

Romans  
Whose Slave Are You? (Part 4)  
Romans 6:15-23  
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This week I came across a quote from that great spiritual guru, Deepak Chopra. I hope you understand I say that tongue in cheek. This is what he writes:

There is no holy life. There is no war between good and evil. There is no sin and no redemption. None of these things matters to the real you, but they all matter hugely to the false you, the one who believes in the separate self. You have tried to take your separate self, with all its loneliness and anxiety and pride, to the door of enlightenment, but it will never go through because it is a ghost.

Now if you didn't understand that, don't worry. You see, man, in his false wisdom, loves to make spiritual issues terribly complicated. God, on the other hand, in His Word, delights to make them very simple.

Scripture tells us that there are only two ways, two paths, two roads, and every human being who has ever existed, every human being alive today, every person in this room, is on one of those two roads. One of the roads ends in God's presence with the joys of eternal heaven and the other ends in hell, a place of eternal shame, regret, and punishment, banned forever from God's presence. This is the teaching of Scripture.

Again and again, these two roads, these two paths, are set before us. You remember Psalm 1, at the very beginning of the Psalms, lays out the two ways. There is the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked, and they end in terribly different places. Our Lord Himself, you remember in Matthew 7, in the Sermon on the Mount, describes two gates by which you enter two different roads, by which you eventually arrive at two totally different destinations.

In Romans 6, Paul is really dealing with those two ways, those two roads, those two paths, but he does so here, in the imagery he's already built, as two kinds of slavery. You are either a slave of sin or a slave of God. We're studying the second half of Romans 6, beginning in verse 15 and running down to the end of the chapter, and Paul's point in this paragraph is simply this, true believers are no longer slaves of sin but are instead slaves of God.

Here's how he develops his argument, he begins in verses 15 and 16 with a flawed conclusion about the believer's relationship to sin. You'll notice in verse 15, Paul asks, is it okay for a believer to live in sin because he's no longer "under law but under grace?" And Paul's response to the very idea is to be repulsed by it. He says, "May it never be!" In fact, it's impossible. And the reason it's impossible is in verse 16. He lays down a general spiritual principle that you become a slave by obeying a master, and that's either of sin or of God, of sin or of righteousness; and you can only be the slave of one master at a time.

As Christians, we are no longer slaves to sin. Why? Well, in verses 17 and 18, he explains it's because of the radical change that's happened to us, the radical change in our relationship to sin. Before our salvation, we were slaves of sin, verse 17; but a change happened at salvation, a radical change. We were transformed. We were regenerated by God. And therefore, verse 18, we are now made "slaves of righteousness." This radical change has occurred.

In light of that radical change, Paul moves on to the practical ramifications of the believer's relationship to sin. We looked at this the last time we studied Romans together. Paul says, in light of what has happened to you, here's how I want you to live; I want you to pursue righteousness, following and expecting the same gradual process you saw with sin in your life. You remember, we talked about this. Before Christ, day after day after day, we obeyed what sin told us to do. We were in a situation and sin whispered in our ear and said, "You know, you should just lie; this whole situation will go easier if you just lie. You know what, it's okay for you to lust, you're not hurting anyone." Do this, do that. Sin comes and gives us commands, and we obeyed. And what happened? Verse 19, it resulted in "further lawlessness," more sin. We obeyed, we obeyed again, we obeyed again, and sin and its power grew in our lives. Paul says, now the opposite is true; now put your members at the disposal of righteousness as its slave, in the same way, and what will happen? Verse 19, "it results in sanctification."

You see, Paul's point is that the same gradual process that occurred with sin before Christ is the same gradual process required to grow in holiness or sanctification. And in fact, you grow using the same means as you did to grow in sin. You see, slavery to sin was about a pattern of obedience to sin's commands each day. Slavery to righteousness is about a pattern of obedience to God's Word, through the help of the Spirit day after day. And as you and I obey and obey again and we obey again what the Scripture tells us to do, it becomes increasingly a pattern and a habit in our lives just as sin did before Christ. This is what we are to do.

