

Sermon for Sunday, February 14, 2010
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WE BELONG TO GOD
Romans 6:15-23

1. Conversion involves a exchange of owner, service, and loyalty (6:15-18)

The image of slavery to God may be startling, even offensive, so let's ease into it by analogy. Joni Mitchell is a musician whose songs fuse folk and jazz with classical and pop influences. She never took formal lessons. She plays piano and guitar; on the guitar she uses "alternate tunings" so that many of her songs have no clear root chord. Rather, her chords can be interpreted two or three ways. Put several ambiguous chords in a row and the music sounds intriguing and strange.

The ambiguity makes it hard for her to find people to play bass for her songs. Most bassists like to improvise around the root chord. So they would ask her: "What's the root?" She would reply, "There is no root. Play what sounds good."

Most bassists didn't get it or didn't want to play that way. The exception was a player named Jaco Pastorius. Pastorius was cranky, argumentative and irrational. Once Mitchell ordered a specialty piece of equipment for a performance; Pastorius saw it and growled "It's mine." Joni endured his act for one reason: He understood her music, her goals. That is, because of her **devotion** to her music, the right sound, she chose to forego the right to peace, respect and her property. We might say she was a slave to her music.

Romans 6:15-23 says everyone is a slave, whether to sin or to God. But to follow best, we need to locate this theme with the rest of Romans 6 where Paul says believers must know and live out the freedom they have from sin. To ensure that people hear him, Paul sometimes covers some points twice from different perspectives. Specifically, Paul twice considers the idea that grace permits sin. After all, the more we sin, the more grace abounds. May the doctrine of grace therefore promote or enable sin? In 6:15, Paul asks, "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" This is almost identical to 6:1 where Paul asks, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?"

The question is the same: Does grace sanction or even encourage sin? After all, God is happy to forgive! Paul is emphatic: Never! Why not? He states the reason. In Romans 6:1-14, he says we lay aside sin because we are united to Christ. Because we died to sin with him and now we live with him, we should think and act like people who are indeed free from sin. In Romans 6:15-23, Paul says we stop sinning because we have offered ourselves to God as his slaves. When we turned to God in faith, we offered ourselves to God to obey him: "Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone... you are slaves to the one you obey?" (6:16).¹

We are slaves to the god or the principle that we obey. We are "slaves to sin" or "slaves to God" (6:16, 22). Jesus said, "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin." He continues, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:34, 36). Paul agrees: Believers became free from sin when we presented ourselves to God

To follow Paul's message thought, we need a word about slavery in the Greco-Roman world. The numbers varied from place to place, but slaves might constitute 10-30% of the population. People became slaves by birth to slave parents. Captured soldiers also became slaves. And while it may surprise us, some people entered slavery voluntarily by offering themselves to a master. The poor might gain protection that

¹ The word translated "offer" is the Greek verb *paristemi*, which can signify a formal presentation (cf. Rom 12:1)

way. Occasionally, people who held important positions such as a city treasurer became slaves to the master or government they served. Everyone knew that if someone offered himself as a slave, he had to obey his master.

Paul takes this custom and bends it to make his main point: Whether we realize it or not, everyone presents themselves to some master, some god. Everyone is devoted to someone or something which we obey roughly as a slave obeys a master. Either we are "slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness" (Romans 6:16). When Paul says we are "slaves to obedience" he doesn't mean we are devoted to the law per se. Rather, as Paul explains a moment later, we have become slaves to God" (6:22).

This is a strong claim: Everyone serves someone or something. If we're not devoted to God, we are devoted, we are slaves, to something else. This is true even if the principle is good in itself. Take equality for example. When love of equality became supreme in the French Revolution of the eighteenth century and of the Russian and Chinese revolutions of the twentieth century, the principle of equality demanded swift, even violent, action toward anyone who once had wealth and privileges. The privileged soon became slaves of fear. And the revolutionaries became slaves of hate.

