

### XIII. Slaves of Righteousness

March 15/16/17, 2016

Romans 6:15-23

**Aim:** To understand that we serve one of two masters, sin or God, leading to two different destinies – lawlessness and death, or sanctification and eternal life.

In 6:1-14, Paul responds to an objection that the very abundance of God's grace in Christ encourages sin by arguing that Christ, in fact, sets believers free from sin. In 6:15-23, Paul responds to a similar objection by emphasizing the 'flip side' of this freedom from sin: slavery to God and to righteousness. Slave imagery dominates this paragraph. Paul also uses the language of freedom but less often. Thus, it is not 'freedom' that is the topic of the paragraph but 'slavery.'

This emphasis on the Christian's slavery is necessary to show that the freedom of the Christian 'from sin' is not a freedom 'to sin.' Between the dangers of legalism and licentiousness Paul steers a careful course. He makes it clear that Christians are free from the binding power of the Mosaic law while at the same time stressing that Christians are 'under obligation' to obey their new 'master' – God, or righteousness. As Paul makes clear, there is no such thing as human 'autonomy,' a freedom from all outside powers and influences. Either people are under the power of sin, or they are under the power of God. The question is not, then, whether one will have a master, but which master one will serve. Serving sin, Paul shows, leads to death; serving God, to life.

In 6:1-14, Paul emphasized that the key to living a life free from sin's dominance is to reckon ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus, and then to stop presenting ourselves as instruments of unrighteousness, but rather as instruments of righteousness to God. Paul seemingly ended his argument in verse 14 with the summary statement, 'For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.' However, Paul realized that some person somewhere would pervert this closing statement. Someone would undoubtedly reason, 'Well, if we really are under grace and free from the penalty of sin, what difference will a little sin make?' F. F. Bruce says, 'To make being "under grace" an excuse for sinning is a sign that one is not really "under grace" at all.' Such thinking is deadly. Paul meets it head-on in verse 15 with another rhetorical question similar to that in verse 1: 'What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!' To make his reasoning stick, he appropriates the powerful, attention-getting metaphor of slavery in the following verses.

As Paul continues his discourse on sanctification, he first reminds his Christian readers of their own past enslavement to sin and then reminds them of their new enslavement to righteousness through their trust in Jesus Christ. His primary point in 6:15-23 is that believers in Jesus Christ should live in total subjection to Christ and His righteousness and not fall back into their former sins, which no longer have claim over them. Because they have died in Christ to sin and risen with Him to righteousness, they are no longer under the lordship of sin but are now under the lordship of righteousness. Because the Christian has a new relationship to God, he also has a new relationship to sin. For the first time, he is able *not* to live sinfully and able also for the first time to live righteously.

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### A. Two Masters (Romans 6:15-19a)

#### 1. The Objection (6:15)

<sup>15</sup>*What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!*

Paul opens this paragraph exactly as he did the previous one: a brief interjection, a rhetorical question, a strong negation of the question, and then a lengthy explanation (vv. 16-23). Even the content of the rhetorical question is similar. In both vv. 1 and 15 Paul asks whether the grace of God should lead to sin. However, 6:1 it is a question of sinning *in order to gain more grace*, while in 6:15 it is a question of sinning *because of grace*. Against those who would insist on the necessity of the law as a force to curb and restrain sin, Paul proclaims the release of Christians from the power of the law as a necessary step in overthrowing the reign of sin. Those who are joined to Christ by faith live in the new age where grace, not the law of Moses, reigns. This being the case, a believer's conduct is not directly regulated by the law.

The second question in the chapter ('What, therefore?') is an abbreviated form of the first ('What, therefore, shall we say?' v. 1). Most likely, in both Paul is responding to the Jewish Christians in the house-based churches in the Eternal City who object to Paul's Law-free preaching. Paul's second question in v. 15, while promoted by the preceding verse, also resembles the question at the beginning of the chapter. Paul's emphatic reply, 'By no means,' is identical with his reply to the first question (cp. v. 2).

