

GOTTA SERVE SOMEBODY**ROMANS 6:15-23**

So far, the first half of this year reminds me a lot of the turbulent, troubled 1960s and 1970s in our country. Many young people back then wanted to experience greater personal freedom – freedom from racism, freedom from the Vietnam War, freedom from traditional values. There was a deep yearning for a more peaceful, just, and loving world. Ironically, many of those who made the pursuit of personal freedom a kind of obsession discovered new and different kinds of personal bondage. Many became enslaved to drugs, alcohol, promiscuous sex, or weird religious cults. The words and music of a skinny, curly haired young man from Minnesota – with maybe the worst singing voice I’ve ever heard – seemed to capture the spirit of those times. His name is Bob Dylan. A while ago now, it was reported that Bob Dylan had become a born again Christian. The pop music scene was appropriately shocked and repulsed. How could this be? I have no idea whether Bob Dylan genuinely came to faith in Jesus or whether it was just a passing religious phase he experienced. But he did write some interesting songs during that period of his life that are quite biblical in their content.

One song was entitled “Gotta Serve Somebody.” Here’s the lyrics to a couple of verses: “You may be an ambassador to England or France. You may like to gamble or you may like to dance. You may be the heavyweight champion of the world. You might be a socialite with a long string of pearls. You may be a preacher preaching spiritual pride. You might be a city councilman taking bribes on the side. Maybe working in a barber shop cutting hair. You may be someone’s mistress. You may be someone’s heir.” The chorus goes like this: “But you gotta serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord. But you gotta serve somebody.”

Bob Dylan is absolutely right. On this Sunday after Independence Day – the day we celebrate freedom – it’s good to remember that you still gotta serve somebody. And, yes, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody. There’s no such thing as total freedom in this universe. At the end of the day, you and I serve one of two masters: the devil or the Lord. There’s no third alternative. Who says so? God does – in His Word. Look with me now at a Bible passage that clearly teaches this claim as truth. The great Christian leader, Paul, wrote those words as part of a letter to the first Christians living in the city of Rome. What’s his point? First...

I SERVE ONE OF TWO MASTERS.

Paul came to the same conclusion Bob Dylan did about 2,000 years before Dylan. Human beings serve one of two masters all their lives. Paul said most people serve a master called sin. When you serve sin or you serve yourself, it’s really a form of slavery to the devil and his purposes. Paul identified the other master we can serve as obedience or righteousness. When you serve either of them, you’re really serving the Lord. The Bible teaches that every person without a personal relationship with Jesus is a slave to sin. It says in Romans 8:7-8 (NLT), “For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God’s laws, and it never will. That’s why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.” Sin is a kind of spiritual

boss enslaving people in chains of hatred, lust, pride, deceit, lying, and greed. It's easy to acknowledge the enslavement of drugs, alcohol, violence, power, or pornography. But other kinds of spiritual slavery are just as real but perhaps not as obvious. Anger, bitterness, gossip, racial prejudice, money or the things money can buy, despising people different from us, chronic anxiety – just to name a few.

Many people object to the truth that everyone's gotta serve somebody. They say or think, "I don't serve anybody. I'm no one's slave. No one's the boss of me. I decide what I'm going to do and how I'm going to live my life." Did you now the devil's actually very content to let you believe you answer to no one but yourself? His favorite strategy of all is to work undetected in your life and mine. He's happy to encourage you to think that you don't serve anyone. When it comes to the spiritual side of life, slavery is subtle but real. You can be a slave to this world's view of success. You can drive yourself to get to a certain socio-economic level that indicates, "I've made it in life." You can become a slave to money, what money buys, or a lifestyle money provides. You can become enslaved to feeling personally secure and safe. So, then, you pursue whatever provides you with security and safety. Other people's expectations of you can enslave you. You live for the approval of your parents, your spouse, your boss, or your peer group. Some people become slaves to deep resentments for some wrong done to them in the past. Others get enslaved to guilt, worry, or anger. You can call sin by whatever name you want to call it. But the fact remains we all start out in life enslaved to it. Sin is our default master. And the being behind sin's power in our lives? The devil.

Did you also know the devil's done a masterful job of convincing people that personal freedom means the ability to indulge or please oneself? One pathetic, ironic example comes from Iraq after the end of Saddam Hussein's tyrannical rule. Ali was a young Iraqi man with little money and no wife. After the fall of Hussein, he could take a 90 minute bus ride from his village into Baghdad. As soon as he arrived he headed straight to a brothel where it cost him only \$1.50 for 15 minutes alone with a woman. Despite Hussein's many and terrible crimes, he strictly controlled vices such as prostitution, alcohol, and drugs. His fall gave rise to every kind of depravity. Referring to all the newly available immoral activities which he saw as a big improvement, Ali grinned and said, "Now we have freedom." The devil is a master at getting us to equate personal indulgence – pleasing yourself - with personal freedom.

