

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

July 2, 2023 – 5<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST/PROPER 8, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Set Free to Become Slaves of Christ*”

Old Testament	Jeremiah 28:5-9	(A true prophet is judged by the outcome of the prophecy)
Psalter	Psalms 89:1-4, 15-18	(Sing of God's love; happy are they who walk in His presence)
Epistle	Romans 6:12-23	(We were slaves of sin; now we are slaves of Christ)
Gospel	St. Matthew 10:40-42	(Jesus says: Whoever welcomes a believer welcomes Him)

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As we approach Independence Day, this occasion presents us with an opportunity to think and talk about what freedom means. In 1941, President Roosevelt identified four essential freedoms: freedom of speech; freedom of each individual to worship God in their own way; freedom from want; and freedom from fear. Today some people suggest that flying our flag is an appropriate symbol of American freedom. Perhaps you remember the commercials after 9/11 encouraging us to buy consumer goods to demonstrate our freedom.<sup>1</sup> By the same token, anyone remember “freedom fries”? In June 2002, a mother wrote an article in *Newsweek* suggesting that her five-year-old daughter playing ice hockey in the United States was a good example of American freedom.<sup>2</sup> Others express their civic freedom by voting or getting involved in the political arena. Just as there are different kinds of freedom, freedom is understood in various ways by many different people.

In 1520, Martin Luther authored an essay titled, “The Freedom of a Christian.” In it, he explores whether a Christian is spiritually free or not. Basically his question is: If Christ has set us free, does that mean we’re off the hook morally? Or, as St. Paul puts it in Romans 6:15, “Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” Paul’s response? “By no means!” The question that keeps coming up is: “If we are truly forgiven does that mean we have free reign to do whatever we want, whenever we want, and wherever we want?” If Jesus freed us from the law, then it doesn’t matter whether we sin or not—right? After all, since it is through Jesus’ death that we have been set free from bondage to sin, aren’t we liberated from being enslaved to anything or anyone?

In his discussion of the liberty of a Christian, Luther writes, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. [At the same time] A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, we are “perfectly free lords of all” because—at least in *our* society—no one can force us to commit a certain act, or compel us to go somewhere we don’t want. As free and independent citizens, we make our own decisions and plans, without necessarily referring to other people or concerning ourselves with their needs. As beings endowed by God with free will, we are in charge of our own choices and have personal autonomy.

Yet, as Christians whose primary allegiance is to God, we are also “perfectly dutiful servants of all.” As followers of Christ, we are obligated to respond to His call to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, comfort the lonely, heal the sick and show compassion to orphans and prisoners. So, while no one can *demand* that we act on our faith, God’s call to us remains. If we wish to be faithful to that call and the example Christ set for us, we *must* be servants of all. In other words, once we have been set free from sin and death, we find ourselves enslaved to a *good and right* “Master.”

Because we have freely received the gift of God’s grace, we ought to freely respond graciously toward others. Luther wrote: “As our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another.”<sup>4</sup> As Christians, we are freed from our self-interest, self-focus, and self-determination *so that* we can serve Christ by serving others. We are released from bondage to sin, evil, and death in order to pledge our allegiance to—and become captives of—a higher and better authority.

In today's Epistle lesson, St. Paul treats us to an in-depth discussion of freedom and slavery. He addresses the Romans as those who were once "slaves of sin" (6:17), but now they have been "set free from sin" to become "slaves of righteousness." Paul insists that whether we like it or not, we are slaves of whatever power we choose to follow and obey (6:16). We treat as our master the one to whom we commit our highest loyalty.

That can sound rather disturbing: that becoming a Christian means being released from one kind of slavery only to be placed into another. In one sense, as human beings we will always be enslaved to *something*. There is no such thing as living without allegiance to anyone or anything. Paul's discussion of slavery and freedom employs the word "doulos," which in Greek means the kind of slave that is owned by someone for a lifetime.

But this word also has the connotation of servitude, not in a demoralized, demeaning way, but rather, as selflessly "devoted to another to the disregard of one's own interests."<sup>5</sup>

Purchased with a price<sup>6</sup>—as we were, with the blood of Jesus crucified—the slave is expected to serve the master's needs, to be at his beck and call, and to do as he or she is told. Therefore, Christian discipleship means, first and foremost, living out a servant relationship to our Savior and to those whom He loves.

