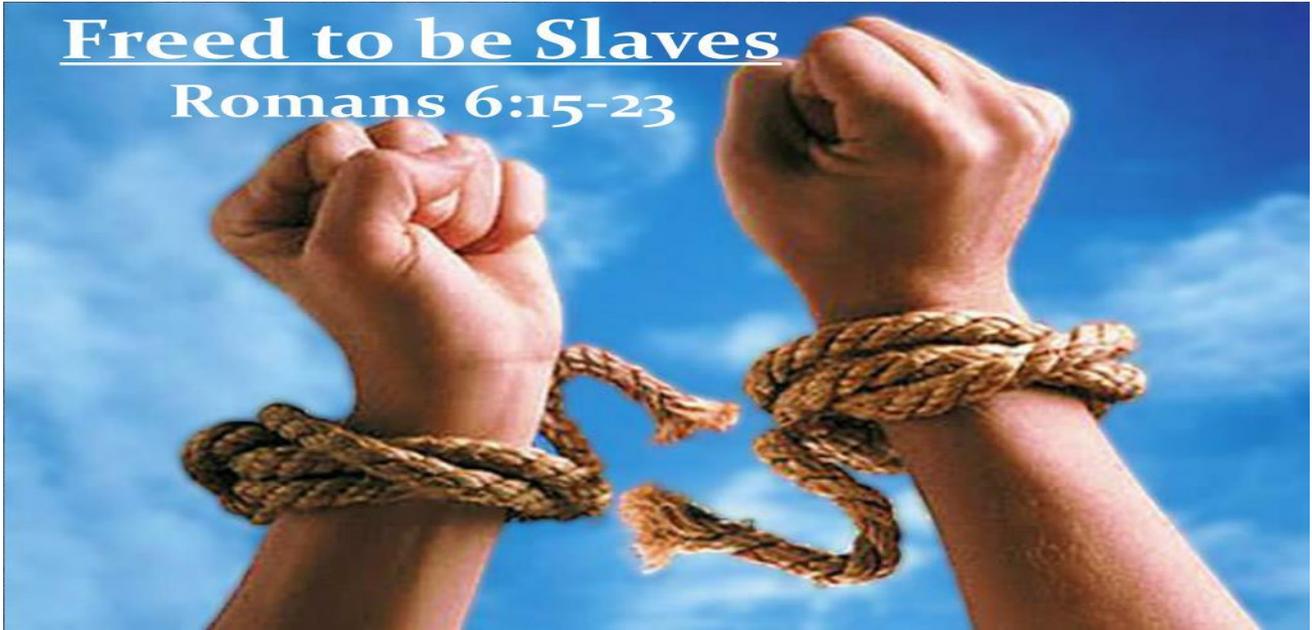


Ministry of Grace Church

Romans 6:15-23 - Sermon Notes

Freed to be Slaves Romans 6:15-23



Background

Throughout this chapter Paul has been making a play on words between “death” and “holiness” or “sanctification.” Have you noticed? You can’t see it in English, but you can in Greek. The Greek word for “death” is *thanatos*, which, as we learned previously, carries with it the idea of separation from something. Separation of our soul from our mortal body is physical death, whereas separation of our soul from God is spiritual death.

The Greek word for “holiness,” or “sanctification,” is *hagios*, which means “to be set apart from common use and set apart **to** or **for** a sacred purpose,” where the emphasis is on being set apart **to** something sacred. Do you see the subtle difference? Death is separation **from** something while holiness is being set apart **to** something. Spiritual death is separation from God; holiness is being set apart to God.

Remember, the people to whom he wrote this letter were predominantly converted Jews living in Rome. They had been brought up believing that the way to righteousness was by obeying the Law. When they became Christians, many of them continued to believe that it was necessary to obey the Law.

