

Sometimes the Bible speaks in offensive ways. And I don't mean just offensive because of sin, because it hits too close to home and it really hurts. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about speaking in ways that makes you ask: "Why is this in the Bible? Why does God say it this way?" Like a story, for example, that you couldn't even show on TV. Or wording which seems a little bit odd or even a little bit wrong to our ears. Why is this in the Bible? So what do we do in a case like that? We need to study it closer, to really pay attention to what God is trying to tell us, even if it hurts to hear. Because when we see the point of what God is trying to say, then we will get something, what he wants us to see in the reading.

Now, our reading for this evening is an example of this. Paul says very clearly that we are now "slaves of God." And that word "slave" is something that is offensive to us. Even just talking about slavery is uncomfortable for most people. But it is one of those things that we as Americans really struggle with because of our past. We remember all the things that happened in our past, and most of us probably wish that we could just forget about it or that it had never happened, or anything like that. To just move past it so we don't have to talk about it anymore. So why, then, we might ask, does Paul say that we are now slaves of God? Isn't that evil? Isn't that kind of degrading? What we supposed to do with this? What is he trying to say in this passage? To understand it, we need to look at it closely.

So there's three things that we have to understand first of all before we will understand what Paul is saying. And the first one of these things is recognizing that slavery was very much a part of his world. Every ancient culture practiced slavery in one form or another. Some, of course, were worse than others. In the Roman Empire, when Paul is writing, more than one third of the entire population was slaves. And another very large percentage after that were freed men, people who had been slaves at one point in their lives, but now were set free. So slavery, then, was very much a part of everyday life for Paul and for those that he was writing to. In fact, many of them were slaves. If you look at Romans 16, for example, and you compare all the names, you can tell that some of them were slaves, because slaves had certain names and free people had different ones. So you can tell just in that passage that Paul is writing to at least a sizable number of slaves. Or in a passage like Philippians 4, for example, when Paul says: "All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household." Caesar's household is not his relatives. Caesar's household refers to slaves, slaves who belong to Caesar who are now Christians. So Paul making reference to slavery in this way was just referring to something that they all knew, they all experienced in their daily lives. It was very, very familiar to them, and they would've recognized his point right away. So that's the first thing that we need to understand about what Paul is trying to say in this passage.

The second thing is probably the harder for us to accept, but it is true. Slavery is something which is in the Bible. The Bible does not outright condemn the institution of slavery. It does condemn abusing slaves. You are not supposed to mistreat them. It also condemns kidnapping, stealing people and selling them to be slaves. For example, in Deuteronomy 24, where it says: "If a man is found stealing one of his brothers of the people of Israel, and if he treats him as a slave or sells him, then that thief shall die. So you shall purge the evil from your midst." So it's very important to understand here that it was not a sin to be a slave. If that was the case, then all of those slaves that Paul was writing to would be sinning just because of who they were. It was also not a sin to have slaves. The book of Philemon, for example, is written to a Christian master who

had a Christian slave and the problems that he was dealing with. But it is a sin to mistreat slaves. That is something which the Bible unequivocally condemns, without any exceptions. So what's the point of this? It's to show that talking about being a slave of God is not something evil. It's not like we're taking a sin and using it to talk about our relationship with God. It is something which does come up in the Bible. And as difficult as it may be for us to hear, that is the second thing we need to understand.

The third and last thing is that Paul says that this is a metaphor. He says very clearly in verse 19: "I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations." So Paul recognizes that you could take this idea way too far. Because slavery in his time and in our time, for that matter, was often very brutal. It was often very degrading. Romans treated their slaves as being less than human. So it was something that had a lot of evil attached around it. And being a slave to sin is just as brutal. Sin is a terrible master. Sin is abusive. Sin is degrading. So when talking about being enslaved to sin, the metaphor works perfectly. But when we're talking about being a slave to God, well, serving God is not evil, so we don't want to take it too far. However--and this is Paul's point--there are few things clearer to show how we belong entirely to someone else than the metaphor of slavery. And that is ultimately his point. That's why he speaks the way that he does. Because Paul's point in this passage, in Romans chapter 6, is this: you belong entirely to someone, either to sin or to God. And the question is: who is your master?

This is what he means, then, when he says in verse 16: "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?" So you belong to one or the other entirely, either to sin or to obedience to God. If you are a slave of sin, you belong entirely to sin. Your actions belong to sin. Your thoughts belong to sin. Your words belong to sin. All of it belongs to sin. That's what it means to be a slave of sin. But if we are a slave of obedience to God, then we belong entirely to him. Our thoughts belong to him. Our words belong to him. Our actions belong to him. So you belong, Christians, body, soul and mind, everything that you are, to one or the other, to sin or to God.

But the outcome of these two, the wages, the pay that you get is totally different. Because being a slave of sin means that you will be paid with death. Sin is a brutal master, Christians. Sin is every bit as degrading as human slavery in the ancient world, especially among the pagans. Sin makes you less than what you are. Sin demands that you do things contrary to God. Sin is abusive. Sin is degrading. And because we are born into sin, we are born slaves, the slaves of sin. And nothing we can do will free us from that bondage. And sin also leads us to do what the world wants to do. Sin causes us to do lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, something that builds on itself, that gets worse and worse all the time. That's what happens when we are slaves of sin.

But when we turn back to sin, Christians, when we go back to what we once were, we're basically saying we want that master back. We want the abuse back. We want to go to everything that sin was doing to us. Because we've convinced ourselves somehow that it's better, that it's more fun, that it's more authentic, or whatever it may be, to go back and to live in sin, forgetting all of the things that sin has done to us. But Christians, it is destroying us. Sin drags us down. Sin only brings death. That's what you get paid in the end. Those are your wages for serving sin:

eternal death. So is it really worth it in the end? That's a question we need to ask ourselves whenever we're tempted to go back to our sins, whenever we're tempted to continue doing something contrary to the will of the Lord. Is it worth it in the end?

But Christians, now because of Jesus Christ, you have been set free from sin. Because of Jesus, as Paul says, you are now slaves of righteousness, slaves of God. Jesus has bought you with his own blood. Jesus has given you a new master in God. But God is a good master. In fact, he is so good it's really hard to even call him a master. Because God took you away from the slavery to sin. He took you out of the abuse. He took you out of that degradation. And he gave you new life. He gave you a new name. And he has made you his own, taught you the truth. He has made you a slave of righteousness. And yes, sometimes that means we have to do things that the world hates. Yes, that sometimes means we have to do things that our own flesh hates. But serving God gives us righteousness, sanctification, eternal life. Your jobs today don't even pay that well! So anything that we go through, Christians, in the service of God is worth it, because the yoke of God is far better than anything that sin might promise to us. To be a slave of God means that we are heirs of eternal life.

So that's Paul's point, then, Christians. A slave belongs entirely to someone, and only to one master. If we are slave of sin, then we do the will of sin, and our reward is eternal death. But being a slave of God means that we do his will, and he gives you life in his Son. So should we go back to sin? Should we go back to what we once were, to our old master? No. We have a new master. We have a better master. So let us serve him with all that we have.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have made us your own by buying us with the blood of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to follow after you in everything, so that we may do what you would have us do in body, soul, and mind. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.