

Alive in Christ: Alive & Free!

A sermon based on Romans 6:19b-23.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Can we all agree...the 1850's, 1860's, even part of the 1870's were some of the darkest days in the history of our country? Do you know why? Of course, those were the years leading up to, the years of, even the years following the Civil War, which besides being the bloodiest war in American history (the deaths in that war nearly equal those from all other American wars combined), besides that, it was a war fought, in part, because of slavery.

And even though the North won the war and slavery was abolished (mostly) with the Emancipation Proclamation, that time period has been a black eye on our history ever since. We're still feeling repercussions from it today. I mean, from the Jim Crow laws, starting in the 1870's, disenfranchising African Americans in the South, the civil rights movement in the 1950's and 1960's, popularized by Martin Luther King, Jr., a struggle for social justice aimed at gaining equal rights for all, white and black alike...all the way to today...with the Black Lives Matter movement, national anthem protests...it's still here.

Words like "servant," "slave" are still trigger words amongst the African American community (and understandably so). NBA superstar Kevin Durant, an African American, a few years back wanted to give himself the nickname "The Servant" because, he said at the time, that's how he saw his role on his team - dishing the ball to his teammates. He was there to serve the fans - entertain them. Some even thought it was reference to his faith, how he saw himself following the example of The Servant, Jesus. But I was listening to a sports podcast a few days ago where the hosts, in light of social issues that still exist, thought that self-proposed nickname, at the time, had been a not-so-veiled jab at critics of his ethnicity's storied past and continued struggles today.

As you are probably well-aware, this wound is still quite fresh...certainly hasn't healed. And again, it all goes back to a dark time in our history. Now, with all that being said, what are your thoughts on slavery?

You're not alone. Even for Paul, in his day, slavery was common. Slavery was still very much a hot-button issue. Even then, the institution of slavery had features making it decidedly unpalatable to people, especially with their natural desire for freedom. We all like to be in charge of our own affairs - to be our own boss. Slavery was just the opposite of that. Being a slave meant losing one's own will and doing someone else's bidding.

You know what it's like, don't you? You know, as much as we might bristle at the idea of slavery - maybe even hate the concept, spiritually speaking, it's reality. What does Paul say? ***"You used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and ever-increasing wickedness...You were slaves to sin...free from the control of righteousness."***

The word "wickedness" here, in the Greek language is "avomia." It means, "without law," nothing to cage me in, no one telling me what to do. So how is that slavery?

Think back to your teenage years. Maybe this was your experience... in high school, it seemed like your friends got to go out and do whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, however long they wanted

to. But you, you had chores, you had rules, you had curfews, you had consequences. Maybe you even felt at times like you were a prisoner in your own home.

But then you became a senior. Your parents decided you could handle a little more freedom. So they gave you the keys to the car, they let you hang out with your friends more often. They made curfew later. They didn't ask as many questions. You got what you wanted.

So what did you do? I went to a friend's house after a musical. I told my parents where I was going to be. I didn't feel the need to call them when it was getting near curfew and then when it was past curfew. So it wasn't really a surprise when I got home, and they were up waiting...and when the car keys were taken away...and when the early curfew was reinstated...and when I was grounded. So much for freedom, right?

"Avomia." Without law. Before becoming Christians, the Romans were **"free from the control of righteousness."** They didn't feel the inhibiting force of God's holy will telling them to lead decent, honest, chaste, industrious lives. They were free from the control of righteousness...but they weren't really free. They were slaves to sin.

Friends, that's one of Satan's great lies. He puts the laws of God before our eyes. He reminds us of God's standard for living...his demands for perfection. And he says, "That doesn't sound like fun. Making worship a priority in your life, especially on a Sunday morning – one of your two mornings during the week when you can sleep in? Remaining sexually pure – in your thoughts, in your words, in your deeds – when everyone else out there does what they want? Putting others before yourself all the time, which means sometimes your own needs get neglected – you don't get what you want? How is that enjoyable for you? Always doing everything God wants? What about your wants?"

"Do what makes you happy. You can do whatever you want. Take the steps to make sure this is the best life for you. Be your own master. Enjoy the freedom." Sounds much better, doesn't it? Why would anyone want to enter slavery? Well, what truths does Paul outline here? One, everyone has a master. There can be no disinterested neutrality toward God. On the other hand, as Jesus once said, **"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other."**

Satan tells us we're free. We can be "without law" (wicked); we can be "free from the control of righteousness." And at one time, like the Romans, we were. But we still had a master. We were slaves to sin. We obeyed Satan; we obeyed our sinful nature; we followed the ways of the world.

