



## FREE AT LAST

*SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY*

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Romans 6:15-23

14th Message

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Some time ago I had an opportunity to share my faith with a young man who was seeking counsel. He told me he was a frequent user of drugs, was deeply in debt and entrenched with a group of friends whom he described as “burnouts and potheads.” He was working in an unfulfilling job at minimum wage, and could foresee nothing exciting in his future. I thought he would be responsive to my sharing my faith in Jesus Christ, so I asked him if he any interest in spiritual things. He replied, “No. I want to retain my independence and enjoy my freedom.” How ironic, I thought, after he had left. He was in bondage, in chains, enslaved to chemicals, indebtedness and a wrong crowd. His future was bleak. He looked like a prisoner. Then I thought that he probably saw me in the same way—a slave, only bound with religious chains. He probably regarded my lifestyle as very restrictive. He thought I was enslaved to God, and what could be worse than that? What an irony! He thought he was free, and I think I am free. Which of us had it right?

The passage from the book of Romans to which we come this morning will speak directly to this issue. We have already pointed out that Paul’s letter to the church in Rome is one of the most powerful and influential books ever written. For almost two thousand years it has been transforming lives. It has been the tool and the force behind some of the most significant conversions in church history. Here we have the clearest description of the gospel, the good news that God has found a way through the death and resurrection of Jesus to justify the ungodly. That includes all of us, because we are all ungodly.

In the opening chapters of this book, Paul made and sustained the charge that all of mankind is guilty. Paul concluded that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Some people are better than others, but we all fall short of the character of God. God’s glory is what he is, and regardless of who we are or what we have done we have fallen short of God’s character. That is the bad news.

But the good news is that in the person of his Son, God has done something about our problem. Jesus came to earth as the sin-bearer and our sins were placed upon him on the cross. When we believe in him, we are delivered from our sins, declare, “Not guilty!” and given the gift of righteousness. Later, Paul will say, “there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). That is the good news.

In chapter 5, Paul reminded us that, having been justified by faith, we are privileged to live in a relationship of unconditional acceptance with God. Now we have a boundless optimism about the future. We used to belong to Adam, the author of sin and death, but now we belong to Christ, the author of salvation and life. Paul made the statement at the end of chapter 5 that “where sin increases, grace increases all the more.” So we have grace increasing and grace reigning. The picture almost seems unbalanced. In his emphasis on the security of God’s people, Paul doesn’t say anything about growth or struggle. As John Stott puts it, “He seems to jump from justification to glorification without the intervening stage of sanctification.”<sup>1</sup>

After reading chapter 5, someone might well say to Paul, “If what you are saying is true, what prevents us from continuing to live a sinful life, since we are forgiven, our destiny is fixed and secure, and there is no more condemnation over the past? If grace abounds where sin increases, why don’t we just live it up? If our acceptance before God depends entirely on God’s free grace, irrespective of anything we do, then shouldn’t we be able to live as we please. If God justifies the ungodly, then what is the point in being godly?” Paul has already established that we can’t out-sin the grace of God. No matter how often or how grievously we sin, grace prevails. So the question remains, Why not live it up, because we are going to go to heaven anyway?

The theological term for this position is “antinomianism.” The word literally means “against law” (lawlessness). Some in Paul’s day argued this truth. Jude called them “godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (Jude 4). That is the question Paul addresses in chapter 6. His response to the assertion that God’s grace gives us a license to sin is emphatic: “May it never be!” “Of course not” (TLB); “God forbid” (KJV); “What a ghastly thought” (Phillips).

Paul reveals the source of that question as ignorance, especially ignorance of what occurs at conversion. Four times in this chapter he uses the word “know.” He wants us to understand that justification is more than mere forgiveness. Grace does more than forgive our sins; it frees us from sinning. As we will see in the coming chapters, grace sanctifies as well. Our salvation results in a radical change in our being. Something happened to us which makes it impossible for us to say, “Let’s just go on and sin, because God is going to be gracious.”