But it's all a trap. There's no better liar than the devil. His "freedom" becomes slavery. His "pleasure" turns into personal guilt. His definition of "success" results in emptiness. As the Bible told us today, people willingly present themselves – their bodies, minds, attitudes, words, and actions – to the service of sin day after day, year after year. Sin is their master. They're enslaved to it. You gotta serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord. But you gotta serve somebody. Yes, you do.

Now, when you become a follower of Jesus, you begin to serve a different master. Paul implied there in Romans 6 that he had mixed feelings about using the image of slavery to describe our relationship with Jesus. Slavery is rightly associated with injustice, humiliation, and degradation. That's not what happens when we start to follow Jesus!

But Paul just couldn't come up with a better image to help us understand the totality of commitment, obligation, accountability, and belongingness that's suggested in the image of a slave. When you're a slave you don't have any of your own time or money. Doing what you want isn't a priority. You're the exclusive possession and property of whoever owns you. The Bible makes it clear when you serve King Jesus, your mind, your body, your time, your talents, your money, your attitudes, your actions, your words, your relationships, your short term and long term plans – very part of you and all of you – is at the moment by moment disposal of Jesus, the King of all kings and the Lord of all lords. Jesus is the Boss of all bosses and the Master of all masters.

Jesus is the only other option when it comes to who you and I will serve in this life. There's a wonderful paradox I don't want you to miss. On the one hand, the devil offers a fake freedom that ends up enslaving us in the most humiliating, miserable ways imaginable. On the other hand, slavery to King Jesus, Lord Jesus, Boss Jesus, and Master Jesus results in true, personal freedom. Jesus put it like this in John 8:34, 36 (NLT), "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin. A slave is not a permanent member of the family, but a son is part of the family forever.... If the Son sets you free, you are truly free."

There's also a further implication here we shouldn't miss either. Only a follower of Jesus can ever made a real choice about which master he or she is currently serving. If you're not a follower of Jesus, who you serve is a foregone conclusion. You're enslaved to sin. You're in bondage to the devil. When you become a follower of Jesus, you simply change owners. Spiritually speaking, you died with Jesus on the cross. As a result, you died to the absolute power of sin over and in your life. Listen to what Rom. 6:18 (NLT) says again, "Now you are free from your slavery to sin, and you have become slaves to righteous living." Verse 22 (NLT) is important, too. "But now you are free from the power of sin and have become slaves of God."

Here's something I constantly have to remind myself about. When did sin or the devil stop being Rick's boss? When I put my faith in Jesus and became His follower. So, Rick, act like it. Sure, sin still has the power to tempt me, but its power to control me was broken at the cross. So, Rick, live like it. Jesus is now my Master, my Boss. So, Rick, live out that reality in your actions and attitudes. Can a Christian still commit a sin, even really bad sins? Of course, we can! But no genuine child of God enjoys living a life controlled or dominated by sin or the devil. You chafe under that bondage. You groan under that slavery. You're miserable until you escape that domination. Now, if for some odd reason it doesn't matter to you if you're serving the devil or the Lord, you're probably not a child of God after all.

When Jesus becomes your Master, He gives you the freedom to become – not who you want to be – but who God wants you to be. But right here is where we have to cooperate or participate with the Holy Spirit who now lives within us. We need to offer ourselves to God daily. Would you expect a builder to construct a home if he wasn't given any building materials? Would you expect a seamstress to make a dress if she wasn't given any cloth? Of course not. Well, you can't expect the Lord to make you

into the person He wants you to be if you don't genuinely give or surrender yourself to Him each and every day. Look at Rom. 6:19 (NIV) again. "Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness." Offer yourself. You do it. You keep on doing it. You keep on doing it daily, regularly and forever.

Archie Moore, one time heavyweight boxing champion of the world, once got knocked down early in a match. He got back up and won the fight by a knock out. Afterwards, a reporter asked him, "Archie, what were you thinking while you were on the canvas?" He said, "I thought, 'Hey, I'm the champ. I don't belong here.'" Everyone listening today will be facedown on the canvas of life for one reason or another sooner or later. Life can be very tough. When that happens to you, remember you've been created in God's image. Jesus died and rose again for you. You're a child of God and He says, "Hey, you're mine. You belong to me. My Son, Jesus, gave His life for you. Get up! You don't belong down there." You gotta serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord. But you gotta serve somebody. You and I can serve only one of two masters. Take your choice – the devil or the Lord. It's equally true that...

I DEMONSTRATE WHOM I SERVE.

There are two very different outcomes from those two very different relationships. In other words, when the devil is your boss, it will get demonstrated in your life. But, when Jesus is your boss, that very different relationship will get demonstrated as well. Hear again one of the most well known verses in all of the Bible. I read it earlier. Romans 6:23 (NLT) "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord." I like how The Message has rendered that same verse, "Work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death. But God's gift is real life, eternal life, delivered by Jesus, our Master."

