



Speaker:  
**Paul Forrest**

## Joyful Slaves of God

1/24/2023 (TUE) | Bible: **Romans 6**

Each of us came into this world in state of slavery. In a legal sense, we were free men. But morally—that is, in terms of our state of righteousness—we were born into what the Bible refers to as *slavery to sin*.

In our reading, we saw a great contrast. God changes certain people so that they're slaves, no longer of sin, but of God himself. If God has affected that change on you, friend, you will have become a willing slave of God through Jesus Christ.

Let's begin by thinking about the concept of slavery as people commonly understand it.

Throughout human history, in every part of the world, there's been slavery. Countries have invaded other countries and enslaved the people, and sometimes countries make slaves out of their own people.

There's a lot of money to be made in it. This is why it's always been so popular.

It's difficult to say who's the richest person in history. Some say it's Mansa Musa, a fourteenth-century African emperor. And surprise, surprise, he was a slave trader. And all the slaves he kidnapped and sold were fellow Africans.

People will do anything if there's enough money in it.

What about today? Well, it's still a huge issue. It's bigger now than it's ever been. There are possibly between twenty to thirty million people in slavery today, and that includes children. (Interestingly, most of the places in the world with little or no slavery are those which have been influenced by Christianity.)

## Slavery in the Bible

I thought today we'd talk about slavery as it appears in the Bible. An important thing to take note of is the word "slavery" describes a range of things. At one end of the spectrum, you have the worst type of slavery. This is where someone's kidnapped and forced to work for nothing.

Some people in this world think the Bible says this brutal type of slavery is okay. I'm talking about people who are looking for reasons not to believe the word of God. But they're

wrong. And if anyone you speak to makes that claim, you should tell them they're wrong and urge them to stop spreading this misinformation.

Let's start in the Old Testament and see what the Law of Moses said about this type of slavery:

**Exodus 21:16—“He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand [his possession], shall surely be put to death.**

Whether it's Mansa Musa selling slaves to the Arabs or the Portuguese transporting slaves across the Atlantic, the Bible condemns it. Within the Hebrew community, selling or even owning this type of slave carried the death penalty.

Now I'm not suggesting we tell people that's what should be done today. Some of the rules in the Law of Moses were meant to be temporary, and others were meant to be forever. We're not going to be discussing that today. But at least you know the Bible contains the severest warnings for people-traffickers and slave traders.

At the other end of the spectrum, there's a good type of slavery. You might think that sounds a bit daft. But let me give you an example to help.

Imagine we go back a few hundred years. I have a wife and children. And we're very poor. There's no Child Benefit, Universal Credit, or anything else. I work out the family soon won't have enough money for food. We face starvation. I approach the local Lord of the Manor. He's a very rich man. And I make him an offer. If he takes two or three of my children in as servants, they'll work for him for the next ten years for free. All they need is food and somewhere to live. This means they'll be safe and well for the foreseeable future, and the rest of the family will be able to feed itself too.

This is a type of slavery, but one which benefits everyone. A similar type is referred to in the Bible:

**Exodus 21:2—If you buy a Hebrew servant [slave], he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing.**

It went on, and it was okay.

We learn something about the rules for those who owned slaves:

- The Sabbath day was a day off for them just like everyone else
- If someone assaulted their slave, causing injury, the slave would be free to go
- And if someone murdered their slave, they faced the death penalty

By the time Jesus came into this world, this better type of slavery was still in operation within Israel. Nowhere do Jesus or the apostles tell slaves to rise up against their masters. You may have seen inspiring Hollywood films about such rebellions, but God sees these

things as sinful. James even says slaves should continue to work hard for their masters even if they're being treated cruelly.

Those slaves who heard this message, who were Christians, were being taught that their suffering would be rewarded by God. And any sinful abuse by their owners would be dealt with by God. As far as was humanly possible, they were to endure.

## Slaves of sin

So far, we've looked at literal slavery, including what we read in the Bible.

But now we come onto something more important. Jesus and the apostles often used the word *slave* to mean something else.

When we came into this world, we did so as sinful creatures. When you see someone's newborn baby, you'll invariably say something nice. Sometimes, the baby's genuinely cute, and you mean it. Other times, the poor child isn't blessed with cuteness, but you say they're beautiful anyway, out of kindness. In any case, every child is a miracle of God.

But don't forget that you're looking at a small sinner. It already has sin in its heart. The newborn baby hardly knows what's going on. But as soon as it does, the sin in its heart comes out. Tantrums in the supermarket. Stealing toys off other kids. Then they progress to lying and cheating. And the older they get, the more ways they find to sin.

