

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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FREEDOM THROUGH SURRENDER

Romans 6:15-23

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the death of a famous Dutch painter named Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516). One of his paintings, known as *Ship of Fools*, is on display at the Louvre in Paris. The term “ship of fools” was a common motif in medieval literature and art. It had its origin in an allegory in Plato’s *Republic*.

Bosch’s painting depicts a small sailing vessel with ten passengers and two other persons in the water swimming around the boat. The ship has no captain, and everyone on board is too busy eating, drinking, flirting – in general, partying – to know, or even really to care, where the currents are taking them.

They are oblivious to their course, caught up in wasteful, self-absorbed living, like the prodigal son in Jesus’ parable (Luke 15:11-32). They are *fools*, because they are enjoying all the sensual pleasures this world offers without knowing where it all leads.

Dangling atop the mast is a bunch of carrots, and there is a man climbing up to reach them. Above the carrots, though, is something one could easily miss: a human skull, signaling the end to which their way of life ultimately leads. Which is death.

This is a picture, I think, of life lived apart from God, cut off from God. It pictures life lived to satisfy one’s own sinful, selfish nature, a life lived in slavery to sin (to use Paul’s term) that does not – *cannot* – deliver what it promises in the long run.

In Romans 6:1-14, Paul has stated that, having been united with Jesus in His death, burial, and resurrection to new life through trusting faith in Him, we are to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God. Paul’s testimony in Galatians 2:20 is my testimony, and I trust it is yours, too: “I have been crucified with Christ. Nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

You see, if we have come to know and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, a decisive change has taken place in my life and yours. Jesus is now on the throne in our hearts. Which means, as Paul points out, that we must not allow sin of any kind to reign in these mortal bodies of ours. We must not obey the evil desires of our selfish, sinful nature. We must not offer the parts of our bodies to sin, as instruments of unrighteousness. Instead, the only reasonable thing to do in response to what God has done for us is to surrender ourselves to God and to offer the whole of our beings to Him, asking Him to use every part of us for His kingdom purposes. That is what Paul says in Romans 6:11-14.

Now, in verse 15, we see almost the exact same question Paul asked in verse 1 and answered in subsequent verses (6:2-14). In verse 1 he asked: “What shall we say, then? Shall we go

on sinning so that grace may increase?” Then, in verse 15, he says: “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” There are minor differences, but in both cases it is substantially the same objection raised against the gospel Paul preached so passionately. In both verse 1 and verse 15 the question is essentially this:

- Does the gospel of grace give us permission to sin as we please?
- Does it mean that sin is no big deal, since we are no longer under the authority of the law?
- Does the gospel of grace actually encourage sin?

Paul’s answer to the question in verse 15 is identical to the answer he gives in verse 2: *Me genoito* (May GEN-oi-toe). Which, when roughly translated, as I told you a few weeks ago, means: “May it never be so!” Or: “God forbid! By no means! Not a chance! No way!” The point Paul goes on to make in verses 15-23 is that in our conversion, in our coming to a saving, personal, and living faith in the Lord Jesus, we offered ourselves – we *gave* ourselves – to God to be His slaves. As such, we are pledged and devoted to obeying Him in all things.

Slave is a powerful word that evokes all kinds of unpleasant images in our minds. Watch the movie *12 Years a Slave* or read the book and you will get a clear picture of the ugliness and evil of the institution of slavery in America. Read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Or consider the life of Harriet Tubman, soon to be featured on the U. S. \$20 bill. Born into slavery in Maryland in 1820, Harriet Tubman escaped to the north in 1849 and quickly became a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad, helping hundreds of black slaves reach freedom in the north before the Civil War finally brought a legal end to slavery in America.

Slavery still exists in the world today, even though it is legal nowhere. Human trafficking for sex or other forms of forced labor is an ongoing worldwide crisis, with millions of children, teens, and others caught in its web.

