

Romans 6, Pt. 2

Last week, I stated that Paul responds to two rhetorical questions in Romans 6. Both questions reflect a variation of the idea that sin is excusable because it gives God an opportunity to show his righteousness or give his grace. The second question, which is found in verse fifteen, is the one which most concerns us today - **“What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?”** Paul’s response is clear and to the point - “May it never be!” Behind this question, we also find Paul’s understanding of the law. The law of God, which is reflected in human conscience, is good but cannot save us. It cannot save us because we all violate God’s standards, and neither our knowledge of the law nor anything that we do can atone for our sins when we stand before God in judgment. God’s standard is righteousness, and we stand condemned unless we experience the way of God’s mercy in Jesus. The law guides us to righteousness and shows us our sin, but **it is Jesus who rescues us from our sin.** But if we are now free from the law, does that mean that we can live as we see fit?

The question of verse fifteen continues to haunt the Christian church. Even in 2020, I can think of at least **three variations** of this idea which are commonly spoken by people who claim the name of Christ. Undoubtedly, you will be familiar with the statements which follow.

1. **God was angry in the Old Testament, but he was loving in the New Testament.** God might have punished Israel for certain behaviors, but he is now more understanding and gentler. The most pressing problem for this view is that Jesus did not believe or exhibit any sense that his message or saving work was inconsistent with the revelation of God found in the Hebrew scriptures. Nor did his disciples take this approach to the Old Testament. Instead, they learned from it and studied it to understand who Jesus was. This line of thinking will get us nowhere.
2. **God is not judgmental because he is forgiving.** We don’t have to be legalistic or focused on our behavior because God forgives us. But even

this line of thought encounters what I see as insurmountable obstacles. The main problem is that forgiveness is meaningless unless there has been a real offense which needs to be forgiven. If there is no objective standard of righteousness, then there is nothing that needs to be forgiven. Forgiveness presupposes judgment.

3. **God does not get angry at sin because God is love.** There are two main problems with this thought. The first is that it is usually unevenly applied. Most who say such things apply it to sexual ethics but would never think to apply it to the actions of a hate group. The problem here is that if God's love simply pardons sin, then it must simply pardon all types of sin, not just those which we are personally okay with. The second problem is that God's love had a great cost. John 3:16 tells us that God's love propelled him to give his son so that those who believe in him would not perish. But this gift makes no sense if there was not a real set of consequences attached to sin, summarized in that often-quoted verse by the word "perish." The color of God's love is red, for red is the color of fire and of blood. God's love is a holy love.

Neither in Paul's day nor in our own should we ever follow down the trail of this dangerous set of thoughts. We should add into the picture that which I discussed last week. **We are joined to Jesus**, and his story shapes our stories. To be under grace is to be in union with Jesus. Turning to Paul's flow of thought in verse sixteen and following, we see that **Paul also teaches that we are now enslaved to righteousness**. Paul's basic point is that **every human being has a master**. Now, I suppose there are some who through early death or incapacity are prevented from making proper moral response to either sin or righteousness. These persons are not Paul's reference. We trust those dear ones to the mercy of God. For the vast majority of people who have ever lived, however, there are only two basic orientations. **One is either a slave to unrighteousness or a slave to righteousness**. There is no third option. One is either bound to the way of sin leading to more sin leading to condemnation leading to death. Or one is bound to the way of righteousness leading to sanctification, justification, and eternal life. The contrast is starkly set out in v. 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 resulting in righteousness?" Notice here

that there is no question of being non-obedient. There is no third option given. Everyone is obedient to some master. The question that presses upon us is really this, “Who is your master?” We may cherish the idea that we are free and can mostly set our own way in life. But it is not true. None of us are as free as we think we are. In fact, **the only real freedom we can find is in becoming slaves to God.** For when God is our master, we receive liberty from him. Jesus says it this way in John’s Gospel: “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:34-36).

Though some people struggle with the idea that they are not free, I think that even non-Christians must wrestle with the problem of freedom. Think about this with me. How many types of constraints are placed on a person, holding them in bondage? Every human being, whether Christian or not, is limited by finances, upbringing, physical characteristics, language, social conditions, education level, and moment in history. And this is just scratching the surface of all the things in life which hold us in a type of bondage. The very concept of a free will has been blasted in twentieth-century academia. Evolutionary psychologists have spent whole careers saying that consciousness is a mere byproduct of inevitable chemical and biological processes. Marxist economists try to teach us that culture and behavior are the products of the distribution of capital, a superstructure sitting upon a substructure. **Freedom of will is a terrifically difficult idea to defend philosophically.** To my mind, the Bible gives us the best understanding of such things. We are all morally responsible before God, naturally capable of obeying him in freedom, but our moral collapse has led us into a bondage which prevents us from making that proper response. But when the Son sets us free, we are free, indeed, to become the morally responsible people that we were created to be.

And so **we find liberty and life in becoming slaves to God.** In calling our present relationship to God slavery, I want to carefully note two things. First, notice what Paul says in v. 19, “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, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.” He refers to this speech as necessary for human weakness. It would be wrong to

say that he is using the slavery language in an absolute sense. We are not mere slaves but, instead, adopted sons and daughters. Second, notice what makes the difference between the two types of slavery. According to v. 17, they had become “obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which [they] were committed.” Slavery carries with it the idea of compulsion. But both before and after conversion, there is **correspondence between the heart and the situation**. When we were enthralled to sin, we also wanted to sin. And now that we are enthralled to righteousness, our heart wants righteousness, even if imperfectly. And, of course, it is God who brings about this change of heart. The promise of Ezekiel rings true: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26). God changes our hearts, giving us warm, lively hearts, as he transfers us from the fallen kingdom to the kingdom of his Son.

So in slavery to God, we find freedom. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (6:23). Millions of people throughout the history of the world have found this paradox to be true. In fact, many people who have literally been slaves, from the first century Roman Empire until our own day, have found in the gospel internal freedom, hope, and the seeds of external freedom from slavery. The message of Romans 6 - the message of slavery to righteousness - is good news.

As we begin the season of Advent, let us apply these words in a particular way. Advent, in part, is about longing for the return of Jesus. When he comes, he will judge the kingdoms and cultures of this world. So, brothers and sisters, use this season as a time to disconnect yourself from the prevailing ideologies that want to take you captive and bring you into bondage. There may be no moment of Christian history in which we have had need to heed so strongly the words of Paul in Romans 12: “**And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind**” (12:2a). Philosophies, ideologies, and conspiracy theories abound and Satan desires to bring God’s people into mental slavery through these means. But we need not succumb. For we can remember who we are - people in union with Jesus - and present ourselves to righteousness, experiencing life and liberty.