

Slavery and True Liberty

Code: A260

The following is excerpted from the new material in John's revised edition of The Gospel According to Jesus (Zondervan, 2008).

Understood correctly, the gospel is an invitation to slavery. When we call people to faith in Christ, we need to stress that fact in the same way Jesus did. On the one hand, the gospel is a proclamation of freedom to sin's captives and liberty to people who are broken by the bondage of sin's power over them. On the other hand, it is a summons to a whole different kind of slavery: "Having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness" (Romans 6:18). As the apostle Peter wrote, "Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God" (1 Peter 2:16).

Both sides of the equation are vital. There is a glorious freedom in being the slaves of Christ, because "if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). On the other hand, being a true follower of Christ means the end of human autonomy. And that is as it should be, because self-determination turns out to be nothing more than an illusion anyway. The only kind of liberty it offers is "free[dom] in regard to righteousness" (Romans 6:20)—and that is the very essence of bondage to sin. Its inevitable end is death and destruction. If we want true liberty from sin and all its fruits, it's not autonomy that we need, but a different kind of bondage: complete surrender to the lordship of Christ.

In other words, everyone serves some master. No one is truly independent and self-governing. We are all enslaved in one way or the other. In the words of the apostle Paul:

Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. (Romans 6:16-21)

No message can rightly be called the gospel if it glosses over or denies those truths. The gospel according to Jesus calls sinners to give up their independence, deny themselves, submit to an alien will, and abandon all rights in order to be owned by and controlled by the Lord. By confessing Jesus as Lord (Kurios), we automatically confess that we are His slaves (douloi).

What does this mean in practical terms? To borrow the words of Edwin Yamauchi,

It means that we have been captured, beaten, and enslaved. We discover, however, that our captor is a Despot of love and mercy. Neither is there anything slavish or servile about our slavehood, for we have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear but the spirit of adoption (Romans 8:15). Nor has our reduction to slavery been a debasement or an abasement. . . . We have been elevated to serve in a heavenly court and have been invested with a higher nature.

. . . [It also] reminds us of our ransom from another master at an incredible price. It was not with the fabulous sums of all the royal estates we were bought, nor was it for handsome features or some prized skill we were purchased. But rather unlovely, without any merit, rebellious at heart, we were redeemed with the precious blood of the Master Himself.

Having thus been bought by Christ we are entirely His.

There's no other possible way to view it.

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