



We're continuing our studies in the book of Romans and today we pick up in the middle of chapter 6. Here we're dealing with a very practical issue, one that every Christian must wrestle with. The issue is sin. What does a believer's relationship to sin look like? Now that we've trusted in Jesus Christ as our Savior, what difference does it make in how we live our lives? Do we just go on living the way we once did, knowing that God will forgive us because of what Jesus did on the cross? Or does what Jesus did on the cross somehow change us?

The issue was stated by Paul very plainly in the first verse of this chapter: "What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" This whole sixth chapter deals with this question: Can we go on living as we used to? Can we continue in a lifestyle of sin, as though nothing really changed when we came to Christ except that we'll go to heaven when we die? Paul's answer is: "By no means!" You can't do that. Why? Because when Jesus died your old life died with him. That person is dead, and when Jesus was raised up, you were raised up as well to new life. Your new life is one where you live for God and not yourself. Paul put it this way in v. 14,

"For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace."

Again, that's a promise: Sin shall **not** be your master. But, as soon as Paul said those words, "you are not under the law, but under grace," he knew there was another, similar question he had to answer, and that's what he brings up in v. 15,

"What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?"

The Issue

Shall we sin because we're not under law but under grace?

This is essentially the same question, but with a subtle change. In verse 1 the issue was if we should go on sinning in order to pile on more grace, but here the issue is shall we sin even just a little bit, even just once, knowing we're free from the law and under grace. The thinking often goes like this: "You know what, I've been really good, I owe this to myself. It won't hurt anyone. No one will know. It will make me feel good. I won't go to hell because of it. God will forgive me because Jesus died for me. I'm not under law, but under grace. Why not give in just this one time?" Can you appreciate the full force of Paul's question here?

Now as we might expect, Paul's answer is the same as in v. 1, "**By no means!**" Sin shouldn't be practiced at all. Don't give it an inch! The Gospel of grace will in fact have the opposite affect. Instead of promoting sin, it will inhibit it. Instead of giving you a license to sin, it will deter it. But why? Paul spends the rest of chapter 6 explaining why and then applying that to our lives.

The Explanation

We are all slaves to the one we obey

The answer Paul gives is found in v. 16,

"Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?"

Why can't we use grace as an excuse for sin? Because we're all slaves to the one we obey. And there are only two options here. There's no middle ground when it comes to who you serve. Even Jesus told us we can't serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). So when you offer yourself to sin, you become a slave of sin. But when you offer yourself to obedience, you become a slave of God.

Now it might seem rather extreme to call this slavery. One thing to keep in mind is slavery in Paul's day was different from how we think of it today. Paul isn't talking about the horrors of African slavery or even that of modern day slavery. Slavery in the Greco Roman culture of the New Testament was more like indentured servanthood. And even though up to one-third of the people in Rome were enslaved, most of that was voluntary. If you were extremely poor and couldn't feed yourself, you'd offer yourself to someone as a slave so you could be fed and housed. Likewise, Paul says this type of slavery to sin is a voluntary act of the will in that we "offer ourselves." Of course once you did that you lost all your rights. The legal status of a slave was that of a "thing." They were "living property" and subject to the absolute power of the master.

Do you know what this means? That means no one is truly free. We're all slaves, either to sin or to obedience. There's no middle ground; no neutrality. In fact, to choose neutrality is to choose sin because that's a choice **not** to serve God. I like what Doug Moo writes about this: "One is never 'free' from a master, and those non-Christians who think they're free are under an illusion created and sustained by Satan. The choice with which people are

faced is not, 'Should I retain my freedom or give it up to submit to God?' but "Should I serve sin or should I serve God." What we sometimes fail to realize is whatever controls us is our master. So if you seek power you'll be controlled by power. If you seek wealth you'll be controlled by money. If you seek the approval of others you'll be controlled by their response to you. No one is in control of his or her own life. We're controlled by whatever we offer ourselves to.

You may think you'll be satisfied by giving a little piece of yourself to sin, but sin wants all of you. It won't be satisfied with a little. If it gets a little, it will go for more. Some of us are slaves to busyness, our work, getting that next achievement. Here in the Bay Area I see slavery to career and success every day. This week I heard about a fifth grader who goes to the library each day until his parents finally pick him up at 7:30 pm. His parents rarely see him during the week, and they have extremely high scholastic expectations for him. He has to read 1000 pages of a book every week, go to tutoring, and learn the piano.

Some of us are enslaved to people. We try to adapt into whatever pleases others to gain approval of those we think are important. If we're suddenly affirmed by that person we're satisfied for the moment, but if they criticize us or are even indifferent towards us our self worth is shattered. There are many today who are just slaves to personal pleasure, comfort, happiness and the love of self. All these masters relentlessly demand more and more time, attention, admiration, devotion and nurture. A little is never enough. Sin wants all of you. C.S. Lewis depicts this in the *Screwtape Letters* where a senior devil offers advice to his understudy about the way to turn God's people into slaves of sin. He says, "An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula. To get a man's soul and give him nothing in return—that's what really gladdens Our Father's heart."