We could think of sinful man as being a kind of slave—to *wickedness*. The people in this world who aren't Christians think they're free agents. They think they're free.

But they're not. Because they can't walk away from sin. In other words, **they can't stop sinning**. It's like sin and Satan owns them. Listen to what Jesus himself said about people who sin:

**John 8:34**—Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.”

“Whoever commits sin”? That's everyone, isn't it? Barring the son of God, every human who's ever lived and whoever is yet to live commits sin. I'm aware there are some people who don't think they sin. They talk of “errors” or “mistakes”. They tell you they know they're not perfect. And this type of language is an indicator they have no idea of their enslavement.

To say, “I know I'm not perfect” is an attempt to sound humble and righteous. They're telling you there's this standard called perfection, but sadly they haven't *quite* managed to reach that—there's the [fake] humility. But they're only a *bit* lower than that—there's the pride.

**Romans 3:23**—all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

We can dispense with discussion about the seriousness of this sin compared with another sin. For the purpose of working out who is a sinner, we only need to know if they've sinned. Whether someone thinks they've fallen short by a bit or a lot, it's irrelevant. They've missed the target of God's glorious righteousness.

All have sinned. Verse 19 in our reading reminds the believers what they were formerly like. When they approached God in repentance, it was with the understanding they'd been "slaves of uncleanness", breaking God's law continually.

But we who are saved tonight thank God that he freed us from that slave master! Verse 6 says we were crucified with Christ so that "we should no longer be slaves of sin." Through the suffering of his own son, he secured our release.

But where does this leave *us* in terms of sin? Each of us would acknowledge we sin each day.

To go into this is beyond the scope of my theme tonight. But I'd like to give you something to think about. At your conversion, you became a new creation. In a way, it was still you. But it was a *new* you. And this new version of yourself is united to Jesus Christ—one who, in some sense, *cannot sin*.

Within your being right now, there are two forces at play. One is sinful. It's the relic of your former self. And it loves pleasure without constraint. So it is you find yourself each day strangely pulled towards the very things you don't want to do. Often, you give in.

The other force at play is the new creature. One which is utterly intolerant of sin. We've heard these two principles described as "the flesh" and "the spirit." And they war against each other. And whichever gets the upper hand, if you like, shows itself in your behaviour, whether righteous or sinful.

The apostle Paul says this. **Romans 7:20—Now if I do what I [desire] not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.**

According to Paul, when he acts sinfully, it's not him. He explains that his sinful behaviour is not from him, in a sense. That is, Paul the new creation doesn't sin. *It's not really me*, he says; *it's sin within me*.

Paul took responsibility for his sinful actions. But he wants us to see that they don't come from us—the new creations who are partakers of the divine nature. They come from the foul leftovers from our old existence.

I've had to be brief so I may not have communicated this well enough. (We can always discuss it later if you like.) But this way of thinking about our sin throws a better light on the verse we just read. **John 8:34—Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin."**

There's a sense in which you sin. And there's a sense in which you don't sin. And from that second perspective, we can conclude this verse has nothing to do with us.

If I've made myself clear on this point to any of you but you simply disagree, let me finally throw in one more verse to see if I can cause you to reconsider. **1 John 3:9—Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.**

“Does not sin.” “Cannot sin.” You've been brought forth from the womb of heaven itself as a holy and sinless child. But while in this state, it's your responsibility to draw on God for the power to overcome that sinful influence that stalks you each day.

There are other interpretations of the verse in John 8. Obviously, I believe they're less persuasive. But whether you accept the proposition I've just made or you believe something else, here's something we'll all agree on: **the unconverted people of this world remain enslaved.**

Ironically, they think they're free. Yet their slavery is a much worse kind than the ones I mentioned earlier. After all, even if you *had* been kidnapped, transported to a foreign country, and handed over to some wicked slave driver for the rest of your life, that won't determine your eternal destiny. And...*it's temporary.*

To be enslaved by sin is far worse. This is a type of slavery there's no way out of:

- They can't escape
- They can't buy their way out
- And there's no automatic release for them after a certain length of service.

It's a pointless existence, and their continuing in it brings them nearer and nearer to a terrible fate. Verse 21 says, **What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.**

It's bad enough to realise, as Solomon did in the book of Ecclesiastes, that the end result of all your grand schemes in life is the grave. Never again to see the things your hands made. Never again to be able to use the money you worked so hard for. The pointlessness of life apart from God is bad enough.

But the events which take place after death are much worse. Those who perhaps lived with the expectation that death would allow them to escape all the consequences of their sin will have a terrifying surprise.

