



When we first began our series in Romans, we listed ten reasons why we should study this New Testament letter. One of the reasons is that *it provides the key to overcoming sin*. We've all felt the tyrannical power of sin in one way or another, whether it be pornography, premarital sex, alcohol abuse, a filthy mouth, a critical spirit, or some other expression sin's power over our lives.

But, thank God, we can be free from sin's control! Romans shows us the road to freedom. Last week in chapter six we considered what it means to be dead to sin and alive to Christ – and how this reality is expressed through baptism. We heard ten believers profess their faith in Christ and then portray their union with him by faith through baptism in his death and resurrection.

Scripture teaches that we who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have died to sin and that “just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). This reality must dominate our mindset, which is why Paul says in verse 11, “you ... must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Get it in your head that sin is no longer your master. Jesus is.

Then work that *mindset* into all your *members* – all your body parts – your eyes, ears, mouth, hands and feet. Do not present the members of your body as instruments for unrighteousness, but present them as instruments for righteousness. Why? Paul tells us in verse 14: “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” Paul tells us what to *do* in light of what is *true*. Our *fight against sin* must always be based on the *facts of Scripture*.

Paul continues this theme in the second half of the chapter – Romans 6:15-23, our text for today (page 887 in the pew Bible). Listen as I read it aloud, then we'll go through it again bit by bit to grasp its meaning and significance for our lives.

¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. 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.

²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ 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. ²² 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. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- Romans 6:15-23

Thus ends this reading of God's holy word. May he write its eternal truth on all our hearts. The transformative truth of this text is this:

**God frees us from sin
so we can serve Him.**

Paul introduces this point by answering a question in verse 15. Then he proves his point with an analogy to slavery in the verses that follow.

**Answer to a Question
(v. 15)**

The question in verse 15 comes on the heels of what Paul said in verse 14: "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." Paul anticipates that some will twist this truth to mean that since we're under grace it doesn't really matter how much we sin, since God will forgive us anyway.

So Paul addresses this issue by asking and answering a question in verse 15: "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" Absolutely not! That's not how God's grace works! Anyone who makes grace an excuse for sinning shows that he or she isn't really "under grace" at all.¹

Paul's Q & A in verse 15 carries enormous implications because it suggests that many who claim to be Christians and think they are Christians are in fact not true believers. John Calvin wrote, "The greater mass of vices anyone is buried under, the more fiercely and bombastically does he extol his freedom." To interpret Christian liberty as a license to sin is to pervert the grace of God and to deny the Lordship of Christ. Paul proves his point by providing an analogy to slavery.

**ANALOGY OF SLAVERY
(vv. 16-23)**

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, second edition. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, gen. ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985, reprinted 2008), p. 145.

It is estimated that one-third of the Roman Empire population were slaves. If you include all the freemen who had once been slaves, then you're talking half of the overall population. But the percentage was even higher in the capital city of Rome. As many as 70% of the city's population were from the slave class. In fact, the slave population was so vast, that the suggestion that all slaves where a distinctive type of clothing was scuttled because it would reveal their numerical strength.²

Because so many first-century believers could relate to the concept of slavery, Paul used it as a metaphor to explain the controlling influence of our lives.

The Principle (v. 16)

Paul begins by stating the overall principle in verse 16: "Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?" (v. 16).

Paul states the principle in the form of a question that begins with the words "Do you not know...?" Paul uses this expression repeatedly in his letters³ to remind believers of things they already know or should know. Here Paul states a self-evident truth: *You are a slave to whatever master you choose to obey.*

There is no such thing as ultimate autonomy, or self-rule. Every person is either a slave "of sin" or a slave "of obedience." There is no middle ground.

Paul chooses the word "obedience" in contrast to "sin" to emphasize that someone "under grace" submits to God. His life is marked by obedience. Near the beginning and end of his letter, Paul refers to the "obedience of faith" (1:5; 16:26). This refers not only to the obedient act of believing the gospel, but also the life of obedience that characterizes true believers. Jesus told his disciples in John 14:15: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

You are a slave to the master you choose to obey. That's the principle stated in verse 16. Except for Jesus, everyone who has ever lived has been a "slave to sin." Jesus said in John 8:34, "everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." Paul says in Ephesians 2, "all of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature" (v. 3 NLT).

But God intervened and saved us by his grace. That's the good news Paul shares in verses 17-18, as he transitions from the principle of slavery to our position as believers.

Our Position (vv. 17-18)

² R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven. Preaching the Word*, edited by R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), p. 124.

³ See Romans 6:16; 11:2; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 5:6; 6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19; 9:13, 24.

“But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness” (vv. 17-18).