What good was that? Or, as Paul says, **"What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!"** Living without the law, doing what you want, feeling like the restraints are off and you can really finally live and live for today...where does that lead? Or, as Jesus once asked, **"What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"** The wages of being our own boss, of living without the law (wickedness), of being free from the control of righteousness, of being slaves to sin...what we've earned...how should God compensate us? Death. Hell.

"But now." That is what you and I were. We were slaves to sin. Satan was our master. He fooled us with his lies of freedom from God's burdensome and unrealistic standards. His intent was to bind us up forever in the prison of hell. **"But now...you have been set free from sin."**

That was then...this is now. You and I have been set free from slavery to sin, and here's how: ***"The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."***

The difference is from what we earned to God's gift to us...Jesus, who, in his own way became a slave...a servant. Listen to what he said, ***"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."*** In coming to this earth, Jesus gave up his will. He was beholden to God's will, God's plan...which was our salvation. And in that, Jesus served perfectly with his sinless life, his obedience to death on the cross, and his resurrection from the grave. What we cannot do, Jesus did for us...and then gave it to us as a gift.

When we, like sheep (in keeping with our Good Shepherd Sunday theme), went our own way, thinking we were in control, but in reality were being led astray by Satan, the wolf, who put the tufts of grass, the appealing freedom from righteousness and "without law" prospect in front of our snouts...when we were being led to the eternal disaster of death...the Servant gave up his life...our Good Shepherd laid down his life for us

Jesus lived, died, and rose for you and me because a new master chose us – at tremendous cost to himself. God gave his Son over to death and the punishment of hell so we could be his. ***"You have been set free from sin," Paul writes, "and have become slaves to God."... "to serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness,"*** Martin Luther writes.

Are you ok with that? Being a servant...a slave to God? I know that it's a loaded title, packed with tons of negative connotations. We might not like the term. That's a challenging order, and one not to our old Adam's...to our sinful nature's liking. It means submerging our own will and letting God's will guide and direct us. But giving up one's will to follow that of another is, by definition, slavery.

Maybe think about it this way. How many of you have a pet. Especially if you have a dog, do you think your pet likes it living with you? I mean, when you go for walks, the dog needs a lease (maybe even a harness). When guests come over, sometimes the dog needs to be put away. In the yard, there's fence limiting how far the dog can go on his own. They can eat only when you choose to feed them, go outside only when you allow them to. Sounds pretty rough, right?

Until you think about the alternative. If the dog were out there on his own, he'd have to scrounge around for food, find someplace warm during a freezing winter's night, maybe even fight off any predators who come his way. At least here, as a pet, he has a warm house, food to eat, a bed, can safely lounge around all day. Which do you think the pet would rather have?

True freedom for us is only when we're in the flock, when we're under Jesus' control. Some might call it captivity...and it is. But think about the alternative. The benefits of being slaves to Christ...***"leads to holiness, and the result of holiness is eternal life...the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*** Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?

But being a slave to God...not easy, is it? Do you know what happened to many black slaves in the South after the Civil War ended? Some lived in actual freedom, although it was filled with poverty...many of them became sharecroppers who paid rent on land by giving a portion of their crops to the landowner.

A lot, though, went back into slavery. Some were of their own accord – this was all they knew, the prospects of freedom were frightening, so they stayed on the plantation and continued to do the work

and receive the same “compensation” they were provided as slaves. Others went back, but not so willingly. You see, there was this loophole in the 13th Amendment (which officially freed all Americans): **“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”**

Here’s an excerpt from an article I read this past week from Timeline.com, explaining how that loophole played out: **“For Southern whites now without their former workforce, there was a clear upside to convicting as many blacks as possible. Laws, especially around vagrancy, were quickly enacted to target African Americans. In North Carolina, for instance, people without jobs could be sent to court. If they could pay a fine, they were dismissed for a year; if not, they were deemed a vagrant and imprisoned. Newly free slaves came with a clause, however. They must return to their former masters under “contract” or be “leased” to a corporation for hard labor.” “Officials claimed black convicts were better off in this kind of servitude than as freemen. There they would be shed of their “old habits” by learning a trade; they would leave prison having been exposed to “rigid discipline” and “regular hours.” But there was little incentive to treat convicts well once they were leased out to work on a plantation or in a mine. After all, the lessors had little interest in the convicts’ long-term health, and by law were no longer entitled to their offspring.”**

It’s hard to break free, isn’t it, from the slavery to sin we once knew and enjoyed and were steeped in. Thank God, then, that those dark days are over. Thank God for his gift. Thank God for the Servant who gave his life to set us free. Now, in thanks, in our freedom, as eagerly and zealously as we used to surrender our bodies to impurity before God set us free, so eagerly will we now pursue righteousness. We’ve been set free, so now we will serve. We are no longer slaves to sin; now, by the grace of God, we will make the clean break and be slaves to God...because in that, we are alive in Christ. We are alive and free! Amen.