

Romans (30): Slaves of Righteousness

Introduction:

The subject of the believers' sanctification has been the emphasis since Romans 6:1ff (although it had been suggested earlier in 5:21). The definition we have cited is a good one:

“Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”¹

The subject of the believer’s sanctification continues to be the major subject in the two paragraphs before us today, which are **Romans 6:15-19** and **20-23**. Here we have more reasons provided for us so that we will be motivated and committed Christians to live in obedience unto our God. In other words here we have further cause given to us to desire and resolve to experience greater degrees of God’s grace of sanctification in our lives. Here is our passage for today:

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.

²⁰For when 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? For 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.

Let us seek to understand precisely what is expressed for us. **Verse 15** reads, ***“What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!”***

In the verse just prior to this passage Paul had stated that his Christian readers were no longer under the power of sin for they were no longer under God’s law, but under God’s grace. Verse 14 reads, “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” But error might result in one’s understanding of this assertion, if this were not properly explained so as to be understood. Moreover, Paul had reason to explain himself clearly on this matter. Paul had detractors to his ministry and message. He was commonly accused of proclaiming a gospel that resulted in giving his converts a license to sin. He had repudiated this idea earlier in Romans 6:1 and 2, and he does so again here.

We see from the statement of verse 15 that even though the believer is no longer “under law” that being “under grace” does not permit a believer to live lawlessly, that is, sinfully. What this means, therefore, is that we are to live according to the moral standards of God’s law, even while we are not under the law as the ground of our covenant relationship with God in Christ. To quote **Thomas Schreiner**,

¹ This is the answer to the 35th question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Asserting that believers are not under law does not mean that they are free from the moral demands contained in the Torah². It means that they are free from the power of sin, which was indissolubly connected with the Mosaic covenant... To say that believers are under grace means that they now have the power to keep the moral norms of the law (cf. 8:4; 13:8-10). Thus the freedom from the law trumpeted here does not imply that believers are free from the law in every sense (Murray 1959; 230-31).

Schreiner made reference to **John Murray's** commentary above. Here are those comments on Romans 6:15:

This indicates that not being “under law”, in the sense of the preceding verse, in no way releases us from the obligation to conformity with the law and gives no license to sin as the transgression of the law. In one sense the believer is not “under law”, in another sense he is (cf. 1 Cor. 9:21). In the verses which follow verse 15 Paul proceeds to show how intolerable is the inference that we may sin because we are not under law but under grace.³

Following the same style of language in his rhetorical answer that he gave to his question in verse 1, Paul expresses in verses 15 and 16 the same indignation toward a false charge that his teaching promotes a license to sin.

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?

Consider how similar Paul's expression is to verses 1 and 2

¹What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (Rom. 6:1f)

What is the difference between these two ideas? In verses 1ff Paul reasoned that Christians should not live in sin under the guise that they will more greatly glorify God by His grace if they sin so that He extends His grace more greatly to them. But in Romans 6:15f he gave a similarly worded rhetorical question with a similar motivation, to discourage Christians from wrongly thinking they can live in sin as Christians, because they are under God's grace. But though both rhetorical questions ask about continuing in sin due to our salvation by God's grace, there is a distinction in Paul's argument.

The two questions are distinct in that verse 1 asks whether sin should be pursued *so that* grace would increase while verse 15 queries whether sin should be committed *because* believers are free from the law and under the power of grace.⁴

Paul reasoned in **verse 16** that for a true Christian to live in sin was not a possibility, for to live controlled by sin results in slavery to sin which results in “death”, in other words, eternal damnation. Obedience to God is the course of this life that results in eternal life.⁵

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?

² The Torah commonly refers to the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. However, here Schreiner is saying that the Torah was the law of Moses imposed upon Israel in God's covenant that He made with that nation at Mount Sinai.

³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 230f.

⁴ Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Academic, 1998), p. 329.

⁵ Granted, here Paul speaks of the outcome of a life of obedience to God is “righteousness”, but what he is implying is that “righteousness” is essential in order to receive the gift of eternal life, as we will see.

There are only two ways of life in this world. If you obey “sin”, it will result in your “death”, which is to be understood as both physical death and the second death, which is the fate of all those who will be damned and cast into the eternal lake of fire (cf. Rev. 20:15).

Paul presents “sin” as a master to whom non-Christians have chosen to “obey.” This is in contrast to God whom Christians choose to obey. Whichever you choose, sin or God, to that one you will become enslaved. And so, there are only two alternative ways to live before you: you can either be a slave that will lead to and result in eternal life; or you can be in servitude to the other that will lead to and result in death.