With his brief introductory question, 'What then?' the apostle again anticipates the false conclusions his antagonists would derive from his declaration that believers 'are not under law, but under grace' (v. 14b). 'If the law no longer needs to be obeyed, and if God's grace covers all sins,' they would argue, 'then believers are perfectly free to do as they please.' Jewish legalists, on the other hand, believed obedience to God's law was the only way of salvation. To them, Paul exalted righteousness out of one side of his mouth, while in reality giving license to sin out of the other side. They accused Paul of condoning lawlessness in the name of God's grace. Paul gives the same forceful and unambiguous denial he gave in verse 2. The idea is, 'No, no, a thousand times no!' The mere suggestion that God's grace is a license to sin is self-contradictory, a logical as well as a moral and spiritual absurdity. The very purpose of God's grace is to free man from sin. How, then, could grace possibly justify continuing in sin?

The doctrine of grace has always been subject to that false charge, which the apostle first answers in the first half of chapter 6. But because the misunderstanding was so common and the issue so critical, he gives the answer again from a slightly different perspective. The doctrine of salvation by God's grace, working only through man's faith and apart from any works, is the furthest thing from a license to sin.

When Paul says, 'You are not under law,' some people take this as a license to sin, as if we are no longer under any obligation to keep the law of God. They believe we passed from law to grace; the law was Moses but grace is Jesus, so we are free from the law. We cannot just restrict law to the laws of Moses. From the beginning of our sinfulness we have been under the dreadful burden of the law, because the law condemns us. The law reveals our disobedience, and the law cannot possibly be the means by which we will be saved because, as debtors to the law, we can never pay our debt. We are no longer under the law in the sense of being underneath the awesome, weighty burden of the law. Paul says we are no longer in the condition of being crushed under the weight of the law, no longer oppressed by its burden of guilt and judgment.

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We are now under grace (cp. Eph. 2:8). Now that we have been freed from the burden of the law, are we going to go back? Now that we know we have been justified by faith alone are we going to try to return to justifying ourselves through our works? No. We move from grace to grace, from faith to faith.

### 2. The Principle (6:16)

#### a) *From the Human Realm (6:16a)*

<sup>16</sup>*Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey...*

‘Do you not know’ introduces, as is customary in Paul, a fact that he assumes is known to his readers. In this case the fact is one with which his readers would have been familiar even before their conversion: habitually ‘presenting’ oneself to something or someone makes one a slave of that something or someone. For people in the ancient world would often sell themselves into slavery as a way of avoiding financial disaster. It is not completely clear whether Paul means by this that habitual obedience *manifests* a condition of slavery or that habitual obedience *constitutes* or *leads to* a condition of slavery. In light of the context, the latter, with its implicit exhortation, is more likely.

An axiom is a general truth that is so self-evident it needs no proof. ‘Do you not know?’ is clearly rhetorical, implying that his readers would readily acknowledge the truth of what he was about to say if they give it the least thought. The phrase ‘present yourselves’ indicates the *willing choice* of ‘obedience’ to a master and makes Paul’s point even more obvious. By definition, all slaves, particularly voluntary ones, are bound to total obedience to their master, the one whom they obey. A person who is not so bound is not a slave.

In verse 16 Paul once more follows the pattern in the first verses of the chapter. Once more he appeals to their initial grounding in the gospel. The imagery of slavery, although merely metaphorical to us, was basic to the culture and economy of Paul’s world. His point is simple. The one to whom a slave offers himself becomes the ‘lord’ and owner of the slave. So, asks Paul, who will that ‘lord’ be—‘Sin’ or ‘obedience [to God]’? If the ‘lord’ is ‘Sin,’ the result will be ‘death.’ If however, the ‘lord’ is ‘obedience’ the result will be ‘righteousness.’

With this mention of slavery, Paul got their attention indeed! It is estimated that the population of Rome in the first century was about one-third slaves. Moreover, many free men had once been slaves. Thus, it is very likely that more than one-half of the Roman church either were or had been enslaved. There was not a member of the church at Rome who was not keenly aware of the implications of what Paul was saying in verse 16. Obedience was the universal hallmark of slavery, and it is the same for the various enslavements we experience today. Some people are enslaved to their work. They have one abiding allegiance in life and that is the job, where they live out slavish obedience. Some are enslaved to things—possessions. All their waking thoughts are given to taking care of what they have or dreaming about how they can acquire more. Other are enslaved to habits that dominate their existence. The examples are limitless. We obey the things that enslave us.