But Paul has skillfully demonstrated that not only are Christians no longer bound to the Law, but we also are no longer under the lordship of our old man (our sin nature.) We are free from the bondage of the Law, and we are free from the dominion of sin. To a Jewish Christian who had felt the weight of the Law and sin in his or her entire life, this would have sounded like a freedom cry and permission to sin without repercussion. That’s why Paul says:

Romans 6:15-18

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you go on presenting yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching to which you were given over, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

This section starts out with another one of Paul's rhetorical questions. At first it may appear that he is repeating what he said in the first verse of this chapter, where he said:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? (**Romans 6:1**)

But there is a difference in this question. In verse 1, he asked if we should "continue" in sin. The tense of the verb indicates continuous, on-going action and the implied purpose of continuing in sin was to cause grace to increase. Here Paul is contrasting being under the law where each sin is punished, versus being under grace where we are declared righteous so individual sins are not punished. Previously, he was focusing on a life characterized by sin, whereas here he is focusing on each individual act of sin.

His purpose for asking the question is to answer an objection that might be raised. He has just declared that we are not under the dominion and power of sin any longer because we are no longer under the Law but under grace. So, Paul asks his rhetorical question: **Shall we sin because we are not under Law, but under grace?** And in his typical style, Paul immediately answers the question with the Greek phrase, "*me genoito*" which, as we have seen before, means "May it not be!" or "No way!"

We Christians are funny people sometimes. Many of us labor for years under the false impression that we will be punished for our sins, being very careful to be as obedient and faithful as possibly for fear of reprisal from God, as if He were a giant ogre just waiting for us to slip up so He can pounce on us and make us pay. But as soon as we learn that all of our sins are paid for (past, present, and future) and that we are no longer under condemnation, but are declared to be righteous, we immediately want to throw off the mantle of self restraint and let our sin nature run wild so that we can commit sin after sin.

Instead, we should endeavor to be as obedient and faithful as possible, not because we will be punished for each sin, but because we have a new owner, and we owe it to our Master and Lord to act the way He wants us to act. We know what we should do, but sometimes we can't figure out how to do it. Paul is now beginning his explanation of how to do it. In answer to his own rhetorical question, he uses a word picture that everyone in the Roman Empire at that time would understand, slavery.

The whole concept of slavery was well known because it was widely practiced. The Romans saw slavery as an integral component to developing and building its society. The institution of slavery permeated all of Roman culture. The Roman economy depended on abundant slave labor, with slaves constituting upwards of 40 percent of the population. It even reached a point in the third and fourth centuries after Christ when slaves outnumbered citizens five to three. At the time that Paul wrote this letter it had become a normal part of everyday life.

In light of this, consider what Paul is saying about not letting sin reign in our bodies. He says, *Don't you know that the one whom you obey is your master and you are his slave?* The difference for the Christian, however, is that we have already determined who our master is. He says we used to be the slave of sin, which produces death, but now we are the slaves of obedience as a result of our righteousness.

You see, a born-again Christian is not the slave of sin since he or she has been declared righteous and, therefore, is now the slave of God. And God, as our master, wants us to produce acts of righteousness

demonstrating the fruit of our salvation. Therefore, we can't continue to live in sin because we are not under the Law (which produced sin) but under grace (which has produced righteousness).

To completely understand this passage, we have to also recognize what Paul is not saying. He is not giving thanks to God that we were all slaves to sin. Being a slave to sin is neither desirable nor commendable. It is a state of helpless devotion to things that are contrary to all that God is. What Paul is saying is, "Though you were slaves to sin, you have now been delivered from that slavery." Paul is thankful for every one of us who has believed the gospel message and has been saved from our sins and from the mastery of sin.

The next thing that Paul says has been misunderstood due to a mistranslation in the past. Literally, it says,

you obeyed, from the heart, unto which you were given over, a pattern of teaching.

Now, obviously we don't talk that way in English, so we rearrange the words a bit so that it says,

you obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching to which you were given over.

The "pattern of teaching" is that which was begun by Christ and taught to His apostles, who in turn taught it to others. It includes the gospel message (by which we were made into the image of Christ), but it also includes teaching about how to live our lives. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37, 39)* This teaching acts like a mold or a form, shaping us into a copy of the original and that original is Christ himself.

As we obey this teaching, we become a "type" of Christ (hence, we are called Christians). We were freed from sin, and we were delivered **to** the new teaching. And because we have received the shaping effect of that teaching, we have been delivered **from** the bondage of sin. Once again, let's look at what Paul is not saying. Paul is not telling us that Christians will never sin again. What he is saying is that we don't have to be enslaved to sin.

