

Romans 6:12-23 (NRSV)

¹² Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³ No longer present your members to sin as instruments^a 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^b of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Slaves of Righteousness

¹⁵ What then? Should we 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? ¹⁷ But 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, ¹⁸ and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations.^c 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.

²⁰ When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. ²² But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹

^a Or *weapons*

^b Or *weapons*

^c Gk *the weakness of your flesh*

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Another Look at Freedom and Obedience

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: Romans 6:12-23

Story about the chemical warfare buildings up to war.

- a holy stone in the middle ages
- company of the war machine

Story about Römerberg through the burning of the books

Janis Joplin sang, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” She meant it in a negative way. She was wryly amused that it was only when you were down and out, when everything was lost that you could be truly free. For when you have something to lose, something to protect, something to hold onto, you are, in the language of the apostle Paul, a slave to it. “You are slaves of the one whom you obey.” he says in Romans. And the thing you obey is the thing you hold most dear.

Paul is on to a great truth. We obey something, always. We are people in relation to other people and other things. We are dependent beings. We are not islands. It is impossible for us to live in a vacuum. We are never truly free. Paul’s great notion of sin corresponds perfectly with Janis Joplin’s song. Paul would say that there are a million things we think will set us free. You know them. We’ve talked about them before. Financial security. Prestige. Power. Independence. Certainty. Someone to love. Some of these things, understood for what they are, can be fine. But they do not set us free. And the irony is, the more we think that they set us free, the more they hold us in their iron grip. And the more we are apt to do horrible things in support of them.

Recently I was watching old footage of the first years of the Weimar Republic in Germany. The humiliation of the Germans in World War I, and more than that in the terms of their surrender, had left the country smarting. The Treaty of Versailles was meant to put Germany to her knees. It was meant to insure that Germany would never have the power to initiate war again. The wounds were raw. The country’s pride was deeply bruised. It made her all the more eager to rise again. By the thirties there arose strong nationalist voices in the political arena. One voice that began to attract great attention was that of Adolph Hitler. In the speeches I saw in the old film clips you could watch and hear a young Hitler rally the people to national pride. Never would Germany be humiliated again, he said. Never would Germany have hostile forces cross her borders, desecrate her cities and kill her people, he said. Never would Germany again be controlled by her enemies. Eventually the rhetoric said that any group or individuals that were perceived to pose a threat to the ideal of total independence was to be legitimately destroyed. Intolerance became a legitimate ideal.

Story about University.

- Eisenhower headquarters
- plaques telling the story
- Professors insistence on revealing that the atrocities were not “the Nazis,” but Germany—the German leaders, to be sure, but also German people, the educated elite, the professors
- I can’t help but think of the debate question to George W. Bush, “Is there anything you wish you had done differently?”

Story about the Römerberg

- Plaque about the burning of the books

Germany has found true freedom in facing and fully disclosing this sordid chapter in her history. She has opened the book. In a sense she found her freedom when she decided there was nothing left to lose. But her most profound revelation was her willingness to accept and say out loud that it was Germany’s obedience to national ideals she thought would set her free, the whole of the country’s belief that her strong protectionism and nationalism was the way to independence and freedom. From this rather simple and seemingly harmless beginning, from this obedience to what Paul would call sin, from this sin came ever increasingly the wages of sin, until it had spun out of control. It became the modern era’s symbol for the most extreme human evil. The evil is staggering not just in the scope of the holocaust and the millions of Jews exterminated in it, but more so because such evil began with a rhetoric that even today seems quite acceptable.

Does every nation that defends its pride and honor with patriotic pledges burn the books and the dissenters? Does every such nation commit acts of atrocity in the service of national security? Does every such nation become so aroused in its fear and its hatred that it will dehumanize and demonize other races and nations?

Maybe not. But how many times has it happened even since the end of World War II? Rhwanda. The Sudan. Bosnia. And what about us? I won’t make a judgment but I worry about us. I worry that we idealize independence, individualism and the idea that we need not listen to anyone else. I worry that we fall for false ideals of freedom, freedom that is instead a kind of bondage. I worry about us.

However we answer the question of what our commitments lead to, Paul has it right about how we can be free. Ironically, it is in obedience to God. That is, when we put our trust and our hope in God, no longer are we enslaved to things that only look as though they will set us free. When we put our trust in God, we do not live as though we need all those other things. In Janice Joplin’s words, we have nothing left to lose. In that moment, enslaved as we are to God, we are utterly free. In that moment the things we have desired in the world make very little sense. But in that moment the sermon on the mount, the golden rule, and the good Samaritan all begin to make all the sense in the world. In that moment we are free at last. Thanks be to God. Amen.