Now, today we come to the final section of this great chapter, the eternal consequences of our relationship to sin, in verses 20 to 23. Here Paul tells us why all of this matters. Let's read it together, Romans 6, beginning in verse 20:

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul is making the same point here that he's made throughout this section, and that is, you are either serving sin or you are serving God. You are either on the path of sin or you're on the path of righteousness. And if you will look carefully at your life, you can tell which path you're on. How do you tell? Well, if your life is marked by increasing obedience to the commands of

Christ and His Word, growing sanctification, then you are on the path of righteousness. If, on the other hand, your life is marked by increasing obedience to the demands of sin, increasing patterns of sin, then you are on the path of sin. And discovering which of those two roads you are on will tell you your ultimate destination.

Now here in Romans 6, Paul compares these two ways or these two roads, but he does so as two kinds of slavery. He begins with the slavery that leads to death in verses 20 and 21. Notice what he writes, the slavery that leads to death:

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death.

Paul points back to before we were Christians, before we believed in Christ, to teach us about this slavery that leads to death, and he begins by telling us it is slavery to sin. Notice verse 20, he begins verse 20, “For,” that’s an important word, that word connects verses 20 to 23; it tells us that verses 20 to 23 are Paul’s argument as to why you should obey the command of verse 19, why you should be pursuing righteousness. Here’s why, for, because, simply stated, when we fail to pursue righteousness, we show that we’re on the other road. Christian, don’t ever forget that verse 20 describes you before Christ and it describes every unbeliever you know.

Now look at verse 20, “when you were slaves of sin.” Before you came to Christ, you were a slave of sin. What does that mean? Well, go back to verse 16, “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience,” to God, “resulting in righteousness?” Here’s what Paul is saying, we were slaves to sin before Christ in the sense that we regularly obeyed what sin told us to do. It was expressed in sinful thinking, in sinful attitudes, in sinful words and in sinful acts. The slavery that leads to death is slavery to sin.

But that’s not all, look at verse 20, “when you were slaves of sin, you were,” also, “free in regard to righteousness.” Now that is a fascinating statement. If you go back to the early chapters of Romans you discover that unbelievers know much of what God requires of them. Go back to chapter 1 verse 32. Speaking of pagans, idolatrous pagans, Paul says, “they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice these sins,” they’re listed here, “are worthy of death,” and yet, “they not only do the same, but they give hearty approval to those who practice them.” How do they know the ordinance of God? Well remember Romans 2:14-15, they know because the God, the Creator, has written the substance of His law on every human heart.

There has never been a single human being of mental capacity who hasn’t understood much of what God requires of him or of her, no matter if they had the Scripture or not. They knew. But here’s the problem, they were free and are free in regard to righteousness. What that means is even though they know what God wants, even if they try to do it, they simply can’t. They can

give it their greatest effort and they can't do it. Chapter 3 verse 12, "THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE." To use Paul's language, they are under sin, they are dead in sin, they are slaves to sin.

Turn over to chapter 8. Paul can't put it any more clearly than he does in Romans 8:6. He's describing believers and unbelievers, and, first of all, he says of unbelievers, "the mind set on the flesh," that's all unbelievers, that mindset, "is death." And then believers, "but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace." Now notice in verse 7 how he describes unbelievers, "because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God," and then watch this, "for it is not even able to do so." Unbelievers cannot acceptably obey God. In fact, verse 8 goes on to say, "those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

So before Christ then, understand that we were not only slaves of sin, but we were free in regard to righteousness. Maybe you're here this morning and you're not a Christian. You know you're not a Christian. You came in knowing that. You're here with family or friends, invited by someone; this is just what you do. Whatever brought you here this morning, you know you're not a Christian. Perhaps you're tempted to think that you are free, that you're free to do whatever you want. Well let me give you God's perspective on your situation. God says you're not free at all, you're a slave, you're a slave to your sin. And the only freedom you enjoy is freedom from righteousness, freedom from being like your Creator who made you. That's the only freedom you have.

Secondly, Paul says this slavery that leads to death brings absolutely no benefit. Notice verse 21, "Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed?" Now let me teach you a little Greek here. Punctuation was not a part of the earliest Greek manuscripts that we've received and occasionally that can present a problem for understanding the New Testament. This is one of those unusual cases where there are actually two possibilities; let me share them with you.

