

## Slaves of a Different Master

Romans 6:12-23

In Romans 6, Paul talks about slavery. It was an established institution of his time, and there's no evidence that he tried to reform it. One of his letters was written to Philemon, a slave owner. During one of his times in jail, Paul met a runaway slave named Onesimus. They got to talking, and Onesimus became a Christian.

When Onesimus' sentence was over, Paul put a letter in his hand and sent him back to his Christian owner. And Paul says, "Now you get him back, as more than a slave - he's a brother." It was a nice thing to say, but the young man was still a slave.

Slavery sounds strange and repulsive to us, but it was a part of Paul's life and the culture he lived in. So much so, that he could see slavery as an image - or a picture - of some of the fundamental relationships in life.

He signs this letter to the Romans with the words, "Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ." The word in Greek is *doulos* which can be translated "slave" as well as "servant." And Paul was just fine with that, because he knew that he had a master. In fact, if you listen to this whole passage from Romans 6, it sounds like Paul believes that everybody has a master. Somebody owns us.

That sounds strange to people like us. We live in a land where freedom is always defined as independence. If you are free, it means you are independent. That's become the governing metaphor for American life. To be free. To be your own person. To not need anybody else. To be an island unto yourself.

**That's what a lot of people want: to become independent.** To be free to do whatever you want, go wherever you wish, buy whatever you desire. Meanwhile, there are a lot of people telling us what to do, where to go, what to buy. We think we're free; but what we're doing is simply accepting somebody else's story.

I saw a group of teenagers at the local ice cream store on a summer night. It was a good night for ice cream. It was a typical scene: clusters of teenagers orbiting around one another, trying to think for themselves and trying to fit in. If you asked them, every one would value independence and freedom.

But if you looked at them closely without staring: all the girls were wearing the same jeans. All the boys were driving their dad's expensive cars and looking cool. Apparently being your own person means buy your clothes at the Gap, borrow your dad's Lexus, and go out for ice cream."

Paul's right. Even in a land of freedom and liberty, somebody has shackled us in chains, whether we know it or not. **The question is: Who is yanking your chain?**

Some people are slaves to shopping. They can't pass up a sale, even if they have a house full of things they don't need.

Some people are slaves to cholesterol. They've never met a donut or a piece of bacon they didn't like.

Some people are slaves to their jobs. They don't like their jobs, but the company is paying them too much for them to quit, so they go to work in golden handcuffs.

Some corporations are slaves to greed. Everybody answers to the bottom line. If the bottom line is not high enough, somebody has to go.

I have a friend who was a slave to Budweiser. If he doesn't have a drink in his system, his body drives him crazy. He's admitted that he is embarrassed about it, and he ought to be. We're all slaves to something. What - or who - is yanking your chain? What, or whom, do you serve?

About twenty years ago, singer Bob Dylan went through a brief spiritual phase. A lifelong Jew, he got serious about God, even thinking about becoming a Christian. He wrote some new songs, hired a back-up group of gospel singers, and went on tour. One of the songs said, "You gotta serve somebody... It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody."

One night on tour he sang that song and the crowd began to boo. The more he sang, the more they booed. He stopped playing and left the stage. Afterward, one concert-goer said, "I didn't come to hear that kind of bologna. I'm free. I don't serve anybody but myself."

**Scripture says that there's no greater slavery than serving only yourself.**

Paul says he is a slave of Jesus. He struggles with his own urges, just like anybody else. But he knows in his gut that no good can come from listening only to his own desires. He is bound to a greater purpose than following his nose or listening to his stomach. He belongs to Jesus Christ. That's his identity. That gives him a purpose.

He says this because he knows if the only thing he does is what he wants to do, if the only opinion he listens to is his opinion or his friends' opinions, if the only purpose for his life is to cover his tail or save his skin, then he's in a whole lot of trouble.

He knows that the power of sin is so pervasive that it can take and twist our best impulses into something foul. There are so many kinds of sin that work on us and bind us. It's hard to be free for all of it. But it's possible.

There are a lot of times when it would be easier to do our own thing. To play it safe. To back away. To retreat in comfort. Then we come to church and remember that we're bound to Jesus Christ and should serve others, not ourselves.

Not only that, we remember that Jesus has bound himself to us and we are never free from him. We remember that when we satisfy only ourselves we enslave ourselves to ourselves. And we know that that's not right.

The good news, of course, is that in this kind of enslavement to Jesus, we find the greatest freedom in life.