

Romans 6:15-23

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[0:00] The personal work of Jesus Christ alone. And in chapter 6, he spends his time talking about how we are set free from the power of sin.

We'll begin reading in verse 15. Beloved, let me remind you that this is God's word to us, written for his glory and our good. And so we would do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and obey its commands.

Paul writes, What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law, but under grace? By no means. 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?

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.

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.

[1:17] 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 ashamed? For the end of those things is death.

But now that you have been set free from sin and become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death.

The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Now there is a lot to unpack in this language of Paul's.

Some of these sentences are a bit complex, and so sometimes when preparing sermons through texts like this, it seems helpful to try to draw just a clean, straight line through it.

If we had more time, I would spend each phrase unpacking each thing, but we're going to have to kind of get a little bit faster than that and a little cursory if we're going to make it through the text today.

[2:18] And so I have a four-point outline for our study, which just for the fun of it, I've alliterated a bunch. So here we go. One of my favorite forms of music is rap music.

It's a little-known fact about me, and I don't think I could ever pick up that skill, but this is my little way that I scratch that itch. Alliteration.

So here we go. Number one, a question asked and answered. Number two, a principle presented. Number three, a principle practiced.

And number four, a glorious future guaranteed. And I actually want to get us to point four fairly quickly this morning. Number one, a question asked and answered.

Note there verse 15. At the beginning of our text, Paul asks another anticipatory question. He's been doing that all along. He's anticipating the objections, likely because he had already heard them many times.

[3:25] So as he sits down to write this letter to these Roman Christians, he's anticipating the kinds of objections that will arise. And so he's answering them as he goes throughout the letter.

You do well when you read the book of Romans to read it in some swaths because you'll often arrive at those objections that you may be forming in your own thinking as you read it.

And there he says, What then are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? Grace, which is the case that he's been making in the previous verses.

And this question is really a restatement of the question he asked at the beginning of chapter 6. Notice verse 1 where he says, What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?

The doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone and the person and work of Jesus Christ alone is often met with this objection. If we are saved by grace, if it becomes the ruling principle in our life, then what this bearing does, how does it have God's law act on our lives?

[4:40] On the one hand, you will have the legalist arguing that if you release people from the rule of God's law, then they will forsake it and live however they want, and this will never bring them into God's favor.

On the other hand, you have the antinomian, which means without the law, argue that the rule of grace does, in fact, give them license to live however they want because they are in God's favor. And chapter 6 is dedicated to getting this relationship between law and grace right. So, Paul asks a similar question with a slightly different perspective.

Are we to sin because we are not under law, the reign of law, but under grace, the reign of grace? Because those who are in Christ Jesus have been set free from sin. Notice verse 14. Sin will have no dominion over you since you are not under law, but under grace.

[5:47] And so Paul asks, so then can we just go on sinning? Can our lives not be transformed if we are in Christ? And his answer is, once again, an emphatic no.

This Greek phrase is a strong no. By no means is the way it's translated here in the ESV. By no means.

We ought not go on sinning because we have been set free from it. And he seeks, as he furthers his teaching in the text, to help us understand this by presenting to us a principle.

Note it here in verse 16. So this is the second point. A principle presented. There he says, 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? Paul employs here a principle in the form of a question. And the question begins with, do you not know? Suggesting that what Paul is saying is known.

[7:03] The principle here is axiomatic, or it's widely understood. He's saying, you know this is the way the world works. If a person, he says, willingly offers themselves as a slave, then they are bound to their master.

Perhaps we could think in terms of being employed someplace. If we go to work, and we say to somebody, you are my boss, then you do what you're told to do, until you change the nature of that relationship.

Notice how Paul seems to personify sin, and to personify obedience, as if they are slave masters. Sin is a master that promises the payment of death, but obedience is a master that leads to righteousness, and promises the payment of life everlasting.

So Paul is saying, if you have been united to Christ, then God is your master. So you should not have the attitude of the antinomian, thinking that you can go on sinning because you are not under law, but under grace.

