

YOU'VE GOT TO SERVE SOMEBODY

by Steve Zeisler

A few years ago the Motion Picture Academy heaped significant praise and honor on the movie *Silence of the Lambs*. By all accounts I have read, it is a dark and violent movie. But the story is built on an enduring myth. It is the story of the evil genius. Hannibal Lector, a brilliant psychiatrist who had deep insights into the way people thought, their vulnerabilities, and the places in their lives where they were fearful or uncertain or weak. Being a terrible and violent person himself, indeed a cannibal, he would prey on people in their weakness.

The story begins with Lector in prison, having been charged with his crime, brought to trial, convicted, sentenced, and banished to a dungeon. He was no longer free to do the terrible things he had once done. But the story goes on to tell how FBI agents trying to catch other criminals, would periodically go down the stairs to the dungeon and speak with him, trying to learn from his evil genius about how evil was spread in the world. Eventually they began to be given over to the power of his deceptive strength as they listened to him. They were weakened and made vulnerable. The evil genius' had no power to act, only to persuade, and then only when his hearers made themselves open to deception.

I call your attention to this subject because the Bible teaches us that our sin nature is very much like an evil genius. In Romans 5 Paul said that sin entered the world through Adam and had absolute command over everyone born since him. But for those of us who are united with Christ, the reign of sin or its lordship over us was broken when Jesus died on the cross. We were united with Christ in his death, and we will be united with him in his resurrection; we are to experience newness of life. So sin is an evil genius locked in a dungeon, no longer free to carry out its awful intentions but retaining the power to persuade. And if you and I are fools we will periodically climb down the stairs to the dungeon and listen to the voice of the evil genius twisting the truth that God has given us, finding the chinks in our armor where we are most vulnerable, preying upon our weaknesses.

Let's begin our study at Romans 6:15:

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey--whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In this book and throughout the Bible the consistent alternative to the sin nature---the antidote to the poison of sin, or the counter to the voice of the evil genius---is grace. But grace is profound and is easy to misunderstand. And that is where the voice of the evil persuader, which understands our weaknesses, tries to twist what is good into something evil.

At the end of chapter 5, for instance, we heard the great statement, "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more." The enormous power of the grace of God is greater than anything sin can do. "Marvelous, wonderful grace of God," the hymn says. So the evil genius, hearing that argument, offers in chapter 6 verse 1, "Well, if that is so, then why not sin more and more? Why not continue exactly on the path you were on---rebellion against God, self-centeredness, personal ruin, destruction of others---because however much you sin, grace will be heaped up higher." Technically, the deceptive genius isn't denying what Paul said. But it is taking the announcement of the greatness of grace and trying to twist it. Paul's answer to that, as we saw last week, was, "By no means!" which is exactly his answer here in verse 15. It is a misunderstanding of grace to think of it as that which only forgives us. Grace is that which changes us as well. United with Christ, we have been buried and raised with him. We are new creatures who are made right with God. We can live differently, and we shall.

When we come to chapter 7 we will find that the deceptive power of the voice in the dungeon will try to ruin law as well. In verse 11 it says, "For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death." Paul will ask, "Is the law bad?" and then explain, "No, the law is good. But sin hitchhikes on the law, twists its message, and brings this destructive message to bear on us. It takes what is otherwise good and cleverly preys upon us. We listen to what it is saying and eventually are captivated."

WE ARE NOT UNDER LAW

Now let's examine what the voice in the dungeon has twisted in chapter 6 verse 15: "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" The immediately preceding verse said, "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace." That was Paul's statement of confidence that you will not lose in your battle to make true in your experience the death and resurrection of Jesus. If it were the law that would save you, you would have every reason to be desperate. But you can be confident that you will not lose the battle because the grace of God is at work in your life.

So the evil genius hitchhikes on that truth and says, "That being the case, why not sin occasionally? You're not under law; you no longer have this judge standing over you with a stick in his hand saying, 'Don't do this, don't do that,' every time you do something wrong. Why don't you periodically give in to the more delicious sins in your experience? You're right with God; his grace is operative in your life." In verse 1 of chapter 6 it said, "Why don't we continue in sin as if we were totally unchanged and lived exactly the way we had always lived, in complete rebellion against God?" Here the lie has been modified a bit to say, "Why don't you now and then indulge yourself in those sins which are particularly fascinating and filled with delight?" Perhaps you have the opportunity for the first time in ages to ruin the person who has tormented you. They have made your life so miserable. Wouldn't it be great just this one time to stick the knife in deep and make them as miserable as they have made you for so long? What a great opportunity! Why not sin just once? God is on your side, you're going to be forgiven, you're not under the law. But this is Hannibal Lector speaking from the dungeon, promoting a deadly deception.

