

NOTHING ELSE FOR IT

Rom. 6:12-23; Matt. 10:40-42

There is no explicit condemnation of slavery in the Bible. Slavery was a fact of life in the world of the Bible and accepted as such. There were many slaveholders in this nation who saw the Bible's acceptance of the practice as justification for their ownership of slaves. It is difficult to imagine a more vicious human practice than the enslavement of human beings, and yet Jesus never utters a peep against the institution, at least so far as we know. And Paul seems at times to positively embrace it. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul is mightily concerned about the power of sin to control our passions. He doesn't say what these passions are, but whatever they are, it is difficult to imagine they are more terrible than a willingness to accept the enslavement of one person by another.

In the verse before the passage that is our lesson, Paul has written, "So you must also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Paul's intent is to portray God not as a judge who condemns us for our shortcomings but rather as a perfectly gracious Creator who freely forgives our sin for love of us. The religious life is thus not a matter of bondage to the law but of freedom in Christ. We are forgiven, no longer burdened by guilt or shame for our offenses. Sweet.

In Paul's mind, if there is no law, there is no sin. The law says what is right and wrong, and without the law there is no standard by which to judge. The law Paul is thinking of here is the Jewish law, which was the means by which a Jew established her righteousness before God. The law was demanding, and in Paul's mind had to be

perfectly kept in order for one's life to be justified in God's sight. That was the religious system of Judaism as Paul understood it. The religious system of Christianity makes our justification a matter of God's grace. It's not the law that puts us right with God but rather we are put right with God by the free gift of God's grace shown in the life of Jesus even to the point of forgiving the taking of Jesus' life, as if to say there is nothing that God won't forgive.

Now, as I trust you can see, this is a dangerous idea. If God forgives all my sins, then why not just do whatever I want to do, no matter how vicious? There will be no consequences so far as God is concerned, so what the hell! Paul sees this coming down the pike and quickly asks rhetorically, "Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?" And his answer is, "By no means!" He then launches into this weird analogy of slavery, which says it is up to us whether we want to be slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness, except that who wants to be a slave to anything? What it seems that Paul is saying here is that the Christian isn't forced to do the right thing out of fear of God but rather does the right thing freely for the love of God who first loved us, and is thus, in his tortured analogy, "enslaved by God." Let's see if we can't take something spiritually useful from this tortured analogy. It will not be easy.

Let's say that the point Paul is driving at is that we must be obedient to God. The nature of this obedience is described by Simone Weil, one of the wisest spiritual guides of the last century, in her recalling of a young ship's boy who has performed an astonishing act of heroism at sea. Asked by a journalist how he had done it, he replies, "There was nothing else for it," which is to say that at the moment of crisis he could not have done otherwise, he just had to do what he did. Weil says, "Obedience is the only

pure motive, the only one which does not in the slightest degree seek a reward for the action, but leaves all care of reward to [God]...” She thinks of such obedience as necessity, something that we have to do to meet a need. This is perhaps what Paul means when he speaks of being “enslaved to God.” But this is nothing like actual slavery, which is merely obedience to force exercised by the master.

The goal of the Christian life is to be obedient to the will of God to such an extent that we become the instruments of God’s will, so much so that selfishness disappears. This is the sort of thing that happens whenever we make the satisfaction of another’s need our heart’s desire. For example, you might have spent a Sunday afternoon pursuing your own enjoyment and your own purposes, but instead you decided to serve dinner at the soup kitchen. Perhaps doing this gives you some satisfaction, which is a reward of sorts, but beyond this there is no reward. So we might say you did what you did without reward because it needed to be done. This is both the mark of human goodness and Christian godliness.

In a short story entitled “Asleep in God,” Jeffrey Eugenidies writes about a religious studies major by the name of Mitchell who goes to Calcutta, India to work with Mother Teresa.

“Mitchell had never so much as changed a baby’s diaper before. He’d never nursed a sick person, or seen anyone die, and now here he was, surrounded by a mass of dying people, and it was his job to help them die at peace, knowing they were loved.... This included giving the men medicine, feeding them, sitting on their beds and providing company, looking into their faces and holding their hands. These things weren’t

something you had to learn how to do, and yet, in his twenty-two years on the planet, Mitchell had done few of them before and some of them not at all.”

Mitchell can do some of the things to meet the needs of the people in Mother Teresa’s Home for the Dying Destitutes, but there are things he can’t bring himself to do, things that disgust and appall him and from which he wants to flee. By the time he leaves the Home he feels that he understands mercy and that he understands sinner, and he prays in his heart, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner,” prays the prayer until he finds that the prayer has taken over and is saying itself in his heart.

The measure of our faith is love. To be “enslaved by God”—how I hate that expression!—might be interpreted as meeting the world with love in every circumstance. The wisdom of our faith is that we are never so free as when we are so bound, loving because we have been loved, loving because there is nothing else for it, nothing else to be done, loving as if by necessity. Think of someone you love. What else is there to do but love them? You can no more stop loving them than you can stop yourself from breathing. In so loving, you are, as Paul says, obedient from the heart—you *want* to do what you have to do. That is the obedience that our faith teaches we are to have to God, not for the sake of reward but simply because love is the way that we are rightly related to one another in the world and to the world’s Creator. You are not, I suspect, perfect in this obedience, or at least not much more perfect in it than am I. You will need mercy when you fall short, as do I. But that’s alright. God is merciful. God’s love is perfect even if ours is not. That is our faith: as simple as giving a cup of cold water wherever it is needed, because how could we do otherwise and be the disciples of Jesus!

Returning to Eugenides' story, "...two female volunteers were hanging wet laundry on the line. One of them, who sounded American, was saying, 'I told Mother I was thinking of taking a vacation. Maybe go to Thailand and lie on the beach for a week or two. I've been here almost six months.'

"What did she say?"

"She said the only important thing in life is charity.'

"That's why she's a saint,' the other woman said.

"Can't I become a saint and go to the beach, too?' the American woman said, and they both laughed." (*The New Yorker*, June 13&20, 2011, pp. 87-99)

The answer is yes, but only by the grace of God. Amen.

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Emanuel Lutheran Church