You have been bought with a price. You belong to God, and therefore, he is your master. It makes no sense that you would go on living how you want to.

[8:25] It only makes sense that you would press on living how he would have you live. Beloved, we were not created to be without authority in our lives.

We are people meant to be reigned over. Before the fall, we were to be reigned over by God. This was the state of Adam and Eve in the garden, and what was the very temptation presented to them before they ate of that fruit?

That they would be like God. Now we are image bearers of God, which means we are also rulers ourselves. We are given authority over other things.

But we are not meant to have ultimate authority over ourselves. We are meant to be brought back into relationship with God by the gospel of Jesus Christ and submit ourselves once again to him.

We are, at our very core, all slaves to something. You will serve something. And so you will either be a slave of sin or a slave of obedience.

[9:36] That's the principle that Paul is presenting to us here. So, which one will you submit yourself to? Jesus presents the very same principle in Matthew chapter 6 and verse 24.

There he says, No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

And if you're familiar with that, verse 24 goes on to say, You cannot serve God and money. This could be principle applied anywhere in our lives.

Devoted to one, despise the other. Hate one, love the other. We're all slaves to something. So what controls you?

So there's a principle presented here, and it's a principle, Paul tells us, is an accommodation to our limited understanding. Notice verse 19, he says, I'm speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations.

[10:43] It's as if he's saying the allegory falls apart at some point, but it's meant to help you understand a bit of the nature of this relationship in which you once walk.

This is a simple principle that is worth wrestling with. I know that some of you feel like it is difficult to understand.

Your experience complicates the simplicity of it. You desire to do good, yet you find yourself doing things that you do not want to do. And Paul feels this alongside us, and we're going to look at it at length in his coming writing in chapter 7.

I must admit, I often do a lot of helpful planning in our Lord's Day, and I get songs sent to me that are planned to be sung, and I didn't even look at the song that we sang just before coming up here, but John Newton is with you if you wrestle with this idea of no longer being a slave to sin and rather being a slave to God, submitting yourself to him.

Why is it still so difficult? Having been set free, being under grace and not under law, why is our life still hard?

[12:02] But that does not change this truth. Experience does not define the truth for us. Scripture defines the truth for us. And the work, then, the labor is to bring ourselves into conformity with it.

So Paul, we're going to see in chapter 7, helps us to see and helps us to understand what is happening as we battle against our flesh. But before he does, he works out this principle a bit for us in today's text.

So you see beginning in verse 17, this principle practice. This is point number 3. Let's note this morning how this principle is practiced in two ways.

First, let's notice how it's practiced as we were. Now, when I say it that way, as we were, I'm speaking of the Christian. If you have not repented of your sin and turned by grace through faith to Jesus Christ, then this is the present state of your soul.

For those who have repented of our sin and turned by grace through faith to Jesus Christ, then this is who we once were. And that is the way Paul is addressing us in his letter.

[13:17] Verse 17, he says, But thanks be to God. Why? Because we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

If we have been changed from one nature to another, we're not the ones who did the changing. God changed us. We were once slaves of sin and have now become slaves of obedience.

It was a work that God did in our hearts. So notice who we were, right? Verse 17, slaves of sin.

Verse 19, we once presented our members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, leading to more lawlessness.

Verse 20, we were slaves of sin. We were free in regard to righteousness, but we were slaves of sin. And notice verse 21, the end of those things is death.

So rebels, cut off from God, right? Presenting ourselves for things that are displeasing to God.

Before Christ, we were slaves of sin.

[14:30] Our old self was obedient to sin, and we loved it. Notice that we presented our members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, leading to more lawlessness.

That is, we willingly gave ourselves to this activity. The phrase impurity and lawlessness refers both to an inward and an outward sinfulness.

Every ounce of our being, Paul doesn't leave any of it unattended to. Every bit of us, our being and our doing, was given to sin.

