

SLAVES TO RIGHTEOUSNESS...BECAUSE OF THE FREE GIFT OF GOD

Romans 6:15–23

Key Verse: 6:19c

“...so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.”

Do you think you are free? Free to do whatever you want? Life can seem that way sometimes. With no one to tell us what to do, no set schedule, maybe even no classes, no job, no one depending on us for anything. That kind of freedom can seem ideal, like a dream. But the reality of life reminds us that we all have obligations to keep. We're not nearly as free as we might think.

What about as Christians? The Bible says Jesus sets us free. We are now “under grace,” and we're given the free gift of God. But in today's passage Paul calls us “slaves.” Not begrudging, oppressed slaves, but slaves who've tasted the free gift of God in Jesus. This slavery doesn't take us spiraling downward. It takes us on a glorious growth process called sanctification. This sanctification is not optional; every real Christian desperately needs sanctification. So, what does it mean to be slaves to righteousness? Why do we need to be? And what does it look like to live this way? May God speak to us through his word today.

Let's read verse 15. “Under law” means under the law's authority; “under grace” means under the authority of grace. We're under a new contract, a new covenant with God. It's called the covenant of grace. God initiates this covenant, and all we have to do is respond to it with faith in Jesus. If we believe in Jesus, we now live under the covenant of grace. It may seem that now we're absolutely free agents. But in verse 14 Paul uses the word “dominion.” The grace of Jesus is now our new ruler.

Why does Paul mention that we're not under law but under grace? It's because, with many old ideas about righteousness, we've developed habits of legalism. We think there's this whole list of rules we need to keep in order to be correct, to be spiritual, to please God. But to truly live under grace means we no longer try to earn God's favor with our effort or zeal. Under grace, we enjoy it and respond to it with joy and freedom.

But what is this grace? Scholars tell us that in the ancient world, people thought of grace transactionally—favors given to those who deserved it, repayment for services rendered. But the grace of Jesus is radically different. It's “incongruous”—a scandalous, beautiful gift given to the totally unworthy. It's so unearned, so outrageous, it shatters our self-centered mentality. We didn't qualify

for it, we could not buy it nor earn it. When we encountered this gift so great, our allegiance was totally reoriented. We were rescued when we deserved the opposite. And in his grace we no longer need honor or self-justification.

Paul knows that all human beings have a tendency to take advantage of grace. Since grace is so free—and everything gets forgiven anyway—why struggle against sin? Well, that's never a healthy response to grace of any kind. If someone did something nice for you, free of charge, would you just take it, be indifferent, then do something mean in return? Wouldn't you rather respond with a sincere thank you and try to show your appreciation in some way? The same is true in how we respond to the grace of Jesus. His grace is so great, so free, the only normal response is to be forever grateful, indebted, loyal to him. But how?

Read verse 16. We are not as free as we think. We may not know it, but we have only two options: to be a slave of sin or a slave of obedience. Paul is dismantling our myth of being free and independent. Yes Jesus forgives us, but sin is still alive in us, too. It still tries to take control every day. If we don't replace our enslavement to sin with something else, sin will take over again.

What is this obedience? Romans calls it “the obedience of faith” (1:5; 16:26b). We don't do it with our own ideas or effort. This obedience doesn't mean taking a few words of Jesus, here and there, and try to practice them once in a while. It means letting Jesus be Lord of my life—all of it. It means surrendering everything to him, gladly, because his grace is so great. This is real faith.

Every day we have a choice to make: am I going to revert to being a slave of sin, or will I give myself today as a slave of obedience to Jesus my Lord? Paul says being a slave of sin leads to death—spiritual death now, and eternal separation from God in the end. On the other hand, being a slave of obedience leads to righteousness. This daily choice is no small matter.

Read verse 17. Paul is so thankful because the power of the gospel has transformed the Roman Christians. They've become “obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which they were committed.” It sounds good, but what does it mean? Did they switch their old legalism for a new one? Not at all. Then what is this new “standard of teaching”? It's the gospel itself. It's the good news of God's grace, of hope, of newness of life in Jesus. It's not doing the bare minimum; it's a new life of love—loving God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and as Paul will mention in chapter 13, it's loving our neighbor as ourselves. We love because we've received such great grace from God our Father through his Son Jesus Christ. We love wholeheartedly, gladly, willingly, with great joy and hope, not with drudgery.

Read verse 18. Paradoxically, we're set free from sin, but now we're slaves of righteousness. What is this righteousness? It's not self-righteousness; it's a right relationship with God, a relationship of deep love that enables us to also love others deeply. We are free to live up to God's righteous standard of love. As "slaves of it," we are fully committed to it, not once in a while, but every day, all day long, everywhere we are, and with everyone we meet. There seem to be many kinds of Christians: Catholic Christians, Amish Christians, Pentecostal Christians, Orthodox Christians, just to name a few. Diversity is not a problem. But with so many denominations, it's hard to figure out what is the definitive Christian lifestyle. According to Romans 6, there is a definite Christian lifestyle, and it's not "grace-abusers"; it's "slaves of righteousness."

