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Romans 6:15–23

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Romans 6:15–23 (NIV)

“What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

It has been two weeks now since we have looked at Paul's letter to the Romans. It might be in order, therefore, to refresh our memory of where we are when we open the Scripture today to Romans 6:15. Throughout this book, Paul has been tracing, really, our theology and our understanding of salvation, showing us first our need for Jesus Christ, and then showing us from chapter 3:21 through 5:21 how Jesus meets that need by taking our place—and that salvation, or being declared righteous by God, comes through faith in Him.

Beginning in chapter 6 Paul develops the theme of our growing in our Christian life. Sometimes the word “sanctification” is used of this. It is the term we just read today. It is the process of

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becoming, actually in fact, holy. God has already seen and fully declared us as righteous, or acceptable, in His sight. And already He's calling us saints. Many times we don't feel like saints, but God says we're saints.

Romans 6 picks up the theme of how it is we, as Christians, relate to the sin question. There are two questions which dominate this chapter. The first verse: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" Then verse 15, sort of a recapitulation: "Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?" The danger of preaching justification by faith—that we are not made right with God on the basis of self-effort—is that a person might assume that because grace is so free and abundant, one can then do anything they please. Paul's question in Romans 6:1 is really coming to grips with, "Can a person who has really been saved by grace go on in their life unchanged? Are we to continue to sin?" And I would underline that word "continue" because it's not found in verse 15. It's a different nuance of emphasis. It's, in effect, saying, "When a person's come to Jesus Christ and they simply go on with the old life, living it as though Christ had never changed them..." The answer is a complete rejection of any possibility of remaining unchanged. And if a person indeed is confessing Christ and yet going on living as they had when they had never come to Christ, that living is a denial, in fact, of their confession and shows that the confession indeed is not a valid confession.

The question in verse 15 points, perhaps, in a different direction. By raising the question, not only are we now to have a different lifestyle, but the possibility may be raised, "What about a momentary sampling of sin now and then? If we are indeed under grace as you claim, and we face a certain temptation, what about facing into that temptation by saying, 'I know I'm very weak, and I know God's grace is very great. So I know if I can do this, I can count on God's grace to bail me out and forgive me.'" So treading on God's grace, we enter into the sin. Are we

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to sin, Paul says, in order to prove that we are not under Law, but under grace? The response is “God forbid!” or “By no means!” or “May it never be.”

In regard to this momentary sampling of sin—this return from time to time to the ways of the old life—Paul, in these verses before us today, really advances three things for our consideration so that we might indeed not only be dead to sin as he taught in the earlier part of this chapter, but also, as he is speaking now, be free from sin in our life.

I. The first thing that he is saying to us through that word “God forbid” or “By no means” at the close of verse 15 is that we are to reject the argument of cheap grace.

Or a doctrine which comes along and says, “Grace has been so freely provided us, take advantage of it. Do everything you can to prove that it is true.” Paul, in his letter to the Romans, this is now the third time he employs that term, “By no means,” or “God forbid.” When he employs it, it is simply a way of stating, “The argument is really not worthy of being stated.” He’ll go on to develop a rebuttal to what is being advanced of, “Let’s sin, because we’re not under law, but under grace.” But his first response is, “This kind of thinking is unapproved thinking. God forbid it.” And indeed Paul, in appealing to argument continually in this letter, I feel—and I’m sure you’ll agree with me as you read through this letter—that our belief in Jesus Christ and our experience with Jesus Christ is certainly simply not on the emotional level. It is one that involves our thought life. It is one that involves us coming to grips with the arguments that are advanced against the way of life that we are to live. So Paul uses argumentation and logic here to rebut false positions.

It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was martyred by the Nazis in World War II, who really coined the term “cheap grace.” It’s this kind of thing that Paul is resisting here. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in one succinct paragraph, states, I think fairly well, what Paul has in mind here by cheap grace: “Cheap grace is preaching the forgiveness of sin without requiring

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repentance. It is baptism or initiation into the church without church discipline. It is communion without confession. It is the announcement that sins are forgiven without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate.”

Cheap grace involves a completely wrong understanding of who our Owner is and who our Master is.