Paul tells us this lawlessness leads to more lawlessness. It just compounds itself. John MacArthur, in his commentary on this phrase, wrote, like a cancer that reproduces itself until the whole body is destroyed.

Sin reproduces itself until the whole person is destroyed. Now, your experience may not feel this way.

[15:40] You perhaps were converted early in your life. I believe that I was. But it's but for the grace of God that I didn't become worse and worse and worse and worse in my sin.

Some of you have felt the weight and the depth of your sinfulness. Thanks be to God, right, that we are now set free from that power.

Oscar Wilde, the 19th century writer and deviant. You can look up why he was a deviant. When his rebellious lifestyle was made, Public wrote this, I forgot that when a man is in secret, he will someday shout aloud from the housetop.

Become proud of our rebellion. And let's be careful not to forget who we once were. I think it's problematic if we read verse 17 and don't find some pause in our souls at the phrase but thanks be to God.

Let's go back to Romans chapter 1 verse 28 and following. Paul includes us in this text. He is not excluding us from it.

[16:55] And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. If we're in Christ, that's who we once were, presenting ourselves, presenting our members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, leading to more lawlessness.

But, thanks be to God. By God's grace and only by grace through faith are we no longer slaves to sin.

Praise God that in Christ Jesus we have been set free from its tyranny. So that's how you see in this text that principle practiced as we were, but you also see it and more importantly you see it as we now are.

[18:22] So again, look through these verses with me, verses 17 through 22. Again, thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin, no longer slaves of sin but we were once slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed.

We have been changed in our very nature. This language from the heart means at the very core of who we are, we have been changed. And out of us therefore comes good and proper things.

And, verse 18 says, we've been set free from sin and rather have become slaves of righteousness, committing ourselves to it. And so the encouragement becomes in verse 19 that we are to present our members as slaves to righteousness which leads to sanctification, the setting apart, the ever-growing holiness that exists in those who belong to Christ.

When we are converted, we are changed in nature, we are set free from sin, we become slaves of righteousness, but we do not become perfect. I wish that we did. I think that God in His sovereignty means to work out in us our great need for Him.

He means to help us recognize the sinfulness of our sin. One day we'll be delivered from it and we'll praise Him for eternity because we'll understand some measure of its depth.

[19:57] I think that He means for us to relate to others, not to present ourselves as perfect because we're not, but to say, yes, yes, this is who I once was, and now being set free from sin, I still go back to that sin and I need Christ as much as you do.

We are to present ourselves, we are to submit ourselves to God as a slave, Him giving to us good and proper direction.

Verse 21, notice one of the marks of a converted person is that the things we once did, we are now ashamed of.

We don't desire to do those things, although we do still do them, but we are ashamed of those things that we once did, willingly presenting ourselves to sin in this way.

But now, verse 22 says, we've been set free from it and we have become slaves of God. The fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.

[21:08] Having changed hearts, God brings forth from who we are good fruit. and this evidences the faith that He is working in us.

It's important that we get this balance right. Law and grace. We're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. And that is a faith that works out in our lives.

And it happens and ebbs and it happens and flows. That's why if you're here this morning and you're not a member of a local church, you need to be a member of a local church because this is one of the authorities that God has given to you to help you discern whether or not you are in fact in the faith.

To help you examine your life. When you join a church, the church is saying to you, with the kind of judgment we can pass as people, we believe that you're in Christ.

We see faithfulness coming out of you. We are bearing witness to the good fruit that exists. We want you to be called gods. In the same way, we practice discipline.

[22:15] To say to people who we once had a confidence they were in the faith, we're not as sure as we once were. We no longer think we can call you brother. For your sake, we're not going to let you go on thinking that you're in Christ because all of the fruit that you're bearing runs in contradiction to that profession.

John Calvin in his commentary on Romans wrote the following quote, as soon as the godly begin to be enlightened by the spirit of Christ and the preaching of the gospel, they freely acknowledge that the whole of their past life, which they lived without Christ, is worthy of condemnation.

