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Slavery and Freedom: The Pauline Paradox in Romans 6

LINDA KING

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul...*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.¹*

Perhaps you once had to memorize these words from the famous poem “Invictus” by William Henley. If you don’t know the words, you are surely familiar with the sentiment. This notion of complete autonomy and utter independence represents perhaps *the* most unanimously held value in all of contemporary western culture: freedom! Probably the unexamined confluence of many streams of thought and practice—from the existential philosophy of radical independence to foundational American precepts of political, economic and religious liberty to television commercials that exploit and affirm our sense of ourselves as rugged individuals with the unlimited right to choose and the unlimited power to determine our own destiny—freedom is our basic right, our cherished heritage, our identity-shaping myth. For Christians, though, there is a big footnote to this wonderful idea of freedom. A significant countercurrent. Maybe even a corrective. And it comes from Romans 6.

The Myth of Independence; the Reality of Slavery

As early as Romans 5.14–21, the apostle Paul wrote of sin and death in terms of a sovereign master who reigned over humanity. But in Romans 6.12–23, he tightens the metaphor of sovereign and subject, of master and slave, and leaves no room for alternatives. Everyone, he argues, is a slave. That doesn’t sound right to our ears, does it? It’s offensive to our sensibilities and repugnant to our Christian understandings of grace, of freedom from law-keeping, of deliverance from the bondage of guilt. After all, “for freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal 5.1 NRSV)² and all that. We shouldn’t let anyone spy out our freedom, Paul had earlier written (Gal 2.4). Yet Paul clearly tells the Romans that they are, and must be, slaves. In the diatribe that is Romans 6, he has a rhetorical dialogue with his readers/auditors, asking questions and answering them, all in the context of an extended metaphor of slavery. Notice his language:

1. William Ernest Henley, “Invictus,” in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1902), 1019. The poem was first published under the title “I. M. R. T. Hamilton Bruce (1846– 1899) in William Ernest Henley, *Poems* (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), 119.

2. All biblical quotations are from the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version) unless otherwise noted.

- v. 12 “...do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies” (NIV says “reign”)
- v. 13 “No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness.”
- v. 14 “For sin shall not be your master...” (NIV; NRSV says “will have no dominion over you”)
- v. 15 “under law” versus “under grace”
- v. 16 “you are slaves of the one whom you obey”
- v. 17 “having once been slaves of sin”
- v. 18 “...you, having been set free from sin, having become slaves of righteousness”
- v. 19 “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.”
- v. 20 “For when you were slaves of sin...”
- v. 22 “But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God...”

For Paul, then, conversion to Christ is not just a deliverance from bondage to sin; it is a change of masters. As Neil Elliott reads this passage, “[T]here are no pockets of neutral independence, no ‘freedom’ from one that is not immediately and necessarily fealty to the other.”³ There was—and continues to be—a cosmic battle for the souls of human beings, one in which the final outcome is certain, but the conflict continues. The believers, now baptized and identified with Christ, must continue to reject their old master and present themselves in service to the new. They are free, and yet they are not free. This is a Pauline paradox, where two statements seem to be antithetical but result in a third, divine truth.⁴ For a Gentile audience, Paul’s words might have emphasized their former enslavement to pagan attitudes and licentious behavior. Jews may have heard him describing deliverance from futile law-keeping. But for modern and postmodern ears, the first hurdle, the hardest part to hear, is that we are, or ever have been, slaves to anyone or anything!

Slavery to Sin: The Death Spiral

For the Roman Christians, the concept of slavery was not some ancient abstraction or historical artifact, as it is to most of today’s Christians. In fact, scholars who have investigated slavery as practiced in the Roman world offer some startling observations:

1. Slavery was a social reality. “Between 1/3 and 2/3 of the population were either slaves or former slaves.”⁵
2. Slavery could be involuntary (resulting from military conquest, from debt, or from birth to slaves) or voluntary (resulting from severe economic necessity).
3. Slaves had no legal rights or powers. Masters could command, control, discipline, or execute their slaves with impunity. Slaves were human property, owned by their masters.
4. Slaves, especially imperial slaves, “presented” themselves to their masters. They stood by at their masters’ disposal, ready for service or as human weapons for combat.

Thus, when Paul describes sin as a lord that had previously *dominated* them (v. 12), made them *obey* (v. 12), kept them in service as *instruments (weapons?)* of wickedness (v. 13), and led them to *impurity* and ultimately to *death* (v. 19), his Roman hearers are instantly reminded of the wretched powerlessness of their former condition. What’s worse, Paul tells them, the exploitative and destructive powers of this lord impel the slaves to “greater and greater iniquity” (v. 19). The only outcome of this downward

3. Neil Elliott, *Rhetoric of Romans: Argumentative Constraint and Strategy and Paul’s Dialogue with Judaism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 251.

4. Larry J. Waters, “Paradoxes in the Pauline Epistles,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167 (2010): 423.

5. Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 416.

descent, this hopeless spiral, is death (v. 21). Over the centuries, a majority of interpreters have understood sin in this chapter as a cosmic force, a quasi-demonic or apocalyptic power.⁶ A minority of scholars argue that Paul's references to sin as exercising dominion over an enslaved humanity are simply a rhetorical device employing personification and metaphor.⁷ Regardless, acquainted as they were with the raw social realities of slavery and the brutal Roman death-dealing culture, Paul's audience understood the terrible plight of being enslaved to sin, unable to resist wickedness and bodily passions. In contrast, Paul's readers today might resist the harshness of Paul's stark assessment. Sure, there are addicts among us whom we might rightly deem enslaved to sin, but not most of us rank-and-file church folk. Outside of Christ we made some bad decisions, had some bad attitudes, hurt some people, but enslaved to sin? C'mon. But when we're honest with ourselves (say, after midnight on a day when things have gone horribly wrong), we might just acknowledge in the dark that we have placed ourselves willingly "at the disposal" of sin; we have been instruments or weapons in the war against God. "Whose will was done today?" we may ask. "Who was in charge?"

Slavery to Righteousness: Sanctification

According to Paul, life "under grace" involves a change of masters. Christians are now slaves to righteousness, with a new owner whom they serve: God. "Sin remains, but in the Christian it does not reign. The Christian is no longer in bondage."⁸ The death to sin described in verses 1–11 of chapter 6 is the beginning of the new life under the new master. But sin—the old master—"still tries to assert authority in the believer's life... It is a lifelong process to experience the reality of 'death to sin'."⁹ This process Paul refers to as "sanctification." According to Robert Jewett, this statement in verse 22 that "the advantage you get is sanctification" is better understood in a more literal rendering as "you have your fruit resulting in sanctification," with the "fruit" referring to changes evident in the lives of the group.¹⁰ It is worth noting that Jewett's translation approaches that of the KJV: "ye have your fruit unto holiness." Therefore, just as enslavement to sin only intensifies the slave's shameful depravity unto death, enslavement to God leads to ever-increasing holiness in the slave/Christian's life. Under the new master, we must continually struggle to resist sin. But we have freedom to choose, where formerly we did not.¹¹ The former freedom described in verse 20—freedom in regard to righteousness—is "an abstract kind of freedom that disallows a relationship with the only thing that matters, the righteousness of God."¹² But becoming slaves of God and servants of righteousness effects a changed condition in the believer, who now obeys the new sovereign and his teaching "from the heart" (v. 17). Using as interpretive background the OT concept of holiness, Jewett concludes that the holiness in view in Paul's promise of sanctification is certainly more than "moralistic strictures." Rather, this sanctification in the broad sense includes moral uprightness, harmonious relationships, and a sense of wholeness.¹³ But for today's Christians, is sanctification really something we understand, much less claim or aspire to? For many, even aspiring to holiness carries with it a faint whiff of sanctimony. The idea of growing in holiness as a result of our enslavement sounds too much like hair shirts and self-flagellation. Who wants to sign up for that? Still, we might be stronger Christians, better servants, healthier and holier churches, if we gave more attention to this process of sanctification, observing and commending it in the lives of the saints among us, and claiming it as an outcome of our surrender and service to Christ.

6. See, for example, Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromeley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 174–176.

7. Emma Wasserman, "Paul among the Philosophers: The Case of Sin in Romans 6–8," *JSNT* 30.4 (2008): 402.

8. Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Narrative Thought World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 290.

9. Waters, "Paradoxes," 440.

10. Jewett, *Romans*, 424.

11. Charles H. Talbert, "Tracing Paul's Train of Thought in Romans 6–8," *Review and Expositor* (Winter, 2003), 55–56.

12. Jewett, *Romans*, 421.

13. *Ibid.*, 425.

A Curious Little Phrase

In the midst of Paul's skillful contrast of the two mutually exclusive lordships—that of sin and death and that of God and righteousness—there occurs in the second half of verse 17 a curious phrase that has intrigued interpreters for centuries.

The NRSV renders verse 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*” (italics added). In contrast, the KJV reads: “But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart *that form of doctrine which was delivered you*” (italics added). So the first question is who or what was delivered/entrusted to whom or what? Was something delivered/entrusted to the Roman believers, or were they delivered/entrusted to something? Literally, the translation is “to which you were handed over.” So in the context of the slave-and-master relationship in Romans 6, the “form of teaching” functions as a master to which the slave has been handed over.¹⁴