The structure of our passage, 6:15-23, is similar to the opening fourteen verses of the chapter. However, the emphasis of our text is different. How all of these changes came about in our lives when we became Christians is described in two different ways. In the first half of the chapter, Paul's emphasis was on what happened to us when we became Christians: we were united to Christ through baptism. Here in these verses the emphasis is more on what we did at what we might call our conversion, which, of course, only grace enabled us to do.

Paul begins with the same sense of astonishment in his question as he expressed in 6:1. Romans 6:15, 16:

**What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? (Rom. 6:15, 16, NASB)**

The apostle sets forth a couple of remarkable principles in verse 16. He says that every human being is a slave of something. That's what Bob Dylan reminded us of back in 1979 in his song, "You Gotta Serve Somebody."

Genesis 2 says that we are made in the image of God. We were created to rule and reign with God, but our ability to rule comes from our relationship to God. We can rule only when we are being ruled. The extent to which we allow God to master our lives is the extent to which we can master our environment.

When man disobeyed and ate from that tree he began to do what God does, i.e., relate everything to himself. Man thought of himself as the center of the universe and he became like God. But it was all a lie. Man isn't the center of the universe. He can never be that. But that is the seductive lie that the serpent has whispered into the ears of man ever since: "This is your world. Everything relates to you. What you like is right; what you don't like is wrong. Don't let anyone make you do what you don't want to do. You are the center of things."

By the very nature of our humanity we are made to serve and be controlled by forces beyond our power. All humanity serves under one of two slaveries. There is no middle ground. Slavery, of course, was common in Rome. It is estimated that about one third of the population of the city were slaves. In fact, it is likely that one half of the church to which Paul wrote this letter were slaves. No member of the church was unaware of this metaphor and its implications. And Roman slaves were not just the unfortunates who were captured in war or bought in the marketplace, there was such a thing as voluntary slavery, too. Poor people offered themselves as slaves in order to be housed and fed. Stott reminds us, "Paul's point is that they couldn't give themselves to a slave-master and at the same time expect to retain their freedom."<sup>2</sup>

It is the same with spiritual slavery. Thus the second principle that springs from this verse is that self-surrender leads inevitably to slavery, whether we become slaves to sin, leading to death, or to obedience, leading to righteousness. "Conversion is an act of self-surrender, leading inevitably to slavery; and slavery demands a total, radical, exclusive obedience. Jesus said that no one can be a slave of two masters. Once we have offered ourselves to him as his slave, we are permanently and unconditionally at his disposal. There is no possibility of going back on this. Having chosen our master, we have no choice but to obey him."<sup>3</sup>

Paul now applies this principle, explaining again that our conversion involved an exchange of slaveries. Verses 17, 18:

**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, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (Rom. 6:17, 18)**

Here Paul gives an outline of the conversion process, gathering up every Christian's conversion in four steps: What they used to be; what they did; what happened to them, and what they had become.

The first step is: *You were slaves to sin*. Everyone is a slave to one of two slaveries, either a slave to sin or a slave to God. Conversion is a transfer from one to the other. At one time all of us were slaves to sin. Before we knew Jesus Christ we were bound and enslaved to sin. Some of us have no problem understanding that. We remember what our lives were like before we knew Christ. We not only had a sin nature, we were sin enthusiasts, accomplished doers of iniquity. We could sin without blushing. If something felt good, we did it. We rarely thought of God and how he felt about what we were doing. And it didn't matter what others thought of our actions. As long as some kind of pleasure resulted we rose to whatever bait was put on the hook. Sin was a way of life for us. In fact, some of us became so accustomed to sin we regarded people who lived according to the Scriptures as if they had come from another planet. That is what we look like now to many of our friends. Students know exactly what I mean. If you read and follow the Bible, you are considered strange. For a girl to be called a virgin is a put-down, a slur, in some circles. People become so accustomed to sin that when they meet someone who leads a righteous life, they wonder what is wrong with them.