WE ARE FREE TO CHOOSE OUR MASTER

As before, Paul recoils from this distortion of the truth: "By no means, may it never be! We are not going to entertain that terrible suggestion for a moment." But it is important to see the structure of his argument. Why is that such a terrible thought, such a deceptive and twisted suggestion? The main reason, and the heart of his argument that fills out the rest of chapter 6, is that there is no such thing as dabbling in sin. It needs to be clear in our minds that there is no such thing as freedom to do whatever we want without being owned by something. We were made to be captivated by something. We are not and never have been independent souls who can make our way through life sometimes taking things out of this bin, sometimes out of that bin; choosing what will happen and guaranteeing the results of our choices. We are free to be owned by something, and that's all.

As the word of God makes clear, there are ultimately only two options. Chapter 5 says the two options are being in Adam or being in Christ. In this chapter Paul uses the language of the slave market. We will be either slaves to sin or slaves to God.

Therefore, if you choose to dabble in sin, you are reconnecting yourself to something that is going to carry you much farther than you have any intention of going. You are making yourself a slave to the one from whom Christ set you free. And dabbling a little bit in sin, thinking you're in charge, giving in to this particular fantasy over here or that particular act of revenge over there, the minor theft that you're going to engage in or the season of laziness that you'll permit yourself, all are a reattachment to a master who, as Paul will say in the end, is going to pay certain wages. And the wages of sin is death.

Before we move on, I want you to notice a couple of things that Paul does not say, because I think we are sometimes inclined to recoil from this suggestion foolishly, without the wisdom of Scripture. One of the ways that people recoil from the suggestion, "Why not dabble in sin---the fun sins, the sins we really like?" is to respond like a very stern parent tapping their foot and exclaiming, "How could you even think of such a thing? All sin is inherently and obviously terrible! It's an outrage!" But it is not outrageous to Paul that anyone should think of such a thing. He knows his own heart too well. There are many sins that are very attractive. I find myself many times very powerfully longing to do what I know is wrong, and everything about it as it presents itself at the moment suggests that nothing bad will happen; I will get away with it and it will really be fun. And very often in the short term, my having given in to it, sin is fun. We have to help each other fight with temptations that are genuinely tempting. The problem is not whether sin could possibly be fun for the moment, but what it is going to lead to. It does have a course; we can't just start with a particular sin and stop with that same sin. If we start, we will sell ourselves to the ownership of a master who is ultimately going to pay us in wages of death.

The second thing that Paul does not do here is recoil from the genuine freedom that we discover in the gospel. Most people here and in every culture grow up with the idea that God cares about things that he doesn't really care about. When we finally get to maturity in the Lord, we realize we were very restricted in some areas thinking they meant something to God, but it turned out they didn't mean anything to him.

For instance, perhaps you used to think when you were growing up that if you prayed somewhere near a statue of the Virgin Mary, God was much more likely to attend to those prayers than if you prayed in other places in the world. You have now grown up and realized that that is not true. So you have new freedom in your prayer life. Or you may have grown up thinking that going to church in a T-shirt is somehow unacceptable to God. It turns out he doesn't care; you're perfectly free to go to church in a T-shirt. You may have grown up thinking that a beer and a hot dog at the ballpark will offend the throne of heaven. When you grow up you learn that is not true.

You might have grown up thinking that spiritual leaders in church are austere figures whose every statement ought to be received with quiet reverence and folded hands. Actually, God prefers that you ask hard questions, study the Bible for yourself, and at times question what you're hearing rather than receive it with reverence. The other day I saw a poster of Chuck Swindoll seated on a motorcycle in full black leathers, staring out of the poster with a very grim visage and Arnold Schwarzenegger look-alike sunglasses. At the bottom it said, "The Sermonator." It was a good way of overturning the notion that spiritual leaders must be treated with the greatest reverence.

But what happens when you grow up with a lot of inappropriate restrictions in your life, finally throw off what used to hang you up, and find yourself really enjoying freedom? Then the deceiver in the dungeon is going to say, "You know, God doesn't care about anything. There really are no boundaries you shouldn't cross. So if you live in grace, why not 'sin' occasionally? It's no big deal." What Paul does not do in response to that suggestion is go back and put the phony restrictions on again to try to defeat the lie. He allows for real freedom to exist as it should. And what he does say is very important: if you sin you are going to reattach yourself to your old master, and there are going to be consequences of the choice you make.

There are a lot of voices today saying free agency is ruining baseball. Perhaps so. But think of what that term means. The freedom a ball player has is to attach himself to one team or another. But he doesn't have the freedom to say, "I want to bat three times in a row," or "I'd just as soon play in winter instead of summer this year." He is not free to change the rules or the environment. He is not free to do anything but what his manager tells him to do: He will travel when it's time to travel, play in the lineup where he is told to play, and

sit if he is told to sit. All free agency does is let him choose which organization he is going to belong to. And having made the choice, he can experience either great success if he is with an enlightened and caring group, or great frustration. That is also our lot in life.

