



“Slave to Righteousness”¹

Romans 6:15-23

We all know that our actions communicate things about ourselves. That’s why we say “Actions speak louder than words.” Let me give a very different kind of scenario. Let’s say you go to Meijer this week. You’re looking for something you cannot find. So, you look around for a Meijer worker. Quickly, you spot someone wearing a blue vest that says “Meijer” on it. There’s a nametag attached to the vest, and they’re putting items on a shelf. Do you think that person works at Meijer? What gave it away?!

The dress and the actions made it clear who this person was. But even more than this, Meijer requires that kind of dress. Meijer requires those kinds of actions. It’s *because* Meijer is the boss that Meijer staff act and behave in those ways. Can you imagine if you went to Meijer and everyone dressed and acted that way? It wouldn’t make any sense! But we understand that your boss in many ways determines your actions.

Obviously, depending on the type of boss you work for and the company atmosphere, this could be a great thing or a horrible thing. Being under a good boss can lead to greater personal development. You don’t care that there are as many rules because you believe in the mission. You know you’re cared for; so, you do what needs to be done. But, being under an oppressive boss can lead to discouragement and be stifling. Maybe for a while, you love the job. It gives you good pay, and that’s all you’re really concerned about. You put up with all the mental, emotional and relational strain because you’re getting paid. But over time, you realize that the environment is not helping you in your personal development. Money is simply like having a bone thrown at you, and you wonder how you’re going to escape.

I give this illustration because it’s very similar to the illustration the apostle Paul is using in the text we’re studying today from Romans 6:15-23. If you haven’t turned there, go there now. In a few moments I’ll read it for us, but let me give a little backdrop before I do that. Remember that Paul has entered into Romans 6 arguing that grace doesn’t lead to a “who cares?” mentality about living just lives. Instead, Paul argues that God’s grace necessitates growth in godly ways of living! In the beginning of chapter 6, Paul shows us how grace isn’t dependent on sinning. Our relationship with God isn’t simply a “I-sin-and-God-forgives” relationship. We do sin, but now that we are united with Jesus, we have the resurrection power of Jesus to give us obedience. Last week, we also saw that God’s intention is to murder sin’s control and influence in a believer’s life. Therefore, we can and must seek after God and his ways.

In verses 15-23, we are going to see that **Your master determines your actions and destiny**. But Paul presses this a little more to apply it to the Christian by emphasizing that God, as a good Master, has set you free, thus determining your actions and destiny in Christ! We’ll flesh this out a little more, but let’s pray before I read verses 15-23.

¹ This manuscript is still in the rough draft phase. I recommend you utilize these notes in conjunction to the sermon to gain greater insight and clarity.

¹⁵ *What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!* ¹⁶ *Do 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?* ¹⁷ *But 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,* ¹⁸ *and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.* ¹⁹ *I 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.* ²⁰ *For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.* ²¹ *But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.* ²² *But 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.* ²³ *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* ²

Your master determines your actions and your destiny. This is Paul's premise. What Paul does here is what's called "Deductive Reasoning." He gives you the main idea and then he explains his main point. He doesn't really even debate the main point. Instead, what he does is he takes an imagined question. Responds to it and then explains with an illustration. So, let's start with the question: **What then? Are we to sin because we are no under law but under grace?** You might be thinking, "Why is Paul asking this again?!" This question is almost identical to the question in verse 1 of chapter 6. But keep in mind that the question isn't identical. When studying the Bible, we should notice nuances like this. In verse 1, Paul is saying that some might wonder if grace is dependent on sinning. "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" In other words, is continual sinning the only way grace can abound because where sin abounds, grace super-abounds? Paul's answer is *no way!* But here, Paul is saying that some might say, "Ok, we get that we're not supposed to be outright immoral, but it still sounds like sin is to be tolerated in the Christian life." If we're not under the law, but under grace, then how we live doesn't matter that much, right?

Honestly, I think this is how many professing Christians live. They don't want to be notably immoral, but they want a way to justify their sin; so, they think their sin is tolerable. Their sins are, as one author puts it "Respectable." We don't do the bad things, but we might gossip, get sinfully angry at the clerk at the grocery store, or we don't speak out for justice when we should. Then when we're confronted, we say, "Well, I struggle with that," and yet we're not really struggling. We have it in our lives without any fight against it. Why? "Because we're righteous in Christ," we say. We're justified! And, after all, those sins aren't that bad, right?