If we serve our reputation, we become angry at anyone who damages ours and jealous of anyone who has a better one. Author Anne Lamott says dazzling success will "happen for some of the most awful, angry, undeserving writers you know – people who are, in other words, not you." They are successful because the blind herd decided to follow them but you wish the "caribou [would] run in your direction for a while."² That's the god of reputation talking.

As many songs say, we can become enslaved to romantic relationships. A character in the musical "Company" laments that he is falling in love. He knows what is coming and tells the audience: Women will "hold you too close, hurt you too deep, sit in your chair, ruin your sleep." They will "need you too much, know you too well, pull you up short, and put you through hell." But love makes him feel alive, so he surrenders to it.

In 6:19 Paul says, "I put this in human terms." That is, he knows slavery is a metaphor; like all metaphors it can be misleading. To be sure, God is like no slave master we know. He has none of the selfishness or cruelty of human masters. But the slavery metaphor expresses an important truth. Full-time service and absolute devotion are the essence of slavery and when we believe in God, He becomes our master and has the right to complete obedience any time. We are totally accountable to Him. We should obey Him completely, not selectively.

God's most common metaphor for Himself in the New Testament is "Father". Still, God is our Master. A Christian is free (6:18, 22, 8:2), but we still serve God.

Again, Jesus said that when "the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). But we don't have freedom to venture into a landscape that has no markers. Even if you have a Jeep that can go anywhere, that doesn't mean you should tear through your neighbor's back yard. There are roads, there are ways to travel. When we walk in God's ways and keep His commands He blesses us (Deuteronomy 26:17, 28:9, 30:16).

"I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord... will bless you in the land you are entering to possess (Deuteronomy 30:16, cf. Genesis 18:19). When the Bible compares the life of faith to a walk or a journey, we're at ease. But life also entails a choice of masters: sin or God.

² Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, pages 122-6

Slavery to sin leads to death. The wage, the per diem, the daily payment, of sin is death. Or we can be slaves "to obedience, which leads to righteousness" (Romans 6:16). We might have expected Paul to say we are "slaves of Jesus" rather than "slaves to obedience." But the point should be clear. If we genuinely give ourselves to God, we will have the righteousness that comes to the justified and receive eternal life. When we come to God in faith, we offer ourselves to him, permanently and unconditionally. So the life of the disciple is like slavery. It is like an exchange of masters: "Though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted" (6:17).

This statement hints at certain stages of development: First, we were slaves to sin. Then we obeyed the standard or prototype of a Christian, which the apostles learned and formally passed on to the church. This would be the essential doctrines of Jesus' sinless life, his substitutionary death and his physical resurrection, in addition to his primary moral teachings (cf. 2 Timothy 1:13, 1 Thessalonians 4:11). As a result, "You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (Romans 6:17-18).

Notice that we were entrusted to the teaching. Paul does not say the teaching was entrusted to us. We are not, as some teachers like to think, masters of the truth, the tradition that we control. On the contrary. God is master and He delivers us from bondage to sin and exercises His loving authority through His word. We are always subject to the word, never the other way around. Further, whether we serve wickedness or righteousness, we go ever deeper into that service.

Romans 6:19 says, "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." The Greek literally says we present ourselves as slaves to lawlessness, for [more] lawlessness. That is, we slide into ever more moral deterioration. But the noble "slavery" of believers leads to ever more moral renewal and holiness.

That is the norm, although we know reality may be less positive. Specifically, pastors and scholars notice that "selective adherent" is a good label for a great many religious people and church attenders. For the selective adherent, religion is supplement to a self-made life. For this person, church is a pleasing experience – the music, the sermons, and the social bonds may all be pleasing, but if a pastor or teacher says something the listener doesn't like, something that would require change, he simply disregards it. The selective adherent hears that premarital sex or cohabitation or gossip or petty deceits contradict God's will and ignores it. If a man picks and chooses among God's laws and follows them only when they are agreeable, he never truly serves God at all. Rather he does what he wills and is glad to see that God agrees with him at times. On the other hand, the true disciple repents and changes when he hears that his life violates God's way.

