

Slaves or Sons

By George Davis

Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. (Galatians 4:1-7)

The "slave" and "son" in this passage from Galatians represent two entirely different approaches to God, resulting in two diametrically opposed realities. One leads to freedom, the other to bondage. One seeks the glory of man, the other the exaltation of the person and work of Christ. Although the above passage was written over 1900 years ago, the dilemma therein discussed is still relevant and current to contemporary Christianity. As it was in Paul's day, so it is today, and every "believer" will fit into one of these two categories--slaves or sons.

Slaves



To slaves, the idea of relating directly to God is a radical one. They know little of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit leading them into all truth. Their preferred means of guidance is external governance, i.e., guardians and stewards. The guardian or schoolmaster is the law. (Compare Galatians 3:24-25). The slaves under the schoolmaster are in bondage under what Paul calls "the elements of the world." Perhaps you are asking, what are the elements of the world?

In verse nine of the same chapter, Paul goes on to ask the Galatian believers this question. "But now, after that you have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn you again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto you desire again to be in bondage?" What Paul was referring to by weak and beggarly elements is the kind of religious knowledge that existed among the Jews before Christ came, the basic principles of religion. Referring to that religion, Paul wrote, "For this Agar is mount

Sinai in Arabia, and answers to Jerusalem, which now is, and is in bondage with her children" (Galatians 4:25). Paul did not mince words; to him religion was synonymous with bondage.

Paul also warned the Colossian believers to beware of being spoiled or led away captive "through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Colossians 2:8). This is the age-old choice before us, the rudiments of the world or Christ, the weak and beggarly elements or Christ, religion or Christ. The word rudiments here is the same Greek word *stoicheion* that is also translated elements in our text. Paul goes on to ask, "If we are dead with Christ from the rudiments (elements) of the world, why, as though living in the world, are you subject to ordinances, 'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle.'" These basic principles of the world indeed do have an appearance of wisdom. but they are not wisdom. They just look like it. They are self-imposed, rigorous, and motivated by false humility. (See Colossians 2:20). These worldly principles encourage the denial and neglect of the body, but are of no value whatsoever in subduing the flesh or sinful nature. There is but one cure for the flesh, and that is the cross.

Slave under the schoolmaster (the law) endeavor to relate to God through external precepts and traditions. "They mind earthly things" (Philippians 3:19). They are preoccupied with the maintenance of their temples and the flawless execution of their services, rights, rituals, and ceremonies. Their approach to God is powered primarily by the human will; thus the term will-worship (Colossians 2:23). Their focus is outward on the ceremonial and observable. They find security in bylaws and creeds. They involve themselves in abstinence and austere self-discipline--the very kind that Paul said was of no benefit in subduing the flesh. For if by the energy of the flesh you attempt to subdue the flesh, the flesh grows stronger. It is like fighting fire with gasoline. The slave is motivated through fear and doleful religious duty. As slaves under the schoolmaster, they are bound; duty-bound to a law-filled, Spirit-less religion. Moreover, by skirting the cross, in attempting to subdue the sinful nature in their own strength, they have become enemies of the cross.

In his excellent article entitled "The Quest for Identity," Douglas Weaver wrote,

"For nothing perverts and diverts the purpose of God more than our good intentioned, noble, god-fearing attempts to follow Jesus."

How true! Indeed nothing is as detestable to God and as honorable to man as is religious flesh. Man always praises what he sees as human excellence. He will applaud man's sweat and tenacity. He is impressed with human strength and intelligence. Religion moves by the sheer strength of human oarsmanship. You must row, and row, and then keep on rowing. The harder you row, the greater the illusion that you are actually going somewhere. Religion must have only one oar in the water, because it always winds up right where it started. Not so with Christianity! True Christianity is powered by Christ only--Christ plus nothing.

James A. Fowler makes this point by asking this poignant question, "The hypothetical question might be asked, "If God could and would die tonight, what would happen to the 'Christian religion' tomorrow?" The answer is nothing! The Christian religion would keep right on functioning, because Jesus Christ, as God, is not the essence and the dynamic of what they are doing anyway! If God were to die tonight, it would be business as usual for religion tomorrow. It does not require God in Christ for the Christian religion to function; just man and money!

On the other hand, genuine Christianity requires the presence and function of the life and person of the living Lord Jesus. Christianity is Christ! Jesus Christ is not just the historical founder of a Christian religion; He is the vital spiritual essence of Christianity. This is His dynamic ontological function within receptive humanity. Another hypothetical question might be asked. If you could take Christ out of Christianity, what would be left? Again it is possible to answer, "Nothing!" Or it is possible that if you take Christ out of Christianity, all you have left is the self-oriented, self-perpetuating religion of "-I-anity."

Sons

Unlike those who are led and governed externally by the schoolmaster, those heirs who have received what Paul called "the adoption of sons" have an entirely other motivation. The Spirit of God's Son who cries "Abba, Father," moves them. They are moved to action by the same Spirit as Jesus. The Spirit of Love is the fulfillment of the law in character and action. It is possible to comply outwardly to the expectations of the law, while inwardly falling short of God's glory (Philippians 3:6). Since the law was to reflect God's character, both loving and holy, the keeper of the law must then conform in purity of character and action. Although man might comply in action, he

most certainly will fall short when it comes to purity of character. Man could no more keep the law than he could make himself pure and holy. Man is essentially wrong, falling short of God's glory not just in action but in essence as well. The law was given to reveal this dilemma.

Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:19-20)

The law could not redeem the sinner; it just proved him more the sinner. It is impossible for mortal man to truly keep the law. It was not given to be kept, but to be broken--to prove man's inadequacies, that everyone might stand guilty before God, knowing how hopeless our condition is. The Law proved that no matter what a man does, he is essentially wrong--he is a sinner. Man is not a sinner because he sins; he sins because he is a sinner. What he does flows out of who he is--out of who he is inside. Jesus posed this question to the Pharisees, "O generation of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). They were essentially wrong by nature, in the very fiber of their being. They were religious sinners. Religion is the attempt to get it right without inner transformation--to look good on the outside.

"I saw that the kingdom must be interior before it can be exterior, that it is a kingdom of ideas, and not one of brute force; that His rule is over hearts, not over places; that His victories must be inward before they can be outward; that He seeks to control spirits rather than bodies; that no triumph could satisfy Him but a triumph that gains the heart; that in short, where God really reigns, the surrender must be the interior surrender of the convicted free men, and not merely the outward surrender of the conquered slave. Milton says, 'Who overcomes by force hath overcome but half his foe,' and I saw that this was true." (Hannah Whitehall Smith, *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*)

Jesus, referring to the purely external righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, said, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). Like whitened tombs, they were garnished on the outside, but inside was another matter. They were essentially and qualitatively incorrect. Paul indicated that to keep the outward

observances of the law was to have your own righteousness. "Not having my own righteousness, which is of the law" (Philippians 3:9). We must assume that the best you could hope for after perfect obedience to the letter of the law is your own righteousness. Blameless or not, it is still not God's righteousness, and it still falls short of the glory of God.

Love is the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:10). All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Galatians 5:14). It is very important that we make this distinction. If our righteousness is dependent upon our blamelessness, it is not the righteousness of Christ, it is ours, and therefore not acceptable to God. The righteousness that is of the law must be counted as loss if we are to win Christ. (See. Philippians 3:6-8).

One of the urgent needs at this time is for God's children to understand these truths and to be delivered from the slavery of the guardian into the glorious liberty of the sons and daughters of God.

Rather than the duty-bound slavery to a mechanical, and yes, christianized adherence to law, God's children must be free to follow the inner cry of the Spirit of Christ. Free to respond to those Spirit-promptings that are themselves the fulfillment of the law. The sons and daughters of God who have been given the Spirit of His Son serve with no thought of reward. They are given the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit that yearns for the success of the Father, the Spirit impassioned with a desire to please Him, the Spirit that values the honor that comes from God. Love is that inexplicable passion for the success and well being of another, and these sons are driven by such a passion. A passion so intense that if required, they would lay down their lives for the loved ones. Unlike the slave under the guardian who is motivated by a bleak sense of religious duty, those sons who know the Spirit that cries "Abba, Father" understand what it means to be constrained by love. The Spirit of Christ works in them, a divine willingness to do. This is so much more than religion, so much more than the external forms of religion, but righteousness that exceeds the purely outward. Love's power, love's passion inspires and enables these sons and daughters of God.

Satan's favorite deception is to trick God's children into viewing Christianity as a religious system rather than a living union with Christ--to view Christianity as a discipline, and the truth as a body of doctrine. If this trick succeeds, he can lead them

away captive in the slave chains of the philosophies and traditions of man. The first step toward that bondage is to view Christianity as anything other than a living and vital union with Christ. True Christianity cannot be enabled by the weak and beggarly elements of the world. True obedience is not a grit-your-teeth white-knuckle compliance to an almost overwhelming list of religious does and don'ts. It is Christ the perfect Son, living out His perfection through us. Although they know that the cross set before them may cause unspeakable pain and suffering, those sons and daughters motivated by the Spirit of Jesus still cry out, "Nevertheless not my will but yours be done." This is the Spirit of Jesus, the Son who willingly tread the Via Dolorosa bearing your cross and mine. It is the Spirit of such love that bears the horrors of Calvary willingly. It is those who are led by this Spirit who are the sons and daughters of God (Romans 8:14).

Those poor and browbeaten slaves who still attempt to be governed by the schoolmaster! Don't they know that the schoolmaster was to bring us to Christ? Don't they know that that school is not just out, but closed, and that the schoolmaster is unemployed (Galatians 3:24,25)? Many yet seek out the old schoolmaster for private lessons, wanting to be back under his stern, harsh and predictable tutelage. Don't they know they are returning to the weak and beggarly elements? God offers adoption, but they prefer slavery. They eagerly extend their feet to the shackles, and their wrists and neck to the stocks.

We are called as heirs. We are not slaves that we should serve out of fear and duty! We are called to be Spirit led sons and daughters of God, motivated by the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit that our Father has sent into our hearts crying "Abba, Father," the Spirit that enables right relatedness to Him. So which will it be? Which one will we choose? I leave you with this question, to be answered between you and God alone. Which best describes your Christianity: duty or love, slave or son?