To fully grasp Paul’s meaning we have to understand something about indentured servitude. We think of slavery as kidnapping young people from Africa, bringing them across the ocean to the auction block, and selling them to other men. In the ancient world slavery was primarily voluntary servitude. When someone had a debt he could not pay, he would offer his services to

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fulfill the debt. That is the context in which Paul asks the question in verse 16. He is saying that if we present ourselves again to sin as slaves to sin, it will lead to death. If we obey sin as a slave, the only outcome is death, but if we present ourselves as slaves of obedience, the end is righteousness.

### *b) To the Spiritual Realm (6:16b)*

*...either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?*

Paul applies this principle spiritually. All humanity serves under one of two slaveries—either ‘sin, which leads to death,’ or ‘obedience, which leads to righteousness.’ There is no middle ground. Everyone who has ever lived has been subject to the first slavery (cp. Jn. 8:33-34). The end of such slavery, according to our text, is death. The second slavery is to Christ. Paul calls it ‘obedience, which leads to righteousness’—ultimate justification that issues in eternal life. Instead of bondage, this slavery brings freedom. So we have before us two slaveries. There is no middle ground. We either choose to obey the world and thus death, or we choose obedience to Christ and eternal righteousness. The key to a full life is profound slavery and obedience.

There are two, and only two, options open to every person and these options carry serious consequences. Either one is a slave of sin or a slave of ‘obedience.’ The choice with which people are faced is not ‘Should I retain my freedom or give it up and submit to God?’ but ‘Should I serve sin or should I serve God?’ In this contrast, it is surprising to find sin and obedience rather than sin and God (cp. v. 22) or sin and righteousness (cp. vv. 18, 20) as the competing ‘masters.’ ‘Obedience’ here obviously has a positive meaning. Paul is out to emphasize the significance of obedience in the Christian life, in a context where such an emphasis is necessary to counter a false libertinism. The freedom of the Christian is not freedom to do what one wants, but freedom to obey God—willingly, joyfully, naturally. In order to underscore further the seriousness of the choice between these masters, Paul specifies the consequences of the respective ‘slaveries’: death and righteousness.

A person’s general pattern of living proves who his true master is. If his life is characterized by sin, which is opposed to God’s will, then he is sin’s slave. If his life is characterized by obedience, which reflects God’s will, then he is God’s slave. The end result of the first slavery is both physical and spiritual ‘death,’ whereas that of the second slavery is ‘righteousness,’ the inescapable mark of eternal *life*. In the previous chapter Paul described the same truth from the opposite perspective, that of the master. In the unregenerate life, the life in Adam, sin and death reign, whereas in the redeemed life, the life in Christ, righteousness and eternal life reign (5:12-21).

Although the natural, freedom-seeking, rebellious mind recoils at the truth, no human being is his own master. The popular notion that a person can master his own life and destiny is a delusion that Satan has foisted on mankind ever since the Fall. It was by that lie, in fact, that Adam and Ever were drawn into the first sin. Many people resist the claims of Christ because they are afraid of having to give up their cherished freedoms. Actually, of course, they have no freedoms to lose. The unsaved person is not free to do good or evil as he chooses. He is bound and enslaved to sin, and the only thing he *can* do is to sin. His only choices have to do with when, how, why, and to what degree he will sin.

When you and I yield ourselves as slaves to the devil, we are death-producing machines. We can be perfectly orthodox. We can be in a ‘separated’ church that tries to keep itself pure from the world. We can say the creeds and confessions and catechisms forward and backward. We can be

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all these things and yet be death-producing machines. We become death-producing machines when we ‘yield ourselves to obey’ Satan rather than the Lord. When you yield yourself to God you are His slave, but this is beautiful and good because God is not a tyrant. He is not a tyrant; He is a loving God. To yield ourselves as a slave in this sense, as the creature yielding ourselves to the God who is there—this is beautiful. This kind of slavery produces life.