But by using this metaphor of slavery Paul also reminds us that you can't offer yourself to God halfway. When we offer ourselves to God, he wants all of us. We're being called to be completely sold out. To be his slave means total commitment, total obligation and total surrender. In fact, Paul goes on and affirms the fact that this is what God has done in the lives of the Romans believers. Look what he says about them in verses 17-18,

"But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."

This describes what happens to anyone who truly knows Jesus Christ. Notice the process: We were slaves to sin. We then wholeheartedly obeyed the pattern of teaching. Then we were set free from sin and became slaves of righteousness. In a nutshell, that's conversion. Paul says this because he wants to remind them of

what's happened to them, and in doing so he affirms God's work in them.

If you're a believer, this is true of you as well. In fact, if you look carefully at this you can see there were three important elements that came together to make this happen in your life. First, there was "pattern of teaching" that you received. You became committed to the truth of the Gospel and how Jesus teaches us to live our lives. Second, you "obeyed from the heart." It wasn't just an intellectual thing, like, "Yeah, I believe in God. I believe in Jesus." It's not even just a behavioral thing, like, "Yeah, I'll change my ways. I'll go to church on Sunday or stop drinking or whatever." It's more than just skin deep. All of a sudden the law is written on your heart. The third element is God's grace. That's why Paul says, "Thanks be to God." It's his work. It's a gift. We don't earn it. God gets all the credit. It's all grace. But, notice, that's what grace does. It's more than just forgiveness. It's not a license to sin, but it's a power that transforms us into new people.

The Application

Choose your slavery

Up until this point there's been no commands; no imperatives, only indicatives. But in verses 19-23 Paul goes on and applies this to our lives. He starts out in v. 19 with a little apology:

"I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations."

Paul seems to know this analogy of slavery doesn't fully describe what it means to serve God, but he uses it because human limitations are such that we're unable to understand these truths without the help of such an analogy. So he continues with it and delivers the command,

"Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness."

Notice how he compares two offerings. We used to offer ourselves as slaves to "impurity and ever increasing wickedness" but now we're to offer ourselves to "righteousness leading to holiness."

He talks first about slavery to impurity. That word has definite sexual connotation, and let's be honest, that's so often the arena in which our slavery to sin shows up. We live in a society where sexual sin is rampant, and Christians are often no different than others. God ordained sex to be enjoyed between a man and a woman who live in the lifelong covenant of marriage. Anything else is sin. That includes pornography, prostitution, and pre-marital or extramarital sex between consenting adults. So often we just think, Well, what's the big deal if we both agree that it's okay? But it's not okay, and it is a big deal. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, ***"Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies***

are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies" (1 Cor. 6:18-20).

He also talks about "ever-increasing wickedness." Notice how slavery to sin isn't static, but rather it progresses and it advances. It's like an avalanche that builds momentum and can't be stopped and destroys. Tim Keller has a great insight into this. He writes, "This deterioration comes because the imperatives of the lords of our lives — the things we serve — are seeking to work out their wills in the world through our bodies. As we act out of a particular purpose, the action shaped our character and will so that it becomes easier to act in that way again. So our offering our bodies to sin leads to impurity, and to an ever-increasing cycle of wickedness."

But what's great about this is the same thing is true of being a slave to righteousness and to God. Paul says that leads to holiness. As we act according to the truth, our character and will are shaped into habits of holiness and righteousness. Once again, it's a progressive thing. It's a good avalanche!

How does this actually work itself out in our daily lives? It means coming into situations and being confronted with choices to treat God as our highest good and thus our master, or to see something else as our highest good. So let's say someone says something that puts me down and makes me look bad. I have a choice: I can let my desire to look good and my wounded pride say, "This is a disaster! No one should treat me that way. I look like an idiot. I have to do something to discredit this person immediately and make sure everyone knows what an awesome person I am. I have to pay them back!" At that point, if I offer myself to that kind of thinking, I'll respond with harsh words and self protective behavior. Or I could recall that pleasing Jesus is my highest good. I can say in my heart, "Is there anything in what this person is saying that might be true and that I can learn from? If not, why am I so wrapped up in my own reputation and what others think of me? God is my judge. I belong to him. He loves me and he's accepted me in Jesus Christ." If I act out of this kind of thinking, I'll respond with humility and gentleness. Like it says in Proverbs, "*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger*" (Proverbs 15:1).

And with this command to offer ourselves as slaves to God, Paul adds a powerful motivation. Look what he says in verses 20-23,

"When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I love how he starts out by saying when we were slaves to sin we were free from the control of righteousness. It's like when you offer yourself to sin you may think you're free but the only thing you're free from is goodness and righteousness! Then he asks the question: What benefit did you receive from those things you're now ashamed of? Notice when you become a follower of Christ you change in how you think about your past. The things you once boasted about are now things you're ashamed of. There are things I've said and done in my life that make me blush with shame. Whenever I think of that, I have to remind myself that the old Mark Mitchell is dead. The one who did those things, the one who sinned in those ways, was nailed to that cross with Jesus Christ, and all of his sins—past, present, and future—were paid for in full on the cross of Jesus Christ. I no longer need to feel shame for those things, because those things have been completely atoned for.