He just recently said, "sin shall not be master over you." The reason that sin will not be our master is because we have been set free from sin. We don't have to obey our old master because we have been set free from him. Then, in verse sixteen Paul told us: "you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness. When we were slaves of sin we had to obey that master. But, since we have been set free, we are now able to move away from sin and "leave it in the dust." As a result, we don't have to obey sin any longer.

When we believed that doctrinal form that molded us like Christ, we were immediately freed from the bondage of sin and made the property of righteousness. This is a reference to the point in time when we accepted Christ as Lord and Savior and became a Christian. At that time, we were set free from the authority of sin, and we became the property of righteousness (that is to say, the One who is righteousness).

Romans 6:19-21

I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, leading to further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, leading to sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then having from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.

Paul now continues with an odd phrase, “I am speaking in human terms.” What he means by this is that he is using an illustration from everyday human life that everyone should understand. His point is that we have believed a teaching (doctrine) that is molding us to the image of Christ. Because of that, we have been made free from sin and have become the slaves of righteousness. Therefore, just like we used to yield our members (the various parts of our bodies, including our mind) to uncleanness and to lawless acts (which lead to more lawless acts), so we should now yield our members as slaves to righteousness (or righteous acts) which results in holiness.

The concept that Paul is driving home over and over again is that we have no right to commit sin or to live in sin, under the total influence of our sin nature. After all, sin no longer owns us; God owns us if we are truly saved. And because God owns us, we should yield (or submit) ourselves to Him. As we do, we begin to acquire His holiness (we become molded into His image) as we become more and more set apart from sinfulness.

Paul now states once again what he has been saying repeatedly in different ways for most of this chapter. Before we were saved, we were in slavery to our sin nature. We had no choice but to sin because our sin nature owned us; therefore, we had no choice but to obey our sinful impulses.

Notice that Paul is saying that there is no gray area when it comes to who our master is. It is either sin or righteousness. We can't be part way in between. While we were the slaves of sin, we were free with regard to righteousness, not under its control.

The argument that Paul has been making all along is that since we are no longer slaves to sin, that is, sin does not own us nor control us, we should be in subjection to our new master, righteousness. Unfortunately for us, though, is the fact that we have a choice as to whom we submit and old habits are hard to break. Now that we are freed from sin, we should gladly obey our new master, righteousness. But we seem to fight our new master far more than we did our former master. It's easier to be lazy and submit to our sin nature than to put the effort into obeying righteousness.

But, and this is Paul's point, we have no right to continue in our lazy obedience to sin because we have a new master who wants us to turn from our old ways and commit ourselves to Him. We have a responsibility to obey righteousness, not just because it would be polite, but because that's what our Master wants us to do, and we are under obligation to obey Him. Paul continues with,

Therefore what benefit were you then having from the things of which you are now ashamed? ...
(Romans 6:21)

The word translated “Ashamed” actually refers to the shame that someone has brought upon himself or herself. In the previous verse he told us that when we were slaves to sin, we were free from righteousness. The clear implication is, now that we are slaves to righteousness, we are free from sin and should not obey it like a master. Remember also, back in verse fifteen Paul asked the rhetorical question, “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” Since that verse he has been arguing that we certainly should not continue in sin because we now have a new master, and we are not under the obligation to sin like we previously were.

And - Paul is making another point in reference to his rhetorical question. Since we once were in bondage to sin we know its effects, we've tasted its bitterness, and we've reaped its fruit. He is implying here that having once experienced these effects and knowing our tendency to sin, we should not indulge in it now. We can look back at the sinful life we used to live and see that not only are the “pleasures of sin for a season” (Hebrews 11:25) not lasting, but the consequences of these sins are lasting, and we are ashamed

of them. Therefore, why would we even consider going back to a state where we were controlled by our sinful impulses?