TWO TRAJECTORIES

Listen to how Paul builds the argument. If you dabble in sin you're hooked again, is his statement. Verse 19 says impurity leads to wickedness, and verse 21 says sin leads to that of which you are ashamed. If you make one choice it will lead to more of the same, to shame, and to death. On the other hand, if you make the opposite choice and obey God, that leads to holiness, and holiness leads to eternal life. A trajectory is established by the choice you make. The trajectory is either downward for the choice to sin, leading to impurity, wickedness, that of which you are ashamed, and death. Or the trajectory is upward for the choice to obey God, leading to righteousness, holiness, and eternal life.

The trajectory downward into sin is one that all of us could probably illustrate with our lives if we were honest. You might say to yourself, "I'm poor, and I'm upset about it. I'd like to have more money." So you're on a business trip and the opportunity arises to pad your expense account, to get reimbursed for more than you actually spent. "It's not a lot," you reason, "and I'll just do it once. My kid's birthday is coming up and I could use a little extra money. Nobody is going to know anyway." Sure enough, you're able to buy the gift for your child and the child loves it. It seems to have been a great bonus. So the next time the opportunity arises, instead of wrestling with the decision you make it right away. Pretty soon you go farther and farther in your rationalizations. You start saying to yourself, "If this company paid me what it ought to, I wouldn't have to do these things. It's their fault, and therefore not really wrong anymore."

The practice of sin and the defense of sin grow quickly. In the beginning temptation meets resistance, but once you get over the initial struggle, it becomes much easier the next time to leap right to the point where you ended last time. The grooves in the path are dug deeper. You realize that it has become common to do and think things that were once abhorrent to you. The choices are easy. The deceptive voice in the dungeon seems more persuasive all the time.

Not only that, but you find that sin doesn't stay in the category that you've chosen for it. You chose to steal from your company and pad your expense account. But that makes you feel guilty about yourself, so you feel justified in being angry at the boss, who should have been paying you more anyway. Not only that, but you go home and you're upset with your wife because she isn't bringing in more money; if she was you wouldn't be in this mess. And your children, as they begin to be affected by the person you're becoming, are becoming the same kind of people themselves. The cancer is spreading. It doesn't stay conveniently located where you want it to stay.

You trot down to the dungeon a lot more often to listen to the voice of the persuader. It becomes easier and more likely all the time. And in verse 23 Paul finally comes to the end of this trajectory: Sin always pays its wages, and the wages of sin is death.

It's interesting how the language has changed. Once Paul talked about the reign of death; the absolute, supreme authority of sin through death in our experience. We couldn't do anything else but sin. But in chapter 6 Paul is writing to people who are united with Christ. The power of sin has been broken, and the cannibal is locked in the dungeon. It retains only the possibility of persuading us. So the imagery here is of masters to whom the worker has the opportunity of joining himself, either one or the other, who will pay their respective wages. He has a real choice in this situation, but he is going to receive the outcome of the choice. He can't dabble in sin without being paid the wages of death. And he can't choose righteousness, ultimately, without receiving the gift of God.

We need to be aware of two sides of the lie that the deceiver will tell. One side of the lie is to say that the downward trajectory does not exist, that the sin looming on the horizon is so exciting to experience, and something you can easily get away with, that it is not really going to lead to death. There is no real slavery, no wages. The other side of the lie is to say that the upward trajectory is not real either; that if you choose to obey God it will not lead to righteousness; holiness; or eternal, abundant, and delightful life. Obedience, making

hard choices, restricts fun for no good reason.

In summary, we cannot sin without attaching ourselves to a master. A number of years ago Bob Dylan put out an album of Christian music called *Slow Train*. One of the songs on it says this:

You've got to serve somebody.
You may be an ambassador to England or France,
You might like to gamble, you might like to dance.
You might be the heavyweight champion of the world.
You might be a socialite with a long string of pearls.

But you've got to serve somebody.
You may be a preacher preaching spiritual pride,
Might be a city councilman taking bribes on the side.
You may be working in a barber shop, you may know how to cut hair.
You may be somebody's mistress, you may be somebody's heir.
But you've got to serve somebody.

Might like to wear cotton, might like to wear silk.
Might like to drink whisky, might like to drink milk.
Might like to eat caviar, might like to eat bread.
You might be sleeping on the floor, on sleeping in a king-size bed.
But you're going to have to serve somebody.

Yes, indeed, you're going to have to serve somebody.
It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord.
You're going to have to serve somebody.

The reason we can say we are not going to choose to dabble in sin is that we serve the Lord, the one who intends only good for us.

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