

A Life Obeying Two Masters Romans 6:15-23

...you are slaves of the one whom you obey...

Introduction: Disenchantment, disillusionment, and deconstruction of Christian beliefs are nothing new. In fact, history is replete of stories of people who grew up with some knowledge of the truth of God, His Word, Jesus, the church, and the gospel, only to fully reject all/most of it after traumatic experiences, hurt, or other influences. In *breaking free* from a partial version of following Christ, many have sought freedom from the bondage of perceived judgment (or judgementalism.), oppressive rules, and pressure to conform. This misunderstanding of the gospel of grace NEVER produces the free life craved but only further buries one into the rebellious bondage of sin.

Back in 2020, a woman named **Glennon Doyle** released a book that captured the hearts and minds of American women. Reaching close to the #1 spot on the NY Times bestseller list, *Untamed* became a national success. Doyle's story is both sad and often repeated. At one point she called herself a Christian, was a mother, wife, and was influential in the blogosphere with her "mommy blog", which was known for its raw, candid reflections on life, motherhood, addiction recovery, and faith. But after her husband confessed to ongoing infidelity and trying to work through it to salvage a reconciled marriage, she announced in 2016 that she was leaving her husband, having fallen in love with U.S. National women's soccer star Abby Wambach, whom she ended up marrying.

Untamed was in no small way influenced by watching cheetah's race at the zoo – caged animals, built for speed, chasing a small pink stuffed animal, and getting a piece of meat as a reward, all for the crowds to watch. *"This is the metaphor that drives the book. Women: You. Are. A. Cheetah. You are wild. You're a bit scary. You need to break free from the conventions, expectations, and cultural conditioning of your environment and become . . . untamed."*¹ Once broken free from these and untamed, Doyle quotes, **"and now that we don't have to be good, we can be free."** She advised women to put themselves and their desires first, and to be good mothers, they must do whatever it takes to make themselves happy. Alisa Childers said Doyle contended that *"right and wrong, good and bad, and should and shouldn't are not real concepts, but culturally constructed cages. She instructs women to ignore their minds—which are clouded by indoctrination—and obey their inner voices and deepest desires."*

Did all of this make Glennon Doyle happy? Perhaps for a time, but it is only transitory happiness and fleeting joy. One can understand the hurt from a husband, or a past of addiction, or ongoing issues of fear, but trying to find happiness and truth INSIDE yourself, listening to yourself, and trusting yourself only reveals that we think WE are divine and masters of our own lives. When anyone goes down this path, what awaits is only misery, both in this life and eternally, and that is EXACTLY what Paul explains in Romans 6:15-23. We are all under a **master, and are each enslaved to that master, one being SIN, and one being God Himself. AND THERE IS NO MIDDLE GROUND.** Seeking freedom in life apart from God leads to enslavement of sin and eternal death, where seeking freedom in Christ allows us to be enslaved to righteousness, which leads to holiness and life.

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/untamed-glennon-doyle/>

So this morning we will look at who our true Master is, and if we have experienced true justification by faith, how it will mark us.

Reality of Everyone Living in Slavery (15-16)

*What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! 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?*

Not afraid to be redundant, Paul once again anticipates an argument from the Roman Christians or answers a question they've posed to him about the gospel of faith through grace alone. The second objection is essentially the same as the first: 1) *should we sin so that grace may abound?* 2) *should we sin because we are no longer under the law but under grace?* The first argument centered around the fact that the **law came to increase sin, not save** (5:20), and the second around the fact that sin no longer has **dominion or power**, some of which came through the law, but we are rather under grace (6:14). Paul's response to both queries was the same in swiftness and clarity: **By no means!** Again, salvation by grace **motivates** us toward obedience, rather than living a "it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission" existence. But Paul uses this second question to illustrate an immensely important reality in life: **ALL people, whether they realize, recognize, or admit it or not**, live under the reality of mastery. One master leads to obedience and life, and the other sin and death.