But it is the first phrase that invites a closer look. Some commentators view the phrase “the *typos* of teaching” as a gloss, a non-Pauline interpolation added by a later hand.¹⁵ It interrupts Paul's elegant parallelism, they say. In the Greek text, the phrase is *typos didaches*—“type of teaching”—but since the word “type” is capable of a range of meanings, both in Greek and in English, a variety of meanings have been proposed. Occasionally, interpreters have seen “type of teaching” here as a reference to the pre-Christian life, either of Jews following the law of Moses or pagans following the teaching of sin.¹⁶ However, most readers of this passage view the reference as a description of Christian obedience. The question, then, is what (or who) is the “type of teaching”? For some scholars, such as J. D. G. Dunn, the reference is to Jesus Christ as the type or model for Christian conduct.¹⁷ For others, such as James Moffatt, it refers to “the Christian norm or standard of life,” perhaps even “that germ of the creed or standard of faith and morals which ruled the practice of the churches.”¹⁸

In recent decades another line of interpretation has emerged. Tracing back through the Greek works of Philo, Josephus and Plato, Robert Gagnon has identified numerous references to *typos* and finds that “almost half of these eighty occurrences refer to the ‘impression’ or ‘imprint’ stamped (as if with a seal) on the soul or mind (which is likened to wax).”¹⁹ For example, Philo wrote of the divine imprint stamped by God onto the soul at creation; he described how Moses shaped his followers: “he stamped upon their minds as with a seal deep imprints of holiness, so that no fusion or smoothing in the course of years should ever blur their distinctness.”²⁰ For Philo, a number of factors affect the deepness, clarity and permanence of a teaching's impression on the soul, including emphasis, length of time of instruction, memory, prior contrary teaching and effacement of the engraving by subsequent stamps of vice.²¹ As Gagnon observes, this imprint-on-the-waxlike-heart interpretation harmonizes well with other Pauline expressions, such as 2 Corinthians 1.21 (the Spirit as a seal on our hearts) and 2 Corinthians 3.3 (where he describes the Corinthian church as “a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit on tablets of hearts made of flesh.”²²) Furthermore, in Paul's day—as now—engraving an object denotes ownership. Therefore, a slave/Christian being transferred from one master to another might aptly be said to be engraved by the imprint of that new master's teaching. For Gagnon, then, the best translation of this curious phrase in verse 17 is: “you obeyed from the heart the imprint stamped by

14. Robert A. J. Gagnon, “Heart of Wax and a Teaching that Stamps: τύπος διδασκαλίας (Rom 6:17b) Once More,” *JBL* 112/4 (1993): 669.

15. See, for example, Victor P. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 197.

16. See the summary of these views in Gagnon, 674.

17. J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans* (2 vols.; Word Bible Commentary 38-A-B; Dallas: Word, 1988), 343–344.

18. James Moffatt, “The Interpretation of Romans 6:17–18,” *JBL* 48:3–4 (1929): 236–237.

19. Gagnon, “Heart of Wax,” 682.

20. For multiple examples of this imagery of a seal's imprint on wax in the literature of Philo and of Middle Platonism, see Gagnon, “Heart of Wax,” 683–687.

21. *Ibid.*, 686.

22. *Ibid.*, 685.

teaching, to which (imprint) you were handed over.”²³ At least for this reader, it is awkward to think of being handed over to a teaching, but it seems a vivid and apt description to speak of the imprint of Christ’s teaching on my heart. The warning against obliterating that imprint by returning to enslavement to sin makes perfect sense. By presenting ourselves in service to God, we re-inscribe the imprint, we deepen the stamp left by the seal. We bear ever more deeply the imprint of the master to whom we belong.

Speaking in Human Terms

No metaphor is perfect, and Paul recognizes this. In verse 19 he apologizes for his extensive use of the slave imagery. He is, he explains, speaking in human terms, in language the Romans can relate to. Today, the hideous visage of American slavery remains in our cultural consciousness, so that we struggle to consider any kind of slavery—even slavery to righteousness—as a God-ordained condition. If Paul were writing to us today, he might well speak of “hard drives,” “encoding,” “rebooting” and the like. On the other hand, some verities are as true as they ever were, whether we admit it or not. There *are* two antithetical dominions, and there is no middle way. One draws its captives into ever-increasing iniquity and death; the other grants eternal life as a free gift. Paradoxically, as Christians and slaves of God, we *do* now have a freedom of choice, the choice between masters, between wickedness and righteousness, between life and death. As Paul wrote his letter to the Roman church, perhaps he had in mind the Jesus tradition about no person being able to serve two masters (Matt 6.24). Perhaps he was remembering Moses, who told the Israelites, “I have set before you life and death... Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you” (Deut 30.19). Or perhaps he was thinking of Joshua, who commanded his people to “choose this day whom you will serve” (Josh 24.15). If we can suspend our fantasies of radical independence long enough, we may be able to listen to Paul’s Romans 6 diatribe not with suspicion or chagrin but with the joyous gratitude of those who have been translated from the reign of death to the domain of life eternal. Claiming the imprint of our owner and master, we can present our changed selves to our sovereign as instruments of righteousness. With this Pauline paradox in mind, we can even say, “Thanks be to God for the gift of holy slavery.”

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23. Ibid., 687.