Still, Paul says, "How did that work for you?" He reminds us, "Those things result in death." What does he mean by "death"? We know sin brought about not just physical death but spiritual death, which is condemnation and separation from God for eternity. This is what non-believers will experience both now and in eternity. But for believers this isn't an issue. What I think Paul is talking about here is the fallout from sin in our lives; sin still produces death-like fruit. So if we don't offer ourselves to God, we become a slave to selfishness, lust, bitterness, materialism, worry, drivenness, power, etc. When we offer ourselves to sin, we become its slave, and that in turn manifests itself in death. So if you're all about being well-liked and gaining the approval of others, you'll constantly experience self-pity, envy, hurt feelings, inadequacy. If you're enslaved to success, you'll work too much, you'll cut corners to get ahead, you'll use people instead of serving them. Anything you worship promises much but delivers worse than nothing. It delivers death.

I recall when my kids were young, teaching each of them to ride a bike. It was always quite a process to teach them how to balance themselves on the wheels and pedal down the street. I'd run along with them for awhile. But eventually they had to go it alone and the biggest challenge was always how to stop. At first, the only way they knew to stop was by running into something. So I'd constantly be picking them up out of bushes and from the side of the car or house because the only way they knew to stop was by crashing! I'd try to tell them, "You don't have to run into things to stop; there's another way to do it. A provision has been made so you can stop this bike without running into things." I'd show them all they had to do was to reverse the pedals and the coaster brake would bring them to a stop. And when they finally got it, it was like they looked at me and said, "It's sure nice to know there's another way to stop. I'm getting tired of running into stuff. That's hard work."

Offering yourself to sin is kind of like that—it's hard work. The end result is death. The end result is you keep running into stuff and that takes its toll. Paul says, "How's that working for you? Do you like this? Do you like running into stuff? Let me show you another way. God has provided a way for you to stop and the end result is much more enjoyable." That's what he's saying here.

What are the benefits to offering yourself to God? He mentions two things: holiness and eternal life. We tend to think of holiness as something unattractive. Holy people are grim and strict and they never have any fun. We think of holy people as those who look like they've been steeped in vinegar or soaked in embalming fluid. But it's interesting the Bible talks about *"the beauty of holiness"* (1 Chronicles 16:29). Holiness is a beautiful thing. The word is derived from the same root from which a very attractive English word comes: wholeness. Holiness means "wholeness," being complete. It's to have together all the parts which were intended to be there, and to have them functioning as they were meant to function. We long to be whole people. Don't you want to be what God made you to be, with all the ingredients of your personality able to be expressed in balance? That's to be a holy person, and that's what God is after.

The other thing he mentions is eternal life. Eternal life isn't just something that starts after you die. It's also a here-and-now thing. It refers to the quality of our life in Christ. Jesus said, *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly"* (John 10:10). Eternal life is God's own life, living in you. If you want to know what that means, look at the kind of life Jesus lived. It's a life lived in fellowship with and in dependence on God. Jesus prayed, *"This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent"* (John 17:3). Eternal life is peace, joy and assurance. It's comfort, strength and hope. It's never-ending life with God, life in heaven after we die, but it's also abundant life now. It's the kind of life we all want.

And do you know the greatest thing about it? It's a gift. It's the kind of life we can never achieve. It's the life God gives us for free when we finally admit how much we need his help and trust his Son to be our Savior. Look at again at v. 23. Sin's wages are

death, but God's gift is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Note the contrast between "the wages of sin" and "the gift of God." These are contrasting terms of service on which the two masters operate. Who do you want to enlist with? Who do you want to serve? Sin pays wages—you get what you deserve, which is death—condemnation, separation from God, the brokenness of life; but God gives a free gift, which you don't deserve—eternal life. Which do you want?

There's a story that's been told from Civil War days before America's slaves were freed, about a northerner who went to a slave auction and purchased a young slave girl. As they walked away from the auction, the man turned to the girl and told her, "You're free."

With amazement she responded, "You mean, I'm free to do whatever I want?"

"Yes," he said.

"And to say whatever I want to say?"

"Yes, anything."

"And to be whatever I want to be?"

"Yep."

"And even go wherever I want to go?"

He answered with a smile. "Yes. You're free to go wherever you'd like."

She looked at him intently and replied, "Then I'll go with you."

That's really the choice we have before us. It's really not a choice; it's an invitation to offer ourselves to the One who purchased our freedom. Why would we possibly pass up what he has to offer? Why would we choose slavery to sin and to death instead of slavery to God? So I say to you today: Offer yourself to him. Choose to be his slave. The benefit package is incredible!

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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