This past week, I came across a quote from a woman named Jen Wilkin, and I think this quote describes the predicament Paul's addressing. She writes, ". . . **we often think of the gospel as justification only. We understand that we have been freed from sin's penalty, but then any conversation about**

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 6:15–23.

obedience to God can very quickly be labeled as legalism. I believe that the gospel is good news in our justification AND in our sanctification” (Jen Wilkin).

Paul believes the gospel applies to our being declared righteous and also to our growth in godliness. Are we to sin because we’re not under the law but under grace? Paul’s response is as emphatic as it was in verse 1. This is a strong negative term in the Greek. Absolutely not! Or, as I said a couple weeks ago, in modern vernacular, it’s all caps “NOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” for anyone who says, “Well, sin can be tolerated in our lives,” is missing essential truths about the gospel because **if you trust Jesus, that means that you have a new Master, and that new Master determines your actions and your destiny.** But before we simply assume that you have a new master, let’s look at verse 16 and discover how

1. Who’s your master: sin or God (v. 16)?

Verse 16 says, “Do 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?”³

The phrase “do you not know” in the Greek is Paul’s way of actually saying, “You do know!” For anyone to ask the question they’re asking, they have to deny truths that they know to be absolutely true. By the way, this is a good truth to keep in mind when you hear people on opposing sides debate one another. There’s something called the “Slippery Slope” fallacy. It’s when you take a position to the extreme and then accuse the other person of believing it. Most humans do not take their beliefs to extremes, and one of the reasons is because there’s a bigger system their beliefs fall in. For the gospel, people could say, “Well, if you believe in a God that gracious, you’re saying you can then sin with impunity.” Paul’s response is, “You’re missing a whole lot of other things. I don’t believe that because grace means so much more!”

Here, Paul helps us to understand some other truths about grace, but what Paul does is use an illustration to help us to get the point. The illustration of slavery fills verses 16-23. And, in eight verses, there are 6 times words related to slavery are used. Now, immediately, you might be thinking, “I don’t like the slavery illustration. How oppressive!” Keep in mind a couple things. First, in the Roman context, slavery was highly common and therefore very quickly grasped – especially considering that potentially upwards to 20% of the population were slaves. But does this mean Paul should use this illustration, just because it’s a common practice? Well, second, using an illustration doesn’t mean you approve of the behavior. Jesus uses an illustration of a shrewd manager. He’s not saying that the manager was being godly. He was using the illustration to prove a point. Finally, please keep in mind there were all different types of slavery in the first century – many of which was not like the enslavement we are familiar with in the 18th, 19th, 20th and 21st centuries.

Either way, in verse 19, Paul qualifies the illustration. He says, “¹⁹I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations.”⁴ Now, what does Paul mean by this? Some think he’s saying that because of the Roman church’s sinfulness, they’re too immature to understand. But the term “natural” does not have to mean sinful. We often think that “limits” mean morally wrong. But it’s not morally wrong to have limits. I agree with one commentator named Douglas Moo, who wrote that the “human nature produces a weakness in understanding that can be overcome in this life only by the use of . . . analogies”

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 6:16.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 6:19.

(Moo, p. 404). Analogies help us to understand. Praise God for analogies! Praise God for imperfect analogies, too!

Keep that in mind. Paul's not using an illustration to give absolute validity to slavery. No. Instead, he's using the illustration to make a specific point. And, what's the point? It's verse 16. If you present yourself to someone as an obedient slave, you are their slave. In Roman culture, you could give yourself as a slave to someone. And if you gave yourself to someone, you were their slave. They became your master. And therefore, your master determines your behavior, and your behavior determines who your master is.

But Paul jumps into this illustration immediately. He spiritualizes it right off-the-bat. He says that you're either a slave to sin (leading to death) or a slave to obedience (leading to righteousness). The accusation against Paul was essentially, "If people aren't under the Law, there's going to be chaos. So, we need to have the Law as a Master." But Paul says that's not one of the options. The Law will never save. The Law was never intended to be a master. The Law shows our sin and our sin attaches to the Law and condemns us. So, Paul says that there's only two choices.

Now, please hear me. I hope everyone is listening. There's no third option that Paul gives. Paul says that *everyone* is a slave of something or someone. It's intriguing how I can have conversations with people who refuse to trust Jesus, and it seems as though their reason for rejecting is because they want to be free. Christianity to them is a straightjacket. God is a killjoy to keep people from having fun. So, they say they want to be free! But are they really free? It's sad to me because they do not see that they're enslaved to a bad master. Sin deceives them. They think they're fine and free, but they're in bondage to what people think about them. They're in bondage to mere earthly pleasures. They're in bondage to porn, to money, to power, to control. They're not free. They're enslaved. And, if this is you, you might have the same response an addict has: "I can quit whenever I want to." But is that true? You know that even if you change behavior, you're just changing behavior. Your master of sin (not wanting God's glory) is still in control.