But not all slaves of sin are that obvious. Many are simply chronically self-willed. Some people are quite moral but they are slaves to self-centeredness. They are proud, arrogant, and critical. You can be a spectacular sinner or a boring sinner, but the point is that it is natural for you to act that way. All sin enslaves, whether sinners are aware of it or not. Sinners are pawns, puppets whose strings are manipulated by the evil one. Like alcoholics, they deny that they have a problem. Deception

and denial run so deep they are convinced they are free, like the man I referred to earlier, but they are not.

Second: *You became obedient from the heart.* When the gospel was shared with you, you accepted the truth wholeheartedly. Do you remember that day? As a sophomore in college in January of 1970, I had already read the entire New Testament. Following a campus ministry meeting, one of the leaders shared the gospel with me and asked me if there was any reason why I couldn't invite Jesus Christ into my life. There wasn't, because the truth already had a grip on me.

But notice what Paul says they had become obedient to. It is a bit unusual. It isn't God or Christ they are said to have obeyed, but a certain form of teaching. This probably refers to some structure of apostolic teaching they had received when they became Christians. Notice that Paul regards conversion not only as trusting in Christ but also believing and acknowledging the truth. Further, Paul doesn't say that this truth was committed to them, but that they were committed to it. At our recent marriage conference, Dr. Paul Stevens was discussing the covenant of marriage and he made a statement that struck me. Referring to his marriage vows, he said, "It isn't so much that I hold on to these vows, it is that they hold on to me." That is exactly what Paul is saying here. When we come to Christ, it is not only that the truth has been given to us, but that we have been given over to the truth.

Third: *You have been freed from sin.* As we explained in a previous message, this doesn't mean we are incapable of sinning, but, as Paul puts it in Colossians, "He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Col. 1:13).

In the first half of the chapter Paul explained that on the cross, Jesus became the sin-sacrifice as the sins of the world were transferred to him. The condemnation of the holy God fell on him and he died. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). So Jesus descended into the grave, laden with sin. But at Easter, when God resurrected him, Jesus burst forth from the grave not as a sinner, but glorified, purified, in newness of power and life. Having already paid the price for sin when he burst forth in power on that resurrection morning, he broke the back of death and sin. He conquered the grave and the power of sin. Jesus went into the grave as a sinner (because the sins of the world were transferred to him) but he came out of that grave spotless, glorified, and pure. The resurrection of Jesus Christ severed the chains of sin and death, not only for himself, but for everyone who would turn to him for forgiveness, grace and salvation. Paul declares that if any of you have trusted Christ, you, too, in a symbolic way, have gone to the grave as a sinner with Christ and have burst forth from the grave with him. You are now clean and pure. Your enslavement to death and sin has ended. Paul says that once you are in Christ, Christ is in you.

Now because that has happened we are identified with Christ and the power of death has been broken in

our lives. We no longer fear death. We certainly don't escape it, but death for us now is simply the doorway to eternity. It is no longer an ultimate defeat, because the power and sting of death has been broken. Death is the doorway to the ultimate victory.

At conversion, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the life of the believer and the puppet strings of Satan's control are cut. Our whole attitude toward and interest in sin has changed now that we are in Christ. The work of Jesus Christ has emancipated us, liberating us from death and sin. So we can cry, "I'm free at last, free at last!" Jesus told some Jews who had come to faith, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. . . . but if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn. 8:31-36). The man I referred to who was enslaved and addicted to sin was so deceived by it he didn't know the difference between freedom and slavery, right and wrong. He was blind. But when Jesus Christ emancipates you, he liberates your mind. The blinders fall off and your perception about sin changes. Your moral discernment improves dramatically. The fog lifts and you see things you never saw before.