Christians, who have been set free from sin by their union with Christ, must recognize that, were they constantly to yield to the voice of temptation, they would effectively become slaves of sin again. The Lord Jesus made the same point (Jn. 8:34). Without taking anything away from the reality of the transfer from one master to another, then, Paul wants to make clear that ‘slavery’ is ultimately not just a ‘legal’ status but a living experience. Christians, who *are* no longer slaves of sin, must no longer *live* as slaves of sin.

### 3. The Examples (6:17-18)

#### a) *Former Slaves of Sin (6:17)*

##### (1) Thanksgiving (6:17a)

<sup>17</sup>*But thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin ...*

This verse and the following one reveal Paul’s conviction that the Roman Christians have already made the decision to follow a new master. For Paul gives ‘thanks to God’ for the transfer of spiritual allegiance that they have manifested.

First the apostle gives ‘thanks...to God’ that his believing readers were no longer subject to the slavery that leads to death. He does not thank or praise them for their own wisdom or intelligence or moral and spiritual determination, because none of those things had a part in their salvation. Believers are saved solely by the grace and power of God. And by His grace, habitual disobedience to Him is in the past tense. Formerly, Paul says, you ‘were slaves of sin,’ but no more. ‘Were’ translates an imperfect Greek tense, signifying an ongoing reality. In other words, the unregenerate person is under the continual, unbroken slavery of sin. That is the universal position of the natural man, with no exceptions.

##### (2) Obedience (6:17b)

*...have become obedient from the heart...*

‘You have obeyed’ points to the time of conversion, when the Roman Christians first bowed the knee to Jesus the Lord. Here, then, the focus is on the initial commitment of the Roman Christians to Christ as Lord, including both their ‘faith’ in Him and their submission to Him. Paul uses ‘obey’ because he wants to underscore the aspect of submission to Christ as Lord of life that is part of becoming a Christian.

Our slavery to sin was broken by the truth of the gospel. And it was broken when we ‘obeyed’ that truth, that ‘form of doctrine.’ It wasn’t just believing the gospel that saved us, but also ‘obeying’ it. Salvation involves an obedience to the truth. Our obedience to the gospel has freed us, absolutely, from the power of sin. And we can experience this freedom in the reality of our daily walk.

That Paul is not speaking about merely outward righteousness is made clear from his declaration that ‘you became obedient from the heart.’ God works His salvation in a person’s innermost

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being. Through the grace provided by His Son, God changes men's very natures when they trust in Him. A person whose heart has not been changed has not been saved. Righteous living that issues from an obedient heart is habitual. Faith and obedience are inescapably related. There is no saving faith in God apart from obedience to God, and there can be no godly obedience without godly faith. Obedience neither produces nor maintains salvation, but it is an inevitable characteristic of those who are saved. Belief itself is an act of obedience, made possible and prompted by God's sovereign grace, yet always involving the uncoerced will of the believer.

The heart is the wellspring of man's spiritual life, and that is where the Roman Christians' obedience was rooted. It was not just a formal obedience—it came from the center of their being.

### (3) Commitment (6:17c)

*...to the standard of teaching to which you were committed...*

Paul uses 'hand over' to refer to the transmission of the early Christian teaching or tradition (cp. 1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:3). In this verse, however, it is not the teaching that is handed down to believers but the believers who are handed over to the teaching. This unusual way of putting the matter is intentional: Paul wants to make clear that becoming a Christian means being placed under the authority of Christian 'teaching,' that expression of God's will for NT believers. The new convert's 'obedience' to this teaching is the outgrowth of God's action in 'handing us over' to that teaching when we were converted.

Notice the phrase 'standard of teaching' because it is the key to understanding what is meant here. The word 'standard' refers to a specific pattern of apostolic teaching. In other words, the Romans' slavery to Christ was not just a vague commitment to follow him. It was a commitment to live by specific standards of behavior to follow Him. It was a commitment to live by specific standards of behavior derived from the teaching of Christ.

