

***Whose Slave Are You?***  
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Nobody wants to be a slave. E.g., perhaps in a way that is how our country started— rebellion over taxation without representation in England. So we became a free nation. But in a certain sense we are still slaves. E.g., it has been about 150 years since we fought the Civil War, which led to President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment from 1865 which outlawed slavery. But in a certain sense we are still slaves, all of us. This point was made clear a little over a century after the Civil War by Bob Dylan, when in 1979 he came out with a song ‘Gotta Serve Somebody’, where he sings: “You may be an ambassador to England or France/You may like to gamble, you might like to dance/You may be the heavyweight champion of the world/You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls” and then the chorus, “But you’re going to have to serve somebody, yes indeed/You’re going to have to serve somebody/Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord/But you’re going to have to serve somebody”. Dylan’s point is that either way, whatever you choose, you and I are going to end up serving someone. In a certain sense, we are still slaves, all of us. Two millennia ago, the apostle Paul agreed.

READ Romans 6:15-23 (pp. 156-157)

**CONTEXT:** Paul is writing to a church he has never met, but hopes to meet one day. “So far in his letter to the Romans (ca. 57 AD from Corinth; cf. Acts 20:1-3 Paul has hit three major theological themes: people are sinners and thus deserve God’s judgment (chs. 1-3), Abraham is an example of someone justified as righteous before God because of his faith (ch. 4), and Adam, who brought sin/human condemnation into the world, serves as an anti-type of Jesus, who offers justification (ch. 5). Now in ch. 6 Paul examines for believers the consequences of God’s provision through Jesus by asking a surprising question in v 15: should we continue to sin? Cf. Matthew 6:24.”

I am reminded about a well-known quote from the Frenchman Alex de Tocqueville (1805-1859) about America after his visit here. He said, “America is great because America is good.” My sense is that America is unraveling, and last month’s events have deepened that impression. Three events especially stand out. The U.S. Supreme Court’s decision not to require physicians to have admitting privileges at a local hospital to do abortions. It is amazing that this decision has not raised more eyebrows. It is not at all unusual for physicians doing colonoscopies and Lasik eye surgery to be expected to have admitting privileges. We seem very casual about abortions in our country, but what really raises protests is telling— like the protests this past week over an 11-foot 300 lb. alligator in Lakeview near a school being euthanized— the man who euthanized the gator would not even give his last name to the press because he was concerned about the reprisals (from *The Times-Picayune The New Orleans Advocate* 1B-2B, July 4, 2020). Something is wrong with a nation that makes such tragic choices of where to protest when we destroy the lives of about 1.3 million babies through abortion each year. Also, the U.S. Supreme Court decided last month to re-define “sex” in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to include homosexuality and transgenderism. Target is a store that allows for people to use whatever gendered

bathroom they think is appropriate that day— and unless I am in a crisis, I will no longer shop at Target unless they change that policy. We have also seen last month the protests over the tragic death of George Floyd descend into mobs destroying private property and businesses and toppling over statues; the city of Seattle actually allowed for a time a mob to take over blocks of the city for what the mayor ridiculously referred to as a “summer of love”. These things make it appear to me that America is unraveling. There are several reasons one could address as causes for this, but one of them surely is that American is unraveling because the Church is unraveling in these same areas, even The United Methodist Church. For several years two official UM organizations, United Methodist Women and the General Board of Church and Society were affirming members of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), a pro-abortion lobbying group in Washington D.C. RCRC is known for its advocacy for unlimited access to abortion, even late-term abortion, and such is not the official position of The UMC. Fortunately, a few years ago we managed to force the two groups to remove their names. Mainline Protestant churches are notorious for their widespread affirmation of homosexuality and transgenderism. And the Church has often been behind protests for racial injustice and discrimination. But we need to remember that racism is *not* the greatest sin. It is a bad sin, to be sure, but it is not the greatest one. Which is? In his *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis has a chapter called “The Great Sin” which he identified as pride— seeing oneself as superior when compared not only to other people, but also to God. We want God to be made in our own image. Lewis said we must come to terms with the truth— God is that which is immeasurably greater than us. When we in effect become our own gods, we find such sins as racism coming into existence.

This is a fundamental question that Paul addressed— for his own time, and for our own. We ask the question, every one of us, whether we want to our not, whether we realize it our not. And the fact that for many Christians the answer is

yes, we can go on and sin, is what an unbelieving world find unbelievable. E.g., I recall talking to a minister before about people joining the church who were still living in an obvious area of sin and were not repentant, and he told me something he heard from a seminary professor, that such a person should be allowed to come into the church as a member anyway and work out their relationship with God—which I can understand for someone who is repentant, but not for someone who is saying I am not repentant and I still want to join the church. E.g., I recall hearing of a pastor who had a daughter who was a lesbian living with another woman, and someone asked him about what the Bible said about it, and he said that he had come to the decision not to mention it to his daughter, but he would just continue to preach the gospel, and the person telling me this was from this pastor’s church and thought this was the height of wisdom. I was asked what I thought, and I said this pastor was neglecting his role as a shepherd to his daughter and congregation, for preaching the gospel means preaching in love repentance from sin, in which his daughter was living. It is as though these pastors would answer Paul’s question whether we should continue in sin since we are no longer under the law but grace, “Yes, we should not get too bogged down in what is morally right or wrong before God, but just love everyone.” This assumes that what is loving and gracious is *not* preaching the gospel, that God came to transform sinners into men and women and young people in His image, to forgive us and reconcile us to Him, the One for whom we were made. As Jesus said in Matthew 6:24, “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