To understand verse 16 and the two paths of life, there are **two important definitions and foundations we must come to grips with**. The **first** is the use of the imagery of **slavery**, an illustration that Paul admitted was an accommodation – see verse 19, "*I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations*". Every analogy breaks down at some point but these types of "common experiences" can help us understand the depth of Biblical teaching. Admittedly, slavery was actually more common in Paul's day than ours, and we must first and foremost try our best to NOT think of the type of slavery our country endured for decades, that which was forced, people treated like property alone, and with in-humane treatment. A quick review of slavery in Paul's day may be helpful:

- 1) The entirety of the Roman empire had *millions of slaves*, and made up a common and important part of the social fabric. Slaves *were* considered property, and freedom was restricted, but slavery was NOT based on **ethnicity at all**.
- 2) Slaves in the Roman world were often compared to the *middle class* of our day, in which they were paid for their work, often had much responsibility given in a home and business, and could even save up to buy their freedom.
- 3) Slavery was not always **permanent**, as they could not only buy their freedom but typically gained it before old age.
- 4) Slaves were NOT simply used for manual labor, but were physicians, estate managers, and city treasurers.
- 5) Slaves were made through birth, kidnapping, defeat in battle, but also often by one **selling himself** into slavery, to pay off a debt or to live a more secure life. A master was bound to provide food, shelter, and often education, thus it was often seen as a pathway to a better life. Even some notable Romans (like Marcus Antonius Felix, the governor of Samaria and military commander) were once slaves.²

² Dan Doriani, "Romans: Reformed Expository Commentary, p. 207.

The key to understanding Paul's usage of slavery was NOT that he was evaluating the morality of the practice, but of the nature of the practice itself. In the analogy, someone is presenting themselves as a slave (like an indentured servant), were obedient, and in so doing, were slaves TO the one they chose to obey. Dan Doriani also said, "***The analogy works because the common thread is full time service and absolute loyalty. Anyone can serve two employers, but no one can belong to two masters, for total devotion is essential to slavery AND discipleship.***" Jesus made the same claim in the book of Matthew when He commented on a person's relationship with money (this one being more common or known to most):

Matthew 6:24-25 "*No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money*"

So the issue of absolute loyalty and service is in focus here, but that begs this important question: *if someone is a slave to sin and thus NOT a slave who obeys, can an unbeliever who is NOT justified, still obey, please the LORD, or choose to do so?* In our experience, it does not seem like those who are a slave to sin are **bad people**, nor does it seem like they do not do some good things. So what does it mean to be a slave to sin? Let's unpack that a little bit here.

God created mankind with a will, meaning we have minds, thoughts, feelings, opinions, desires, and dreams. Since we are NOT robots or pre-programmed in every choice, we are called **free standing moral agents**, able to make decisions and choices in our lives. God is sovereign and will always accomplish His will, but He does not impress on us each day what we will choose: coffee, no coffee, to get up during service or not, to get out of bed this morning or not, etc. By God's common grace, the type of grace that shines light and pours rain on the godly and ungodly (Matt. 5:45), and the same God who gives a conscience to all for the preservation of society (Rom. 2:15), and gives the Holy Spirit to restrain evil (2 Thess. 2:17), there are moral and better choices that each individual can make. It's better for a believer and unbeliever to exercise, obey the law, serve their spouse, eat right, and save money. Sometimes unbelievers can even do these things BETTER than believers. **So in what way are unbelievers' slaves?**

The answer lies in what they CANNOT do. Before the gospel transforms someone from the inside out with a new heart, new mind, new desires, to a new Lord, we are all categorized as those who are **alienated from God, hostile in our mind, doing evil deeds** (Col. 1:21-22). We are **darkened in our understanding, alienated, ignorant, hard-hearted, calloused, and given over to sensuality, greed, and impurity** (Eph. 4:18-19). In this state, we not only CANNOT please God, we do not WANT to. It is clear in Scripture:

Hebrews 11:6 "*And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him*"

