

I find it quite ironic that on the weekend when we celebrate our nation's independence, Paul in Romans talks about freedom and enslavement, framing the subject in a very different way than we often do. We are rightfully proud of our nation's emphasis on freedom, an emphasis that has been a great gift to the community of nations. But Paul's view of freedom in Romans takes us to some very different places than we are accustomed to going to.

The first thing to note about Paul's view is that, in some ways, it suggests that for us humans that freedom is a bit of an illusion. You and I as Americans are quick to announce that we are free, meaning sometimes that we can do what we want when we want to do it, say what we want when we want to say it, buy what we want when we want to buy it. It is a narrow and sometimes peculiarly American notion of freedom—a notion that does not come to grips with the fact that our freedom to do, say, and buy can become a new form of slavery. The freedom to buy has created folks who are addicted to QVC.

Paul today is claiming that we who think we are free may be missing out on the forthrightness of reality, may be living with our heads stuck in the sand, failing to come to grips with life as it really is. He says, "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?" In other words, none of us are really free. We are slaves to something, to someone. For Paul, we are either slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness, to God.

Bob Dylan, in one of the truly profound songs of the last fifty years, says,

You gotta serve somebody. 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.

You may have no power, or you may be a bigwig. It doesn't matter. You may be a Haitian or an American. You still are going to have to serve someone. No one is absolutely free. Hear this, you younger folks, who think that when you finally get beyond the control of your parents you will finally be free. You still are going to have to serve somebody. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord; you are still going to have to serve somebody.

Paul in Romans today is addressing an issue that he is anticipating his opponents bringing up to him. He has been ringing the bell for this thing called grace. He has been taking on the notion that the law has the power to truly change people, and he anticipates hearing his opponents speak a response like this: "Then we can do whatever we darn well please, right? We are free, right? If it's all about grace, then we might as well sin big time, so that we can get more grace, right?" Paul says, "No, you are missing the point!" Doing whatever you darn well please is another form of slavery. What looks like freedom is really enslavement.

You are going to have to serve somebody. It might be the devil or the Lord, but you are going to serve somebody. And Paul wants you to serve the Lord. Paul wants you to realize that you, big-old free American that you are, are dependent upon one thing or another. Your freedom is an illusion. You are going to bow down at the feet of something. "I'm free, and I can do whatever I want," you say. Eventually you are doing whatever you want, and you are bowing down at whatever it is that you want. Pretty soon it's all about you, your desires, your projects, your little world. Pretty soon sin is exercising "dominion in your mortal bodies to make you obey your passions." Pretty soon you are using people, abusing people, thinking that they are just about your pleasure needs. Pretty soon you are climbing all over people as you are heading to the top of the ladder you think you

must climb. Pretty soon you have no need to limit what it is that you consume because, my gosh, you are free to do whatever you darn well please. Pretty soon, it doesn't matter there are other people in the neighborhood, in the church, in the school, or, as we Americans sometimes forget, even in the world.

Who us, keep our music down? Who us, keep our comments to ourselves? Who us, think about the impact that we might have when we don't wear helmets? Who us, think about what the implications are of our lifestyle choices for the whole health care system? Who us, think about the well-being of the poor, the left out, the easily forgotten? Who us, pay attention to the needs of the world—the refugees, the immigrants, the victims of war? We're free.

Ya, right! We're going to serve somebody, the devil or the Lord. Life lived within a sense of absolute freedom is life lived in a new bondage to ourselves. We become slaves either of sin or of righteousness. Paul says that the former leads to death, the latter to life.

We often don't get this. We often don't see what the preoccupation we have with ourselves, our own needs, or our wants does to others. We often don't see what it does to us. As we are busy being "free," we hurt others. We tear them down. We reduce their humanity. We scar the planet. We cause others not to want to be around us, not to trust us. We give ourselves and even our nation a bad name. "Free to do whatever we want," we harm the world.

And let's face it. We harm ourselves. Sin turns us in on ourselves. Sin turns us into sad people, angry people, defensive people, crabby people, needy people. There is a line that I hear people saying these days which I think so aptly applies so often: "How's that working out for you?" How's a life turned in on itself working out for you? How's that self-preoccupation working out for you? How's that uncontrolled tongue or pen or computer working out for you? How's our uncontrolled use of resources working out for this world? How's your protectiveness, defensiveness working out for you? And Warren Beatty,

or at least your character in the old, somewhat crass movie **Shampoo**, how did it work out for you when you used and abused one woman after another? From my recollection, the end of the story left you all alone by yourself.

Paul says that the “wages of sin” is death. Sadly, some people have interpreted this as having to do with the next life. You know, if you have sin in your life or especially unrepented sin, you are going to go to hell. I don’t think that’s Paul point. His point is that sin creates a mess, and the mess doesn’t give us what we want. It creates more mess; it gives us death.

Now you’re hearing all this talk about sin and death, and you are beginning to wonder who captured your thoroughly Lutheran pastor and replaced him with an old-fashioned Baptist preacher who can talk about nothing but sin. But really, Paul’s talk and my talk about sin is not really a preoccupation with sin. In fact, in some ways, it is just the opposite. Somewhat hidden in Paul’s words today is a fascinating line that is so telling. The line reads: “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” Dealing with sin is primarily a matter of dealing with grace, not law. This is something that people who are truly recovering from alcoholism or other diseases eventually understand. Addressing their addiction is fundamentally about receiving grace. The law (defined here as the pointing finger, the constant measuring of the self, the frequent trips down Guilt Lane) does not have the power to give them what they want. In fact, what it does is drive them deeper into their addiction. Guilt often leads to punishment, and punishment often leads to more negative behavior. Alcohol is often poured on the top of guilt.

But Paul says that we are not under law, but under grace. We are under that reality that enables true change to occur. You are under grace. To welcome Jesus is to welcome grace. It is to welcome love. You are loved. You have what you need. You have been gifted with worth. Your past does not determine your future. You have a self that is secure. So all the shenanigans that you do because you don’t believe

that, because you are so busy trying to prove yourself, make up for your past, make yourself look good—you don't have to do that stuff. You don't have to keep with the Jones'. You won't have to consume, consume, consume, because you won't be worth much, if you don't. You don't have to call people names, tear other people down in order to feel better about yourself. You don't have to be self-centered, thinking that if you aren't you won't have a place. You don't have to be needy, worrying that if you aren't you won't be noticed. You have what you need. You are under grace. Why would you want to live enslaved to sin? Doesn't make sense. All it gives you is death.

Because you are under grace, you want to live enslaved to righteousness, to that which brings right relationship, that which builds others up, that which serves the neighbor, that which protects the poor and the left out, that which treats others and the earth with dignity. You are under grace, so you are gracious. You are under forgiveness, and so you forgive. You are under love, and so you love.

“Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members as instruments of righteousness.”