So, either sin is your master or, Paul says, "Obedience" is your master. This is kind of intriguing to me. Why did Paul say "obedience?" Why didn't he say "God?" Well, in verse 18, he says "slaves of righteousness," and then in verse 22, he says we have become "slaves of God." While these terms all have somewhat different nuances, I think the reason why Paul says "obedience" here is because he's personifying sin, and then he is going to personify "obedience." But the term obedience, I think, has more richness. In verse 17, Paul talks about being obedient from the heart that standard of teaching. I'll comment on this more in a bit, but I believe this takes us all the way back to Romans 1:5 when Paul talks about the obedience of faith. The obedience of faith, I believe refers to God counting faith as obedience, and if you have trusted Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then obedience will flow through faith. This obedience is accepted because it's a recognition that you cannot save yourself and you need the Lord. This is relational. It's turning to God knowing you deserve punishment, but resting on his grace to forgive and give you peace with him! So, I believe that presenting yourself to obedience means that you look to Jesus and depend on him.

So, getting back to verse 16, Paul's not saying here that if you sin, then sin is your master. And, he's not saying that if you externally obey, you have obedience as your master. You have to present yourself first. Then actions flow. Verse 16 says that the one to whom you present yourself to is your master. If you present yourself to sinfulness, then sinfulness is your master and that will lead to death. And if you present yourself to obedience (meaning, trust Jesus), then righteous acts will follow.

With this simple illustration, I have to ask you then, “Who is your Master?” Who have you presented yourself to? Remember that “sin” refers any act, thought or deed that diminishes the glory of God. Are you ok with living that way? Do you love other things more than God, and are you good with that? Or, have you presented yourself to obedience? Have you humbled yourself before the Lord Jesus? Do you genuinely want to follow him or do you simply want him as a co-pilot or a “help” when things get really difficult? A Master doesn’t take back-seat. A Master is the one in control. Who’s your Master?

Now, in trying to answer that question, some of you might be a little confused. You might say, “I think Jesus, but I still sin. And, there are times I don’t want to submit to him.” The remaining verses qualify what Paul means by what he’s saying. So, let’s look at verses 17-18 and see how

2. **Has God freed you to be a slave of righteousness (vv. 17-18)?**

Read verses 17-18 with me again: ¹⁷ But 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, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ⁵

In these verses, Paul shows how someone transfers from enslavement to sin and then enslavement to God. This is extremely important for multiple reasons, but remember the argument that people could bring against Paul. Is sin tolerable in the Christian’s life? Paul’s answer is NO because God has become our Master. How does God’s mastery affect how we live? Well, first look at the contrast Paul brings out. He says you were once slaves of sin. This is the reality for all human beings. Paul’s already covered how we are all born unrighteous and therefore we suppress the truth and glory of God. Being enslaved to sin means we then sin. But Paul says something happened in the Roman Christians (and in all of us here who are genuine Christians).

God gives heart-obedience. This is an extremely important point to ensure that you understand. As a parent, I’ve now been parenting for 14 years, and I’ve seen a difference between willing obedience and external conformity. Sometimes when I’ve told my child to obey, they’ll do it immediately with a smile on their face. Other times, I’ve had it happen when I’ve reiterated what I told them, and their response was an angry, “I’m doing it!” Now, are they really obeying if they have that attitude? No. Obedience relates to the heart. Is there not only willingness, but a trust in the person giving the rule? Jesus consistently called people to trust him and love him. Listen, if you don’t depend on the Lord and love God as your motivation, then you’re not really obeying. But praise God if you have become obedient from the heart! God has set you free.

God also sets us free from sin by **devoting us to “the standard of teaching.”** As I said earlier, the word obedience seems to connect with Romans 1:5, and the phrase “the obedience of faith.” Trusting God is counted as obedience and it leads to obedience. And if this is the case, then the “standard of teaching” is specifically referring to the gospel of Jesus. This fits the context of the entire book. The teaching is the good news of the victorious One who came to this sinful world and took on human flesh. This One, Jesus, lived in perfect Obedience as a Second Adam, and became a new representative. On the cross, he took the punishment that people in Adam deserved. And, for all who turn from their sin and trust in Jesus, they are placed “in Christ” so-to-speak, and they are given the righteousness of God as a gift – having their sins forgiven. As a result, they’re free to obey the Lord.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 6:16–18.