We are very aware of the end result of our sinful past, and that a life characterized by sin produces death. “But,” you may say, “I’m now saved so I have eternal life and will never die again spiritually.” This is absolutely true, but remember, the definition of death is separation. To die physically is to be separated from this mortal world. To die spiritually is to be spiritually separated from God. If you are truly saved, then you will never, ever, ever, ever be separated from the Spirit of God because He has adopted you into His family and has promised that He will never leave you nor forsake you. But - when we sin (after we have been saved) we are separated from fellowship with God and that type of separation (death) can only be overcome by humbling ourselves and confessing our sin to God.

Romans 6:22-23

But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you have your benefit, leading to sanctification, and the end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Now Paul gives us his answer to the previous two verses and a summary of what he has been saying for this entire chapter. In verse twenty Paul said:

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

Before we were saved, we had no choice but to obey sin because we were its slaves. In answer to that he now says:

But now having been set free from sin, and enslaved to God ...

As born-again Christians we are free from the bondage of sin and have become the slaves (the personal property) of God himself. We are no longer owned by sin, but we’re not free to just do as we please either because we are now owned by God; He is our master, and we are to submit to His will.

In verse twenty-one Paul said:

Therefore what benefit were you then having ... For the end of those things is death.

The benefit (if you want to call it that) of the sin of our former way of life was death (**separation from God**.) In this verse he says:

But now ... you have your benefit ... sanctification, and ... eternal life.

The fruit of our salvation now is sanctification (being **set apart to God** for His use), which results in eternal life.

Now let me tie this all together. Throughout this chapter Paul has been saying that before we were saved, we were slaves to sin and we were **separated from God** (we were spiritually dead.) Now that we have received His gracious gift of salvation we are **set apart to God** (we are spiritually alive for eternity).

We have now arrived at one of the pinnacles of Paul’s teaching in the book of Romans. It is the second step in what has been called “The Romans Road,” the road to salvation. The first is found in **Romans 3:23**:

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Now, after having talked at length about the fact that we used to be slaves to sin, Paul has just taught us that we are now the slaves of God. We learned that when we were slaves to sin, we were dead (separated from God).

And, Paul told us **why** we were dead when we were slaves to sin. He said:

For the wages of sin is death,

He said that death is what we earned for our sin (and we worked hard for it!) But now he says, God does not pay us what we have earned if we have received His gracious gift through faith in the blood of Jesus Christ. Instead of paying us what we deserve (that is, what we've earned), God gives us a free gift that we didn't earn (and don't deserve).

If you stop to think about it, there is no greater gift that God could possibly give to us than an eternal existence with Him. The one constant in this earthly existence is the fact that we all will die physically someday, we will be separated from our earthly body. But because of this marvelous gift that God has given us, we will continue our existence in His presence in a heavenly body. We will join with all of our loved ones who have likewise received God's gift, and together we will glorify God for eternity.

So What?

We should be so grateful for having all of our sins forgiven that we should work hard to restrain our sin nature and live for God the way He wants us to! But that's not the way we think, is it?

Are you living the life your master wants you to live? The answer, of course, should be yes. But, the real question is – Who is your master? To whom are you submitted? To whom are you being obedient?

This is easy to talk about, but it is not so easy to do, is it? Even though we want to obey our Lord and submit ourselves to His righteousness, we constantly seem to be slipping away and going back to our old master. Lord, help us learn to flee from sin and yield ourselves to righteousness.

The laziest thing for a Christian to do is to just sit back and skate through life. But now that we have the ability to obey righteousness, we also have the obligation to obey righteousness. Let's commit right now to resisting our old master and submitting ourselves to our new Master.

Did you ever wonder why the world seems to be getting more sinful and wicked with each passing year? It's because those who are of the world are slaves to sin and are constrained to obey their master. As a result, sin continues unchecked, growing stronger and more pervasive with each passing day.

But consider this, in heaven we will not have a sin nature, and we will obey righteousness perfectly. We will not have to fight our tendency to sin. That's part of what will make heaven so rewarding. We will always do what is right and our actions will always be pleasing to our Heavenly Father.

But -- we're not there yet. We still have our sin nature. So, to boil it down to the essence of what Paul is teaching here, we should submit to our new Master and commit to doing His will. No longer should we be constantly trying to break free from righteousness so we can "do our own thing," which is called sin, let's all commit to doing His "thing."

Let's pray.