
Freed from Sin's Enslaving Power

Romans 6:15-23

Pastor Russ Kennedy

Why do so many Christians struggle with sin? I am not talking about new believers. I am not talking about believers who have no teaching. I am talking about Christians who sit in teaching churches and have a good working knowledge of the Bible – why is there a steady parade of them in our counseling ministry? Christians are enslaved to vices of the heart and the body.

How should we think about this? Do we just say, “Well, they must not be Christians...” Yet they repent of their sin. They try to work hard to overcome it. And have difficulty. Why? Listen, we can discuss this and what comes to mind are the big sins, the stuff you don't do. But what you? Do you have a sin that keeps coming back? You hate it. You fight it. You ask God to help you with it. You talk to people about it. You read the best books on overcoming sin. You have accountability partner. You carry around a picture of Jesus in your pocket... Ok, just kidding.

Does the Bible help us understand this? Yes, I think so. In many texts we are taught about how sin can enslave people. We are also taught how to deal with the potential and even the problem of enslaving sins. We have one of those texts before us. But we do not open this text without some context. What have learned that prepares us for these helpful and freeing verses?

We are a part of two worlds. We were born in Adam and are now in Christ. We are a part of this world and we have within us the Spirit who belongs to the new creation. We no longer live under law. We live under grace. We have been given and are still being given the power to overcome sinning. This comes because we have been placed into Christ. Since we are in Christ, we have died and have been raised. We must believe these truths. They are our present realities.

The first half of Romans 5 teaches us:

We have union and identification with Christ.

We may not live as though sin does not matter.

We may not live as though sin has control.

We have been delivered from the old life and are empowered for the new life (v.4-11).

We have been delivered from the condemnation of the law to the freedom and power of grace (v.14ff).

We must not let sin master us because sin is not going to master us (v.13-14).

I have come to see Romans 6-8 as absolutely essential for people who have a right standing with God – that is, they are justified – to please and glorify God in every aspect of life – that is, they are growing in grace. You must not only understand the meaning of the text, but the essential structure that frames it in and the two major doctrines taught in it. All of this informs and builds our faith – what we believe – so that we will have grace to obey.

The Principle of our Obedience to Christ

(v.15-19)

By way of an extended illustration Paul clarifies for us how our union with Christ and our surrender/yielding to Him is functioning. Paul helps us by using an illustration that would be quite familiar to his hearers and listeners. For us today, this is a bit more difficult since most of you are not personally familiar with slavery.

¹⁵What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

¹⁷But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

In its Concern

(v.15-16)

He begins by raising and answering the second major question. Since we are under grace and not law, we do not have license to sin. Now once again, notice the Bible's way of reasoning. Paul turns our thinking a bit on its head. Christians are not supposed to sin. But this is not because we have laws that tell us what to do and what not to do. Rather, we are not to keep on sinning because we have a Master, the Lord Jesus to whom we yield and surrender. We make sin our master when we yield to it. We make Christ our master when we yield to Him.

Christians then do not sin because of Law, but because of their Lord.

In its Contrast

(v.17-18)

What graciousness here as Paul acknowledges their good beginning in these things. Though he has those in Rome who will raise the questions, he is glad to be able to express gratitude that they are not dominated by that thinking.

Verses 17-18 are at the heart of Romans 6. There is little to add to the simplicity of how they summarize what we need to learn. Listen again to those verses: *"Thank God! Once you were slaves of sin, but now you wholeheartedly obey this teaching we have given you. Now you are free from your slavery to sin, and you have become slaves to righteous living."* We were once slaves to sin. We now have an obedience from the heart by faith.

We are believing and being committed to truth. Thus, once for all, at the cross, having been set free from sin, its realm, rule and ruin, we have become mastered by righteousness.

In its Command**(v.19)**

At the heart of this is a command. Just like you used to continually present yourself to sin for its use, so now continually present yourself to God for His use. While the one resulted in slavery to sin and impurity, the other leads to slavery to righteousness resulting in transformation or growth in grace.

This is an intentional obedience. It does not happen to you. The truths that frame it do. But the command here is something you set yourself in many practical ways to obey.

The Products of our Enslavement to Christ**(v.20-23)**

This section develops the implications of our union and surrender to Christ. So while there are our responsibilities, there is also God's initiative. He unites us with Christ and places us in the realm of grace so that we do not have to sin. Being in the realm of sin leads to death. Being surrendered to God, being God's slave yields the fruit of growing in grace and holiness.

²⁰When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. ²²But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. ²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In its Contrast**(v.20-22)**

Paul wants us to see the terms of our slavery so as to motivate us to serve God. When we were in sin, we were without righteousness. That produced all kinds of fruit, evil thoughts, desires and actions of which we are ashamed now and resulted in death. But now, having died to sin, we are truly alive for righteousness. Its final outcome is life eternal.

Further, there is the great paradox here, as Stott points out. Each freedom to sin has its corresponding slavery. And our slavery to God has its corresponding freedom to live and please God.

In its Cause**(v.23)**

Why is this so? Because sin has wages but eternal life is a gift. Once again, he points us to the importance of not banking on works but believing and receiving the gift of life.

But there is more to that here. Eternal life is not merely a future life with God in the heaven and in new heavens and new earth. We often think of eternal life as beginning at our death and going on for eternity as though it is something we enter. *The Bible never speaks of it this way.*

Eternal life is your present possession. You have it now. It is the life of God in the soul through the union of the Word and Spirit in your soul. When you were born from above, raised from spiritual deadness and given spiritual life, you received the life that is eternal at that instant. The gift of God is His life into your soul so that you spiritually live forever.

Now, this is why we do not grow in grace by Law. The Law brings death. The Law kills. The Law rules over the realm of death. To sin is to step into the place where sin rules, law

reigns and death results. But we have been made alive. We live by life. Growing in grace and holiness is simply living the life, the eternal life that God has given you.

Reflect and Respond

All of us by nature are enslaved to sin – we don't rule sin, sin rules us. God is the decisive deliverer from sin – and our efforts, though real and crucial, are dependent on Him. Without this deliverance from sin and the resulting new direction of righteousness and sanctification, we have not and will not inherit eternal life.

- We have union and identification with Christ.
- We may not live as though sin does not matter.
- We may not live as though sin has control.
- We have been delivered from the old life and are empowered for the new life (v.4-11).
- We have been delivered from the condemnation of the law to the freedom and power of grace (v.14ff).
- We must not let sin master us because sin is not going to master us (v.13-14).
- We must obey truth from the heart, having been freed from sin and become God's slaves (v.17-18).

We must present ourselves to God for His use, rather than presenting ourselves to sin for its use.

We must understand that we may not live as though sin were not deadly and sanctification were not demanded.

Justification always brings transformation leading to glorification. Our transformation is decisively God's work and dependently our work. So, those who have been justified by grace will grow in grace. Sin is deadly and holiness is demanded. Isn't it glorious then that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.