READ vv 16-21. “Paul states that believers can proceed in one of two ways, which he ironically calls ‘slavery’. The first is slavery to sin, which leads to increasing iniquity/lawlessness, shame, and eventually to death (vv 16,19,21,23).” As we see in v 19, Paul is not happy that he is using the term “slavery” for following God. He realizes the ugliness involved with the word, the shock value

it provokes. But it seems to be, “because of the weakness of your flesh” literally, necessary. Because it is so easy for them to slip into their old former ways, before they were Christians. It should not escape our notice that Paul begins this letter by calling himself a slave of Christ Jesus (δοῦλος χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ), which he does in other letters (Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:1). And Paul realizes that everyone is a slave to something, whether to sin or obedience. The outcome of slavery to sin is increased sin/iniquities, shame, and death. Let’s explore that for a moment. How does slavery to sin lead to such things? E.g., I recall the story of Whitney Houston’s life, who grew up in the church and singing there, but when she became very popular in secular music, she got involved with a man who was into drugs, they got married, she started using drugs, and she eventually died at 48 due to overuse of cocaine. Slavery to sin can do that. It can also lead to shame. Have you ever been ashamed of your sin? E.g., I recall a story about Peyton Manning where when he was growing up playing football at Newman he was meeting with the players and coach after a game and apparently they lost the game and Archie thought he saw his son Peyton pointing at the coach and saying basically, “The reason we lost the game was because of you”; when Peyton got in the car Archie addressed the disrespect that Peyton showed, and Archie drove him over to the coach’s house to apologize to him, which must have been shameful for him, but appropriate. And sin leads to death, and in this passage it is not just physical death or eternal death, but a living death. E.g., there are times I have gone to a party where I was the only Christian, or one of few, and the conversations ended up being about sports or the weather or jobs, and I left with an empty feeling; there was no life in the conversation, like when people talk about Jesus and the joy of serving Him and the fruit in our lives of serving Him. That is slavery to sin, which leads to increased sin, shame, and death. But there is another kind of slavery.

READ vv 22-23. “The other is slavery to obedience, which brings righteousness, sanctification and eternal life (vv 16,19,22-23).” Paul’s readers had been spiritually dead, slaves to sin, but now they were following Jesus, and Paul wants them to keep with it. Just because we are under grace and not the law does not mean we go half-hearted into our faith. If anything, it means we should all in! It is here that we see the power of the gospel! I am reminded of what Paul said in 2 Timothy 1:7, “God did not give us a Spirit of timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.” I always wondered what was meant by “power”— and in other parts of Paul’s writings he states such as 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 he shows this power is about a changed life in line with God’s wisdom and ways. E.g., I recall an area of my life I had a hard time with was my temper, and it would especially come out when I played sports. I recall playing golf and basketball and I could have a pretty coarse mouth. And I remember in high school when I had finished playing basketball and was about to graduate, an adult said to me that he noticed when I was on the court I controlled my temper well when a call went against me, and I thought, “Really?! That’s the power of God in my life, because that is not *me!*” E.g., I recall a New Testament scholar Royce Gruenler who was involved with Process Theology, which says basically that God is evolving and morality is evolving, the idea of God is dynamic not static, and it basically makes the human being God who makes God into what he or she believes He should be; Gruenler got back to believing the Bible revealed who God is, and he had a great joy about him. E.g., I recall reading about Billy Graham that when he was confronted by Charles Templeton about doubts about the Bible, Graham did not want to pursue those questions because for him the issue was settled. How did he know the Bible was the Word of God? Because he sensed the power when he preached it as the Word of God, and it changed people’s lives. I recall going to a Billy Graham crusade in the Superdome and seeing streams of people going down to the floor of the Superdome to accept Christ! And the hope we have is for eternal life— one

day, those in Christ will be alive with Him, forever! That's the blessing of being a slave to obedience to God!

“Whose slave are you and I?” Bob Dylan was right— everyone serves somebody, everyone is a slave; the question is to what or to whom? Our nation is unraveling because it is falling slavery to that which is opposed to God. That may be a harsh way of putting it, but it has great truth. Satan is a harsh master; God is a wonderful master. The choice is ours. Let's choose wisely, and know the blessings of righteousness and eternal life.