Let’s not pass over that opening clause, “thanks be to God,” too quickly. God is the one who rescued us from sin’s dominion. We were utterly powerless to save ourselves. Tom Schreiner rightly notes,

To be a slave of sin means that one is under its lordship and dominion and thus unable to extricate oneself from its tyranny. God in his grace broke the shackles of sin so that glad-hearted obedience became a reality....⁴

God enabled us to “become obedient from the heart.” God did this by fulfilling his promise to institute a New Covenant. Speaking through his prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel several centuries before Jesus’ birth, God declared that he would forgive the sins of his people and write his law on our hearts (Jer. 31:31-34). God promised to cleanse us and give us a new heart and a new spirit. In fact, the Lord said, “I will put my Spirit within you so that you will obey my laws and do whatever I command” (Ezekiel 36:27 LB). The New Covenant was ratified by the blood of Christ, which is why he speaks of the cup as being the new covenant in his blood. Thus, Jesus declared, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

Free to obey God, that is. Prior to trusting in Christ as our Lord and Savior, all we could do was sin. Even the good works that non-Christians do are sinful and cannot please God because they proceed from a heart that has not been purified by faith (Heb. 11:6) and are not done with God’s glory in view (1 Cor. 10:31).

Before Christ, we were slaves to sin. Because of Christ, we are slaves to obedience. “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart *to the standard [form] of teaching to which you were committed....*” The word “standard” or “form” translates the Greek word τύπος (typos), which was the mold into which molten metal was poured to produce a particular shape. Paul uses this as a graphic illustration of our conversion. God delivered us *from* the tyranny of sin *to* (or *into*) the truth of his Word, so that we might be molded into the image of Christ. What an incredible picture. That is our position as believers. Thank God!

Our Practice (v. 19)

Our position as believers is intricately connected to our *practice* as believers. That is Paul’s focus in verse 19. But first he comments on the analogy he’s using.

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, second edition. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, eds. Robert W. Yarbrough and Joshua W. Jipp (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), p. 333.

Paul says, “I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations.” Because of our finite understanding, we cannot fully comprehend the wonder of our salvation and what it means to serve God. Any human analogy is going to be imprecise and imperfect, including the analogy of slavery. Throughout history, the human institution of slavery has often involved fear and degradation. Serving God is not like that. But the analogy of slavery is still appropriate, because a slave by definition is *someone whose identity is bound up in his service to another*. That’s why Paul testified of himself in Philippians 1:21, “For to me to live is Christ.”

That’s what the believer is about. Having been bought with the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter. 19), we now belong to Christ and are to live accordingly. So, Paul says in the second half of verse 19, “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.” In other words, *be just as dedicated to God as you once were to sin*.

One of the early church fathers described what this looks like in practice, saying,

Once your feet ran to the temples of demons; now they run to the church of God. ... Once your hands were stretched out to steal what belonged to others; now they are stretched out for you to be generous with what is your own. Once your eyes looked at women or at something which was not yours with lust in them; but now they look at the poor, the weak and the helpless with pity in them. Your ears used to delight in hearing empty talk or in attacking good people; now they have turned to hearing the Word of God.... Your tongue, which was accustomed to bad language, cursing and swearing, has now turned to praising the Lord at all times; it produces healthy and honest speech, in order to give grace to the hearers and speak the truth to its neighbor.”⁵

Our change in position produces a change in practice. Once we were slaves of sin, but now we are slaves of God – and our life shows it.

Our Pathway (vv. 20-22)

In verses 20-22, Paul shows us our pathway – where we were headed previously as unbelievers, and where we are headed now as believers.

Previously (vv. 20-21)

“For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now

⁵ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (ACCSR): New Testament, VI: Romans, 170.* Cited by Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, gen. ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 284.

ashamed? For the end of those things is death” (vv. 20-21). In verse 20, Paul reiterates the principle stated in verse 16: you are a slave to whatever master you choose to obey. Since sin was your master prior to your conversion, you were not controlled by righteousness. You were “free” in that sense. *But you weren’t really free, because you were under sin’s tyranny.* As you look back, you see how empty your life was, and you’re ashamed of the things you used to do.

In fact, one of the indications that you’ve been born again and have new life in Christ is that you recognize your past life for what it was. Not only did it bring you shame, but it also brought you under God’s judgment: death. Paul is referring to eternal death, because it stands in contrast to “eternal life,” which Paul mentions twice in verses 22-23. Eternal death is “the eternal separation from God in hell that begins after death.”⁶ That is when the real misery begins. It is unspeakably horrific, and it will never end. That is the price we pay for sin against an infinitely holy God. That’s where sin takes us. It is a cruel master, and those who have been freed from its tyranny through faith in Christ see that now, which is why we renounce our former way of life. God in his grace has put us on a new path.