When Jesus and Paul compare the life of faith to slavery, they create a new way of thinking. We are not the king of our castle, the captain of our own ship. The Lord is king of every castle, captain of every ship. We either serve him or we serve sin.

Sin as slavery

Sin can enslave us without us knowing it. Take greed for example. Greed makes us slaves to work. We toil so long that we alienate our family and friends and ruin our health. We are slaves to greed if we betray friends and break laws to get more riches. We're slaves to greed if we can barely part with money even to give a gift to people we love. We are also slaves to greed if we buy things we can't afford and run up debts that fill us with fear.

I said I would talk about rumors today and this is where they fit. Gossip can enslave us to emotional turmoil and travail. Sadly, some people seem to like travail. They feel alive in a crisis and if there isn't one, they create one, so they are slaves to turmoil. Other people love calm and hate crises and feel horrible, trapped by crisis. Either way, rumors are often part of a crisis scenario.

Some people like rumors. Andy Warhol once said, "I have to go out every night. If I stay home one night I start spreading rumors to my dogs." A character in a movie once said, "Rumors! I love rumors. Facts are so uninteresting."

Solomon knew that gossip can be attractive: The words of a gossip are like choice morsels" (Proverbs 18:8). But the Bible says gossip and rumors are destructive: "Without gossip, a quarrel dies down" (Proverbs 26:20). And "gossip separates close friends" (16:28). That's not to say that all rumors start with evil intent.

It's human nature to be inquisitive. Because we're created in the image of an all-knowing God, we have a drive to know as much as possible. Ordinarily that is good. But sometimes we're just dying to know what is going on. And sometimes when we hunger for knowledge, we seize on one or two things that seem to be facts and we guess at the best way to extrapolate from these alleged facts. Some guesses become rumors. Many rumors are harmless, but some can hurt.

Definitions say a rumor typically spreads mouth to mouth or computer to computer. Rumors may have no discernible, reliable or authoritative source. Rumors are unverified statements about people, events, or issues that are of public concern. Gossip traditionally refers to private individuals and concern, although the boundary seems to be slipping.

Experts compare rumors to propaganda and distinguish "misinformation" – a statement that is false - and "disinformation" – one that is deliberately false and intends to promote a cause or damage a foe. Rumors may get longer or shorter as they spread. Rumors almost always have an element of truth. But then we put them in the "rumor mill" or assembly line and each "worker" adds something to that small, harmless truth and the horror, the evil, the outrage grow.

Actually rumors aren't necessarily negative; some are wildly optimistic. A book written about rumors in World War II era put them in three categories:

Euphoric rumors or dreams reflect what the public wanted. Example: Japan's oil reserves were low – the element of truth. Therefore the war would soon end. No.

Fear rumors reflect dreaded outcomes: An enemy surprise attack is imminent [true, one happened before]. Fear rumors reflect uncertainty or anxieties.

Wedge-driving rumors undermine group loyalty or relationships: German-Americans, Italian-Americans, Japanese-Americans were not loyal. Wedge rumors are especially prominent in partisan politics. The politician not from my party isn't wrong, he's evil! Recall the fifth membership vow to pursue the purity and peace of the church.

Rumors spread because people want information. Like all desires, the desire to know can be ruined by sin: We want to know things that are not our business. For example, what is happening in the finances of a neighbor who lost his or her job. We see a tiny change in their home and make a guess: They get a new water heater, so they must be fine. They have a yard sale, so they must be desperate. Maybe they just want to clean out the basement. Some guesses are positive, most are negative. Negative guesses can become rumors.

The bottom line is rumors hurt people. They hurt **people** – the sons and daughters of God. Rumors view people as objects. Lord, give us eyes to see other people as you do, especially when we disagree or irritate each other. May we see our brother or sister as you do, as your son, your daughter, as our brother or sister. Amen, so be it, Lord.