This is the “teaching” to which Paul is referring, but notice that he doesn’t just say that you’re obedient to the teaching. He says that you’re obedient to the standard of teaching. I actually wish the ESV would say “imprint” or “stamp” of teaching. The idea of this word is that we are stamped and conformed to the teaching itself. The gospel isn’t simply a message that is mentally affirmed. It’s a message that conforms you to its mold. The reality is that if you can declare the message and your life isn’t changed by it, you haven’t been given to its mold. But for those who trust Jesus, God has given you to the gospel message, and that means you are given over to its molding influence! How can we continue in sin if the gospel molds us to our Savior’s image? Paul now goes on and shows that all of this is a gift of God’s grace because:

God alone rescues people from sin’s bondage. If you read verse 16, you could read it thinking that you are the one who must rescue yourself. When Paul you present yourself to sin or you present yourself to God, you can think, “I decide and I save myself!” Many people believe this. They think God has no influence on drawing them, showing them Christ. They have to be completely *free*. But the problem with humanity is that we’re not free. We’re bound in our sins. And, being bound to sin means that we are bound to *not* wanting God’s glory. Well, if we’re bound not wanting God’s glory, how could we ever want to present ourselves to God as our Master?

This is where verse 17 comes in. Paul thanks God ultimately because the only way we could have God as our Master is by God rescuing us out of enslavement to sin and giving us a new heart. Paul says to the Roman Christians that they were once slaves of sin. And, by the way, this is the reality for the whole human race. We’re born sinners. But then Paul says that you “have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed.” The final phrase “to which you were committed” does not mean that we committed ourselves to the teaching. But, instead it means that God committed us to the teaching. Or, as one commentator writes, this speaks “of believers being handed over to the imprint or stamp of teaching” (Schreiner, p. 335).

Paul praises God that God handed the Roman Christians over to the gospel-mold. I remember years ago, talking with a former member of Ventura, and they said to me that their contribution to their salvation was *running away* from God. This is the problem, isn’t it? Yet for many people throughout the ages, God came in and overpowered the slave-master of sin, and through Jesus and his sacrifice and resurrection, he gave us new hearts that love the Lord, and now we have a new Master – the Eternally Glorious God.

As a result, verse 18 says we’re set free from sin’s enslavement, and now we are slaves of righteousness. Ventura, I want you to grasp something very important in this phrase. If you are a Christian, you *are* a slave of righteousness. This is your position. I want you to grasp this because I think many Christians don’t believe this statement. I think more Christians focus on the sins in their lives than they do their status in Christ. If I said to you, “Do you believe you’re a sinner,” many of you would jump on that and say, “Oh yes! I know.” But if I said, “Are you righteous?” Or, “Are you holy?” You’d say, “Whoa, I have a long way to go.” Did you realize that your status, Christian, is righteous and holy? Paul writes to churches calling them “saints,” which means you are a “holy one!”

But, I sin, Pastor Timothy. And to that, I say, “Praise the Lord your status is not defined by what you do!” You are a slave of righteousness! And this status ought to be freeing to you because your status affects *how you live*. This is how Paul argues in all of his letters. You are holy; therefore, live holy. You are righteous; therefore, live righteously. And if you say, “No, I’m not righteous.” Then either you’re saying

you are an unbeliever or you're calling God a liar! Either way, you need to turn to Jesus and know the freedom he gives!

But if you are a believer, you are a slave to righteousness. Therefore, how should you live? Well, Paul said in verse 16 that whoever you are presented to, you will then obey that Master. And, if you now say, "But I'm weak. I still disobey." To that I say to you that God committed you to the gospel-mold. He set you free and made you a slave of righteousness. Is God not going to follow through on what he began? Verses 17-18 come to you to bolster your confidence in the Lord, not yourself! You are no longer a slave to sin. Therefore, Paul goes on to show us that

3. Are you becoming what you are (vv. 19-23)?

Read the end of verse 19 with me first: 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.⁶

You are a slave to righteousness therefore live like it. But Paul puts it more strongly. He says just as you presented your members as slaves. Hold on. Your members refers to your body, your mind, your desires. It's YOU. You gave yourself to impurity and to lawlessness. The words simply describe the multiplicity of ways we can sin. Whether you were a child and you disobeyed your parents and hit your sibling or you grew up and pursued after other sinful ways, you experienced the stronghold of sin.

