the original readers of this letter were people who had grown up as unbelievers and then heard the gospel and came to faith. In the first generation of the church's existence it had to be that way. Even Jewish believers by and large had been stuck in a pattern of thinking that God was going to let them into heaven because they were children of Abraham and because they kept the Old Testament laws. The idea that Jesus died and paid for our sins and gave us eternal life was something they all had to learn. For most of them, it was a profound experience to learn about God's grace.

It's a little different for us. God's grace is every bit as profound, but sometimes it's harder for us to see that because today most Christians are born into Christian families where they're baptized and brought up to believe in Jesus. Now, there's nothing wrong with that. It's a tremendous blessing that we didn't live for years as slaves of the devil. But if you're like me, you don't remember ever being a slave of the devil and you don't remember being set free. I've known for as long as I can remember that Jesus paid for my sins and I will go to heaven. The children in our grade school and even in our preschool know that, too. Thanks be to God!

But that means that we might think that Paul isn't really talking to us in this section where he talks about being set free from slavery to the devil. But he is. We were all born slaves of the devil. That's been true ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin. The number one thing that I inherited from my parents is my sin. That's the

first thing that I gave to my children, before they were even born. So that means that every one of us is born doomed to die and go to hell. Every one of us by nature wants to sin. That can only lead us to hell. The fact that God rescued us from that when we were so little that we don't remember it does not change how great a gift it is. If you had cancer when you were an infant and the doctors cured you, you might not remember all their efforts and all the trips to the hospital. But as an adult, you would know it happened. Every time you heard about someone getting cancer, you would think about how blessed you were to be cancer free. You might just breathe a prayer of thanksgiving. Well, every time we hear about someone who doesn't know Jesus, the same thing should happen. We were like that once. But God reached down through gospel and gave us faith. Now we will live.

We had nothing to do with that. It was all God the Father. It was all Jesus. It was all the Holy Spirit. God the Father chose us to have faith in Christ before he created the world. Then he sent his one and only Son into this world to die so that we will live. Jesus, the Son of God, accepted that mission. He left the glory and wonder of heaven behind to be born as a helpless human child. He squeezed all that God is into the body of a human baby and he suffered all the hurts and sorrows of this life. He lived the perfect life that we can never live. He was holy in our place. Then he went to the cross and suffered hell itself there for us. He died there because death is the curse of sin. He paid all that we owe and then he rose to give us eternal life. The Holy Spirit took that message and he ran with it. He ran all the way to our hearts in baptism and in the spoken word and he gave us faith. He set us free from the power of sin and made us children of God.

Paul said that this morning with a marvelous economy of words that makes a long winded guy like me blush with shame. He said, **“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** What every one of us earned is death and hell. But what God gives us is heaven and life. He does that because of Jesus. He does that through the faith he himself gave us. God has set us free from sin.

II.

All that lies behind what Paul is saying here this morning. But it's not actually his main point. In Romans chapter 6, Paul is talking about sanctification, which is the big scary theological word for living a Christian life. Yet, even when he commands us not to be slaves to sin, he cannot say it without coming back to the gospel. He calls to live a new and holy life, but he wraps that command around this message of forgiveness and life and freedom in Christ. We need both parts. My friends, **don't be a slave to sin! It's the opposite of being a slave to God.**

Paul says, **“But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted.”** We're back to Luther's donkey illustration, right? The devil used to ride us. But God knocked the devil out of the saddle and he climbed up in his place. Now, is that any better? Either way, we're still slaves right? Well, what do you think? Is it better to be a slave of God or a slave of the devil? You know the answer: it's way better to be a slave of God – or his donkey if you prefer. God is going to take care of his donkey. He's going to love it and feed it and monitor how heavy the loads are that we carry. But the devil? He's going to beat and abuse and neglect his donkey. He's gonna pile up as much as he can on it, because the devil likes it when we hurt.

Paul points out that being a slave of the devil leads to death. That certainly includes physical death. We all die because we're sinners. Even now, we still have an Old Man, a sinful nature, who loves to sin. Paul is warning us about the danger of letting that Old Man have his way. Being forgiven is not a license to sin. It does work that way in this life, quite often. Bosses who threaten to fire employees but never actually do it often lose control of the workplace. But that's different from God's forgiveness. God still disciplines us, he still intervenes in our lives when we sin to teach us to live a holy life. But at the very same time, he forgives us. Jesus has washed all our sin away in his blood. There is no hell or punishment for us.

But every time we sin, we give that Old Man a boost. When we wallow in sins, when we commit the same sins over and over again and just shrug our shoulders and say, “I am what I am,” when we make excuses for our sin or blame other people for our sin instead of repenting of it, we are beating our faith to death. In the end, we can kill our faith. That includes even sins like failing to come to church. It's a sin to stay away from God's Word and people who go years without coming are killing their faith. One day, they won't believe anymore. Being a slave of sin leads to eternal death – to hell.

There are consequences in this life, too. Paul asks, **“When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed**

of? Those things result in death!” Sometimes, we think there will be benefits from sinning. I can tell a little white lie and stay out of trouble. I can pretend like I don't know what God says and avoid an ugly confrontation with someone. I can get ahead financially or be more popular or whatever. But in the end, those things mean nothing. So often, what we really experience is embarrassment over how weak we were and sorrows that we could've avoided if we had just lived as God calls us to live.

That way leads to death. But slavery to God leads to eternal life. Why? Not because we earn heaven with our good works. But when you are slaves to God, when you live as a child of God, you flee from sin. You hurt your faith less. And every time you choose to do the God pleasing thing, you are exercising your faith. In truth, to do the God pleasing thing in this life requires trust that you will come out ahead. It takes faith to say hard things that our world doesn't understand. It takes faith to devote time to hearing and learning his word. It takes faith to put aside the temporary pleasures of wickedness – pleasures our flesh wants to enjoy. We trust in Christ who tells us we have something better and we live as his slaves. That constant devotion ultimately leads to eternal life.

One of the great miracles of this process is the fact that the most basic part of being God's slave is hearing his word. In that gospel of Jesus Christ, God built his power. That power is what renews our faith and gives us strength. With that strength, God calls to live for him. That is a real command. I'm not saying, "Go to church and you'll be good." I know my own life far too well to believe that. I spend as much time in church as anybody here and yet I keep on sinning. But God calls us to apply all that we are to serving him every single day. God calls us to willingly and actively flee temptation and seek to live a new and holy life. Do we do that?

If we're honest, we all have to admit we don't, not always, not every day of our lives. Sure, most of you are "good people" the way the world defines that. You're slaves to Christ and it does show. But we all have that Old Man, that sinful nature. Sometimes, we're just too lazy to do what God calls us to do. Sometimes, sin is just too attractive. Sometimes, we don't even know why we chose to sin, but we know we did. I am just as guilty of that as any one of you.

But that's why Jesus came. He died and paid for all that sin, even when we know better, even when we're just too lazy. He rose and his blood has washed all that sin away. We are free. We will live with him. Cling to that promise because it is the power to get us home to heaven and it is the power to change our lives here. Cling to that promise and apply that power – strive every day to live as a slave to God. And know that when you reach heaven, Jesus won't call you a slave, or even a servant. He will call you a child and heir. You will live with him in glory forever. Live for him now while you're on the way. It's the best thing for your faith. Amen.