The word of God tells us the grave is not the end. At some unknown point in our future, there will be a resurrection of the dead. Those who died in Christ will be raised to everlasting life. But those who died still in the slavery of their sin will be raised to a state of damnation.

We're told very little about their future condition. But I am persuaded it will be conscious, deeply unpleasant and never ending.

Here then is the story of every man and woman who lives their lives as slaves to sin. They're trapped in their enslavement till they die. After that comes the day of judgement. And for those people, things will then get much, much worse.

## Slaves to God

I said people can't deliver themselves from their slavery. I didn't say they couldn't *be* delivered. There is one who can rescue them, and that is Almighty God himself.

God set in place a way for him to rescue a definite number of the people of this world. He would end their slavery to sin. And this is what we present to people in the message of the gospel.

You've been told many times that the word *gospel* means "good news". But it's only good news to people who know there's a problem! It's when people realise they're sinners—and slaves *to* sin—they start to understand the consequences. They see how, when death brings an end to their slavery, they don't get release. They suffer a penalty: an eternity separated from God and his blessings.

This is why, in our evangelism, it's essential to make sure people understand that they're sinners **and are on their way to falling into the hands of an angry God**. And should the Holy Spirit open their eyes to this, they'll suddenly become very concerned. And when you come along with the message about what Jesus Christ has done, **then** they'll see it as good news.

And when they repent, everything changes. They pray to God and say, *All this sin I've committed against you, Lord: it's awful, and I deserve that terrible judgement. But I plead now for your mercy. Save me!*

And they tell God they trust in his son Jesus Christ as their saviour. They see that he came into this world to die so they could be released from this slavery to sin. **God sets us free.**

Now this doesn't mean he liberates people so they can go off and carry on like before, obviously. **They're released from their bondage so they can become followers of Jesus Christ**. And as disciples they're then called *servants* and, curiously, even *slaves* of Jesus! Look again at what the apostle Paul says in v22:

*Romans 6:22—But now, having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life.*

Slaves! Everyone here today who is a believer is a slave!

Yet if you're a child of God, you'll think being a Christian's the best thing that's happened to you in your entire life! You see that none of those negative connotations of the word "slave" apply to your service for God.

Think of it like this. You were a slave to sin, and now you're a slave to God. You haven't stopped being a slave, but you have a new owner! And whereas the slavery you used to be in was the worst kind, the kind that would never end and only get worse; the kind of slavery you're in now, if you're a believer, is the best kind, the kind which makes you happy and which you'll never want to end.

The Law of Moses recognised that some slaves loved their job—and loved their masters—so much they didn't want to leave. When it came to the time for them to be released from service, they could go through a small ritual and remain as slaves.

The master would take a small tool which we know as a bradawl, and he'd pierce through the slaves ear and into a doorpost. That would make your eyes water! But it was a small price to pay to be able to live happily in the service of one you love.

And we'd do the same if it was required of us. Is there one of you here tonight who would go back into the slavery of sin, even if you could have all the carnal pleasure you could manage? Absolutely not!

Verses 17 and 18 say we who "obeyed from the heart" the gospel of Jesus Christ are now slaves of righteousness, so that we can experience and exercise holiness.

Verse 12 commands us to prevent sin from reigning in our mortal bodies. We're no longer to give free rein to our lusts. We are now "alive to God", and our lives should show evidence of it.

As I said, there's a daily war going on within your soul. If you neglect prayer, your behaviour will become sinful. You'll get so far combating temptation in your own strength, then you'll miserably fail.

However, if you pray earnestly to God for help and use every ounce of strength he gives you to avoid temptation, your behaviour will become righteous.

Sin, we're told in v14, shall no longer dominate us. Since we have God dwelling in our hearts, sin will never again have the hold over us it once did. Having been delivered from our slavery we should, as it says in v4, "walk in newness of life."

As I said earlier, when the Bible talks about us being under new ownership, it sometimes uses the word *servant* instead of *slave*. Listen to how some of the saints in the New Testament church describe themselves:

- Paul says he was "a servant of God"

- Jude introduces himself as “a servant of Jesus Christ”
- And James identifies as “a servant of God *and* of the Lord Jesus Christ”

Those saints have all gone, and we who are the saints alive today are to carry on their work.

- We do all we can to show others they’re in bondage to sin
- We tell them of the consequences of their sin
- And we give them the good news of the gospel, the message that Jesus Christ “came into the world to save sinners”:
  - To end their enslavement to sin
  - To add them to the ever-growing number of the redeemed
  - And to make them to be like us, joyful servants of God forever.

Amen.