

"THE SLAVERY THAT IS TRUE FREEDOM"

I. Introduction

- A. Most people in the modern world (including those who refer to themselves as "postmodern") have embraced a peculiar concept of freedom.
1. A writer named David Bentley Hart describes this conception of freedom as follows: "Modernity's highest ideal — its special understanding of personal autonomy — requires us to place our trust in an original absence underlying all of reality, a fertile void in which all things are possible, from which arises no impediment to our wills, and before which we may consequently choose to make of ourselves what we choose. We trust, that is to say, that there is no substantial criterion by which to judge our choices that stands higher than the unquestioned good of free choice itself, and that therefore all judgment, divine no less than human, is in some sense an infringement upon our freedom. This is our primal ideology... we live in an age whose chief value has been determined, by overwhelming consensus, to be the inviolable liberty of personal volition, the right to decide for ourselves what we shall believe, want, need, own, or serve. The will, we habitually assume, is sovereign to the degree that it is obedient to nothing else and is free to the degree that it is truly spontaneous and constrained by nothing greater than itself." [*Atheist Delusions*, 21, 22]
 2. As Hart points out, this way of thinking is nihilistic.
 3. Nihilism is the philosophical perspective that says that life is ultimately meaningless.
 4. The refusal to submit to anything outside the self is really a denial of any ultimate meaning.
- B. This modern concept of freedom stands in sharp contrast to older models of freedom.

1. In both historic Christianity and ancient paganism, freedom is understood as the liberty to be conformed to what you were intended to be.
 2. While the modern view says that freedom consists in the ability to exercise our will however we please, the older view says that freedom consists in being able to attain the end towards which human nature is oriented.
 3. In Hart's words, the older view of freedom says that "we are free not merely because we can choose, but only when we have chosen well." [25]
- C. As we study the second half of Romans 6 this morning, we will see that Paul is making a very similar argument in these verses.
1. This passage makes it clear that true freedom cannot be conceived as a matter of total autonomy because there is no such thing as total autonomy.
 2. Instead, true freedom is a matter of being able to enjoy living under the beneficent rule of the One by whom and for whom we were created.

II. Two Kinds of Slavery (15-19)

- A. Our passage begins with Paul raising a question in reference to the point that he made at the end of the preceding paragraph.
1. He asks, "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?"
 2. Christians are "not under law" in the sense that we are no longer required to live up to the standards of the law in order to obtain salvation and in the sense that we are no longer under the sentence of eternal death for our deviations from the law.
 3. By way of contrast, the phrase "under grace" means that we are the recipients of the salvation that God gives as a free gift through faith

in Christ.

4. This salvation entails the forgiveness of sins and imputation of Christ's righteousness as well as the Spirit's work in forming us anew unto good works.
 5. In other words, those who are "under grace" are the recipients of both justification and sanctification.
- B. The question that Paul asks in verse 15 has to do with how we should respond to being "under grace" instead of being "under law."
1. If we are not under the law, does this mean that sin does not matter anymore?
 2. Should we feel free to live in unrepentant sin?
 3. Paul's response to this line of thinking is the same as his response at the beginning of the chapter: "By no means!"
 4. The gospel does not abolish the law.
 5. The gospel only removes the curse of the law.
 6. The law still teaches us the right way of living.
 7. The fact that we have been freed from the law as a works-covenant does not mean that we now have the freedom to live in sin.
 8. The law is the Christian's rule of life.
- C. Paul expounds this by explaining that you are either a slave of sin or a slave of obedience.
1. The person who thinks that he is his own master is deluded.
 2. Slavery to self is slavery to sin.

3. You will either have sin for your master or you will have God for your master.
 4. And if God is your master, you cannot serve sin.
 5. The reason why this is the case is because a slave is constrained to go on serving his master.
 6. The master has the power to secure his slave's fidelity and obedience.
- D. Sin constrains those under its dominion by enslaving their wills, but God constrains those under his dominion by freeing our wills.
1. It is God's love that constrains us from living in unrepentant sin.
 2. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."
 3. Listen to how J. Gresham Machen explains those verses: "Once [Christians] are convinced that Christ's death was a death for them, their gratitude to the one who died hems them in, restrains them from evil, more effectively than they could have been restrained by prison bars." [*God Transcendent*, 143]
 4. Your freedom as a Christian is not the freedom to do whatever you want.
 5. It is the freedom to obey the One who gave his life to save you from eternal judgment.
- E. In verse 17, Paul gives thanks to God for transferring us out of slavery to sin and making us slaves of obedience.

1. The fact that God is thanked for this means he is the one who has set us free from our bondage to sin.
 2. This is underscored by the fact that Paul describes Christians as those who “have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed.”
 3. The verb “committed” is in the passive voice here, which means the action has been done to them, not by them.
 4. God is the one who delivered them to the gospel’s standard of teaching.
 5. When a slave is delivered by one master to another, a transfer of ownership takes place.
 6. This is what has happened with Christians.
 7. Because God has set you free from sin, your life now belongs to him.
- F. Notice also that Paul describes the nature of Christian obedience as obedience that is “from the heart.”
1. This means our obedience is sincere and voluntary.
 2. It is not a matter of compulsion.
 3. At our effectual calling, the Holy Spirit sets our will free from its bondage to sin and makes us willing and able to trust in Christ and follow him.
 4. By the powerful working of God’s grace, we renounce our former bondage and give ourselves to God.
 5. True freedom is not a matter of being totally independent of anything outside the self.