Reference to 'pattern of teaching' (*tupon didachēs*) implies a fixed format of teaching at their baptism. Although Paul did not lay the foundation of Christianity in Rome, nonetheless he assumes that these believers have been instructed in a 'pattern of teaching' at the time they were baptized. To our surprise, Paul speaks of the baptized in Rome being 'handed over' to this 'pattern of teaching.' From other passages we know that apostles and evangelists 'handed over' set forms of teaching to new converts (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:2; 15:1-3; Col. 2:6-7). Here, however, the emphasis is subtly different; these converts are said to have been 'handed over' to the teaching, a telling reminder to them of its importance. This 'obedience' to the 'pattern of teaching' had been the means to 'righteous' living, as it will continue to be into the future.

Paul had confidence in the salvation of his readers in the church at Rome because they obeyed 'to that form of teaching to which [they] were committed.' 'Form' translates *tupos*, which was used of the molds into which molten metal for castings was poured. 'Committed' translates the aorist passive of *paradidōmi*, which carries the basic meaning of deliver over to. And because *eis* ('to') can also be translated *into*, it seems that a more precise rendering of this phrase is 'that form of teaching into which you were delivered.' Paul's point here seems to be that not only is God's Word delivered *to* believers, but that the true believer is also delivered *into* God's Word, His living teaching. The idea is that when God makes a new spiritual creation of a believer, He casts him into the mold of divine truth. The divine 'teaching' to which a believer submits himself in Jesus Christ stamps him with the authentic image of his Savior and Lord.

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Why does Paul say ‘pattern [*typos*] of teaching’ rather than just ‘teaching’? Many interpreters think that Paul alludes to a ‘rule’ or ‘pattern’ of early Christian teaching. There is good reason to think that this is the case, but he may also want to suggest a contrast with another ‘pattern’ of teaching, such as the contrast between the ‘form’ of Christian teaching and the ‘form’ of Jewish teaching. Paul would then imply that Christians, while no longer ‘under the [Mosaic] law,’ are nevertheless bound by an authoritative code of teaching. And Paul may have an additional reason for using *typos*. Most of the Pauline occurrences of this word refer to believers as ‘examples’ to other believers. In these verses, *typos* includes the active connotation of a pattern that ‘molds’ others. Similarly, in this verse, it is likely that *typos* includes the idea that Christian teaching ‘molds’ and ‘forms’ those who have been handed over to it.

### b) *Current Slaves of Righteousness (6:18)*

...<sup>18</sup> *and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.*

This brief verse recapitulates the ‘indicative’ of the believer’s transfer from the old realm to the new that was the central teaching of 6:1-14 and that was hinted at in v. 17a. For the first time, however, Paul uses the language of ‘freedom’ to describe the believer’s new status with respect to sin. Paul’s concept of freedom is not that of autonomous self-direction but of deliverance from those enslaving powers that would prevent the human being from becoming what God intended. This is why, without paradox, Christian freedom is at the same time a kind of ‘slavery.’ Being bound to God and His will enables the person to become ‘free’—to be what God wants that person to be. For the first time, Paul follows through on his ‘transfer’ language and makes clear that freedom from the power of sin means servitude to a new power. The Christian is not just called to do right in a vacuum but to do right out of a new and powerful relationship that has already been established.

Freedom from the lordship of Sin (in Death) is not an end in itself. The Christian has been ‘set free’ from one ‘lord’ (Sin) for ‘slavery’ to another ‘lord’ (‘righteousness’). In this case, as in v. 16), ‘righteousness’ is not God’s gift of imputed righteousness but man’s actual righteousness, though the former is the source of the latter. Paul is no libertine. On the contrary, as we see here, Paul is deeply concerned that Christians are ‘captured’ by and ‘enslaved to’ righteous behavior. Yet that life of ‘righteousness’ does not arise from self-justification, as it would from a Law-based theology. Rather, actual righteousness is to spring from and be inspired by God’s gracious gift of righteousness to those who by baptism are united with Christ crucified, buried, and raised.

