



You Cannot Serve Two Masters

 Romans 6:15-23

 Pastor Jeremy Thomas

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 fbgbible.org

 Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin Street

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

(830) 997-8834

In our study of Romans 6 we find the classic biblical text on sanctification. We've defined the word sanctification. It's a word derived from the concept of holiness and the idea of holiness is the idea that something is being set apart for a specific purpose. In our context it's the believer that is being set apart for God's purpose. We pointed out that there are three phases of sanctification; positional, which is the past phase where once for all at the moment of faith we were set apart by God, saints by calling; experiential, which is the present phase where we are in the process of being set apart, be ye holy as I am holy; and ultimate, which is the future once for all phase when we are face to face with the Lord, when we see Him we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is. Paul's subject in Romans 6:1-8:17 is phase 2, experiential sanctification, and the means by which that takes place during the Church age, which is similar to prior ages but distinct. I want to introduce a few of the proposed means of which we are sanctified during the present age that are prevalent today. Not everyone agrees as to the means. By the means we mean how does the process take place? Who is involved? What is the role of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility? There are a number of views. Some say it is passive, others say it is automatic and others say it is voluntary. The three views all differ on fundamental points of theology. The first view is the passive idea of sanctification. The passive idea is that of Keswick theology. Keswick is a town in Britain and a number of spiritual life conferences were held there in order to work out details related to experiential sanctification. It's not a formal theology but it has been influential. The Keswick view says that the key to victory is realizing that you already have the victory in Christ and as long as you realize you have the victory the Holy Spirit is controlling you. I refer to this as passive sanctification because we do nothing other than realize that we already have victory as long as we realize that God does everything. It is sometimes referred to popularly as the "let go and let God" model of sanctification. If you have heard that expression you have heard what came out of Keswick, England, because that's where the expression came from. In my humble opinion, the Keswick idea is too passive. We do have victory positionally, but that realization alone does not give sufficient attention to passages which put the responsibility on the believer "to abide, to walk and to be filled with the Spirit," all equivalent concepts. It is therefore not a sufficient concept of sanctification. The second view is the automatic idea of sanctification. The automatic idea is that of Reformed theology. Reformed theology, generally speaking, is the theology that arose out of the Protestant Reformation, and in that sense we are not opposed to it because

it is our heritage too. But when I use it in this context I am referring to a view of salvation within Reformed theology that is known as Lordship Salvation. Lordship is the idea that God's sovereignty is such that it eliminates all human involvement, even in the experiential phase of sanctification. It says that sanctification is the sole undertaking of God and He guarantees all that is involved, including the active participation of its subjects so that in sanctification you don't even have to offer yourself to Him. In this view sanctification is guaranteed. Since it is guaranteed then they maintain that all we have to do to identify the true believers is to analyze their life and see if they are performing correctly. Since God is the one who will do it then without it someone is not really saved. The Reformed idea places too much emphasis on God's sovereignty. It does not give sufficient attention to passages which put the responsibility on the believer "to abide, to walk and to be filled by the Spirit." It is therefore not the biblical idea of sanctification. The third view is the voluntary idea of sanctification. The voluntary idea is that of Dispensational theology. Dispensationalism says that God's gracious enablement for sanctification is always available to the believer and that the believer has the responsibility to make use of God's resources by abiding, walking and being filled by the Spirit, all conceptually related ideas. As the believer increasingly learns the word he is able to better abide, walk and be filled so that he increasingly lives a life pleasing to God. The voluntary model may be summarized by saying that God is always supplying His gracious enablement for sanctification to proceed but the believer is to be actively dependent upon Him. When he is, there is passive production of fruit, the fruit of the Spirit. I think this model best accounts for both God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in sanctification as described in the Bible.

In Romans 6, Paul has repeatedly stated that for experiential sanctification to progress we must know what God has sovereignly done for us and reckon (believe) it to be true by voluntarily making a daily presentation of ourselves to Him. Know, reckon and voluntarily present are therefore keys to experiential sanctification. When they all work together fruit is borne, experiential sanctification progresses and a full experience of eternal life is enjoyed. Tom Constable agrees saying, "First, we must "know" certain facts about our union with Christ, specifically that sin no longer possesses the dominating power over the believer that it has over the unbeliever (vv. 3–10). Second, we must "reckon" (believe) these facts to be true of us personally (v. 11). Third, we must "present" ourselves to God in dedication as His slaves to perform righteousness (vv. 12–19). Each of these verbs has the force of an active command. Each represents something every believer should do. These are our basic responsibilities in our progressive sanctification regarding our relationship to sin."¹ These three are essential to the voluntary model of sanctification which is commonly found among Dispensationalists. They put an emphasis on what God has done as well as our responsibility to appropriate those things by faith and present ourselves to Him.