Possibility number one, look at verse 21. This could be the question, "Therefore what fruit were you having then?" End of the question. Answer, "The things of which you are now ashamed." In other words, with this punctuation verse 21 means that the only benefit of your slavery to sin was the things or the sins of which you are now ashamed; the only fruit, the only benefit of that slavery before Christ was one thing, sin and more sin. That may be what Paul means here.

But almost all English translations take the same approach that our New American Standard does. Look at verse 21 and see the question Paul asks in this punctuation, "Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed?" I think this is more likely the question Paul intended to ask. So what's his answer, what benefit? Well, there is no answer. Why? Because there was absolutely no benefit to our spiritual lives, our sinful lives, before Christ. There's no answer because this is a rhetorical question; there was no benefit of the things, the sins, of which we are now ashamed.

If you're here this morning and you're currently living in a life of sin, let me ask you what benefit that's bringing to you? Oh, perhaps there's a temporary pleasure. Scripture talks about that, the pleasures of sin for a time. It doesn't last. It's short, it's brief, but, yes, there's pleasure. But really, if you're living a life of sin, let me ask you, what benefit are you deriving from that? Does it truly satisfy your soul? I can promise you that it does not, because you were created for more. Does it provide lasting benefit to your soul? Does it do good to you? Do you grow as a person? Do you love the people around you better? Are you more connected? Do you understand and care for people more because of that life of sin? Again, no! Does it help you prepare for death and eternity? And you know the answer to that. When your conscience wakes you up in the middle of the night and that faint echo of the coming judgment of God is in your soul, you know that's not true. What benefit? Paul says there's none. A life of sin gives no fruit that matters, nothing that satisfies.

And, thirdly, it ends in eternal death. Look at verse 21, "Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death." The Greek word translated "outcome" is literally "the end." It's the Greek word *telos*, "the end." The final destination of the road marked by a life of sin is death. And here he's not just talking about physical death, although that's included. We know that because he contrasts this death with eternal life. Look at chapter 6 verse 23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord." So he's talking about way more than physical death. He's talking about physical death, yes, but he's talking about spiritual death, dead to God, no relationship to God. But he's also looking into the future and describing eternal death, "the second death," as John the Apostle calls it.

What is this? What is eternal death? Well, turn to Revelation 20. John the Apostle describes it for us, Revelation 20:11, he is allowed to see the coming judgment, the great white throne of judgment before which every unbeliever will stand. Every person who has not believed in Jesus Christ will stand before Christ Himself. Verse 12 says, and everybody will be there, "the dead, small and great, standing before the throne, the books were opened," these are books that are records of the lives of people, "and the book of life was opened as well, and they were judged from the things which are written in the books, according to their deeds." You will be evaluated with perfect justice. If you don't believe in Christ, you will get perfect justice, but every single thought, word, and act you have ever committed against God and His Law will be recorded and recited back.

And everybody will be there, every unbeliever, verse 13, no exceptions, judged by their deeds. Then, verse 14,

death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Verse 8 of chapter 21, “But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars,” by the way, that’s not a comprehensive list, that’s a representative list, “their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death,” eternal death. Here’s how Jesus described it in Matthew 25:46. He said, ““These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”” However long life lasts for the righteous is how long punishment lasts for the wicked. That’s what Jesus says.

That’s where a life of slavery to sin will take you; that’s where it ends. Paul’s point is that a life of sin, a life of slavery to sin, ends in only one destination, eternal death. So there is one of the two paths, one of the two roads, one of the two kinds of slavery, slavery to sin. And Paul warns us here what the road looks like and what the destination finally is.

Fourteen years ago this month, I had just come as pastor of Countryside, and one morning at 2 a.m. my phone rang. I answered the phone, and Rocky Wyatt was on the other end. His son Jake and Jake’s girlfriend Candace had been in a horrible car accident. I quickly dressed and I hurried off to the hospital. I was still learning at that point Texas roads, which do require some adjustment. And near my home there is this strange intersection, it’s still there, where the roads don’t properly align. And in the middle of the night with no other traffic to be seen, and barely awake, it’s easy to get confused.

And so, the light turned green, I started across the intersection, and I went straight across the intersection, which should have been my lane, turns out it was the opposite lane. And a minute later I realize that I was driving on the wrong side of a divided highway. How did I discover my mistake? Well, the road signs were all facing the wrong direction. It’s like, those crazy Texans, why would they do that? I was on the wrong road.