Presently (v. 22)

“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” (v. 22). Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount that you would recognize true believers by their fruit (Matt. 7:16-20). They will produce works that are pleasing to God and prove that they really belong to God. Jesus said in John 15:8, “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.” This is the fruit that the Holy Spirit produces in our lives: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:23). Do these qualities characterize your life? This takes us to the final point – a powerful conclusion to the chapter.

The Point (v. 23)

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). This verse is well-known and used often in evangelism – and rightly so. But keep in mind that Paul is writing this verse to Christians. He is presenting a powerful contrast that should cause us to both tremble and rejoice.

Having begun his analogy with the principle that he stated in verse 16, that we are slaves of whatever master we choose to obey, Paul now presses upon us the consequence of such a choice. First Paul says, “the wages of sin is death.” The word Paul uses for “wages” (*opsōnion*) referred to the pay received by a soldier for his service (cf. Luke 3:14; 1 Cor. 9:7). I find this interesting in light of verse 13, where Paul said,

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, second edition. The New International Commentary on the New Testament, gen. ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), p. 433.

Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

Last week we noted that the word “instrument” (*hoplon*) can also be translated as “weapon.” Such was the case in John 18:3, where we’re told that the soldiers who went to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane came with “weapons.” Every person makes a choice to use the parts of his body as a weapon for sin or as a weapon for God. How you choose to use your weapons reveals who your master and commander is. “The wages of sin is death.” Think about the wages you earn. What’s their purpose? The purpose of wages is to provide sustenance in life. We call it “making a living.” But “the wages of sin” provides the opposite: death.⁷ Sin is a cruel tyrant. But if you serve it, you can be sure that you will get paid in full. You will get everything that’s coming to you.

But those who serve God do not get the wages that they deserve. They get grace instead. That’s the contrast: “but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The good works that we do are all owing to the transformative power of God’s grace in our lives (Eph. 2:8-10). That grace is found in none other than “Christ Jesus our Lord.” Notice that word “Lord” (*kyrios*). It means “master.”

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so we can serve Him.**

So, what’s the key to overcoming sin? Basically, the key consists of two essential elements. First, you must be *saved*, and second, you must have a *strategy*. They must come in that order. Frankly, I think many professing Christians are looking for a strategy when what they really need is salvation.

Two hundred years ago, the Scottish preacher Thomas Chalmers preached a powerful sermon titled “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.” The sermon was based on the words of 1 John 2:15, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” In his message, Chalmers pointed out,

The love of God and the love of the world, are two affections, not merely in a state of rivalry, but in a state of enmity and that so irreconcilable, that they cannot dwell together in the same bosom.

The heart is not so constituted; and the only way to dispossess it of an old affection, is by the expulsive power of a new one.

Chalmers went on to say, “The world is the all of the natural man. ... He loves nothing above it, and he cares for nothing beyond it.” So telling him not to love it

⁷ Kruse, 286.

is like telling a man to set fire to his own house and property – to burn it all down. He might do that with severe and painful reluctance if his life depended on it. But he would do it willingly and even gladly if he saw that a new property worth ten times as much was to emerge from the wreckage of the old one.

Chalmers' point is that unless we behold the beauty of the gospel of the glory of Christ, and our affections are changed to love God supremely, we will not escape the pull of the world. Paul celebrated the salvation of the Thessalonian believers, saying, "You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:9-10). God in his grace continues to save people today, delivering them from the dominion of sin to the truth of Scripture.

Is this your testimony? It can be today if you will turn from sin to serve God. Once you are saved, sin will no longer be your master. But it will still try to be. That's why you need a strategy. The strategy is not easy, but it is simple. Jesus said, "Watch and pray, so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41). You cannot fight sin in your own strength. You must rely on the power of God through prayer as well as "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:17). That's how Jesus fought the temptations that Satan hurled at him (Luke 4:1-13). The psalmist testified, "I have treasured [stored up] your word in my heart so that I might not sin against you" (Ps. 119:11). Thirdly, you need the encouragement and support of your church family. As Colin Kruse points out in his commentary on this text, "Godly living is worked out primarily in the life of the Christian community."⁸ That's why Scripture tells us not to forsake meeting together but to do it all the more as we await the Lord's return (Heb. 10:23-25).

This is the overall framework for our strategy – harnessing God's power through prayer, Scripture, and church fellowship. More specifically, in Romans 6, we see that we must consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God. This must be our mindset – that sin is no longer our Master, Jesus is. We must work this *mindset* into all of our *members* – every part of our body – so that we are fully weaponized for God. Then sin will be no match for us, because it no longer has mastery over us. This is what it means to be "under grace." This is what it means to be slaves of God.

⁸ Ibid., 285.