II. That’s Paul’s second point in this letter: that we become free from sin as we recognize Who indeed now owns us.

Once having recognized the illegitimacy of the argument of cheap grace, we move on to another level. I had an experience out in the desert yesterday. We had gone out to spend a few hours with the singles’ leadership on retreat. Whenever we go anywhere, we take our dog Boomer with us. I have used him previously in sermon illustrations. He seems to be an immeasurable treasure house of theological learning. Boomer is an eleven-year-old poodle who has been in our family longer than our children. Boomer was in the room at the motel. One of the children, Evangline, slipped out and didn’t notice that she had not closed the door, and he ran away. This was the umpteenth time he had run away. There had been many miracles before in finding him. But he was gone long enough that when we discovered that he was missing, I immediately realized the gravity of this situation—especially the fact that he’s been having trouble breathing well lately when he gets excited, and he was out in the desert, and I was certain that he would be found dead or not found at all. We mobilized, about ten of us, and promised every child in Desert Hot Springs five dollars if they found him. And we scoured the city for about two hours trying to find this lost dog. At the very end of everything, my wife—who never gives up on these sorts of hunts—was the last one out, and, sure enough, she was the one who discovered him, and found him, and brought him back. The remarkable thing is that no sooner did we have him back that

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I'm sure if we opened the door again, he is absolutely so unoriented to who his owner is that he would dart out the door and be gone again. He has no homing instinct. He has been in our home eleven years. We have fed him, loved him, cared for him, and he cares nothing for us!

He reminds me of the sentiment expressed in one of the hymns. Whenever we sing it, I try to insure that verse gets eliminated. "Come, Thou fount of every blessing. Tune my heart to sing thy grace." It's a beautiful hymn, the first two verses. The third verse, in exalting the grace of God, says something like this: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love." That's supposed to be a Christian singing that. "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it." You that are married, how would your wife like it if you turned to her as you kissed her goodbye in the morning and said, "Prone to wander, honey, I feel it. Prone to leave the one I love." I don't know if she'd let you back in!

Cheap grace is one that doesn't recognize what God has done. It simply goes on as though all the benefits God has provided us are for nil and we go on our merry way, knowing that the Father will always come out and search for us and take us back home. I don't think that has as happy an ending as the story I just related about Boomer.

We're to recognize as Christians, as Paul is teaching here in Romans 6, that the real source of our freedom is a mystery. The real source of freedom is slavery—slavery to righteousness. Or as Paul will put it, slaves to God. I think the King James may use the word "servant." It's a much stronger word involved here—slaves—and Paul actually, in verse 19, apologizes for using the term. He says, "I'm speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations." He's saying there's a limit to any story or analogy you make. You can't press it too far. The reason why he says that is many persons in his audience may themselves be slaves and know what it's like to be under strict ownership. They cannot—as today, as we are employed—spend eight hours working

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at a job, then go off in the evening and do something on our own. A slave is one who is under total possession, and every moment of his time is dominated by that person who owns him.

Paul, of course, in using this analogy of slavery, recognizes that this is a poor analogy in reference to the Christian life. Because bondage to Christ, slavery to Christ, does not involve the same kind of thing as bondage and slavery to sin, or bondage and slavery as it's worked out in the Roman world. Nevertheless, it really fits in the sense that we are under total ownership of God. And if we're going to have real freedom, it comes in recognizing that no one is their own master. We're all mastered by someone, and we can choose who our master is going to be. But we cannot choose to be free without mastery. So we choose to come in under obedience or slavery to God. And the source of real freedom, then, is coming in under that obedience, or that discipline, of belonging to Him.

Another way to express this, perhaps, in analogy is a tennis tournament—pros from all over the world. I don't have the same freedom on a tennis court that these persons. I have very little freedom on the tennis court because I've only been on a tennis court once or twice. The last time I went on a tennis court, I quit when I banged my nose with the racquet. I have no freedom because I had no discipline.

The same thing is true of playing the piano. If you don't know how to play the piano, you can have all kinds of freedom on the piano. You can bang every key in any order you want. But it's not edifying. It's not worthwhile. It's nothing, because you have not endured the discipline and the pain and the agony of being a slave for that period of time that it took to get the discipline to play freely. True freedom—whether it's in the field of education or technique or sports or whatever—true freedom is only expressed by those who pay the price of commitment.