Last time we worked with the master-slave analogy that was hinted at in 6:14 by Paul's use of the word "master" and in 6:16 by Paul's use of the word "slave." The master-slave relationship, of the 1st century Greco-Roman world, was used by Paul to communicate deep spiritual truths to the Roman believers who, Paul says in verse 19, were feeble in their spiritual perception. Since we live 20 centuries later we don't share knowledge of the

master-slave relationship as it existed in Paul's day and so we defined these words and the practice. By "master" Paul is referring to one who has a legal position of authority. Slaves were purchased and therefore legally owned by their master who had authority over the slave's life. By "slave" Paul is referring to the one whose will was swallowed up in the will of the master. One who obeyed the master entirely. Putting the two together, in Paul's day a master had the legal right to dominate and control every aspect of his slave's life. There was no room for the slave to exert his own will. The slave was obligated to render total obedience to the master. A slave could become free if the slave's freedom was purchased by the master or another. This was usually at a pagan temple where it was recorded. Once freed the former slave was prohibited from ever returning to slavery again. This prohibition was difficult to enforce. Slaves who were freed often sold themselves into slavery again.

The entire scenario pictures with great precision the very situation we find ourselves in in the Christian life, and Paul employed it. As unbelievers we were slaves to the sin nature which was our master. It had legal authority over us. Our will was swallowed up in the will of our master, our sinful nature. We were obligated to obey its will and did so willingly. Christ paid the redemption price to free us from slavery to our sin nature but only when we believe in Him are we actually freed and the record of which is kept in the book of life in the heavenly temple. At that point we are prohibited from ever putting ourselves back into slavery under our sinful nature. Yet, this prohibition is difficult to enforce. Often Christians who have been set free once for all do put themselves back into the service of the sin nature again. We call this bondage. This prohibits progressive sanctification from taking place in his life.

Verse 14 states that we are not under law but grace. Verse 15 asks, "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!" The fallacious thought must stem from the common conception that if man has true freedom then he is freed to sin and the further thought that when a man sins he is enjoying his utmost freedom. The thought stems from a failure to understand both freedom and slavery. Jesus taught that he who sins is a slave. John 8:34, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of the sin nature" (author's translation). To sin is to forfeit freedom and grovel at the feet of our sin nature, obeying it as master. The more we sin the more difficult it becomes to not obey our master, the sin nature. For example, take alcohol or drugs. If we drink to get drunk or we do drugs, the effect has a negative feedback that stimulates a greater need and desire to fulfill that need. The effect over time is drinking more and more or doing drugs more and more.

Interestingly, both alcohol and drugs are derived primarily from plants. So in essence we are becoming enslaved to plants. Plants are a part of nature and so man, made in God's image and distinct from nature, is putting himself under nature. To be in bondage to nature is not the way most people addicted to alcohol or drugs think but it is a fact of reality. That nature can be used for good goes without saying, but that nature can also be used for evil goes equally without saying. In the beginning Adam and Eve in their lapse both fell relative to a plant. Noah in his lapse fell relative to a plant. All of them were becoming enslaved to plants. While it is obviously silly

to be enslaved to a plant it is a sad reality for most of the human race. Alcohol and drug dependence is just one example of many forms of nature slavery. At the heart of all dependencies on nature is the worship of nature, idolatry, a substitution of the creation for the Creator. To take drugs or get drunk is not freedom but slavery, you enslave yourself to the lust of the sinful nature which is to submit to nature and worship an idol.

True freedom is the freedom for which Christ set us free, freedom to do righteousness and enjoy all the results which stem from a life well-lived; joy, peace, kindness, et al. When we commit ourselves to righteousness we are serving as a slave of Christ. But when we are a slave to Him we are really free because He is good and the life we live is a life that brings about good.

But verse 16 is saying that we are always slave and never master. Jesus said it this way relative to money, "No one can serve two masters; either he will worship God or he will worship money. Choose this day who you will serve!" He could have applied it to God and anything in creation. The point is you will worship either God or something in creation. What you cannot choose is not to worship. You must worship. But if you choose to worship Christ then you are choosing a good master. Verse 16 says, "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?" So you have no other choice. You can choose to be a slave to the sin nature or a slave to obedience but the one choice you cannot make is to be the master. I suggested last week that the one you listen to the most is the one you will most present yourselves as a slave. So listen to the word of God, allow that to dominate your thinking patterns. 99% of the Christian life is lived in your head, what you are thinking about. Every word and deed comes out of your mind. So it will make a lot of sense when Paul says in Romans 12, be transformed by the renewing of your mind. He doesn't say renew your speech or renew your deeds but renew your mind because the Christian life is lived out of the mind, how you think. From there the other things will change. But you need to have your thinking changed and that comes by hearing the word of God so you can live by faith.