We cannot please Him or seek after Him, because we lack understanding, desire, and ability (see Rom. 3:10-13; Psalm 14:3). Any attempt in our flesh to get to God apart from faith in Christ is **garbage or excrement**, according to Paul's own life and attempts (Phil. 3:2-8), as he had more of a record of good deeds and accomplishment to point to than anyone, yet considered it all **refuse** in comparison to knowing Christ. Being a slave to sin is equivalent to a **person living in a modern day prison**. Yes, an inmate has some semblance of choice and freedom: they have outdoor activity time, can choose to read, or sleep, or talk to others, and can determine how much to eat. They can give common courtesy to the guards and fellow inmates, but that will not buy them out of their sentence. Their choices are LIMITED to the walls, gates, and bars of the prison. They are slaves to them. Even if they escape, they

are not free. This is the life of a person who is **enslaved to sin, or under bondage of sin**. They can DO good things, but they CANNOT glorify God in them. They can act more morally than some, but that cannot justify them. They can choose to live a healthy life or be a faithful husband, but that cannot save them. Why? Because sin is defined as *falling short of the glory of God* (Rom. 3:23) and the wages of that sin is **death** (Rom. 6:23). This is why seemingly nice people are defined by being a slave to sin, not just those given over to addiction or the “bad” sins.

Reality of moving from Slavery of Sin to Righteousness (17-19)

*But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become **obedient from the heart** to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and, having been **set free from sin**, have become **slaves of righteousness**. 19 I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once **presented your members** as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now **present your members** as **slaves to righteousness** leading to sanctification*

If unbelievers have an INABILITY to please God without faith, it means that justified believers have the overwhelming PRIVILEGE to please God by faith. In the midst of his explanation, Paul bursts through with **thanksgiving**, which is both logical and instructional. Stepping back, we are reminded that we once **WERE** slaves to sin, and only God’s grace, cutting through our sin, and Christ’s atoning work on the cross could buy us OUT of slavery. The only logical response is NOT snobbery or entitlement, but simply thanksgiving. But it is also **instructional** to all who would grapple with these vital but difficult theological concepts. We never want to shy away from them, but they should not create an arrogance in our heart or a condescension toward others. Thanksgiving is the antidote to both of these sinful responses. We should never review the gospel in our lives (a daily occurrence) and NOT respond in sheer gratitude. The minute we stop thanking is when we start thinking we’re deserving, and the me-monster comes out.

Salvation has not only transferred us from the kingdom of darkness to light, from death to life, but also moved us to a new **Master**. But look at verse 19: it says we have been **set free from sin** and have now become **slaves of righteousness**. We are still slaves, but now there is true freedom in our lives. This freedom is NOT getting to do whatever we want in our sinful flesh ---- like we did when we were little, and said, ‘*when I grow up, I’m going to eat candy all the time*’ ---- but then realize that would be bad for us. Being a free slave of righteousness now means we can do what we were created to do, and we get to do it **willingly, gladly, joyfully, whole-heartedly**, and because we have a new affections and desires, we can **obey God from the heart!** This cannot be emphasized enough. God did not create us to obey as mindless zombies or shackled servants, but what brings Him glory is when we find Him so satisfying and pleasing, that we **WANT TO OBEY HIM**, to live righteously. We each understand this desire because that is what we hope from those we love. They don’t spend time with us out of **duty but delight**, not because we **have to but because we WANT to**. That is makes actions truly honoring.

In order to accomplish this, God promised and delivered **new hearts** to His own:

Ezekiel 36:26-27 “*And I will give you a **new heart**, and a **new spirit** I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and **cause you** to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”*

This is where WILLING OBEDIENCE comes from, where God did the miraculous and did a heart transplant on each of us. This is how we can love God with ALL our heart (Matt. 22:37), to understand and observe His law with our whole heart (Ps. 119:34), to do His will from our heart (Eph. 6:6), and to obey all of His commands out of love (1 John 5:3). God does not NEED our obedience, as if He were

lacking something. But He gave us new hearts and the imputed righteousness of Christ so that we would have a **new will** to please Him out of faith. Now, **two other important observations from this section:**