Slavery is an ugly word. For good reason. Yet here in Romans 6, Paul uses it to describe our most fundamental relationship in life. There are, he says, only two kinds of people. Either you are a slave to sin or you are a slave to God. Paul’s view of slavery is a bit different from ours, because slavery in the Roman empire of Paul’s day was different than the slavery that characterized the U. S. prior to the Civil War. In America, slavery was involuntary. It was coerced. In Rome, it was often (though not always) voluntary. That is, people in dire poverty – unable to pay their debts or to provide for their own needs and the needs of their family – could offer themselves voluntarily as slaves to someone in order to be fed and housed. In giving themselves to a slave-master, they couldn’t simultaneously retain their freedom. If you’re a slave, you’re not free to make decisions about what to do or not to do. Someone else is in charge of your life. Or, in the case of sin, *something else* is in control of your live.

The point Paul wants us to understand is that you are a slave to whatever (or whomever) you have given yourself or surrendered yourself. If sin is the controlling principle in your life, the “benefit” or fruit (Greek, *karpos*) that will come of it will be remorse, guilt, shame, and ultimately death. Not just physical death, but the kind of death that is total separation from the God who made you and loves you.

On the other hand, if serving God with the obedience that comes through faith is the controlling principle in your life, the direction of your life will be much different, as will the benefit or fruit of it. The fruit of a life surrendered to God will be righteousness (6:16-18) and holiness (6:19), which refers to the process of sanctification by which we are changed more and more into the likeness of Christ.

So, are you a slave to sin? Or are you a slave to God? Whose slave are you today?

In verses 17 and 18, Paul identifies four stages in a person's conversion to faith in Christ. First, in verse 17a, he points out what we were in our BC (Before Christ) days: We were "slaves to sin." Sometimes voluntary, perhaps, and sometimes involuntary, but slaves to sin nonetheless. Apart from the saving power of Christ, we were not able not to sin. We were powerless to keep from sinning. That is the fallen human condition apart from the saving grace and power of Jesus.

But then, continuing in verse 17, Paul says: "You wholeheartedly believed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted." In other words, you believed the gospel message of salvation in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. Not only did you trust in Christ, but you acknowledged and accepted the truth about yourself, about your sinfulness, about the seriousness of sin, about your need for a Savior, and about Jesus' fitness and ability to save you from your sins.

The third stage, in the first part of verse 18, is that now "you have been set free from sin." In and through Christ, you have been emancipated from your slavery to sin. It does not mean that you are no longer capable of sinning. Believe me, *you are!* Just as *I am!* But you have been rescued from the dominion of sin. Sin is no longer your master. You are no longer unable to not sin. Now, because Jesus has set you free, you are able, in the power of His Spirit who is at work in you, to choose to not sin.

We all still sin. I do. You do. We all do. And we all will continue to struggle with one kind of sin or another as long as we live, until the day comes when Jesus returns or calls us home to heaven to be with Him. But you don't have to give in to sin. You don't have to give in to temptation. You don't have to commit the sin, whatever it is, that is such a temptation for you. Sin is no longer your boss. It is not in charge of your life. It is no longer sovereign in your life. Jesus is – if your hope and trust are in him. And He is able to make you able to say no to sin. Any sin. Big or small.

The fourth stage is that, having been set free from sin, you are not a slave to righteousness (6:18b). This "decisive transfer" (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 184) in your life is all God's work. It is all by His grace and power. Only God could do it. Only God *can* do it. Only God *has* done it. Only God *will* do it.

There is a paradox in all of this, of course. The paradox is that true freedom is found in surrender. The gospel the world wants you to believe is that real freedom and fulfillment in life are found in the freedom to sin; the freedom to do whatever you want anytime, anywhere,

with anyone you please; the freedom to put yourself and your desires above everyone and everything else. But that is not true freedom, because sin will take over your life if you don't renounce it, repent of it, reject it, turn away from it, and let God deal decisively with it.

True freedom is not found in surrender to sin. It is found in surrender to God. True freedom is found only in willing surrender to the gracious and sovereign rule of God in your life. True freedom is found only when you let go of the reins or the steering wheel and let God take control of your life. Surrender to God and His will is the greatest and the best kind of freedom there is.