So far from trying to excuse it, they are in fact ashamed of themselves. Indeed, they go farther and continually bear their disgrace in mind so that the shame of it may make them more truly and willingly humble before God.

To give you my simple summary of what he's saying, he's going to this little phrase in our text, verse 21, the things of which you are now ashamed.

And he's saying that this becomes a fuel for us to not do those things any longer, to not return to those things, to make us humble, but by the grace of God.

[23:38] Paul says of himself, a sure and confident thing, that he is the chief of sinners and we all ought to feel the same. If it weren't for the grace of God, I would be the worst.

So back to the beginning of verse 17, but thanks be to God. He's given us such reason to present ourselves to him and to pursue holiness.

And on top of all of that, right, this changing in our nature, this has promised for us something to come, which is our last and final point, a glorious future guaranteed.

Verse 23, for the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Before we can address the glorious future guaranteed in this text, we must first address the absolute truth that those who continue in their sin, those who do not, by grace through faith, turn from their sin and flee to Christ, deserve the penalty of death.

[24:47] It is the wage that they have earned. That is not how I want to spend the last moments of our time together. Rather, I want to remind you a future reward.

Those of us who are in Christ, I want us to drink deeply at the well of God's grace as we remember what he has granted to us in Christ. I think that we understand that a gift is free, but lest Paul leave us with any doubt of God's gracious kindness toward us, he says the free gift of God.

It wants to be so clear that we are saved by grace, right? Undeserving. And that free gift is eternal life. In Christ Jesus, our Lord.

The scope of eternity future is incomprehensible for our feeble minds. What will that look like? Life forever more.

But the glory that is found in it is not diminished by our weakness to comprehend it. It is an incredible, vast thing for us to think about.

[25:57] This is the promise that pulls us through the trouble of this life, the pain, the persecution, the problem of our flesh, the sickness and the sorrow, the weariness and the wars, the destruction and the death.

The future reward is what spurs us on. This life is but a vapor. we can bear up and we can press on. We can be ashamed of those things we once did and present ourselves as slaves of righteousness that we might press on to the end, kept by our God.

So we are to do this, present our members as slaves to righteousness, which leads sanctification. I want to read from you just a little bit from, this is John MacArthur's commentary, this is a quotation inception, because I'm going to read from John MacArthur's commentary, him citing Dietrich Bonhoeffer from his book, The Cost of Discipleship, in which he quotes Martin Luther. Bonhoeffer, I commend the book to you, Bonhoeffer wrote a book called The Cost of Discipleship, and it was just easier to find this quotation in MacArthur than in the book, but in there he juxtaposes cheap grace and costly grace, and he does this at great length, and you've heard me present this idea to you before, the difference between cheap grace, people who think that they are saved, therefore they can live however they want to, the antinomian he would have called cheap grace Christians.

[27:49] So he says this, Cheap grace amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs.

Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.

Costly grace, on the other hand, is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him. When Martin Luther spoke of grace, he always implied as a corollary that it cost him his own life, the life which was now subjected to the absolute obedience of Christ.

Happier they who, knowing that grace, can live in the world without being of it, who by following Jesus Christ are so assured of their heavenly citizenship that they are truly free to live their lives in this world.

Costly grace that grants us a sure, a guaranteed reward. Revelation chapter 21 verse 1 through 4, John gives us a glimpse of what will come.

[29:12] There he says, Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God.

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

And so we have in this text a question asked and answered. Should we go on sinning? Absolutely not. A principle presented, like we're all slaves to something.

To what do you present yourself and a glorious future guaranteed? So, some brief application.

[30:22] Firstly, if you have not repented of your sin and fled to Christ for the salvation of your soul, do so today, for the wages of sin is death.

Secondly, if you are in Christ, and I do hope that you are, remember who you once were, be ashamed of your former sins and do not return to them.

Hold in your mind that you have been set free from your past sinfulness. And third, if you are in Christ, and I hope that you are, remember who you are.

you have a glorious forever future awaiting you. Let this wonderful future truth drive your pursuit of holiness now.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together.