That there are only two alternatives available to man is no different than what our Lord had declared to His disciples in **Matthew 7:13** and **14**. Jesus said:

“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

Obedience to God, or the practice of righteousness, is essential to being a true Christian. It is one of the “tests” of discerning who are true Christians and who are not true Christians.

“By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.” (1 John 3:10)

And earlier in that chapter the apostle John stated the matter quite clearly:

⁴“Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵You know that He appeared to take away sins, and in Him there is no sin. ⁶No one who abides in Him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen Him or known Him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as He is righteous. ⁸Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. (1 John 3:4-8)

But Paul was confident that the Christians to whom he sent this epistle were not characterized as practicing sin. He was assured that they had been the objects of God’s saving grace in their lives. We read in **verses 17** and **18**:

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.

Paul thanks God for them, for Paul recognized and acknowledged that God was the reason they were “under grace”, the reason that they had salvation. Paul was always careful to give thanks to God for the salvation of the people among whom he ministered and to whom he wrote his epistles.⁶ Salvation is of the Lord. Salvation is due to God’s free grace, due to God’s free will, due to God’s free love that He bestows upon sinners who deserve His eternal wrath.

Paul not only shows forth God’s sovereignty in His grace in saving them by saying that he thanked God for their conversion, but when he described their conversion, he used a passive voice verb, which further indicates God’s act in converting them. “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin ***have become obedient***. Paul did not say, “You ***became*** obedient”, but rather “you ***have become*** obedient”; God was the one who caused them by His grace to become obedient. If you are saved, it is because you were saved by God’s will and by God’s grace, not by your will and your works.

⁶ See 1 Thessalonians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; 2:13; Colossians 1:3, 12; Ephesians 1:16; Romans 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:4; Philemon 4.

Further, Paul declared to them, “that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient **from the heart** to the standard of teaching to which you were committed.” God’s grace in salvation involves a work of grace in imparting a new heart to those who were formerly dead to the desire of believing and obeying God. What Paul is describing here is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to Israel in the prophets. In Ezekiel 36 God promised His salvation to a remnant of Israel:

²¹“But I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations wherever they went. ²²Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name’s sake, which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went. ²³And I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD,” says the Lord GOD, “when I am hallowed in you before their eyes. ²⁴For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. ²⁵Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶**I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.** ²⁸Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God. ²⁹I will deliver you from all your uncleanness...³¹Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good; and you will loathe yourselves in your own sight, for your iniquities and your abominations.” ³²“Not for your sake do I do this,” says the Lord GOD, “let it be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your own ways, O house of Israel!” (Ezek. 36:21-29, 31, 32)

Let us look further at verse 17 and consider the language closely. It reads, “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...**” This is interesting. Notice, Paul does not say of them that they became obedient from the heart to the teaching to which they had committed themselves; rather, they had become obedient from the heart to that standard of teaching “**to which you were committed.**” Paul’s emphasis was not that they had committed themselves to the teaching, or doctrine, but that God had committed them to the teaching. Here again, we have a passive voice verb, not active voice, which means that they did not do it themselves, but rather it was done to them. What Paul is saying is that God had taken them and that He had caused them to become committed to that standard of teaching. And so once again, Paul is showing that their salvation, even their attention and obedience to the “teaching”, was due to God’s grace operative in them and upon them.

One more point of interest here is in the expression, “the standard of teaching.” It is worded a little differently in the other versions.

ESV. “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...”

KJV. “But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart **that form of doctrine** which was delivered you...”

NKJV. “But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart **that form of doctrine** to which you were delivered...”

NASV. “But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart **to that form of teaching** to which you were committed...”

NIV. “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.

Once again, take note that Paul was not saying that “the form of teaching” or “doctrine” had been delivered unto these Christians to obey. Rather, Paul was saying that God had delivered *them* over to the teaching so that they would obey it. The teaching was not entrusted to them; God had entrusted them to the teaching.