So when Paul addresses this theme of really being free from sin, we have really changed masters. We are not owned by Satan. We're not owned by death and sin. We're into freedom. We are to

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recognize that that freedom first has been accomplished in Christ. Justification—God sees me as righteous. He declares me perfectly acceptable. But, as yet I find in myself, there is a difference between the way God sees me and the way I actually am at times. God accepts me as totally righteous. I find that I am needing to work out the terms of that righteousness. And that principle is called sanctification. In fact, I'm coming and moving toward the point God already sees me as having arrived at—totally perfect and acceptable in His eyes.

When the apostle gives us admonition about this momentary sin that we would get involved in as Christians, are we to sin? Are we to kind of settle for bondage to sin? When it comes to delivery from sin in the believer's life, he rejects certain alternatives that are very popular. Alternatives for example, like, "If you would just pray through and get the right experience, you will never again be bothered by the sin question." Notice he does not say anything here about having another experience. He instead talks about yielding. We are, as Christians, not to ignore sin. We're not to cast it out. Paul instead appeals to our will and to our mind and gives us some very direct orders we are to obey. We are to yield. In other words, what he is really saying is, as Christians, God has put within us power to deal with sin. And this dealing with sin is one that involves ourselves recognizing we are under the ownership of God, and we have been handed over, or delivered over, to a body of doctrine, of Christian teaching. Part of our training as Christians is to get this Word into us in a systematic way, being delivered over to this systematic teaching, this standard of training, coming under obedience to it and yielding our will again and again. Paul is saying that, "Just as you once yielded your members to greater and greater iniquity, now yield your members to righteousness."

What is being said there, by the way, is an extremely powerful thing. Because in yielding your members to greater and greater iniquity, we recognize that sin is never satisfied. It always demands more. It demands a deeper intrusion into sin. This is especially true in the area of sexual

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immorality, where sin keeps going on a deeper level of perversion, demanding more and more and returning less and less. One does not passively become involved in sin. One, when he is sinning, is actively involved. And just so, Paul is saying in regard to righteousness, “We are to yield ourselves continually to God or righteousness.” Not passively waiting around for good deeds to happen to us, but actively doing them—recognizing that our salvation does not rest upon the performance of these things. It’s already accomplished in Christ. But as our loving response to the Father, we are obeying with our mind and our will.

I read a story this week of an Indian person out on a reservation who had just become a Christian. He was sharing his testimony. He said, “In me I find two dogs. A black dog, who is all the time mean and all the time fight, fight, fight. And a white dog, who is all the time good and all the time peace.” Someone said to him, “Which one is winning?” He said, “Whichever one I say sic ’em to.”

This response of whatever we’re yielding ourselves to—obedience or to sin—is encouraged by our attitude and frame of reference. If we want to have license to sin then, that is what we live yielding ourselves to. But if there is a passion for righteousness, we will yield ourselves and will not be content with anything less than perfect obedience to God. This must be from the heart. I don’t know how to get this into any one of you. It has to be a voluntary response. No one can force anyone to do anything. God has chosen, even, not to force us to do something.

In the swimming pool yesterday out in the desert, there was a father who was trying to teach his little girl how to swim. Everybody was getting out of the pool. They couldn’t stand the event that was happening. He decided that it was time for her to learn. This was about a five- or six-year-old girl. So he’s taking her on the side and throwing her in, then coming and catching her after she’s gone under water. Then when she’s in the water he’s saying, “Swim!” She’s out there, scared to death, and he’s continuing to say to her again and again, “Swim!” not telling her how to

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do it and teaching her patiently, but just “Swim!” Finally, the little girl got to the edge of the pool and she started to try to climb out to run away. She said, “Please, Daddy. No more!”