Now the end of who you choose to be a slave to differs radically. On one hand, if you choose to be a slave to the sin nature then what's the result? Death. Think of Israel's experience in Egypt. For four hundred years they died under the hand of the taskmasters as they stomped the mud and straw making bricks day after day to build Pharaoh's kingdom. That is the physical picture of dying under the mastery of the sin nature. Did the master care about them? No. Does the sin nature master care about you? No. The master only wants you to fulfill his lusts, his desires. Now what does it mean by death? What kind of death? "Death" here is "death" in the general sense of separation from joy, life, light, all the good things of life. Try putting yourself under the mastery of your sin nature and letting your body fulfill all its lusts and I guarantee you will find that your life becomes more and more tangled in evil. You will find yourself lying and deceiving and cheating and doing whatever you can to cover your tracks. The book of Proverbs calls that way the way of destruction because after a while everything in your life is a mess. On the other hand, if you choose to be a slave to obedience then verse 16 says the result is

“righteousness.” This is righteousness in the general sense of moral goodness, peace, contentedness, relaxed mental attitude, joy. In other words, if you put yourself under the mastery of righteousness then you will find that your life is full of goodness and stability and security. Proverbs calls this the way of life because that is true life indeed. So then, as a believer you have a choice to make today and every day. Choose you this day whom you will serve, but I encourage you to make the wise choice and not the foolish.

Now with that said, in verse 17, Paul is reminded that the reports he had received about the believers at Rome had been reports that they had been making the wise choice and so he bursts forth into praise. **But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of the sin nature, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from the sin nature, you became slaves of righteousness.** Now, why would Paul thank God for what they had done? Because they had not done these things without God! God is always involved in our sanctification. The word **thanks** actually is the word “grace” and reminds us that God’s grace is always available to us so we can grow in sanctification. Apart from His grace we could never grow. So it is always of first importance that we give **thanks...to God** because apart from Him there would be no sanctification.

What is Paul giving thanks to God about? Two things. First, **that though** the Roman believers **were slaves of the sin nature**, they **became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which they were committed.** They had voluntarily utilized God’s grace. There are several things here to observe. For one, the words **though you were slaves of the sin nature** is the imperfect tense. The imperfect is one of three past tenses in the Greek. In English we just have the past tense, in Greek they have three past tenses. So when we translate these we have to use circumlocution; that means, talk around it, elaborate. This is part and parcel of translating from any language. That’s why it’s so important to know the original languages. Furthermore, there are three uses of the imperfect and that gets into interpretation but we won’t go into all that. This one refers to a continual action in past time. The point is this was not a one-time action in the past that they were slaves of the sin nature but a continual action. In other words, they **were** continually **slaves of the sin nature.** This is the time when they were unbelievers, just as the time when you were an unbeliever, and during that time the sin nature was their master and your master. So then they and you were obligated to render obedience to the sin nature. They and you could do no other. For two, however, observe that things had changed now that they had become believers, they had learned **obedience from the heart to that form of teaching to which they were committed.** The words **you were committed** are in the passive voice and should be translated “entrusted.” There was a form of teaching that they were entrusted to or put under. That’s what brought about the change. It’s not saying they committed themselves to this teaching, though that may have been true. It’s just saying that their spiritual lives were entrusted to a form of teaching. What it means is that when they became believers God entrusted them to a new form of teaching, something they had not been under before. God expected that this new form of teaching would bring about a change in their lives as it renews the mind. We may not be too committed to it but He is committed to using it to bring about change in our lives. As we listen to it and apply it to ourselves it

impacts us; changes our thinking patterns and thereby our words, how we respond to others, how we speak to others and our deeds, how we act toward others, how we behave. The believers at Rome had clearly listened to this teaching and applied it to themselves for Paul says they had become **obedient from the heart**. Because their minds had been impacted by the truth they had learned a new way to live life. This is what God wants for all of us. That way of life is according to that **form of teaching**. What exactly is **that form of teaching**? That **form of teaching** must be the principle of living that verses 14 and 15 insist that believers are now under. What is it? Grace. Grace is a new way of living in dependence upon the Spirit of God activated by faith in the word of God. These two always go together and are adequately attested through the NT. Take Galatians 3, Paul's challenge to the Galatians who were putting themselves under the principles of legalism. Paul said, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" Of course you can't be perfected by the flesh. There is only one way to be perfected and that is "by the Spirit." Now how is that life way of perfect triggered? By faith. Galatians 2, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God..." So it is by faith, at which time the Spirit of God lives through us. This is all the grace mechanics of the spiritual life. Therefore, there is but one form of teaching to which we and all believers have been entrusted and that is grace teaching. God has provided grace by the Spirit of God who lives through us as we depend upon Him in humble faith. Paul is praising God for the fact that the Roman believers had taken advantage of this grace way of living.