In God’s sight, on the day when He declared you justified, you were made free from sin and you became the servant of righteousness. ‘Now,’ says Paul, ‘live this way.’ The way you were freed absolutely from sin is the way to be freed now from its prevalence in your daily life. First, there is the acknowledgment of sin; then the laying hold of the blood of Jesus; and then the thankful heart and mind. These are the realities.

### 4. The Caveat (6:19a)

<sup>19</sup>*I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations.*

The first sentence of this verse is not explicitly linked to what precedes. The sentence is a parenthetical explanation of why Paul is using slavery imagery to depict the Christian and so it is related both to v. 18 (‘you were enslaved’) and v. 19b (‘slaves’). Paul’s point would appear to be that human nature produces a weakness in understanding that can be overcome in this life only

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by the use of (imperfect) analogies. However, Paul is not withdrawing or ‘apologizing’ for his slavery imagery. Indeed, he goes right ahead and uses it twice more in this passage with the same application (vv. 19, 22). It is just that Paul recognizes that his language could be interpreted to mean that Christian experience bears the same marks of degradation, fear, and confinement that were typical of secular slavery. But, while shorn of these characteristics, life in the new realm of righteousness and life does mean that a person is given over to a master who requires absolute and unquestioned obedience; and to make this point, the image of slaver is quite appropriate.

Paul meant that the analogy of masters and slaves was used as an accommodation to his readers’ humanness. ‘Flesh’ is here used as a synonym for humanness, or mortality, and is equivalent to ‘the members of your body’ in verse 13 and ‘members’ at the end of verse 19.

### B. Two Destinies (6:19b-23)

#### 1. The Comparison (6:19b)

*For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.*

The last part of v. 19 is very similar to v. 13. However, whereas v. 13 made the contrast with a double imperative—‘do not present ... present’—Paul in this verse employs a comparison: ‘just as you presented ... so now present.’ He thus makes clear that Christians should serve righteousness with all the single-minded dedication that characterized their pre-Christian service of such ‘idols’ as self, money, lust, pleasure, and power. Would that we would pursue holiness with the zeal that so many of us pursued these other, incomparably less worthy goals! The repetition of ‘lawlessness’ is unexpected; Paul means that the service of ‘uncleanness’ and ‘lawlessness’ leads on to every increasing lawlessness.

Before salvation, believers were like the rest of fallen mankind, having no other desire or ability but to follow their natural bent to ‘impurity and to lawlessness.’ Those two terms refer, respectively, to inward and outward sin. The unregenerate person is both internally and externally sinful, and, as he lives out his sinfulness it results in still ‘further lawlessness.’ Like a cancer that reproduces itself until the whole body is destroyed, sin reproduces itself until the whole person is destroyed.

‘Sanctification’ may refer to the state of ‘holiness’ as the end product of a life of living in service of righteousness. But most of Paul’s uses of this word have an active connotation: the *process* of ‘becoming holy.’ Committing ourselves as slaves to doing what is right before God (‘righteousness’) results in living that is increasingly God-centered and world-renouncing.

There again is the word *yield* (‘present’). Before you were saved, you yielded yourself absolutely as a slave to sin, as a slave to rebellion against God. But Paul is talking about yielding ourselves to the slavery of sin and rebellion against the God who made us. ‘Even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness.’ Holiness is a calling. It is a command. Certainly we must guard against any teaching that claims the possibility of absolute perfection in the Christian life. But we should not overreact by failing to teach the necessity of consciously yielding ourselves to the Holy Spirit. This yielding is a command. It is a privilege. It is a calling. It is a duty. It is a joy.

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Because it is possible for them to resist sin and to live righteously, believers should ‘now present’ their ‘members as slaves to righteousness.’ And just as the life of sin leads to further sin, so the life of righteousness leads to further righteousness, whose ultimate end is complete ‘sanctification.’ God’s purpose in redeeming men from sin is not to give them freedom to do as they please but freedom to do as *He* pleases.

The truth is: in slavery to God there is freedom; in obedience to God there is liberation. What is God’s slavery like? I enjoy what Chrysostom said: ‘it is better than any freedom.’ Paul unashamedly calls us to such slavery.