Why rumors

We gossip, murmur and spread rumors because we're human and flawed. James says, "We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man. The tongue... is a fire [and it] sets the

whole course of life on fire... No human can tame the tongue" (3:1-8). The problem lies with us. Sometimes we speak and wonder, "Now why did I say that?" Perhaps you know the feeling.

Sometimes we swing from one error to the next. I'm too rash or glib one day, tight-lipped the next. Let me be concrete. Sometimes I'm reticent to say exactly what I'm thinking. There are reasons for that. I grew up in a home where it was wise to pause before talking. And every leader knows the danger of being misquoted, the danger of speaking before he or she is certain. So I'm cautious. People may feel that and wonder, "What is he holding back?" Well, often it's a lame joke or something that isn't helpful or something I'll tell you in a few weeks when I'm sure. I'm sorry for my mistakes.

How to address rumors

People sometimes bring rumors to me. Many have to do with our church; others are about other churches or Christian leaders. Some of them are astonishingly dark. Let me share my policy with you. I listen to what they say – the text, which is often preposterous. Behind that text is the author who made it up. The author usually is working with a partial truth that has gotten distorted. And this partial truth intersects with some fear or some past hurt to create a statement that is false and perhaps dangerously false.

And I ask: What does someone want to do through this statement? What is their goal? How do they want the world to be? At the same time, I remember that the Lord is serious about sins of the tongue: Remember the indictment of humanity in Romans 1: "They are filled with wickedness... They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips..." (Romans 1:29).

Here are my suggestions:

When you hear a dark, accusing rumor, ask: Are you sure? What is your source? Would your source know? Have you asked the person in question? In general, have you taken steps to find out if this is true? If not, don't say it.

If a rumor, in effect, accuses someone of foolish or of evil deeds, are you confident you should be making this accusation? Have you met the biblical standards for making an accusation? Have you heard both sides of the story, as Scripture says we must (Deuteronomy 19:15, Proverbs 18:17)? Are there two or three eyewitnesses? Are they willing to step forward? If not, you should keep the rumor to yourself.

I also ask: Is there a hidden problem? Sadly, we don't always realize or face what is bothering us most. If our health is bad, if we're worried about our finances or our work – or lack of work, we may lash out at someone who makes a convenient target. Don't let that happen. And remember: we move forward together when we are seeking God's wisdom and grace for ourselves and when we extend it to each other.

3. "Freedom" can enslave and God's slaves are free (6:20-22)

Paul's final thought is that slavery also frees us in a way. If we are slaves to sin, we are free from any dealings with righteousness. By contrast, when God is our master, we're free to receive eternal life. Yet Paul emphasizes that we will serve someone, whether sin or God. We are slaves to whatever power we willingly obey.

All masters offer rewards and punishments and Paul leads us to consider them. Sin offers two results, death and shame. Romans 6:21 says the servants of sin do things that cause them shame. Worse, the fruit or the wage of sin is death (6:23). The term for wage in 6:23 means the daily or regular supply of food or money. The daily payment of sin is death. That is, sin kills a little every day. Acts of hate kill the hater. The cheater cheats and kills himself. The one who refuses to love loses the life of love, every day and then for all eternity.

Service to God brings wages or benefits, too. Romans 6:22 says we are set free from sin. Yes, we are still tempted, sometimes sorely. Yes, we sometimes succumb. But we are slaves no more. Sin can be like an addiction to something like cigarettes. People who successfully stopped smoking describe the break different ways. A few simply decide to quit and stop smoking that very day. The longing for cigarettes disappears quickly and temptation ends. Other people struggle. They may still have cravings a decade after their last cigarette. One person may feel less free than the other, but both are free. So it is with us. We may still be tempted, but we remain free from bondage to sin. Thus we see that God's second wage or benefit is holiness.

Third, when we serve God, we get a gift (not a payment), the gift of eternal life (6:23). This is ours through our union with Christ. He lives forever and so shall I. He lives forever and so shall we. When we have worshiped him and reigned with him for 10,000 years, not one day of life will be exhausted and we will enjoy him forever.