Turn to Acts 20:27. I want to show that the only form of teaching that any Christian should obey is the grace teaching of the word of God. Everything else is either licentiousness or legalism. In Acts 20 we find Paul's meeting with the Ephesian elders at Miletus just before he goes to Jerusalem, knowing what will befall him and that he is never to return. On this occasion he reminds them in verse 27 of his history with them, "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God." Paul had a teaching ministry at Ephesus that covered the whole Bible. In verse 28 he gives the Ephesian elders a charge, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." No one is immune from being deceived. Verse 29, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. 32And now," this is what I want you to see because the picture is Paul is leaving. These men are not going to be able to turn to Paul to solve their problems. Paul is leaving and he's never coming back. What's his final charge? "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to" do what? "To build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified." You see what God and the word of His grace can do? It can build you up spiritually and give you reward status among those who are sanctified. Paul couldn't continue to be in that place. Paul didn't want them to depend upon Him and always turn to Him. Paul wanted them to turn back to God and to the word of God's grace. And if I ever leave here I hope you remember this because if you think that me leaving

you is leaving you out in the wind spiritually to blow away, think again. It's not going to. I'm continually commending you to God and the word of His grace because His grace is sufficient. People can't be there to hold your hand all the time. What is there all the time is what I'm giving you, a form of teaching that is characterized by grace! And if you let anyone spy out your liberty that you have in Jesus Christ and bring you into the bondage of legalism, following silly, extra-biblical commandments that someone says you have to follow or else you're not spiritual, then you're a fool!

So when you turn back to Romans 6:17 and you see the expression **that form of teaching**, the only form of teaching anywhere in the context is grace teaching. You are under grace and that means the way you live is by humble, faithful dependence upon the Holy Spirit. That's active dependence with the result of passive production of fruit. Don't try to crank out the Christian life because you aren't going to crank out anything of value by the flesh. Just do like the Roman believers here and learn obedience from the heart to grace teaching!

Now the second thing that Paul praises God here for is verse 18 and this is necessary to the former, **and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness**. See, you're always a slave. It's just that being a slave of righteousness is actually freedom from bondage. What Paul is looking at here is that moment where you went from being legally obligated to the sin nature to being legally obligated to your new nature. You were an unregenerate man legally obligated to obey your master, the sin nature, but when you believed in Christ you became a regenerate man with a new nature. You still have the old sin nature but it's not your master. The new nature is your master, you are obligated to obey it now. The tenses are both aorist passives, **you were freed...you have been enslaved**. In other words, the switch in legal obligation happened in a moment of time. Now you owe the righteous nature, not the sin nature. The **righteousness** here refers to that new nature that you have that wants to please God. You didn't have this disposition before you were freed from the sinful nature. All you had was the desires of sin and evil. But now you have a new disposition that wants to please God and that is the disposition you are legally obligated to. You may not always obey it, that's the struggle we have, but as far as law is concerned, you are legally obligated to obey it. That's why the analogy of the master-slave is so powerful. The freed slave was prohibited from ever selling himself back into slavery. He often did but he was not supposed to let that happen. The same story is true for you. You have been freed from being a slave to the sin nature and you are prohibited from ever putting yourself back under its authority. It has no rightful authority over you. You do not have to obey it. You now belong to Christ and are obligated to obey your new disposition of righteousness.