### 2. Slaves of Sin (6:20-21)

#### a) ‘Freedom’ (6:20)

<sup>20</sup>*For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.*

As in v. 18, Paul reminds his Christian readers that they were formerly slaves of sin. But instead of immediately completing the temporal sequence with a description of their present Christian status, he pauses to remind them of an implication of their past lives. Non-Christians often pride themselves on possessing a ‘freedom’ appropriate to autonomous human beings and deride Christians for giving that up—becoming ‘subhuman’—in obedience to a ‘god.’ And Paul admits that those apart from Christ have a certain ‘freedom.’ But it is a freedom ‘with respect to’ one thing only: ‘righteousness.’ As ‘slaves to sin,’ people are ‘free’ from the power and influence of the conduct that pleases God; they are deaf to God’s righteous demands and incapable of responding to them even were they to hear and respect them.

Before you were saved, you certainly were no slave to righteousness! It had no claim upon you at all. In fact, you never really did anything righteous. There were comparative ‘goodnesses,’ but no real righteousness. You were completely free from righteousness.

Unsaved persons, who are ‘slaves of sin,’ are ‘free in regard to righteousness.’ That is, they have no connection to righteousness; it can make no demands on them since they possess neither the desire nor the ability to meet its requirements. They are controlled and ruled by sin, the master whom they are bound to serve. In that sense, they have no responsibility to righteousness, because they are powerless to meet its standards and demands. That is why it is foolish to preach reformation to sinners. They cannot reform their living until God transforms their lives.

#### b) Fruit (6:21)

<sup>21</sup>*But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.*

This verse continues Paul’s characterization of the pre-Christian situation of his readers. Paul highlights the negative nature of the ‘freedom’ enjoyed by Christians in their past by showing that the ‘fruit’ of which they are now ashamed resulted from that freedom. ‘Fruit’ is used in the NT to describe both concrete actions and general character traits. As confirmation (‘for’) of the shameful character of pre-Christian ‘fruit,’ Paul reminds his readers of the ‘end’ or ‘outcome’ of them: ‘death.’ In contrast with ‘eternal life’ (v. 22), ‘death’ refers particularly to what we usually call ‘eternal death’: the eternal separation from God in hell that begins after death.

In the New Testament, ‘fruit’ (*karpos*) is used for visible and concrete actions, both positive (Gal. 5:22) and negative (Mt. 7:16-20). By ‘fruit,’ the New Testament writers mean outward behavior which reveals the true state of the heart.

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In God's sight, there is absolutely no benefit that men can derive from the things they do apart from salvation, things of which after salvation they become 'ashamed.' The only possible 'outcome of these things is death,' the second death, which is spiritual death and eternal torment in hell. One of the marks of true salvation is a sense of being 'ashamed' of one's life before coming to Christ.

### 3. Slaves of God (6:22)

<sup>22</sup>*But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.*

'But now' answers to 'when' at the beginning of v. 20, as Paul contrasts his readers' present situation as believers with their pre-Christian past. The descriptions of these two situations are parallel. Once 'slaves of sin' and 'free with respect to righteousness' (v. 20), Christians have been 'set free from sin' and 'enslaved to God. In this, the last of the antitheses in this chapter, Paul confronts us with the ultimate 'powers' that dominate the two respective 'ages' of salvation history: sin and God. But Paul's focus in this verse, expressed in its main clause, is on the results of that past 'transfer' for his readers' present experience: 'you have your fruit leading to sanctification.' The 'fruit' of which they are now ashamed has been replaced with fruit that 'yields a harvest' of sanctification. And the final outcome of this 'fruit leading to sanctification' is 'eternal life.'

Before you were a Christian, you were totally free from righteousness. Now, in Jesus Christ, you are also totally free, absolutely free—but this time it is freedom from sin! Through justification, the guilt is gone. We have become slaves of God. And our new life to Christ should produce fruit. Quite clearly Paul seeks to encourage and confirm their ongoing growth as Christians, with greater and greater evidence of the 'fruit' of righteousness.

