

The Myth of Free Agency

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St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania

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Romans 6:12-23

¹²Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³No 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 to God as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. ¹⁵What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶Do 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? ¹⁷But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, ¹⁸and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. ²⁰When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. ²²But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. ²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If you follow professional sports at all you know that we live in an age of “free agency.” In earlier generations a player was picked by a team, and had little control over their own contract. Teams could buy, sell and trade players with other teams, with the players themselves having little say in the matter. Times changed and we now live in an age of free agency where players, after their first few years of playing, are then allowed to negotiate their contracts with their team, and are free to seek a place on another professional squad. Americans generally see this as a positive development. We believe in free agency. It just sounds right. No one should be treated like team property, and freedom is an American birthright. Free agency sounds right to the Christian as well, for we were set free from our bondage to sin and death by Christ, and are now free to live as free moral agents. Or are we?

The Apostle Paul, who by all indications was a big sports fan, did *not* believe in free agency—at least as an understanding of our walk with God. Here in our Romans lesson we find the Apostle speaking of our team loyalties in a way which unsettles modern people. Paul stressed that we were once slaves to sin. We were on the devil's team, but now, by Christ's liberating work, we are on God's team and have become *slaves to righteousness*. Verse 19 summarizes Paul's argument well: *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 greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.* In this great game Paul saw no room for free agency. We are either slaves to sin or to God. This sounds painfully harsh and radical, and it may be tempting to ignore Paul as if he was becoming unduly extreme. But Paul has a word we need to hear. Let us listen.

While Paul's writings can often be complicated and hard to understand, here he is speaking very plainly and clearly of two slave systems. We are either the devil's slave or we are God's. Let us first consider slavery to sin. To be a slave to sin has a very dramatic sound and such language may make us think of a testimony we once heard from a murdering gang member who became a follower of Christ and changed their life. Some were slaves to sin and that sin was obvious for all to see. Others, like Paul himself, were slaves to sin while living lives which appeared to be upstanding and good, yet their hearts were selfish and alienated from God. So we all were apart from Christ's saving work. Now, argues Paul, we have been set free from that bondage to evil and have become slaves to righteousness. When faced with the options of being slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness, most people scratch their heads and look for a third option—"none of the above." We want to be free agents, neither slaves to sin nor slaves to being too religious. Paul, however, is making the argument that there is no third option.

Paul may sound extreme, until we consider the true nature of sin. We often think of sin the bad choices which we make. While there is much truth to this statement it is a painfully weak statement about sin's real nature. An accurate model for sin in our day is seeing it as being like an addiction. An addiction may begin as a bad choice, but once an addiction develops the victim's ability to choose is severely compromised! Sin, like an addiction, has real power, and it is a power which we cannot overcome by our own strength. You may be feeling satisfied that you are not caught up in addiction or anything like it, but think again. What if I were to tell every one of you, "stop worrying!" Worry does not glorify God nor make our lives any more joyous. We really shouldn't worry, for the Bible tells us many times that God will take care of us. So why don't you just stop worrying? We make excuses and try to justify worry, but the truth is that it is a power greater than ourselves. We cannot simply un-choose to worry. We are slaves to such sins. I could mention other sins, like selfishness, greed or over-eating. We are not so strong and in control as we like to believe!

Slave is not too strong a word for our bondage to sin. Years ago, the comedian Don Knotts had a beloved skit in which he played a speaker at an ex-smokers' gathering. In his humorously nervous way he began his halting speech by stating that he had been an ex-smoker "for two years, three months," and then after a brief pause continue, "two weeks, five days, ten hours" and then, after nervously glancing at his watch added, "and twenty-seven minutes." We laugh at this comedy sketch because it speaks so eloquently of our weakened condition.

In these days many are very sensitive to the use of the term *slave*, and Paul confesses that this is an imperfect analogy, but it is one which the Roman's understand. In the Roman Empire, slavery was very common, and was more of a contractual arrangement and not tied to a belief in an alleged racial inferiority. The slavery of Paul's day was more like a severe kind of servanthood—like an indenture. Slavery is a radical kind of allegiance, and this is Paul's intended point. Humans are slaves to sin, and our only option is to become slaves to righteousness.