Now verse 19 we've covered, but briefly again, Paul explains **I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh**. You see here that despite verse 17, how they had become "obedient from the heart" to grace teaching they were still in transition. They didn't suddenly become sinlessly perfect. No believer becomes sinlessly perfection in their experience until the resurrection. There is a weakness of the flesh that is brought over into the Christian life that hinders our spiritual growth. Paul says, **For just as you presented your members as**

slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness. He's talking about their past lives as unbelievers and do you see the downward trend as they submitted to the sin nature over and over and over? As an unbeliever when you turn your body over to impurity and lawlessness over and over the more complex your lawlessness becomes as you weave a tapestry of sin patterns together into complex evil. The bible looks at evil in a simple way and as a complex way. By simple evil I mean acts of evil, an act here, an act there, but by complex evil I mean a whole meshwork of evil acts all involved and supporting one another, such as a criminal organization like the mafia or a gang or a fraudulent business. Those don't form overnight, they form due to the fact that you sin, simple evil, and then you do it more and more until you've built a complex system of evil around you. It's a dark world there. That tendency is part of the downward trend of an unbeliever continually acting on this sin nature. They don't get better, they get worse. They may hide their sin better but if you could you'd see they are on a steady decline. They don't all decline at the same rate, they don't all act on their impulses to the same degree, but there is a steady decline. They can do no other and so if these people become believers they carry over some of the sinful habit patterns that they developed as unbelievers. Now Paul says, turn that around, **now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.** Do the opposite of what you did before. Incline in spiritual growth; He wants to see a steady incline in their spiritual growth. And the more they present their bodies as slaves to righteousness the more they make it a habit pattern to make this presentation and the more they will grow. So in **sanctification** you're putting off old habit patterns and putting on new ones. You're learning to stop presenting your members to the sin nature and learning to present them to righteousness. And the more you do it day by day the more **sanctification** results, the more you are being set apart to be used by God for His glory. That's what this is talking about. Paul is saying he wants to see their sanctification go like this; if we have growth on the x axis and time on the y axis then you start your spiritual life here and there's to be this upward trend. In reality it looks like this, but note the overall trend. So there's the idea of experiential sanctification and Paul is aiming for the ideal, this constant upward trend. We're not to be content with a little sin here and a little sin there. We don't give in and say, well, that's just the way it is, we're going to sin. Verse 15 says no, no sin is permitted. The way we're supposed to think is that we need to daily present our bodies to the new nature of righteousness so that sanctification results, this upward trend.

Now in verse 20 he says something interesting. **For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.** He's returning to who we were when we were unregenerate, when the sin nature was our master and we it's slave and he says, then **you were free in regard to righteousness.** In other words, you couldn't do **righteousness.** How could you do righteousness? If you could then you would be living contrary to your master, the sin nature! It's not possible for the sin nature to dispose you to righteousness. It's the sin nature for crying out loud. That's why I have said over the years that there's no such thing as free will relative to an unbeliever and his sin nature. You're not ever going to choose righteousness; the sin nature is disposed toward sin, not righteousness. And if you mix these up then you've got righteousness coming out of the sin nature. But Paul says, at that time **you were free with regard to righteousness.** You had none. None are righteous, no not

one. And that is because the sin nature demands sin. You gladly comply. Just like an Israelite in Egypt. You gladly comply and continue to build Pharaoh's kingdom. But now you have been set free from the sin nature and you are free to righteousness. You may want to go back, the Israelites wanted to go back. But God said thou shalt not go back that way. You shall never enslave yourselves again.

In summary, there are the passive, automatic and voluntary models of sanctification. The passive is the Keswick view, the let go and let God idea, it doesn't lay enough stress on the believer's responsibility to make this presentation, to abide, to walk by faith, all those related concepts. The automatic idea is the Reformed view, the God's going to do it, it too does not lay enough believer's responsibility to make this presentation, to abide, to walk by faith, etc...The voluntary idea is the Dispensational view. It has always emphasized that God's grace is continuously available, if we will only avail ourselves of it by making this presentation, abiding, walking by faith, then the Spirit of God will work through us. In verse 17 Paul gave thanks to God because His grace is always available and because the Roman believers had availed themselves of God's grace by becoming obedient from the heart to the grace form of teaching that God had entrusted them to. Apart from grace teaching true spiritual growth can never occur. In verse 18 they had been freed from the shackles of the sin nature and had become slaves of righteousness, which is true freedom. In verse 19 Paul spoke in human terms of the master-slave relationship because when they were unregenerate they built up habitual sin patterns that they brought over into the regenerate life that caused a spiritual dullness. Just as they had done so now they are to do the opposite and build up habitual patterns of righteousness that will bring about progressive sanctification, an upward trend of spiritual growth as new patterns of living by grace are established. In verse 20, when they were unregenerate this was impossible, because when they were slaves of the sin nature they were free with respect to righteousness. It's not possible for the unregenerate man to produce righteousness. But now that we are regenerate, a whole new way of living is made accessible to us by grace. So let us daily employ it and humbly depend upon Him in faith, making this presentation of ourselves to Him so that the Spirit might work through us to produce righteousness.

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 6:23.