

A Sermon for DaySpring  
by Eric Howell  
*You Gotta Serve Somebody*  
Romans 6  
June 28

For the sermon this morning, we are going to turn into Romans, chapter 6, our epistle reading for today. Turning into Romans 6 is no light thing. The sixth chapter of Romans takes you right into the teeth of sin and death and slavery. But if you take the posture of Romans 6, you're already in those places of sin, death, and slavery. And going into chapter six is the journey to be set free. So that's what's at stake here in this chapter, in all of Romans, in fact, in all of the Gospel. But particularly in Romans six where it comes right to the forefront.

The biggest, densest book in the New Testament is St. Paul's letter to the Romans. It's big and dense and also marvelous, if you take the time to dig in. Let's dig in a bit this morning. In this letter, it's like the Apostle Paul gathers up all his best most important ideas and lays them out. The Roman Christians needed this. They lived at a critical time in a critical place. All roads lead to Rome and for Paul, if he can get to Rome, he may be able to share the Gospel in the center of the world. And if he can shape the minds and hearts of the Roman Christians before he gets there, he may well just change the world. But to do that, he wants to show how God has already done it. In Jesus, God has already changed the world; don't you know?

All over the world, we're all different, Paul acknowledges from the beginning. Even in the church we're all different, but church is where differences come together and are made whole. Where different people are brought together and made one. But it starts with something we all share in common, because despite our differences, we're not so different after all. That's how Paul sees the world. What we share in common: All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

All have sinned. This seems to be the foundational building block of Paul's message. You think you're so different, you think you're better than each other. (The Romans had some serious problems in the church). You think you're so different, you are and you're not. Because what separates you from one another is less important than what separates you from God. Before you focus on what separates you from one another, you ought to take a closer look at what separates you from God because you all share it in common. We all share it in common.

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

This is a major point for Paul. In Chapter 1, it's the Gentiles he's talking to. In chapter 2, it's the Jews. You're all in this together. IN chapter 3, it's everyone. In chapter 5, he goes back to our origins. Original sin, Paul says. You not only share this in common with one another, you share it in common with every person who's ever lived, every son of Adam, every daughter of Eve.

But Paul is not just throwing bricks at people. He's not the pointy finger, pulpit pounding judgmental preacher. Every time Paul talks about sin, he immediately talks about redemption.

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God...  
And are justified freely by his grace.

While we were still weak...  
At the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

The judgment following one trespass brought condemnation...  
But the free gift following many trespasses brings justification.

For the wages of sin is death...  
But the free gift of God is salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord.

You see the pattern? It's like the Apostle knows he needs to talk about human sin, and he does so frankly, but it's also like he can't get the words out fast enough to get to talk about redemption. If you talk about redemption without taking about sin, it's cheap. And Christianity is not about cheap grace. The crucifixion, if nothing else, reminds us of this. But if you talk about sin without talking about redemption, it's hopeless. And Christianity is all about hope. The resurrection, if nothing else, reminds of of this.

And so, redemption is what the Apostle really wants to talk about. We're all in a mess in so very many ways, so he wants to talk about grace, redemption, justification, salvation, sanctification, but he also knows we can't feel the force of the great themes of grace unless we feel the terrible weight of our need for it.

By chapter 6, he's ready to let loose. Chapter 6 is where Paul really unravels the power of sin over our lives by the power of God in grace. In this chapter, he uses 2 metaphors to tell the story. Both are potent illustrations that something happens when a person is converted to Christ that brings an old state of life to an end and opens up the possibilities for a new way of being. The first half of the chapter is the story of initiation into Christ. It is the experience of the death of sin and new life in Christ. Just as Christ was buried and raised, so we are buried and raised to walk in new life. We talked about that last week. Salvation is the move from death to life. The experience of grace destroys the power of sin and brings new life. That's the first half of the chapter.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the chapter uses a 2<sup>nd</sup> metaphor. The journey from sin to salvation is now described as slavery from one master to slavery to a different master. You were slaves to sin but now you are slaves to God. Grace liberates us from the dominion of sin's destructive power and sets us free to submit to God's will and God's ways.

That all sounds great, but slavery? Did he have to use the image of slavery? We may want to protest this metaphor on a couple of grounds though in doing so, we also see its meaning for us. First, on using the imagery of slavery. Some translations do this work for us by translating the word *doulos* as servant instead of slave. I'm ok with that; it is servanthood we're talking about and unpacking the painful, complex, shameful history of slavery in modern times and in ancient times is heavy work. Better to just say servant.