Sometimes, perhaps teachers and preachers, in their quest for helping a congregation to come to righteous living, may be like that person who was trying to teach his daughter how to swim. You cannot force a person to stay in the pool if they want another owner. It has to be something within you that wants it. Then the Scriptures come at you in such a way as to not put you under such bondage and guilt in learning how to be righteous. Then you become so afraid of righteousness that you never want it. Some people are scared to death of holiness because of maybe of the way it’s been presented in our background. They say, “If that is what’s involved in holiness, forget it.” But holiness really means to be clean, to be pure, to be well, to be healthy, to be all that God wanted you to be. It’s something to be desired. The way to come at it is not only to recognize our salvation is in Christ through what Christ has done for us. We have died to sin. We’ve died with Christ. We were buried with Christ. We rose with Christ. But also, now we’re to be actively involved in our obedience to God.

So Paul tells us, first of all, to reject the argument of cheap grace, and then to recognize that we have come under slavery. Thirdly, he tells us to then realize the final results in the contrast of the two ways of life.

III. We must decide which owner we are giving heed to.

In verse 21, he states very clearly the results of being outside of Christ and coming under the dominance or ownership of sin. He articulates the result sin three ways.

A. First of all, fruitlessness. Verse 21: “What return did you get?” He’s really saying that in the life of a person outside of Christ, there is fruitlessness, ultimate emptiness. This fruitlessness may not always be felt at any given moment of time. But it’s a fruitlessness which eventually must be recognized. The Book of Ecclesiastes, for example, is given in Scripture to help us

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understand the fruitlessness of life when it is not under the ownership and control of God. The person who is writing Ecclesiastes has tried wisdom, learning, pleasure, building great palaces. They've given attention to art and to architecture, the improvement of life. They've finally come to the conclusion: "What gain is anything? Vanity of vanities. All is vanity." That's what Paul is saying here. Life outside of Christ leads to an ultimate fruitlessness.

B. Secondly, he says, it leads to shame. "Those things which you are now ashamed of," verse 21. One has to only think back to the list of sins which are noted in Romans to get a picture of the shame of sin.

C. Then, thirdly, he indicates that its final result is death. Sin leads to death.

The question must be raised as we go through this, "What about the good person who is without Christ? Does this person fall into these categories of either being a slave of sin or a slave to righteousness? Isn't there a middle ground for the person who doesn't feel awfully bad? The person who is a good community-minded individual, maybe a good family member, a good job holder, a good professional kind of individual? Does everybody have to divide up into one of these two areas?"

Paul here, under the guidance of the Spirit, sort of narrows it down. Is there no middle ground where a person isn't under bondage or sin or under bondage to Christ? We have to say from Scripture, "No, there is no middle ground." Because the claim of Scripture is, "If a person is standing on their own righteousness, they have no righteousness with God." In fact, the Scripture lays very strongly the claim, "There is no real righteousness at all before God if one is standing on the basis of the fact that they are a good person."

Look at what Paul says in Romans 10:3, when he critiques the theology that says, "I look at myself, and I'm good, and that will permit me to be acceptable with God." Paul says: "For being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God and seeking to establish their own, they do

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not submit to God's righteousness." God's righteousness has only been fulfilled completely and totally by one person in all of human history: Christ Jesus. There is no righteousness that even comes close to the righteousness He had. Paul goes on to indicate what is the attitude of the good man when he comes to Christ and recognizes that, indeed, the righteousness which he thought he had compared to Christ is nothing at all. He says in Philippians 3:7-9: "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish [or dung], that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith" (NIV).

Jesus himself, in Luke 16:15, critiques the Pharisees by saying: "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted before men is an abomination in the sight of God."

So all line up within one of the two camps in scriptural frame of reference. "There is none righteousness, no not one" (Romans 3:10). Those who claim a righteousness outside of Jesus Christ can only claim it of humanity. They cannot claim to have the righteousness of God, which is only expressed in Jesus Christ and only available through Him. Those, like the Pharisees, who claim a righteousness and no need of God, also manifest the lack of hunger in their lives for God, which is the chief requirement for entrance into the kingdom of God. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5). It is to good people in Scripture that the gospel also comes. A man like Cornelius who in every respect is moral, godly, prayerful, but is still outside the faith. It is in coming to the greater light, Jesus Christ, that he submits to the ownership of another. It is to Nicodemus, the good man, that Jesus talks also about being born again.