That’s what Paul is saying here. If you are living in an increasing pattern of sin, you’re on the wrong road. You never got on the right road, you’ve never been changed by God, and the road that you are on is taking you straight to the lake of fire.

In verse 22 Paul moves on to the second road, the second kind of slavery; it’s the slavery that leads to life. Verse 22, “But now,” don’t you love that word? Then, “But,” believer, “now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.” Notice first of all it’s slavery to God, “But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God.” By the way, both of those are divine passives. You had nothing to do with being freed from sin. God freed you from sin. And in the very same way, God made you a slave to Himself. He enslaved you. You say, what’s that like? Well, I think it’s like the new covenant promise that we looked at several weeks ago in Ezekiel 36:27 where God says, “I will put My Spirit within you and I will cause you to walk in My ways.” Enslaved to God. It’s slavery to God.

Secondly, this slavery that leads to life brings the benefit of sanctification. It isn't the only benefit it brings, but it does bring this benefit. Again, verse 22, "But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification." Before Christ, our lives of sin produced no fruit, no benefit but sin. But for those of us in Christ, that has changed. Having been enslaved to God, one great benefit we have is sanctification. Christian, if you are truly redeemed, you are in the process of becoming more holy; it's a reality.

In fact, look at verse 22, follow along and let me translate verse 22 literally for you from the Greek text. You look at your English Bible and follow along as I translate it literally, "But now having been freed from sin and having been enslaved to God, you," and the you is plural, it's all Christians, you all, to be southern about it, "are having your fruit unto sanctification." "You," all Christians, "are having your fruit unto sanctification." That's Paul's point. If you are in Christ, you are having fruit.

This idea that's grown up within the last century, in fact much of it promulgated by a local seminary, that you can be a follower of Jesus Christ and be a spiritual flat line, have no evidence of any fruit in your life, folks, that is a lie. The truth is, "you are having your fruit unto sanctification." Listen, it's true, Christians grow at different levels. Jesus talked about that in John 15. He said, you bear fruit, I chose you to bear fruit. Some of you bear "fruit," some of you bear "more fruit," and some of you bear "much fruit." But every true Christian bears fruit. If there is no fruit of righteousness in your life, let me say it as bluntly as I can, you are not a Christian. No fruit, no life.

So what is the fruit that true Christians bear? Well clearly, obedience to Christ, we've seen that unfold throughout this passage. Galatians 5, the fruit of the Spirit, love and joy and peace and patience, and all of those qualities that reflect the heart of Christ Himself. Increasing holiness, that's the word sanctification. Increasing growth in likeness to Jesus Christ. This slavery brings the benefit of sanctification.

Thirdly, the slavery that leads to life ends in eternal life, verse 22, "and the outcome, eternal life." Again, the word outcome is the Greek word meaning "the end." The destination of slavery to God is eternal life. We'll talk a little more about that next week when we look at verse 23, but what is eternal life?

Understand, Scripture tells us eternal life is a present possession. If you're a Christian, you have eternal life as you sit here this morning. But Scripture also teaches that it won't be fully consummated until the future when, as Paul puts it to the Corinthians, "all that is mortal has been swallowed up by life." So what is eternal life? Eternal life is complete and final salvation. It is, according to John 17, knowing God and knowing Jesus Christ His Son. It is the restoration of the human soul to the favor, the enjoyment, and the glory of God forever.

Now look at chapter 6 of Romans and verse 23. Again we will look at this verse in more detail next week, but I just want you to see one thing here, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Read that verse carefully, and it’s clear that righteousness, what do I mean by righteousness? Right-thinking, right speaking, right attitudes, right actions; those things don’t earn eternal life. Notice what he says, eternal life is the free gift of God; it’s a gift of God’s grace.

So how does righteousness figure in? Righteousness is like a road sign that tells you you got on the right entrance ramp. The right entrance ramp, or to use Jesus’s analogy, the right gate, is that you have been saved by grace alone through faith alone through the work of Christ alone; you’ve been radically transformed, regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Righteousness doesn’t get you on the right road any more than that huge sign over the freeway got you on the right freeway. You get on the right road by taking the right entrance ramp.