The late J. I. Packer, an Anglican theologian, wrote in his book, *Your Father Loves You*: "What work does Christ set his servants to do? The way that they serve him ... is by becoming the slaves of their fellow-servants and being willing to do literally anything, however costly, irksome, or undignified, in order to help them. This is what love means, as he himself showed at the Last Supper when he played the slave's part and washed the disciples' feet."<sup>7</sup>

So we're slaves either way...the only question is: What or who is *your* "master"? Whom or what enslaves *you*? Perhaps the best way to approach this is to examine your priorities and values. What fills your time and your thoughts? What do you "snap to" as if it were your master? Are you living as though you were a slave to your job, or to your retirement? Or to your family, with no identity of your own? Or to greed, yearning for possessions at all costs? Or are you enslaved by loyalty to your political party or some other organization, regardless of whether it represents truth or goodness?

Even if you have no regard for anyone else, you might call yourself "free," but you're still enslaved by your passions or addictions, and even by your physical limitations. For instance, you are free to jump off a sixty-story building, and yet, that freedom does not spare you from the consequence of certain death.

Once you've figured out where your allegiance lies—if it's not exclusively to God alone—it's time to reclaim the promises the Lord has given to you. It's not a question of whether any of us will be slaves, but to whom do we pledge our allegiance? As to the question of whether we are free to sin once we are freed from the law of sin and death, the more important question would be: If we have already been forgiven, if we have already been given the unmerited gift of eternal life, why would we wish to continue in sin? Why would we keep turning back to sin, instead of moving forward in the salvation and sanctification God has already granted us in Christ? Yes, sin has a strong grip on us, but God's claim on us is stronger.

Bishop Phillips Brooks, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Episcopal clergyman who penned the hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem," once wrote: "No man in this world attains to freedom from any slavery except by entrance into some higher servitude. There is no such thing as an entirely free man conceivable."<sup>8</sup> St. Paul would agree. In his letter to the Galatians, he writes: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (5:13-14 NRSV).

So, the question is not whether we will be enslaved, but to what, or Whom, will we be slaves? Enslaved to sin and self? Or enslaved to righteousness and Christ? We're still slaves, either way! In 1979, Bob Dylan released a song titled "You Gotta Serve Somebody," and he was right. Jesus tells us in John 8:34 "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." But then Paul reminds us in Romans 6:6: "We know that our old self was crucified with [Christ] so that the body of sin might be destroyed, so we might no longer be enslaved to sin."

So, the Christian life is a paradox: We have been freed from sin—and its consequences—through Christ's atoning death. And yet, we are, as Paul writes in Ephesians 6:6, "slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the soul." But ours is not a thankless or unrewarding slavery! Through our service to others, through our enslavement to Christ, we reap the benefit of becoming more and more like Him. Once we pledge our exclusive loyalty to God, the Lord will continue working in us, changing us, and transforming us, so that we will learn to rejoice fully in being completely named and claimed by God.

**Let us pray:**

Heavenly Father, give us grace to remain faithful to Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, so that God the Holy Spirit may set us apart in holiness, that we may become unreservedly and completely servants of God and those whom He loves—for a lifetime. *Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Adapt. Carla Powell, "Slaves Either Way ..." 20 July 2022. [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/slaves-either-way-carla-powell-sermon-on-sin-bondage-to-48585) <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/slaves-either-way-carla-powell-sermon-on-sin-bondage-to-48585>> 27 June 2023. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> [Newsweek](https://www.foxnews.com/2002/06/03/newsweek), 3 June 2002.

<sup>3</sup> W. A. Lambert and Harold J. Grimm, *trans. Martin Luther: Treatise on Christian Liberty* (1520), Paragraph 3. Hanover College History Department <<https://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/165luther.html>> 27 June 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:367, p. 371.

<sup>5</sup> "Doulos," [Strong's Lexicon, The Blue Letter Bible](https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1401/kjv/tr/0-1/) <<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1401/kjv/tr/0-1/>> 27 June 2023.

<sup>6</sup> "You are not your own; you were bought at a price." (1 Corinthians 6:19b-20a, NIV).

<sup>7</sup> J. I. Packer, *Your Father Loves You: Daily Insights for Knowing God* (Harold Shaw Publications, June 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Phillips Brooks, *Perennials: Selections From the Writings of the Rt. Rev. Phillips Brooks, D.D.* (Forgotten Books, 2018).