But *doulos* does seem to mean slavery, at far as Paul understood it. It means not just adopting a humble posture of servanthood to another; it means belonging to something or someone. This is the stark framing of our lives in Paul's view: we belong to sin. We are owned by it, until we are set free. It's not that Paul is entirely comfortable with this metaphor. In verse 19 he even apologizes for using it, but he uses it anyway because the plight of a slave as he saw it in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was an apt, if imperfect, picture of our universal condition in relationship to sin. Sin has that kind of power over us. There comes a point in just about every person's life where we cry out, "Lord, deliver me from this. Set me free." We are owned by it. And, let's be honest, that's more right than wrong, isn't it?

One of this week's daily readings was from Micah 7. Those verses, the end of the book of Micah read,

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression . . .?  
 God does not retain his anger forever because he delights in steadfast love.  
 God will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot.

Then the prophet turns his face toward God and says a prayer that sounds like he suddenly realizes the implications of all this God and grace talk. The prophet says,

You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

The sea for Israel was a very faraway place, the darkest depths, the scary place. The sea was where monsters lived and death came from. God casts our sins into the sea, into the very depths of the sea. That's how far away that are, and how free we are from them to live in God's grace and serve God and all of God's children. None of us will ever do this perfectly; we'll always fail, likely over and over again. That's chapter 7 of Romans. But that too reveals the nature of God's grace. Should we continue sinning? No, but does God ever give up on his people? No. God never gives up on you. God holds you close and takes your sin and frailty and failings and chunks it into the depths of the deepest sea and sets you free.

But that takes us to the 2<sup>nd</sup> possible protest of using the imagery of slavery to describe our salvation. In Paul's image, we don't move from slavery to freedom; we are rescued from slavery to one master to become slaves to another master; freed from sin to become slaves of God. Here's where I really prefer servant than slave. Being a servant of God sounds life giving; being a slave of God . . . that sounds complicated, at the very least. Paul knows this, thus his verse 19 apology for even using this imagery. Yet, he uses the image to make the point: you're going to belong to someone or something. Grace gives you the freedom to choose.

The great singer-songwriter Bob Dylan got ahold of this wisdom too. In 1979, about the time he was reported to convert to Christianity, he recorded his song, "You Gotta Serve Somebody." He opens with,

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.

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed,

You're gonna have to serve somebody.  
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord,  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody

The song goes on to muse through many walks of life, each time coming back to the line: you're gonna have to serve somebody.

Dylan understood the wisdom St. Paul was teaching: freedom is freedom from and freedom toward. We are set free from sin to be set free to serve God. One way or the other, you're serving one or the other with your life. I don't know how the Romans in the 1<sup>st</sup> century felt about this image of salvation, they may have wrestled with it, too. But I know how Dylan's song was received in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rolling Stone magazine ranks it the 2<sup>nd</sup> worst Bob Dylan song. And John Lennon snorted out a parody song in response called "Serve Yourself." Serve yourself, Lennon said . . . it's always been very popular idea. Maybe it's why Lennon was on to something when he thought he was more popular than Jesus.

Serve yourself. It may be popular, but it's not the good news of the Gospel. The imagery of slavery to God may be jarring, but it is good news. "We are God's" is protection, it is help in times of trouble, encouragement when the way is dark. It is a purpose for our lives, for our existence, for our activities that gives us meaning beyond our little, isolated, individual lives and what we might think are our little isolated freedoms. We don't live for ourselves. We live for God and for all of God's children. This is the vision of the Christian life. Never alone to face your temptations, never alone in the darkness. You belong to the one who knows you and loves you and gave his Son to die for you, and now claims your life has meaning beyond your own. Your life has purpose and value beyond your own little life.

Romans 6 draws to a close with one of those verses a lot of us memorize, another one of those sin and redemption duos: the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If sin seems like the foundational building block of Christianity, it's only because we haven't yet taken to heart what always comes next. What comes next is the building block for everything else: for faith, for life. The Gospel is good news. It is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes. It frees us from our sins and frees us from our freedom—that we may belong to the one who truly sets us free to live.

May you know the power of God at work in your life to bring you from slavery to darkness to the freedom, joy, and life of knowing and serving God in Jesus Christ.