

The New Normal: A Different Kind of Master
Romans 6:12-23

On September 22nd, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which declared that as of January 1, 1863, all slaves in the states currently engaged in rebellion against the Union “shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.” The states ratified the 13th amendment on December 6th, 1865 which abolished slavery in the United States. The blood of Union soldiers paid for this sin in the Civil War and the legislation made it official. On June 19th, 1865 the last remaining slaves were freed in Texas. Slavery was no more. It took America much less time than the rest of the West to end this barbaric practice but it still is a blemish on our history as a nation. I’ve heard legislators say in the last week that the US invented slavery but of course, slavery did exist around the world before the founding of our country. We can trace it back to Greece, Rome, and even to biblical times. Unfortunately, there is still slavery today in many eastern countries and cultures such as China and India. Human trafficking is also a form of slavery which is legally and illegally practiced all around the world. Slavery, as we know it, is a terrible thing. It oppresses. It demeans. It destroys. Today, we are going to talk about slavery. Today, we are going to take a different approach on it. Today, we are going to explore slavery in the new normal. As the church is formed. As the church steps out into the world, what is slavery?

Slavery is more than just oppression of a person physically. It is more than just owning someone, robbing them of their personhood by claiming them as property. Slavery is a mindset. Slavery is something that we abhor and yet we willingly submit to on a daily basis. Think of all the things that we are slaves to. We are slaves to our television. We are slaves to the news that comes through that television. We are slaves to political ideologies and party lines. We are slaves. We are slaves to our jobs. We can be slaves to our family. We can be slaves to the idea of climbing a social or corporate ladder. We are slaves to addictions. We are slaves to our social circles and service organizations. We are slaves to each other. We are slaves to all sorts of things that dominate our thoughts and control our behavior. We willingly submit ourselves to a system that oppresses us. A system that tells us how to live, what to think, what to say or not say. We can’t think outside of that system because we are slaves. We have a slave mentality, whether you recognize it or not. Physically slavery is alive today and that is something we fight against for the dignity of all people. Mental slavery is something that is rampant everywhere and there are no laws against it. There’s nobody fighting against it, pushing back against it. We accept it without any real thought or care. Mental slavery is something that ends up controlling our physical selves, our physical nature, our behavior and ideas and thoughts and actions.

Paul addresses slavery today in our reading from Romans and he talks about how we are slaves to either one of two things. We are either slaves to sin or we are slaves to righteousness. We are either one or the other, there is no deviating from this truth. Now, this might be kind of shocking information for you because you’ve been taught that as a Christian you are free. We are free in Christ. We are free from the law. We are free people. Our chains are gone. The bondage of sin broken because of Jesus. We are now free and obviously this is true in a sense because scripture tells us this. But what are we free for? What are we free from? What are we free to do? Paul tells us that we aren’t totally free, we are just under a different master once we become Christians. As we explore the new normal of the church, how Christians are to behave in the world, we aren’t abandoning the idea of slavery. We are just switching masters. We are switching from the masters of sin and addiction in this world that dictate our behaviors. We are switching from the princes and powers and authorities of this world that seek to control us and demand our allegiance to a good and faithful master, Jesus Christ. So we are no longer slaves to sin but slaves to righteousness. That is the big switch for us. When you realize that, you are exposed to a whole new mindset. It opens up a whole new world of opportunities as a Christian when you think about being a slave to righteousness, a slave to Christ, our dear master.

Now, I want to take you back to some of the first stories in the bible. I want to take you back to the Torah, back to the Pentateuch, back to the book of Exodus for a moment. Exodus is the story of God's people being freed from slavery. They had been in bondage in Egypt. They were oppressed. They were beaten. They were forced to build an empire that wasn't their own. They were held under control by another people and mainly because of their ethnicity, because they were foreigners in a foreign land. God's people were captive to the will of the Pharaoh, one who claimed to be God but wasn't, in the land of Egypt. They were slaves. God heard the cries of his children and he raised up a leader to deliver them. Moses was spared from death as a child, raised in the palaces of his people's oppressors, and called by God to be the great liberator of His people. So Moses comes back from the wilderness he had escaped into, back into the land of Egypt to be the person that will free them from slavery forever. Through his leadership the people of God will be emancipated from their chains and labor to travel to the Promised Land waiting for them in Canaan, given to them by God. So it happens. Through ten plagues that included diseases and pestilence, ending with the tenth plague that killed the firstborn of every family in Egypt. That was the night of the first passover where the blood of the lamb painted on their doorways spared each Hebrew family. They were allowed to leave that night but then Pharaoh changed his mind and chased them down in the desert with his army. The result was these former slaves passing through the Red Sea on dry ground and the slavers of Egypt drowning in its waters. The Israelites cheered and sang on the other side of that victory. God had parted the sea for them, safely taking them out of slavery to the foot of Mount Sinai.