Think about this. Paul sets before us two ways to live. You can either serve sin or you can serve God. Jesus had already said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:24) that you can't serve two masters. No one can. You can either serve sin or you can serve God. Jesus also said that there are really only two roads you can travel in life. One is the broad, wide road that leads to destruction. It is wildly popular, but too many people don't find out until too late that it is a dead-end. The other road – the road that leads to life – is much narrower, and not as many choose it (Matthew 7:13-14).

Two roads. Two kinds of slavery. Both images point to the same truth. Slavery to sin is a dead-end road that leads to guilt, shame, and separation from God. It pays wages, yes. You will get what you earn from it. "The wages of sin is..." What? Death. Sin pays wages. Not that anyone should desire the wages of sin. But God gives a free, unmerited gift to those who serve and live for Him. Not only the benefit or fruit of increasing holiness in this life, but the gift of eternal life with Him (Romans 6:23).

Are you a slave to sin? Or a slave to God? Do you try to excuse your sin or rationalize it, saying it is just the way you are? Or just the way God made you? In his book *The Obedience Option*, David Hegg writes about a young man who said he couldn't stop his pattern of sleeping with different women. He knew in his heart it was wrong, but he claimed his lust for sex was inevitable and irresistible. It was just the way he was. Therefore, it wasn't his fault, since God had made him with such strong desires and urges.

Hegg said to him: "Suppose I came into your room just when you and your girlfriend were beginning this 'inevitable' process. Suppose I took out ten \$100 bills, and told you they were yours if you stopped. What would you do?"

Without hesitation the young man said he would rather have the cash. So Hegg asked: "What happened to the irresistible force of lust?"

What happened? Hegg writes: "We both realized a very simple truth: *one passion may seem irresistible until a greater passion comes along....* If we take this principle into the arena of righteous living, it comes out like this: The only way to overcome a passion for sin is with an overwhelming passion for righteousness. This overwhelming passion for righteousness is actually a mindset that the Bible calls faith.... (This kind of) faith is a life-dominating conviction that all God has for me through obedience is better by far than anything Satan can offer me through selfishness and sin" (Hegg, *The Obedience Option*, 27-28).

Slavery comes in a variety of shapes and sizes and colors. Some people are slaves to their work. Others are slaves of achievement, success, or reputation. You can be a slave to things, possessions, money, cars, power, popularity, pleasure, sex. All kinds of things. If your passion (desire) for any of these things is greater than your passion to know and love and serve God, you can be sure something is wrong in your life.

Don't mess around with sin. Don't let sin of any kind take root in your heart. Why? Because, as Paul says, it will make you a slave (6:16-19), it will lead to regret, guilt, and shame (6:20-21), and it ultimately leads to death (6:22-23).

Or, to put it another way, sin is like a cancer. In a small group that Mary Sue and I are part of, we are reading the book *Respectable Sins* by Jerry Bridges. It is about those "respectable sins" that many Christians tend to overlook or excuse in our lives as we choose to focus instead on what we consider to be the more grievous sins of others or of our society as a whole. Bridges makes the point that "sin [of any kind] is a spiritual and moral malignancy. Left unchecked, it can spread throughout our entire inner being and contaminate every area of our lives" (Bridges, *Respectable Sins*, 20). If not dealt with decisively, it will poison not only your life but your relationship with God and your relationships with others as well. It is nothing to mess around with.

"The only way to overcome a passion for sin" – a passion for anything that takes precedence over God in your life – "is with an overwhelming passion for righteousness" that seeks first, above all else, the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33), glory, honor, and praise.

This overwhelming passion for righteousness, for God and His kingdom, comes only in surrender born of faith in Him. It comes only in response to His grace that does not treat us as our sins deserve (Psalm 103:10), but accepts us as His beloved children through the saving work of Jesus His Son for us.

What then? What shall we say and do in response to this? Do not be content, even for a moment, to be a passenger on a "ship of fools" headed for disaster. Do not allow a passion – or tolerance – for sin of any kind to hold you hostage or captive as a slave. Do not ever think that the freedom Jesus has won for you in His suffering and death on the cross gives you a license to hold onto a sin you don't want to let go of.

The greatest and best kind of freedom in the world is found in surrender to God. For, as Jesus said, "if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.