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So the return for sin is shame. It is fruitlessness. Ultimately, it is death. But the return in Jesus Christ is our sanctification and eternal life. Thus Paul summarizes this section in verse 23 by saying, “The rations of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Always as believers, we are brought to that final focus of things—the end. The end when good catches up and passes evil. When all accounts are balanced and reckoned. Where every question we’ve had about injustice is finally straightened around, and we see justice prevailing at the end. I think of Psalm 73 in reference to Romans 6:23, because in Psalm 73 the person who is praying the psalm is lamenting. He is a believer who is going through tremendous adversity in his own life. He’s been sick for a while. In that position of sickness, he has watched the prosperity of others. He has seen how they have sleek bodies. How they live prosperously. It appears that they are going to come out ok. And he is languishing away in trouble and in need. He comes out of this condition right about in the middle of the psalm, where he reflects that he went into the sanctuary and he perceived therein. And he began to see the difference of the way of grace and the difference between the way of man—that in God and in the gospel alone there is hope and life. The balancing of the scales and eternity are available for the person who believes. So as persons who believe in Jesus Christ, when we tackle the question of sin as it occurs from time to time in our lives, as it brings itself to us in temptation, we’re no longer struggling to get rid of sin because we want to earn a standing with God. But it is rather like a love relationship. Because now we recognize that God has loved us. Our response is one of love, and our attempt to see sin totally put away from our existence, our yielding ourselves more and more to righteousness, is our way of saying thanks to God for loving us and cleaning us up and setting us around and changing us as human beings.

You cannot be a Christian and not change. You cannot be a Christian, really, and not grow. You cannot be a Christian and not have your thought life reoriented by the Lord Jesus Christ. There’s

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no such thing as salvation to a standing-still position, where simply you are saved to sit. Saved to vegetate. Saved to be static. Salvation is dynamic. The kingdom of God is pressing in. The Word is a seed that is growing in a soil, that's coming up. It's becoming first the blade, the ear, then the full corn. It's growth, and it's life. The Lord is saying this to us in regard to our lives. Get going. Are you stagnant? Don't try to cast out the stagnancy. Start yielding yourselves to righteousness. Be obedient. Count the cost of discipleship, and follow Christ.

This is not the whole on this subject, by the way. We're breaking off Romans again before Paul did. We have to go to Romans 7 and look at this again in deeper detail.

Closing Prayer

Some things, Lord, are coming to me as I'm studying the Book of Romans with this congregation. I'm really seeing how much, in my life, I have passed off struggles I have had to, "If I can just get the right emotion, or if I can just get the right feeling, or if I can just get the right experience, this will all go away." I've been really putting the responsibility elsewhere. All along, You're saying to me, "I want you to obey. My way of solving this is not to give you some new experience. My way of solving this is to make you a disciple—to grow in grace, to yield yourself to righteousness." So I hear You saying that, Lord, loudly and clearly as we're coming through this part of Romans right now. I take what You're saying to me, and I would pray for all of us who are here today. All of us who are Christians face limitations in our life, areas where we have not yet, in terms of our obedience, come to that perfect standard example by our Lord Jesus Christ. We do struggle with various issues in our life. If there are areas of defeat in our lives where over and over again we have been yielding—instead of to righteousness—we've been yielding to sin, and we've become passive about our life and about our obedience, I pray that through this Scripture today, we would turn around and become active in our pursuit of You. We recognize that that activity is in no way, on our part, a measure to earn favor from You. But

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nevertheless, it is a real reflection of our deep love for You and for what You have done for us. We are, through growing, attempting to work out the terms of our discipleship and response to You. There are many subtle areas in our lives which are not as apparent as more visible sins. I pray, too, that in these subtle areas—where we slide and gloss and cover over and are not diligent—that You would speak to us as well. So that we might—in every way from the heart daily—be obedient to the standard of teaching that we have received. We thank You now that in the gospel we have the power to obey. Whereas once sin was on top of us, outside of Christ, now, through Christ, we're on top of sin. It no longer dominates our life. Jesus, You are the dominating factor. Sin is now a nuisance to us. It is a bother. It is a blemish. It is a sore. But it is not at the heart. It is not in control. Because I live, and Christ lives in me, we praise You for that. In Jesus' Name. Amen.