

“From Slave to Child”

Soul Shift – part #3. Based on the book by Steve DeNeff and David Drury

Matthew 18:1-5, Romans 8:14-17

[53] (Welcome, prayer, etc.)

[54] Look around the room. Do you see any “shifty” characters? Normally, that means someone shady or unsettling. But today, I see lots of “shifty” characters, and that’s a good thing. I see people who are shifting to new ways of thinking and living out their faith.

We are continuing on this journey called the “Soul Shift” based on the book by Steve DeNeff and David Drury. We are expressing the desire to see our souls change, shifting from worldly thinking to Jesus-thinking. We know our world is in a constant state of change, so together, we are committed to changing our own lives at Grace UMC, for the better.

[55] Last week we talked about the shift “From Me to You.” We called out the selfish tendencies in humankind from birth and asked, “Would we allow God to change our hearts and start thinking of others the way Jesus does?” While that is hard to do, we believe together we can make that change.

[56] Today’s shift is called “From Slave to Child.” As with all of these shifts, they are shifts of the heart, mind and soul. So let’s talk about what it means to be a slave or a child when it comes to our relationship with God.

[57] Just before my eighteenth birthday, I had my first real car accident. It was just after Thanksgiving, and I hit a patch of black ice on a rural road about 30 miles south of my hometown. I mentioned this story a few weeks ago – it was the one where I totally wrecked the car and the ER doctor thought I had a concussion.

However, I didn’t tell you about the conversation I had with my dad that night. It started with a short phone call from the car of a Good Samaritan, while I was hyperventilating mere yards away from where my car lay in the ditch.

“Dad, I just had an accident.”

“Where are you? Can you drive home?”

“Dad, the car is in the ditch.”

“OK, but can you still drive it?”

“Dad, the car is upside down.”

There was a slight pause, and then he said, “We’ll be right there.”

I dreaded making that call. I dreaded having to explain to my father that my poor driving skills had led to a total disaster. But I will never forget when my parents finally met me in the hospital and dad said, “It’s all right. We’re just glad you’re alive.” Yes, the car really looked that bad. That was my senior year in high school, and my dad wisely bought me a bicycle for my graduation. (I haven’t wrecked the bike, by the way.)

[58] Imagine for a moment that I was not my father’s son, but rather his employee. Imagine I had taken the company car and wrecked it. What would I have expected? To be fired? Sued? Certainly at least reprimanded. When you have the mentality of an employee (e.g., a slave), you are trapped by the idea of perfection. You see your self-worth only in production and obedience, and you live in constant fear of rejection. An employee has a relationship with the boss, but it is superficial and fragile.

That’s what happens when you think you’re a slave of God.

[59] Many of us know God. We know Jesus. We’ve heard the gospel: God loved the world so much, God sent his only Son, Jesus, to save us. Nothing we can ever do will win God’s love and forgiveness for us. That was the work of the crucifixion. Grace is a free gift.

We’ve heard that many times, I suspect.

And yet, there is a nagging doubt in our minds. “What if I’m not good enough? What if I make a wreck of this second chance God gave me? Shouldn’t I hedge my bets a little? Shouldn’t I work as if I’m on God’s timeclock and put in my 40 hours a week?”

[60] I once heard an illustration that describes our dilemma. It’s like getting into a tram at the airport while holding your suitcase, and the door closes over your arm. You are in the tram, but your suitcase is still outside the car. It’s not going to be a pleasant ride until you drop the bag and get your whole self inside. If the car represents God’s grace, we need to fully step in it. We must learn to let go of the baggage of “slave” mentality. You cannot live with both.

[61] The Bible makes so many promises to us, and sometimes we just forget how good they are. Look again at the passage in Romans 8: We are not slaves.

We are heirs with Christ. We are precious, beloved children who are receive an amazing spiritual inheritance from God. (Romans 8:14-17)

Do we believe it? Do we cry out with our souls, “Abba, Father, Daddy?” Or is it more like, “Yessir. Jump? How high?”

[62] In the book Soul Shift, Pastor DeNeff likens our condition to spiritual amnesia. It’s like we’ve forgotten who we are in God’s eyes. DeNeff says, “When you don’t know who you are, you act like someone you’re not.” (p.51) Have you ever pretended to be someone you are not? That’s really hard. That’s one reason I’m a pastor, not an actor.

I love this other quote from the book: When you don’t know who you are, “a great robbery takes place. You rob yourself, and the world, of what you could have offered if only you had been who you were meant to be.” DeNeff likens this slave mentality to self-kidnapping, “abducting a child of God” – you. (p.51)

You are not God’s workhorse. You are not God’s employee of the month. You are God’s child. Your picture is on God’s refrigerator. You know the one: You lost two front teeth and smeared chocolate frosting on your face. Yes, that picture. And God loves it dearly.