Notice how Paul says sin works. You can't simply sin and keep it under your control. Many people who think God's a killjoy and sin is great need to hear these words. Sin leads to greater sinfulness. And, even if it seems fun, it has murderous intends for you. As I think through this idea of Paul's, and the deceptive nature of sin's enslavement, it makes me think of the human trafficking industry and how human traffickers will often start off by befriending people. They'll give great gifts and make people feel accepted. Then they've got them. Eventually, the person is under their control as the trafficker will pretend to be friends and then abuse. This is not freedom. Yet sadly, even people being trafficked will think they're fine while the slave-master is owning them!

But Paul takes the idea even further here, if you would give yourself so completely to sin, give yourself that completely to the Lord. With the same amount of vigor and strength, give yourself to the Lord! After all, isn't the Lord greater than sin? Ventura, does this sound like having a new master means we tolerate sin? Paul is saying if you're being molded by the gospel, and you know the love of God in rescuing you, you should have greater zeal for godliness than for sin! For you to tolerate sin is to go against your identity as a slave of righteousness.

So, live as a slave of righteousness. And, as you live this way, guess what? You'll see a progression of growth. Paul says you'll experience sanctification. This word sanctification refers to growth in holiness in your practical living. Just like sin leads to more sin in your life so it is with righteousness. The more gospel-driven discipline in your life, the greater growth, and the greater growth, the more gospel-driven discipline. This is the promise of God!

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 6:19.

At this point, Paul gets very practical with his readers (and with us). Look at verses 20-21: ²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.⁷

Some here may say, “But I really like to sin!” To that, Paul says, “Yep. And you are completely free from righteousness. You have no justice in your life – and as Paul has already explained, if you don’t have righteousness, then you are condemned *forever* from God. And, I hope you understand this. You were created for God and his glory. In addition, condemnation doesn’t mean you get a slap on the wrist and you can go back to doing your own thing. God’s just punishment for your sinfulness is an eternity of ever-increasing punishment while you are in complete, full bondage to your own sinfulness – living in the insanity of sin. I pray you’d turn to Christ! I pray that you’d be enslaved to righteousness and be set free!

But some others of you might be believers in Christ, but you’re thinking, “I don’t know why, but past temptations are coming back with a vengeance, and maybe those sins weren’t that bad.” And to you, Paul says two things: 1) What fruit did you get from those things? Fruit refers to end results that are life-giving. Look back at your life and those sins. Did they really fulfill and give life? 2) You used to be ashamed of those things. They bring shame! Why are you drawn back to things that bring shame? This is not God’s intention for you. His intention is freedom and restoration. Why turn back to sin’s temptation, only to be under the bondage of shame again? You are free! You are a slave to righteousness.

So Paul says in verse 22: ²² But 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.⁸ You have been set free. You are a slave of God. And therefore, there is life-giving and life-receiving fruit. God has planned for you to grow in holiness and someday, you will have the fullness of eternal life! This is God’s design. You see here what I said earlier, “**Your Master determines your actions and destiny.**” Get this point because the phraseology here is that if you are a Christian, this *will* happen. I’ve said this before, but I must say it here, too. Those who were justified must be sanctified. And those who are glorified have been sanctified because they were justified. All of these terms are considered part of the salvation God gives to us. You can’t have justification and jump to glorification. You can’t have sanctification apart from justification. All of these things come from God. Therefore, if you live like the devil, don’t you dare claim with assurance that you are heaven-bound. God’s gracious promise is to grow all who have willfully come to Christ!

Have you turned to Christ? Who’s your Master? Paul finally concludes this illustration in verse 23 by saying, “²³ **For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**”⁹ To the people who say that grace leads to a “who cares?” attitude towards sin, Paul says that grace leads to eternal life. It’s a works-mentality that leads to death. To put another way, you can either live on the basis of you and what you want (with yourself as the center). Or, you can live your life on the basis of free grace through Jesus Christ, the Lord.

Do you want God to give you your paycheck for your own actions? Or, do you want God to give you his eternal kindness on the basis of Jesus? Which one is freedom? Which one is a greater motivation

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 6:20–21.

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 6:22.

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 6:23.

for obedience? Which one guarantees righteousness and eternal life? Answer: Only Jesus because in Jesus is only grace! He is the Master who guarantees your righteous actions and destiny of eternal life!

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