Sadly, there are many so-called "Sunday Christians." They go to church faithfully, getting all dressed up. They know the songs and the prayers and the words of the Bible. But the rest of the day, the rest of the week, there's not much heart-invested activity. The talk, the way of thinking, the behavior, the time and resources spent are not really transformed. It's hard to see the righteous love in their lives that God requires of those who say they believe in Jesus.

Paul says that truly receiving the grace of Jesus makes us a "slave" of righteousness. In verse 16 he said we're "slaves" of obedience; now in verse 18 he says we're "slaves" of righteousness. He uses the word "slave" for its shock value. He repeats "slave" eight times here. He's not trying to demean anyone; he's highlighting the level of commitment to Jesus that grace requires. We used to be owned by sin; but after receiving Jesus' grace, now we're owned by Jesus.

Paul also repeats the word "righteousness" here four times (16,18,19,20). It can mean integrity, purity of life, right thinking, right feeling, and right acting. It's a life aligned with God's character. Most of all, "righteousness" means having a right relationship with God. We think about pleasing him in all we do. Slaves of righteousness are people who make their relationship with God and living in a way that pleases him their top priority every day, in all they say and do.

People today have a "me first" mentality. All other commitments are seen as optional and negotiable. Even church has to revolve around me. When things get inconvenient or uncomfortable, people bail. Frankly, with such behavior it's just not possible to live the Christian life.

What's the core of Christian life? It's the cross. Jesus gave his life for us. We receive his grace, and in turn, we give our lives for him and for others. We deny ourselves and suffer to do so. We're no longer slaves of self, but slaves of Jesus. And it's joyful because of his grace.

Still, Paul knows that getting the right concept of living under grace is not easy. So now he gets graphic and plain. Read verse 19. What stands out here first is Paul's description of our former life. We were "slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness." That's pretty bleak. Paul wrote earlier in Romans: "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity...For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions...God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (1:24a,26a,28b–31). That's what lawlessness leading to more lawlessness looks like. Many people today still live like this. Paul is warning us that once we start giving in to sin, even a little bit, it's a slippery slope that leads to ruin and misery.

Then he contrasts slavery to impurity with slavery to righteousness. He urges us, "...so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification." It's inspiring. Paul is repeating what he said in verse 13: "present yourselves and your members." Under grace, what we do with the members of our body really does matter. We bring our entire self under the control of the grace of Jesus. We want to please him with every part of our lives. We want our daily, practical life to reflect that I really do know his grace and have a right relationship with God. We want people around us to see the living God in my life.

As we continue to present our members as slaves to righteousness, Paul says it leads to sanctification. What a beautiful word: "leading." We're made more and more holy by God himself, because we're responding more and more to his grace in real life, relying on his grace more and more in real life. It's the only way his grace can transform us more and more, from the inside out. Sanctification is not for some special people; it's the normal eventual outcome for every Christian living under the grace of God with real gratitude.

In his letters Paul gladly introduced himself as a "slave" of Jesus. His level of commitment to Jesus was so wholehearted, so absolute. At the beginning he had to make a 180 degree turn, from a persecutor to preacher of Jesus. Nobody trusted him. Yet he went through it because of the free gift of the grace of Jesus. He was a passionate slave from the start, sharing the gospel with all his heart. He willingly endured beatings, imprisonment, stoning, dangers, cold, and hunger (2 Cor. 11:23–27)—all for his master Jesus. He made himself like the people he was with, whether he felt like it or not (1 Cor. 9:19–22)—for his master Jesus. He was filling up in his flesh what was lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church (Col. 1:24). He wanted to become like his master Jesus in his death by sharing in his sufferings (Phil. 3:10). He loved his master Jesus with love incorruptible (Eph. 6:24). It was a hard life, but it was the best life.

Once more, Paul reminds us of what life was like as slaves of sin. Read verses 20–21. As we look back honestly at what we were like as slaves of sin, we're so ashamed. It's painful but necessary to remember, so that we'll be motivated to persevere in our quest for sanctification.

Finally, Paul points to what the end looks like. Read verse 22. He uses the word "fruit." It's a sanctified life. What is that? It's pure and holy. It's a character forged into the image of God's Son, Jesus Christ. It's a person full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. It's a person who truly glorifies God. Paul says it ultimately results in eternal life.

He concludes in verse 23. Let's read it. Paul is emphasizing that our struggle to present our members as slaves to righteousness does not make us legalistic and self-righteous, but ever-more deeply aware of the free gift of God of eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. It's this free gift of God that gets us started on our journey of sanctification, and this free gift of God that still shines as brightly as ever at the end of it.

So, do you think you're free? Free to do as you please, even free to sin? Or do you know the free gift of God in Jesus? Have you really become a slave to righteousness? Let's read verse 19c once more: "...so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification." May God bless us to experience this beautiful process of sanctification through giving ourselves wholeheartedly as slaves to righteousness because of the grace of Jesus.