[63] Even the disciples, after walking with Jesus for two years, still didn’t understand. They were slaves to their desire for attention, promotion and glory. They argued “who was the greatest.” And Jesus cut through their question and gave them the best example he could. Jesus said you must become like a child to enter the kingdom. (Matthew 8:3) Otherwise you never will.

That was a serious gut-check moment. The disciples did not see themselves as God’s children? Apparently not yet. They were still competing for God’s attention. They were still thinking they could earn their way to heaven if they just put in enough time.

Jesus said, “No, that’s not the way. Become like a child.” Not childish. Not foolish or immature. Become a child who inherently trusts God because of their relationship.

[64] I learned a new abbreviation this week: DTR – Define The Relationship. A DTR is the moment when you confront the awkwardness and actually say what

you’re thinking, hoping the other person feels the same. Friends, maybe it’s time we had a DTR with God.

The gospel is all about trusting Jesus. Yet many people say they trust in Jesus and still don’t shift to becoming God’s child. In fact, the longer you’ve been in church, the more likely you are to see God as your task master, your boss. If that is you, you will not experience the fullness of salvation. Instead, all your energy and thought will be based on your own self-worth, measured by what you think are your “good works,” such as: How many minutes do you read the Bible daily? What percentage of your money do you give away? How many times do you pray daily? Ooh, let’s set S.M.A.R.T. goals! DeNeff says, there are Christians who act like God is going to give them a pop quiz; if you don’t get at least an 85%, you fail and might be in hell. (in video of his sermon, “Slave to Child.”)

Friends, don’t live that way. Become a child of God. A slave is preoccupied with performance. Living as a child is different. A child responds to God with love. A child enjoys God’s presence. A child has no fear of measuring up. They simply rest in the fact that they are God’s favorite.

[65] One of the most powerful scriptures I know is Matthew 11:28. In it, Jesus says, we can come and lay our burdens down and receive rest for our souls. Rest is what the slave longs for but never gets. Rest is what the child needs and receives. Friends, take a nap in God’s lap. It’s good for your soul.

[66] If we are to shift from Slave to Child, we will have to confront some of our addictions that keep us in chains. We already talked about performance. Some people are slaves to their heightened sense of duty. On the other side are those who are “addicted to entitlements.” They live in the “Me First” world. They are bound by their belief that the world should revolve around them, and they are bitter when they discover it does not.

What other ways do we enslave ourselves? To rules? To work? To money? To other’s expectations? What about addictions? The never-ending search for pleasure and self-gratification? Friends, some people can even be enslaved to their own local church. (Wow, Pastor, them’s fightin’ words.)

The only way to shift from Slave to Child is to admit we have gotten our priorities mixed up and repent. We must believe that God has something better for us than what we have pursued.

[67] DeNeff gives two practical ways to shift from Slave to Child. First, retrain yourself to listen to God's voice. God speaks to us all the time. And the best way to hear God's voice is to dig deep into God's love letter to you: the Bible. Friends, this book is not a manual or syllabus. It is not your job description or contract. It is God's love letter poured out to you. Read it like a conversation. Ask yourself frequently, "Jesus, what are you saying to me here?"

Second, talk to God. Remember how a child has to learn to talk? Remember those first words? Were they awkward? You bet. But the more a child listens and then responds, the easier it is for them to talk. Don't worry about vocabulary and word counts. Simply start by telling God how you feel. "God, this hasn't been a great day." Or, "God, this day has been fantastic. Thank you." Learn to appreciate God. Thank Him. Say, "God, I love you. I need you. I want to break free of this bondage."

[68] I told you last week, I preach to myself as much as I preach to all of you. I know there are still areas in my life where I feel like I'm acting more like a slave than a child of God. But friends, I know I can count on you to help me. And I want to help you to help you help each other. Those whom the Son sets free are free indeed. (John 8:36)

I want to close this message with a song called "Who You Say I Am" by Hillsong. As you listen or sing, claim this truth for yourself. You are not God's slave. You are God's child.

(Sing). Let's pray.

Memory Verse: John 8:36 (NIV)

"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

Reflection Questions:

1. When have you felt like a slave to your own expectations or the expectations of others?
2. What causes us to mistrust the goodness of God?
3. What pursuits in life end up enslaving us?

4. What is your main image of God? An employer or a parent?
5. What would it take for you to shift from “Slave to Child”?