In this verse, however, it is not the teaching that is handed down to believers, but the believers who are handed over to the teaching. This unusual way of putting the matter is intentional; Paul wants to make clear that becoming a Christian means being placed under the authority of Christian “teaching,” that expression of God’s will for NT believers. The new convert’s “obedience” to this teaching is the outgrowth of God’s action in “handing us over” to that teaching when we were converted.⁷

This idea become more pronounced when one considers that the Greek word translated as “form” or “standard” was a word that was commonly used to describe a mold that a potter might use, or a stamp that might mint a coin. It has been said that this word suggests the idea that “the teaching ‘molds,’ ‘shapes,’ and ‘transforms’ those who are delivered over to it.”⁸ Another said that “it is likely that *typos* (Greek word) includes the idea that Christian teaching “molds” and “forms” those who have been handed over to it.” When God brings salvation to a person, He commits them to His teaching, to the doctrine of His written Word, which in turn molds them into sanctified people who in the end receive eternal life.

Paul completed his sentence in verse 18 that he had begun with verse 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.***” Here, again, we have passive verbs. Paul is giving all glory to God. Believers had been set free from sin by God and God had made them slaves of righteousness.

Paul had been using the metaphor of slavery. The non-Christian is a slave of sin; the Christian is a slave of righteousness. But the metaphor does not fit perfectly, for although it is certainly true that we are *slaves* to righteousness, there is true *freedom* that is enjoyed by the Christian. In **verse 19** Paul acknowledges that he had to use this metaphor in order to explain to them the truth he had just expressed: ***“I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations.”***

Nevertheless, Paul pressed upon them their responsibility: ***“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.”*** Here we are told specifically how we may become sanctified:

The Christian becomes sanctified through obeying the teaching of God’s Word.

Becoming a mature and victorious Christian is not complicated. You do not become holy through some mystical experience that suddenly transforms you. When God converted you by His grace, He entrusted you to the teaching of His written Word, the Holy Scriptures. It is the pattern for you. He would have you conformed to the pattern that He has set before you. We might illustrate it this way: As God told Moses to make the tabernacle and its furnishings according to the pattern that he saw on Mount Sinai so that God could and would dwell among His people (cf. Exo. 25:9, 40; Heb. 8:5), so we are to make our bodies, that is, this “tabernacle”, or “temple” (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19) according to the pattern that He has prescribed in His written Word, so that we may be a holy dwelling place for God. As you conform your thinking and your practice to the Word of God it will form you into its pattern. God sanctifies His people as they come to understand His written Word and obey it. Paul is setting forth before us what our Lord Jesus prayed to His Father on our behalf: ***“Sanctify them through Thy truth: Thy word is truth”*** (John 17:17).

⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1996), p. 401.

⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 336.

⁹ Moo, p. 402.

Paul now appeals to them drawing their attention to the miserable existence they had before they were converted to Jesus Christ. **Verse 20** reads, ***“For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.”*** Again, there are only two ways of living in God’s world. If you are a slave of sin, being ruled by, controlled by sin, then you are free in regard to righteousness. There is no common ground, no relationship, no loyalty, no commitment to serve righteousness. You felt “free” when you sinned because you were not enslaved to God’s law, which would have been misery to you.

Paul reasoned with them: ***“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”*** (6:21). Then you had no “fruit.” Those old days and old ways are now a cause of embarrassment to you; you are ashamed of the things formerly gave yourself to serve.

But upon our conversion that all changed. **Verse 22** reads, ***“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.”*** Paul described the life of the Christian. “Fruit” is life in accordance with the Word of God. As you order your life according to the Word of God, you increasingly become sanctified. The outcome of a life being sanctified through God’s Word is eternal life.

Several points may be made here. **First**, for Paul, eternal life is most often presented as a future inheritance, a future blessing that God will bestow freely upon His people. However, the expression, “eternal life” is defined differently in John’s Gospel. There “eternal life” is a quality of life, true spiritual life, that God imparts at regeneration. The Christian presently has eternal life, as taught by John (cf. John 3:36). But in Paul’s epistles, eternal life is viewed as the gift of God bestowed on the believer on the last day after having endured his final judgment. This is what is taught in this verse.

Second, we see once again that sanctification is essential to salvation. Not only does a person need to be justified by God’s grace through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone in order to be saved from the penalty of sin, but that believer must be sanctified by the grace of God through the Spirit of God using the Word of God in order to be delivered from the power of sin. Salvation from sin and the gift of eternal life belongs to the one who has been justified and who is also being sanctified. The “end”, or outcome, of a sanctified life is the gift of “eternal life.”