6. True freedom is a matter of being delivered from the enslaving forces that keep you from living as God intends.
 7. As a Christian, you have been transferred out of the dominion where sin reigns into the dominion where righteousness reigns.
 8. This is your new identity in Christ.
 9. You are not a slave to sin but to righteousness.
- G. Paul adds a note in verse 19 to explain that he is speaking “in human terms” here.
1. Slavery is not a perfect analogy for the Christian life because it implies oppression and degradation.
 2. But Paul uses the idea of slavery in order to illustrate the fact that we always serve some master.
 3. Slavery to sin is slavery to impurity and lawlessness.
 4. Sin is both a defilement of the soul and a failure to conform to God’s law.
 5. But slavery to righteousness is, as John Chrysostom put it, “better than any freedom.”
 6. Or as Charles Hodge explains, “the more completely God reigns in us, the more completely we are subject to his will, so much the more are we free; that is, so much the more do we act in accordance with the laws of our nature and the end of our being.” [207]
 7. Through Christ, we can now present ourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.
 8. As Paul will say in chapter 12, we are to present our “bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.”

9. This does not mean that we can merit God's approval by the obedience that we render to God.
10. Even as Christians, our best works are still tainted by the sin that continues to indwell us.
11. Nevertheless, just as God accepts our persons through Christ, he also accepts our service through Christ.

III. Two Kinds of Fruit (20-23)

- A. We turn now to the second paragraph in our passage, which begins at verse 20.
 1. Here the attention turns to the outcome of slavery to sin in comparison to the outcome of slavery to God.
 2. Paul says in verse 20, "When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness."
 3. This is basically the same point that Jesus made when he said that a man cannot serve two masters. (see Mt. 6:24)
 4. While the non-Christian may take pride in his autonomy, the only thing that he is really free from is righteousness.
 5. Of course, non-Christians can do things that are righteous from a human point of view.
 6. But the fact that they are still under law means they are required to offer a perfect and complete obedience to the law in order to be righteous in God's sight.
 7. No one is able to do that.
 8. Righteousness is not something that we can produce.
 9. It is the gift of God in Jesus Christ.

10. As long as a person is outside of Christ, he is completely cut off from any possibility of attaining righteousness before God.
- B. Paul continues by explaining that slavery to sin doesn't produce any good fruit.
1. We do not profit from the service that we render to sin.
 2. Slavery to sin only produces the torments of an accusing conscience in this life and eternal death in the life to come.
 3. Take note of Paul's use of the language of shame here.
 4. Christians are ashamed of the things that we did when we were under the dominion of sin.
 5. And we continue to be ashamed of the sins that we commit now.
 6. Shame is an important part of the sanctification process.
 7. We need to be dissatisfied with our failures and ashamed of our wretchedness.
 8. Thinking upon your past sins should cause you to hate sin all the more.
- C. We also need to remind ourselves that being a slave of God is better than anything else in the world.
1. There is no higher privilege than offering your life in service to the living and true God.
 2. There are no greater benefits than those that we receive as servants of God.
 3. In this life, we reap the fruit of holiness, as the Spirit of God carries out his sanctifying work in our lives.

4. And in the life to come, we will receive the end of this sanctifying work: eternal life.
 5. The more we think about the wonderful fruit that we get from being slaves of God, the more we will love and desire the holiness that has the end of eternal life.
- D. Our passage concludes with one of the more memorable verses in all of Scripture: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."
1. Notice how the three components in the two halves of this sentence mirror one another.
 2. "Wages" is set in contrast to "Free gift."
 3. "Sin" is set in contrast to "God."
 4. And "death" is set in contrast to "eternal life."
 5. This summarizes the distinction between the two kinds of slavery that Paul has been discussing in this passage.
 6. Those who labor as slaves to sin will receive a wage for the service that they have rendered to sin: the wage of death.
 7. Death is the payment that sin deserves.
 8. This is why it would be unjust for God to let sin go unpunished.
 9. This is why Gods' plan of salvation required the death of Christ as our substitute.
- E. By way of contrast, those who are set free from slavery to sin and made slaves to God do not receive a wage for the service that we offer.
1. The blessings that God gives us in Christ are not things that we have earned.

2. Merit is entirely excluded in the gospel.
3. Salvation is God's free gift.
4. Even the service and obedience that we render to God is part of the gift that he gives us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

IV. Conclusion

- A. Charles Hodge sums up this passage quite well when he writes the following: "The leading doctrine of this section, and of the whole gospel, in reference to sanctification, is, that grace, instead of leading to the indulgence of sin, is essential to the exercise of holiness. So long as we are under the influence of a self-righteous or legal spirit, the motive and aim of all good works, are wrong and defective. The motive is fear, or some merely natural affection, and the aim, to merit the bestowment of good. But when we accept of the gracious offers of the gospel, and feel that our sins are gratuitously pardoned, a sense of the divine love, shed abroad in the heart of the Holy Spirit, awakens all holy affections. The motive to obedience is now love, and its aim the glory of God." [211-212]
- B. Christian obedience is not motivated by slavish fear but by childlike love.
- C. It is not offered grudgingly but out of a willing heart and mind.
- D. The end of Christian liberty is that we would be delivered from the house of bondage and given the desire and ability to live as bondservants of God.
- E. We think of slavery as a degrading institution, and when it is a matter of one human being being enslaved to another human being there is a sense in which it always will be degrading.
- F. But when slavery is conceived as the reasonable service for which we were created, when it is a matter of being set free from the miserable servitude that we experienced under the dominion of sin in order that we can live for the God who is perfectly good and perfectly just, then such slavery is the only true freedom.