

Slavery, Anyone?

Romans 6: 16-23 ESV

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of 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. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

It happens quite often. When people my age get together, we often end up talking about things in the news. We all know that the news is filled with violence, tragedy, selfishness, lies, power struggles, money grabbing – you name it. There’s plenty of bad going on. Senior citizens have a way of comparing what’s happening now, with what happened 50 years ago, or perhaps 60 years ago, or even 70 or more years ago. Many seniors believe that things are worse today than they used to be – that there really WERE good ol’ days. Call it nostalgia, if you want to, but a whole lot of people believe that, back in the good old days, people had more godly values, and that people didn’t sin quite as bad back then. My personal view is that there have always been plenty of sinful people and that their sins were just as frequent and just as serious as the sins of our day. My exhibit 1 in support of this position is slavery.

There are only a few of us here this morning who have been personally touched by the kind of slavery that was a powerful social and economic force in the United States in the 18th and 19th century. For many Americans, it only showed up on the radar when the television miniseries called ROOTS captivated the American people during a very cold winter week in 1977. We had three young kids (and one in the “oven”), and we all watched it together. The kids got to stay up late, so they didn’t mind. We weren’t the only ones. According to Wikipedia, (and since it’s on the internet, it must be true!) even 37 years later, the series finale still ranks as the #3 most viewed TV program in the history of television. It was masterful story telling; it was compelling TV. It was Alex Haley’s family history, and it made me mad.

While ROOTS was an extraordinary TV mini-series, there are still photographs that are painful reminders of how life shattering slavery was, and how many of its scars will never heal. These photographs capture the horror and the power of the slave trade. After armed thugs would go into African villages and capture African people, tearing them away from their homes, their families, their world, they had to be held someplace. At least 30 slave castles or forts were built on the western coasts of the African continent to hold the captured slaves until ships could be found to transport them across the Atlantic to the New World, including the American colonies and, of course, later the United States.

Slavery’s Castles

They were enormous fortresses, built to hold thousands of slaves at a time. As soon as one ship departed, they would begin to fill the fort or castle again. They were large and very expensive, but they were a business expense, used by slave traffickers and slave owners to get wealthy at the expense of others. The slaves were held captive by those whom we might call “slaves to sin.”

The fact that slavery flourished in past centuries is a huge obstacle against the argument that people were better or less sinful centuries ago than they are today. And while slavery was known and practiced around the world, the fact that it

flourished here is a reminder that our nation is no less prone to sin than any other nation. And it's not just about Africans.

There are still powerful human forces which want YOU to remain slaves to sin – probably because they benefit from sin. They are ready to promote their favorite kinds of sin and they want to remove any shame connected with their favorite sins. While we may consider this disgusting, it is quite natural. Every human being is born with a sinful image, and unless God breaks into the cycle of sinfulness, sin goes crazy. Sin will be normal. And sin will enslave. And the wages of sin is death. God would have all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth; the forces of sin and Satan want us to remain separated from God and forever in the chains of sin slavery. This is not a chess match or a card game. You are at the center of it, and the forces on both side are cosmic and powerful.

Paul writes about a switch from slaves of sins to slaves of righteousness. This would be so simple to visualize, if the switch in slavery were neat and clean. If we could only leave slavery to sin, become slaves of righteousness, and never backslide, never return. It's NOT that neat and clean, and producing fruits of righteousness is not a continuous, forward movement. In Galatians, Paul provides a list of some fruits which God's people ought to be producing:

...The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23 ESV)

There are others, but these are powerful, and they are impressive. As they are fruits are lived out, they give glory to God, and quite frankly, they impress other people. They cause us to stand out because those who are slaves to sin find no reason to do these things unless it is in their own personal interest.

Remember, that there is a huge distinction between our justification and our sanctification. It is God who justifies. God shows his grace and love. He declares us JUST because he credits what Jesus did on the cross to us. We do nothing. Even the faith we have is a gift from God. It results in a relationship of trust. It is sealed in our baptism, and

that too is God's act, and not ours.

Our producing fruits of righteousness is part of our lives of sanctification. The Spirit equips us and empowers us to do things to God's glory, for the benefit of others, in accordance with His Word and commandments. There are times when we are on a roll, and love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, are flowing from us like a river. Then there are other days and other times, when we know exactly what kind of fruit God wants and expects from us, and we pretend we're uncertain, we pretend we don't know what God wants us to produce. Instead of showing acts of love, we are apathetic. Instead of radiating joy, we are quick to express our sadness or disappointment in others. Instead of being at peace, we are anxious. Instead of showing patience, we are impatient. Instead of showing kindness to others, we do only what is convenient. Instead of producing goodness, we go along with the slaves to sin around us. Instead of gentleness, we are assertive, rude or crude. Instead of demonstrating self-control, we act on our urges and throw our tantrums. We have a long, long way to grow in producing fruits. We have a long, long way to grow if we are going to convince others that we are no longer slaves to sin, but instead, we are slaves of righteousness.

We know we could be doing much better, and we admit our frustratingly low production of the fruits of righteousness. Paul was there, too. He confessed, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. (Romans 7:19 ESV)

Slavery, anyone? Are you ready to partner with the Holy Spirit to change master -- in moving from being a slave to sin, to being a slave of righteousness? The Spirit of God is ready. We're not going to shed slavery, but we can be partners with God rather than with the forces of sin, death, and the devil.

As horrific as human slavery is, God is ready to lift you, day by day, to the new life in Christ. God is ready to be your new master, and God is ready for you to be a slave of righteousness.

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The doors on the slave castles and forts had doors of no return. Those who left Africa were forced to leave everything behind. One window contains just two pieces of metal, melted together. They form a cross, probably because it was the least amount of iron, the cheapest way of doing the job, to keep a slave from freedom. The cross you know is your symbol of freedom. By the power of the resurrected Christ, you have exchanged slavery to sin, for slavery to righteousness.

Let's pray:

Lord, Thank and praise you for doing it all, for the free gift of eternal life, for the opportunities to serve you in righteousness. Guide us by your Holy Spirit. Lead us to lives that honor you and show our love for others. Amen.

Philip Tesch
June 25, 2017
North Highlands, California