For those who have 'been freed from sin and enslaved to God' through faith in Jesus Christ, the 'benefit' is 'sanctification' and the outcome is 'eternal life. In salvation God not only frees us from sin's ultimately penalty but frees us from its present tyranny. 'Freed from sin' does not mean that a believer is no longer capable of sinning but that he is no longer enslaved to sin, no longer its helpless subject. The freedom from sin about which Paul is speaking here is not a long-range objective or an ultimate ideal but an already accomplished fact. Without exception, every person who trusts in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is 'freed from sin and enslaved to God.'

### 4. The Contrast (6:23)

<sup>23</sup>*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

This verse expresses two inexorable absolutes. The first is that 'the wages of sin is death.' Spiritual death is earned. It is the just and rightful compensation for a life that is characterized by sin, which is *every* life apart from God. The second inexorable absolute is that 'the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.' By definition, a gift is free, but lest anyone underestimate the magnitude of God's grace, Paul speaks of God's 'free gift.' Salvation cannot be earned by works, by human goodness, by religious ritual, or by any other thing that man can do (cp. Eph. 2:8-9). If a person wants what he deserves—eternal death—God will give that to him as his just wages. And if a person wants what he does *not* deserve—eternal life—God offers that to him as well, but as a free gift, the only source of which is Jesus Christ our Lord. That is

## Romans – Lesson 13

Paul's great climax to chapter 6 of Romans: Jesus Christ is the *only way* from sin to righteousness, from damnation to salvation, from eternal death to eternal life.

This verse not only explains the contrasting 'outcomes' of death and life specified in vv. 22-23, but also brings the entire chapter to a fitting climax. As in v. 22 'sin' and God are contrasted as rival 'powers' that determine the destinies of each individual. Paul fittingly describes the (eternal) 'death' that those under the power of sin experience with the word 'wages.' He thereby implies that the penalty sin exacts is *merited*, in contrast to the 'eternal life' from God, which is a 'free gift.' We may summarize the verse by noting, with Lloyd-Jones, its three contrasts: the master that is served—sin versus God; the outcome of that service—death versus eternal life; and the means by which this outcome is attained—a 'wage' earned versus a gift received.

The preceding passage (vv. 15-22) is rich in contrasts. In verses 16-19, Paul contrasts two slaveries: 1) slavery to Sin → uncleanness → lawlessness → Death; 2) slavery to God → righteousness → sanctification → Eternal Life. In verses 21-22, he contrasts two 'fruits' of these 'slaveries,' the evils of 'uncleanness' and 'wickedness' on one hand and (progress in) 'holiness,' on the other. In verses 21-22, using the word *telos*, the apostle contrasts two 'ends' or 'finishing' points to the human journey, Death on the one hand, Eternal Life on the other. In verse 23 Paul draws together these contrasts into one splendid, justly famous summary. King Sin pays his slaves a 'wage' and that wage is Eternal Death. Adam and his sons and daughters, without exception, discrimination or favoritism, receive that payment at life's end. That is all that they have to look forward to. God, however, does not pay wages (cp. 4:4-5) but only makes gifts. God's 'gift' or 'gratuity' (*charisma*) to Adam's descendants is another man 'our Lord Jesus Christ.' By His death for Sin and resurrection from the dead, Christ defeated Death, the 'Last Enemy,' and made available in its place Eternal Life.

What does sin earn? What is its basic wage? The more we sin, the more we earn, and what we earn is death. If we are slaves to sin, we earn demerits; we earn wrath. If God did not pay what we earn, He would be unjust. 'The wages of sin is death.' In stark contrast to that is the good news, the gift of God. Wages are something we earn; a gift is something we cannot possibly earn. Wages are something we merit; the gift, on the other hand, is free. It is gratuitous. The wages of sin is death; the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. All the way through this section Paul has been dealing with contrasts: slavery to sin versus slavery to righteousness; wages of death versus the gift of eternal life. We now have experienced grace.

The abiding truth is this: obedience is the key to our liberation. Our spiritual life comes, of course, through our union with Christ. But the fullness of that life comes through obedience. Obedience looses the creative power of God in our lives. God will do great and wondrous things in and through the life of an obedient soul.

For next time: Read Romans 7:1-12.