And fourth: *You became slaves of righteousness.* Our desire for sin changes. We are freed from the power of it. The desires of our hearts change over time. The "old things pass away and all things become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). Our desire to seek revenge when we are wronged is softened. We may have had an insatiable desire for power, but now we want to serve and empower others. Once we sought men's applause, but now we want to please God and sense his smile. Once we couldn't care less for what God thought, but now that means everything. Once we wanted to have all the toys, but now we want those eternal trophies, now we want to win the real race. Once we had an insatiable desire for all those fleeting pleasures, but now all that looks like silliness to us. We wonder how we could have thought those things were worth all our time and energy. Our internal desires change as we grow in Christ, as we yield to him.

Verse 19:

**I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.** (Rom. 6:19)

Paul almost apologizes for the human terms he uses to describe the conversion process because, in many ways, slavery may not be the best metaphor to describe the Christian life. It does explain clearly our devotion and obligation to Jesus Christ, but certainly not the way God views us. In fact, Paul says in Galatians, "When the

time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, Abba, Father. So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir" (Gal. 4:4-7). And remember the words of Jesus: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:29).

Paul declares that neither slavery is static but that both develop. One gets better and better while the other deteriorates.

He concludes his argument in verses 20-23:

**For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 6:20-23)**

Paul invites us to assess the claims of each kind of slavery by examining its fruit. What are the benefits of each? Our past slavery to sin only brought us regret ("the things of which you are now ashamed") and the ultimate end of that path ("death"). But our enslavement to God reaps sanctification in the present, and in the future, eternal life. Verse 23 sums it up: Sin pays a wage that we deserve, but God gives us a gift that we don't deserve.

Thus we have two completely different ways of living which are totally opposed to each other. Jesus represented them as two roads, the "broad road which leads to destruction and the narrow road which leads to life." Paul calls them two slaveries. Stott summarizes: "By birth we are in Adam, slaves to sin; by grace and faith we are in Christ, the slaves of God. Bondage to sin yields no return except shame and ongoing moral deterioration, culminating in the death which we deserve. Bondage to God, however, yields the precious fruit of progressive sanctification, culminating in the free gift of life."<sup>4</sup>

I want to close by sharing a scene from the movie "The Shawshank Redemption." In the story, Andy is a prominent New England banker who, though he proclaims his innocence, is convicted of murdering his wife and her lover. He is sent to the maximum-security state prison at Shawshank, Maine. An introvert, he doesn't make many friends until Red, a 30-year-veteran of the system, decides to take him under his wing. The movie centers on their 20-year friendship.

In one scene, Andy and Red are sitting with their backs against the wall of the cold prison. Andy has already decided that he is going to try to escape. They are sitting there talking about what it would like to be out of Shawshank, to be free. You would think that both men would long to get out, but Red has been in there so long he has grown accustomed to prison life. He is tired and no longer even tries to impress the parole board at his hearings.

Andy is talking about getting out and going to Mexico, buying a little hotel and a boat and starting a fishing business. He looks at Red and says, "You know, I could use a guy who knows how to get things." But Red says, "I don't think I could make it on the outside, Andy. I've been in here most of my life. I'm an institutional man now." Andy says, "I think you underestimate yourself, Red." Red responds, "No. I don't think so. I mean, in here, I'm the guy who can get things for you, sure! But outside, all you need is the yellow pages. I wouldn't know where to begin. The Pacific Ocean? That would scare me to death, something that big, Andy, I don't think you should be doing this to yourself. This is all pipe dreams! I mean, Mexico is way down there and you're in here, and that's just the way it is." And Andy says, "Well, I guess it comes down to a simple choice really, to get busy living or get busy dying!"

That is where some of you find yourselves this morning. Listen carefully to this point. There is only one Master in the entire world whose enslavement liberates. To the extent that you are totally yielded to Jesus Christ you are free. Conversely, to the extent that you are keeping back your full devotion to Jesus Christ, someone or something has a grip on you and you are jeopardizing your Christ-purchased freedom.

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1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994) 166.
2. Stott, 183.
3. Stott, 183.
4. Stott, 186.