Again, using Jesus’s analogy, the right gate, which is the work of Jesus Christ alone, that’s how you get on the right road. But how do you know you’re on the right road? Look at the road signs. And what are the road signs on the right road? Righteousness, a life that desires to be like Jesus Christ, that’s pursuing obedience to Jesus Christ. The road signs point to patterns of righteousness in your life, that’s how you know you got on the right entrance ramp, that you’re on the right road. John Stott writes:

Here then are two completely different lives, lives totally opposed to one another – the life of the old self, and the life of the new. They are what Jesus termed the broad road that leads to destruction, and the narrow road that leads to life. Paul calls them slaveries. By birth we are slaves of sin; by grace and faith we have become slaves of God. The slavery of sin yields no return, except a steady, moral deterioration and finally death. The slavery of God yields the precious return of sanctification and finally eternal life.

Please understand this morning that you are on one of these two paths, and the path that you are on today will lead you either to eternal life or to eternal death. Your path today predicts your destiny tomorrow. You are on a path, and the path you are on can only end in one destination.

If you’re a professing Christian, if you claim as you sit here this morning to be a follower of Jesus Christ, then don’t forget where Paul began this paragraph. Remember back in verse 15 he asked the question, “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” It’s a question Paul’s opponents raised. It’s a temptation that every one of us as Christians has faced. Which one of us hasn’t heard that little voice, call it Satan or whatever you want, our flesh, but that little voice saying, “Go ahead and sin, you can ask forgiveness afterward. It’s okay. You’re under grace.”



Our response to that temptation should be the same moral outrage as the apostle Paul, “May it never be!” It can’t be! Why? Because verses 1 to 14 of Romans 6 say that we are no longer slaves to sin because we’ve been united to Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection. Verses 15 to 23 say that we can’t live in sin because we are now slaves of God. And that means we’re committed to obeying God. Here’s one of the great reasons not to live in sin and to pursue obedience, because a life of sin shows that you never actually got on the road that leads to heaven.

So how do you know? How do you know if you’re still a slave of sin? I just went through this chapter, what we’ve studied here together, and I just made a little list. I’m going to put the verse references next to the questions, but I’m just going to read the questions. I just want you to take self-inventory. How do you know if you’re still a slave of sin? Here’s how you know. Number one, do you continually live in sin as a pattern of life? Number two, do you continually obey your body’s lust as a pattern of life? Number three, do you continually present the members of your body to sin as tools of unrighteousness? Number four, are you unable to point to a significant break with sin? In other words, is sin still your lord, still your master, it still reigns in your life? Number five, does the frequency and depth of your sin continue to grow, not growth in righteousness? Number six, do you feel no real obligation to obey Jesus Christ? Number seven, are you still spiritually dead toward God, there’s really no relationship with God your Creator?

If your answer to those questions is clear, then you know where you are, you know you’re still a slave of sin, and I plead with you this morning to run to Jesus Christ, really. Don’t put your confidence in some prayer that you prayed in the past, some aisle you walked, some card you signed, some stick you threw in the fire at camp.

Listen, this is the Lord’s own test and if you don’t pass the test, then before this day is done, find yourself on your face before God, crying out for His mercy, for Him to truly change you. Because if that doesn’t happen, you are on the wrong road, and that road will only lead to one final destination. Let’s pray together.

Father, we thank You for this passage, for its penetrating insight into our lives. Lord, in one sense it’s a heavy passage. In another sense it’s encouraging, by Your grace, for those of us who do love Christ, who are pursuing obedience, who are living in lives of righteousness, however imperfectly; that’s our pursuit and desire. Father, encourage us. I pray that You would use this passage to comfort those hearts that need comfort and encouragement, and to bring conviction and unsettledness to those hearts that need that.

Father, for those of us in Christ, may You use who we have become in Him as a further impetus to live holy lives. We are no longer slaves of sin, but we’re Your slaves, willing grateful slaves, and not just slaves, but sons and daughters.

Father, for those who may be here who are not in Christ, O Father, strip away the façade, strip away the false claims, the false profession, and may Your Word, like a hammer, break apart the hard heart and bring them today to true knowledge of Yourself, we pray in Jesus's name, amen.