- 1) We are obedient to the **standard of teaching** we've been committed to – the word 'standard' here means a type or stamp, something that would have been struck to make an imprint. We are **committed to God's Word** in a way we NEVER could have as slaves to sin. Scripture is UNLOCKED for the slave of Christ, and imprinted in us through the Spirit of God and the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). In order to obey **from the heart**, we must engage our **minds fully in the truth**. A transformed, born again believer WILL have a desire for God's Word, which is one of the clearest and most definitive marks of a true believer. We cannot say we love the Lord with our heart, soul, and mind, and regularly neglect the Word. That is why we want to teach the Bible is all that we do ---- and reject the notion that we could ever have '*too much Bible*' --- when the reality is the exact opposite. ***Are you committed to knowing God in His Word, so that you can obey and please Him?***
- 2) We are to **present our members as slaves of righteousness** – Before Christ, we easily presented all of our life to the one we obeyed ---- whatever idol we were trying to appease or please ---- which was most often ourselves. We would please ourselves in every facet of life, from mind, body, material, desire, etc. The opposite is now true that we have a new **Master and Lord in Jesus**. We need to view EVERY aspect of our life and body as means by which we glorify God and live righteously. It requires us to think differently about life, and say as Paul did, "*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do ALL to the glory of God.*" (1 Cor. 10:31). This helps us answer one other important question: **who does the work in sanctification, God or us?**

The work of **justification** is *monergistic*, which means it is up to God to work, since we are dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-2), where **sanctification** is *synergistic*, meaning that God still does the work (Phil. 1:6) through the Spirit (Gal. 3:3) and the Word (1 Pet. 2:2), but we MUST respond and work:

Philippians 2:12-13 "*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, **work out your own salvation** with fear and trembling, 13 for it is **God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.***"

We CAN work out our sanctification by faith BECAUSE God is working in us. The question for us is this: **if you claim to know Christ as your LORD and Savior**, are you active in working out your salvation? Are you seeking to know Christ with your mind, obey Him in your heart, and love Him with all of who you are? Are you using the *means of Grace* available to us, by committing to His Word, prayer, and committing to His Body, the church? If you are saved, you are a SLAVE ---- and we must present ourselves continually as those who seek to obey Him, not ourselves.

Reality of the Outcome of Different Masters (20-23)

*For when you **were slaves of sin**, you were **free** in regard to righteousness. 21 But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now **ashamed**? For the end of those things is **death**. 22 But now that you have been **set free from sin** and have become **slaves of God**, the fruit you get leads to **sanctification** and its end, **eternal life**. 23 For the wages of sin is death, **but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord***

Finally, Paul lays out the differences of outcomes for different masters. The one who is still continually a **slave of sin** is free, or unable, to have righteousness produced in them. The only things that can come out as lasting results are **sin, shame, and death**. Remember, shame is a powerful tool in the hand of our enemy, and keeps us away from God as it works in our own conscience, since we KNOW what we are doing is wrong.

The opposite Master produces eternally joyful and fruitful things. Instead of shame, freedom. Instead of sin, obedience. Instead of death, eternal life. Jesus being **Master and Lord** of our life is NOT restrictive like being in the prison, but freeing, since we know that obeying Him actually leads to the greatest joy and keeps us out of harmful ways.

We conclude with a well-known and oft-memorized verse. It reminds us that death is earned through the wages of sin. What awaits those who are slaves to sin is not only physical death, but spiritual and eternal death. That is why we take no pleasure in stories like Glennon Doyle or anyone who rebels against the Lord, knowing that they are captives in their own sin. We know that without God's grace in our lives, we would be exactly where she is or worse, in a state of trying to convince ourselves that we are ok, that everyone else is wrong, and someday this path will lead to the happiness and fulfillment we so desperately crave.

BUT...the way out of slavery of sin is a **free gift**. Not free in the sense that it was not costly. No, it's free in the sense that we could not earn it. But the gift of salvation is for those who **believe, who turn FROM their sin TO God**...leaving their old life and master behind, and coming to Christ for the forgiveness of our sin. When we repent and believe, God forgives our sin and cleanses us, declaring us righteous so that we can now, as a result, LIVE righteously. So today, you have an opportunity to no longer live in shame, or sinful slavery, or stay on a path that leads to death. Today, will you believe that you are a sinner before a holy God, confess your sin, turn to Christ, and follow Him? That is where true **freedom is found, and we'd LOVE to talk to you about that today**.