At the base of this mountain is where the Israelites settle while they wait on the Lord. What does God do next? What does God ask of his people? What does God demand of his people? What does God tell Moses that he needs to do now? I guess if they were truly free people he could have scattered them and said, "Go and be free. Do what you want. Good luck. Now that you're out of that mess, you're on your own. This is freedom now, go live how you want to live." But that isn't what God does. God gathers them at the foot of Mount Sinai. He pulls Moses up from these people to the top of this mountain and gives him the law. Moses goes up to the very top of this mountain to receive the law, to receive from God instructions on how to live. To receive a system to obey and live under. Does that sound like freedom to you? Meanwhile, down below the people grew anxious and enslaved themselves to false idols made with human hands. The human condition draws us into slavery. They couldn't help themselves. They couldn't handle the new normal. Now, next week we are going to talk about the law because we have a fresh perspective on it as Christians. I'm looking forward to talking about that as we continue to walk with Paul and learn the new normal for us. But God calls them out of slavery into a relationship with him, which is an allegiance to him. Think of how God speaks about this in scripture. You are my children. You belong to me. I am your God and you are my people. That is the relationship that is established at Sinai.

That is how God does it. Think about that too with the waters of baptism. We mention crossing the Red Sea. We mention Noah's ark in the rite of baptism because God spares his people through water to be his own. Not to live however we want. Not to be whatever we want to be. So that we can be freed from the shackles of sin. We are his children. It even says it in scripture that we are his treasured possessions. So we are still slaves. We still belong to another but now we don't belong to the powers of this world. We don't belong to a political process or a sociological revolution or something like that. We don't belong to that. We belong to a great and merciful God who is above all things, over all things, controlling all things, in charge of all things, sustaining all things, saving all things, redeeming all things, making all things new. That is the master that we now are under. We are no longer slaves to sin, death, the devil. They no longer have any mastery over us. We reject these things to run into the gracious arms of our loving master, Jesus Christ.

And this master is a good master. He provides for our needs and gives us what we don't deserve. Many people think a law is an oppressive thing but God protects us in the system he creates. God shows his great love for us in this. Remember we talked about this last week. Christ died for us while we were still sinners. That's what our master does for us. Our

master calls us out of sin, out of the dark depths of sin and death into his marvelous light. To live as his own. To be in his house. To be his children, not just property, living in huts around his big house. But his own dear children with all the riches of heaven given to us. We are heirs of his heavenly kingdom. Our master earns all of this for us through his death and resurrection. So there's no longer any separation, we are family. That is what our master does for us.

When you think of slavery, you probably think of the evils of the slave trade. You probably think of the lash of a whip or the racism of the past. Being a slave to righteousness is different. Paul shows us something new. Would a slave trader or a slave owner die for one of these people he considers his property? Would a slave master treat his slaves as anything other than property that can be beaten or bought and sold for the right price? Really, bought and sold at a price that would benefit him, looking to get the best deal for human flesh. Thank God that our master is not like this. Our master gives everything, at a great cost to himself, to purchase us. That's the amazing thing when you think back again to the Israelite people. The word used to describe this process. The word used to describe buying us back from slavery is introduced for the first time in Exodus. That word is "redeem". God redeems us. Our master redeems us. He buys us back into his family. Not because we are a great return on investment, but because of his great love for us. Because he sees value in us when the rest of the world sees us as property that can be used, abused, controlled and discarded. That's what the work of Jesus Christ does for you and for me. It buys us back at a great cost to the master. Because of this we can actually cling tightly to and cherish the identity of slave, of him as our master. Because it means that we are cared for, that we were bought at a price we couldn't afford and weren't even worth, that we are welcomed in as family not property. Not as something less than but as an heir to all the riches of heaven.

Think of it like the prodigal son returning to his father in the parable from Luke 15. When that son returned to his father after reckless and wild living, he was willing to make himself a slave just so he could have a place to belong again. He wanted to pay back all that he had misused, all the riches he had foolishly demanded from his father. His father looked at him not with anger and vengeance, willing to put him to work to pay off those sins. No. He look at him with great joy and relief. He welcomed him home with open arms not as a slave but as his son. For he was once a slave to the world but now he belongs to me again. The son wanted to serve at his father's feet but his father had a seat for him at the table instead. Our world might think differently. Our world might look at that son and say, "you owe me." Yet, at the very sight of us, our great God, our merciful master runs to us. He welcomes us back into his family, back where we belong. Not controlled by our sin but loved greatly by our master, Jesus. So that is our picture of slavery. That is the new normal I want to settle into. One where I'm not wandering out on my own. Or one where I'm enslaved to the system of this world. One where I am sitting at the feet of my father and he says, "no, no you sit up here with me." That is the new normal for us as Christians in God's family. That's something that we can show the world.

That challenges us, again, to have the eyes of our master. To look at those enslaved by the world with eyes of empathy and determination. We shouldn't want people to live like that. We can show them a new master. We can show them that life doesn't need to be the way they are living it. We can show them their value. They aren't just a target for commercial advertising. They aren't just a lost cause, lost to the causes of worldly masters. They are a prized and beloved child of God. They are his treasured possession and he will liberate them from the bonds of slavery to live under him in His kingdom. A kingdom not of this world, characterized by grace and mercy and forgiveness and love. It's okay to belong to that kind of master. We need his redemption, his protection, his unending love and inhibited forgiveness. Our master dies for us. Would any other master or manipulator in your life do that for you? Shake out of your slavery to sin. Let God break the shackles so that you can live under him. That is the new normal we need to promote and insist on in our world. Each person is worthy of saving. Each person is in need of redemption. Each one, precious in the eyes of our great master. Amen.