Paul's teaching is unpopular in our day, and probably was in the first century too, for it contradicts our general understanding of freedom. The popular mindset is that we do indeed need to be free from addictions and other terrible behaviors, but once this is accomplished, we can then go on living as moral free agents. We boast of our independence and how we answer only to ourselves. Religion, most think, is a good thing, if taken in moderation, and wanting to be a slave to righteousness is getting far too wrapped up in one's faith! I can think of several situations where I have shared my faith with someone hoping that they too would be interested in knowing life in Christ. The answer commonly received is that "I'm glad that religion has made you happy, but I don't really need it." Going a little farther along that line of thinking I recall discussions of whether religious faith is a crutch to help us through life. The understanding behind that illustration is a belief that all were meant to stand as independent agents. Is our faith a crutch?

To truly understand freedom, we must first understand our basic nature and the kind of people that we were created to be. True freedom is being able to live according to our intended purpose. As a child I was read the story of "Tootle the Train." You may be familiar with it. Tootle was an amiable locomotive with a serious problem. Tootle kept wanting to leave the tracks and wander through the meadows, and these adventures never ended well. Though I do not remember just how the story ended, I recall a way being found to keep Tootle from jumping the tracks and thus becoming a truly happy and useful locomotive. A train's true freedom is found on the tracks, and while wandering through meadows may seem sweet for a short while it is a path to misery. Now let us consider the real question. What was God's intention for our life travels?

God created us to be **connected**. In Eden we were to be connected in friendship and service, to God, to fellow humans, and to the Creation. We were never intended to be

isolated, unrelated wanderers. This is why the shutdown of the recent months has been so painful and disruptive. When we became disconnected from God, He sent Jesus Christ to bridge that gap and bring us back together again. As we walk in faith, we are not to do so alone, but together as the Church! God created us to be connected.

Now let me push this argument up one notch. With that connection, we are also to be **committed!** Pastor and scholar Eugene Peterson has remarked that we live in an adolescent society where youth is idolized as it is a time in life when we have maximum freedom of choice and movement with a minimum of commitment. This is the worldly ideal of freedom. But is it really freedom? Before I say anything more, let me be clear that I do not mean to speak badly of young people. Youth and young adulthood is a time of many options and fewer commitments, and this is just fine. Choose wisely and seek God's leading. But is a commitment-free life a fulfilled one? The days of youthful freedom may supply us with a few fond memories, but are these the events which really give a sense of satisfaction and meaning? The great joys of our lives, ultimately, are the promises we have made and kept, the commitments which we have honored and the service we have offered. To live one's whole life with an adolescent kind of freedom will lead to an empty end. Slaves to righteousness is, paradoxically, the path of freedom, and it was the path which our Savior walked!

Paul closes his teaching by pointing out the conclusions of a life of sin and a life of righteousness. *So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life.* The path away from God leads to death, that is, a separation from God. It is commonly observed that those who wish to live a life apart from God ultimately get their wish. This is so sad. But to those who have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, there comes sanctification. Sanctification is a fancy word which means, to be made holy. This does not mean to be made perfect, but it does mean to be marked as God's special possession and filled with God's Holy Spirit. None of us have overcome all the sins and impurities of our lives. We are works in progress, with God at work in us and promising to complete that work on the Last Day. Our service will close with a song of sanctification: *Lord, I Want to be a Christian.* This spiritual is deceptively simple in its form, but it speaks deep truths. It is a simple expression of desire to be a Christian, to be more loving and to be more like Jesus, but it is much more. To sing these verses is to be gripped by our need and desire to be raised with Christ. To sing these verses is to realize how unable we are to do make these changes by our own power and will. And to pray these verses is to be joyously assured that God will answer those prayers and do a work of transformation in us!

Paul then adds that we shall receive eternal life. Whenever I speak this word, I feel compelled to offer explanation, because it is so often misunderstood. To many, eternal life means only an extension of time and living a life like this one, but having no end. Along these lines of thought I have heard people suggest that heaven must get boring

as time just drags on. Eternal means full and complete! In the life eternal we shall be fully reconnected to God, to the human family and to the new heaven and new earth. *That* will not be boring! We shall be at perfect peace, and I cannot wait.

A final word on free agency. I have been awfully hard on the term, and there is another side of the story that must be told. You see, in time, we will all be free agents. In the age to come, when sin is finally defeated and we are fully free, we *will* be free agents, able to do the good and no longer tempted. And even then, we will still serve God gladly.

We haven't gotten to free agency just yet, as that is for an age to come, but in the meantime, we are playing on the right team, and this is the *only* team that will get us there. Play ball!