

God's Instruments

Romans 6:12-23

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Personal freedom is something we value deeply in our culture. Our country was founded on the promise of freedom from a tyrant king. In our healthcare we want to be free to choose our doctors and treatment plans. Young people today are grateful for the ability to choose their own spouse. We can even choose a cell phone plan with “unlimited talk, text, and data” so that we are free to call as many people and stream as many videos as we want. As Christians, one of the claims that we make is that through Christ’s death and resurrection we are free from the power of sin and death. This idea of Christian freedom comes directly from Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome. But in today’s reading Paul claims that we who are no longer slaves to sin might now think of ourselves as slaves to righteousness. Slavery to righteousness may not sound like the kind of absolute freedom we have come to expect and desire these days. How is a 21st century Christian – especially someone who recoils at the very mention of slavery – to make sense of Paul’s words, and what do they mean for our life of faith today?

I heard a story last week on NPR about a television show called *Rectify*, now in its second season on the Sundance Channel.¹ The program chronicles the life of character Daniel Holden after he is exonerated following 20 years on death row for rape and murder. He is released from prison and reenters life “on the outside” in the small town where he grew up. After spending most of 20 years in isolation, he must learn anew to communicate and interact with other people. Leaving a world where he had virtually no choices about anything he says, “Everything out here is so complicated.” In an interview, actor Aden Young describes Daniel as someone who “wants to experience life; he just doesn’t know how.”²

The fictional story of Daniel Holden grew out of interviews creator Roy McKinnon heard with real people who faced this very same sort of reentry into society; but the difficulties of reentry are not only for those exonerated from their crimes. Those same difficulties, and more, face men and women who must return to society after having served out their sentences for crimes which they did commit. Many of these people find life outside of prison to be complicated, even as they are thankful for their freedom. Many of them want to experience life but do not know how. They

¹ Read the transcript here: <http://www.npr.org/2014/06/18/323351099/the-return-of-rectify-a-critical-darling-sprung-from-death-row>

² <http://www.sundance.tv/series/rectify/videos/rectify-season-2-this-is-daniel-holden>

are free from prison, and they must now learn to experience life within a new set of rules – the rules that govern free society.

This sort of choice between two different kinds of masters is what Paul had in mind when he wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome. Paul has just finished proclaiming to the Romans Christians that in Christ’s death and resurrection they are set free from sin and death. But, Paul goes on to say, you who are set free from sin now have a different set of rules which govern you, not unlike one who is newly released from prison. “[You have] shed an old regime (prison), but have taken on a new one (society). . . . But [you are] not at that point somehow free from all constraints, as though at the moment of release [you] stood on some level apart from both prison and society. . . . [Every person] is always under responsibility, whether forced to obey (prison) or free to obey (society).”³ The person set free in Christ from is now free to live in accordance with God’s way. This is what it means to say we are no longer slaves to sin but have become slaves of righteousness.

The point Paul is making is that no one is absolutely free. We all serve something or someone. At the very least we must be governed by the rules of society, or else we end up in prison. One writer describes a friend who is a slave to fashion where “every season brings a new set of requirements, new clothing and accessories to be purchased, new trends to be adopted. . . . She has pledged her allegiance to *Vogue* and takes her orders from its editor. Some people are slaves to physical fitness, arranging their lives and relationships around trips to the gym and rigorous workouts. Some people have pledged their allegiance to personal wealth and are guided by the whims of Wall Street.”⁴ What Paul is telling us is that every master besides God will eventually steal from us the good and abundant life God offers, and they make us into instruments of death. But through Christ we are free from all of those allegiances, from every form of slavery – no matter how benign they may seem, so that we are free to live in allegiance to God and become God’s instruments of life.

Let us look for a moment at our spiritual ancestor Abraham. In Genesis 12, God speaks and Abraham answers, “Here I am, Lord.” Abraham accepts God’s offer of a new land far from his father’s house and many descendents living distant from their kinsmen in Haran. Anyone who has ever left home and set out into the unknown can appreciate the invigorating freedom Abraham must have experienced. But Abraham, too, will soon discover that this new freedom is not absolute. Abraham, free to receive the blessing of God, now is under allegiance to the Lord.

The story we read today in Genesis 22 is among the most difficult in all of Scripture for Jews and Christians alike. It seems unthinkable that God would ask Abraham to kill his son Isaac and

³ Paul Achtemeier. *Romans: Inpterpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (Louisville: John Knox, 1985) p.109.

⁴ Shawnthea Monroe, “Romans 6:12-23, Pastoral Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word*, edited by David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Year A Vol. 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011) p.183.

unconscionable that Abraham is willing to submit to these instructions. I continue to wrestle with this story and find no comfortable resolution. What I do discover (even if I do not like it very much) is that true life and blessing are found when we offer our absolute obedience to God who will absolutely show up. While I find it hard to accept this test from God to Abraham, I also find it hard to imagine that God could accept any less than our whole lives. The ancient rabbis imagine that Abraham tries to sidestep the issue at hand:

God said, "Take your son." And Abraham said, "I have two sons." God answered him, "Your only son." Abraham said, "Each is the only son of his mother." God said, "The one whom you love." Abraham replied, "Is there any limit to a father's love?" God answered, "Isaac."

There is no sidestepping. Abraham believes in the promise, and however much his faith might be wavering, he sets out in obedience. At the moment of truth, with Isaac bound and laid upon the altar, God speaks again: "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." Now I know. "This story does not subscribe to later notions of God's perfect omniscience. This is a genuine test, and Abraham is free to decide what he will do. God neither knows nor pre-ordains how Abraham will respond."⁵ In Hebrews, Abraham's faithfulness is reckoned to him as righteousness. Giving himself fully to God, Abraham finds freedom and life and receives the blessing which God had promised.

God wants our whole lives so that he can set us wholly free. Everything, even our families, when we turn them over to God becomes instruments for freedom and life. But anything, when held too tightly, when held above our allegiance to Christ our Lord, can become the cords of death that will entangle and then strangle us.

The freedom Paul imagines for us is not only freedom from but also freedom for. Freedom in Christ is first of all a gift of God's grace, just as the blessing and promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 was a gift of grace to the nomad herdsman. Forgiveness of our sins and freedom from their power is not something we earn by passing any test. And yet, our freedom from sin necessitates our allegiance to Christ which is itself the most enduring kind of freedom. It is our allegiance to Christ that shows us how to experience life. It is our obedience to Christ's way that sets us on the path to life. Allegiance to Christ means the freedom to be God's instruments, God's tools for life. Claiming freedom from fear, we are free to show hospitality not only to friends but also to strangers - to offer a cup of water, as Matthew's gospel suggests.. Set free from greed, we are free to give generously, not only to those causes which we respect or trust, but to anyone in need. Set free from the tyranny of work, we free to rest, worship, and play. Set free from self-interest, we are free to fully value others: their time, their ideas, their feelings, their deepest needs and

⁵ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2138

longings. Obedience to Christ means freedom - not in the absolute sense our culture chases - but in the deeper sense of abundant life for all.

In Jesus Christ you have been giving the blessing of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. You, like Abraham, are free to choose. I invite you today to bind yourself to the Lord who has already bound himself to you. Live in obedience to him and you just might find that you are free in ways that you never expected. May it be so. Amen.