When the devil is your boss or you're a slave to sin – it's the same thing – there's an unmistakable result: death. That means more than just physical death, because everyone dies including those who are serving Jesus. Sin brings death to everything it touches. It kills us emotionally. You can get to a place where you no longer care about other people. Sin kills us intellectually. When we shut out the one who created our minds, our thinking becomes twisted. Sin kills us relationally. Other people just become objects to satisfy our own desires or obstacles that need to be removed. They become disposable to us. Sin kills intimacy, fellowship, caring, and love between husbands and wives, parents and kids, and even fellow followers of Jesus. Ultimately, sin causes eternal death. When people who have rejected Jesus as their Master die physically, the Bible says the result is they've freely chosen an eternity consigned to Hell, judgment and separation from God forever.

The Bible is pretty clear about how slavery to sin or the devil gets demonstrated. Here's a description from Galatians 5:19-21 (NLT). "When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension,

division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.” Do those actions or attitudes describe your life in any way? If so, they reveal whom you are serving. They tell the world who is your real master.

Years ago now, a very unusual work of modern art opened to the public: a shotgun attached to a chair. You viewed this “wonderful” work of art by sitting in the chair and looking directly into the gun barrel. The gun was loaded and set on a timer to fire at an undetermined moment within the next 100 years. The amazing thing about it was the fact people waited in line to sit and stare into that gun barrel. Everyone knew it could go off at point blank range at any moment, but they gambled the fatal blast wouldn’t happen during their minute sitting in the chair in front of it. Foolish? Well, yeah, for sure! But how many people are there out there who wouldn’t dream of sitting in a chair and looking into a loaded shotgun, but who will instead live a lifetime essentially thumbing their nose at God thinking they can escape the consequences of rejecting Him? No one can and no one will.

But because there’s another master available to you and me, there’s a different demonstration of that relationship. On special occasions, the Roman Emperor – Caesar – would give his soldiers something called a *donativum*. It was an unexpected and generous gift. This wasn’t the soldier’s regular wage or salary. It was a bonus – an above and beyond gift from the Caesar. That’s the thought behind the word we find there in Romans 6:23 (NLT), “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.” Sin pays a wage to its slaves. Death. Now God doesn’t pay a wage to anyone, because it’s impossible for God to owe you or me anything. We can never put God in our debt. Whatever God gives is always and forever a gift. Never earned. Never deserved. Always abundantly generous. The gift God gives is life. It first finds expression in and through the forgiveness of our sins. It means being adopted into God’s family as His children. It means having the Holy Spirit within us. We discover wonderful new dimensions of it as we continue to follow Jesus throughout our lives. And then when we die physically, it means eternal life with God.

Contrary to Master Sin or Master Devil, Master Jesus creates emotional life in His servants. Someone once told me that when he became a follower of Jesus, he began to experience joy like he never had before. But he also discovered he had a new and far greater sensitivity to emotional or spiritual pain in his life. He grew in compassion for others because now he was alive emotionally at a deeper level. Master Jesus creates intellectual life in His servants. We should be the best and most logical thinkers out there. Why? Because the Holy Spirit is renewing our minds every day. I’m not suggesting we’ll understand everything about life and living now, but the closer you live to the Lord, the more sense life makes. Master Jesus creates relational life. He heals marriages and homes. He restores friendships. He puts love in our hearts for people who are different from us as well as for people who are difficult to love. If Jesus is your master and you are His slave, here’s what your life will look like. It’s described in Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT), “But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Master Jesus creates eternal and spiritual life. Oswald Chambers, a much loved Christian author, put it in a memorable way. He wrote, "Eternal life is not a gift FROM God; eternal life is the gift OF God." No, God doesn't promise any of us a life free from heartache, pain, disappointment, or failure. He doesn't promise we'll escape the effects of living through a pandemic or even being the victim of injustice. But He does offer us forgiveness, grace, peace, joy, a new power to help us deal with life's troubles, and the blessed assurance that the moment we die we'll wake up in the presence of Jesus forever. God's gift is the very life and presence of God Himself inside you. Jesus said in John 10:10 (NIV), "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Let's make sure we settle for nothing less than what God gives us through His Son, Jesus.

There's an old legend out there that tells of a newly liberated slave who went to see President Abraham Lincoln in order to tell the President that he just couldn't accept his freedom as a gift. Instead, he proposed to pay for it. He put a silver dollar on the President's desk. But Lincoln tried to show the man he couldn't pay for his liberty. In fact, when this freed man assumed he could pay for it somehow, it revealed he didn't yet fully appreciate the priceless gift he'd received. The story goes that Lincoln took this man over to the window and showed him the row of Union soldiers' graves across the Potomac River in Arlington. He asked the man how his silver dollar could pay back the lives given that he might live now in freedom. Then this freed man asked Lincoln what he could do. Lincoln said he must walk the world with gratitude from then on and live his life fully like a free man every day for the rest of his life.

When Jesus died on the cross, He paid the price for our lives and for our spiritual freedom. We can't pay Him for it. We can only receive it as a gift. But here's how we can express our eternal gratitude. Let's live every day in the freedom His undeserved gift has bought for you and me. You gotta serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord. But you gotta serve somebody. Let that somebody be King Jesus and Him alone today and everyday.