We may now consider the final verse in this chapter. **Romans 6:23** reads, ***“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** This is a verse that is commonly used in personal evangelism--a presentation of the gospel to a non-Christian. But I would argue that it is used contrary to the meaning conveyed by Paul. It has been used as bolstering one of “The Four Spiritual Laws” promoted by Campus Crusade. It is one of the verses that is used in what is known as “The Romans Road to Heaven”, in which four verses from the book of Romans are used to present the “gospel.” The presentation to a non-Christian goes like this: The soul winner first says to the “sinner”: (1) “First, do you understand that you are a sinner? For the Bible teaches in Romans 3:10, ‘For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.’” Through this verse, the soul-winner attempts to lead the potential convert to acknowledge that he is a sinner. It is assumed that if he acknowledges he is a sinner as all people are sinners (which most anyone will acknowledge), that this is sufficient “conviction of sin” to then address the second spiritual law. (2) It is here that Romans 6:23 is employed. “The Bible teaches that ‘The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.’” The sinner is taught that he cannot save himself through his works, that only Jesus Christ can save him and that He is willing to do so through faith alone. “Eternal life is a gift.” (3) The sinner is then told how God secures this gift for sinners. Romans 5:8 is cited, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” It is told to the sinner, “God loves you and gave His Son to pay for your sins; He died in your place.” (4) Then fourthly, the sinner is told that he must “receive” Jesus Christ through faith alone. “Romans 10:13 reads, ‘For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ If you will receive Jesus Christ right now, through faith alone, He will give you the gift of eternal life.” The soul-winner then leads the sinner in a “sinner’s prayer to “receive Jesus.” The soul-winner then tells the new “believer” that he is saved and that God has given him the gift of eternal life, “After all, does not God’s Word say, ‘For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord’? And that ‘For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved?’” The new “convert” is

thereby given assurance by the soul-winner that he has salvation, for God has forgiven his sins, given him the free gift of eternal life through faith alone.

This method of evangelism or soul-winning has been employed for the past 150 years and has served to give false assurance to multitudes who remain strangers to Jesus Christ but now believe that they have been saved. Beside wrongly assuming that all that is necessary for conviction of sin is to acknowledge that you are a sinner like everyone else is a sinner, beside presenting a way of salvation that says nothing to the “convert” about the need for repentance from sin and submission to Jesus Christ the Lord, beside wrongly assuming that “to call on the Lord” in Romans 10:13 is not a one-time decision but rather a life-long practice, the “gospel” presentation misrepresents the teaching of Romans 6:23. For Paul was not declaring that God gives you eternal life upon your first occasion of “believing”, but rather it declares that God grants eternal life as a gift at the end of one’s life characterized by the sanctifying grace of God working in the believer’s life.

Romans 6:23 declares that the outcome of a life of sin results in the wages of death. Sin is seen as the master who eventually pays wages to those who serve him. The wages of sin on the Day of Judgment will be death, both physical death and eternal punishment. In contrast to sins’ wages, God gives the gift of life on that last day. This is consistent with what Paul wrote in the verse before which reads, “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. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God (in the end) is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*”

We need to be careful about what we say or teach people about how God bestows salvation to them. I would suggest that we are to be faithful to proclaim the message, “the teaching” as described here, and wait and watch God do His work of grace in the soul. What then do we look for? We look for someone who embraces the message in faith, forsakes his former life of slavery to sin, commits himself to obey God’s Word, shows forth in his life that God has indeed saved his soul. We should emphasize not what you do in order that you might become saved, but announce what it is that God does when He saves people. Yes, command people to repent of sin and believe on Jesus Christ. Tell them they should confess their sins and confess their commitment to believe and obey Jesus Christ both with their mouths and through baptism. And then be prayerful and watchful that the evidence of God’s work of saving grace will be seen in the soul.

But be careful of declaring a person is “saved” when there is yet very little evidence of new life in Jesus Christ. Let us follow the counsel of **Charles Spurgeon** in this matter:

Do not, therefore, consider that soul-winning is or can be secured by the multitude of baptisms, and the swelling of the size of your church. What means these dispatches from the battlefield? “Last night, 14 souls were under conviction, 15 were justified, and 8 received full sanctification.” I am weary of this public bragging, this counting of unhatched chickens, this exhibition of doubtful spoils. Lay aside such numberings of the people, such idle pretence of certifying in a half a minute that which will need the testing of a lifetime. Hope for the best, but in your highest excitements be reasonable.”¹⁰

Let us watch over their souls, be in prayer for them, and encourage them in the faith. But let us continue to see if they are being conformed to the teaching to which God has committed them, if indeed they are His.

¹⁰ Charles Spurgeon, *The Soul Winner* (Eerdmans, 1963), p. 19.