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Romans 6:15-23

Thirteenth Message

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FREE TO MAKE CHOICES!

One of the greatest ideals of this nation is liberty. Our nation was founded in order to overthrow tyranny. The value which our leaders placed upon liberty can be seen in the words of Patrick Henry: "Give me liberty or give me death!" This liberty was built into the fabric of our society through the Bill of Rights and the Constitution. Two hundred years after that writing, we still delight in raising our banner of freedom high. Just recently, we celebrated our constitution by redecorating the Statue of Liberty in New York. At every baseball game, we declare that we are "the land of the free."

Something happened in the last couple of decades to distort our view of freedom. I do not think we are as free as we think. It began in the late 60s and was first expressed in the sexual revolution but spread into our economic, political, and judicial systems. We redefined freedom.

When our forefathers sought freedom from tyranny, the early Puritans wanted to be free in order to serve God. In fact, the city of Boston was described as a city set on a hill, a city of life—a place of light, beauty, and truth. Our original universities, such as Harvard, Princeton and Yale, were free universities established to prepare young men for the ministry.

Now we have changed our definition of freedom to mean "freedom without restraint, without responsibility, and without absolutes of right and wrong." We think we are free to do what we please. This corruption has even spread to the American church. The gospel declares that Christ came to set us free from the tyranny of sin, law, and death. What does the world observe in the American church? When they watch a service on television or come into our churches, they see people engaged in heavenly worship, a rapture-like ecstasy. But during the week, they see these same people void of ethics. The world is not impressed!

This is the reversal of how God built the nation of Israel and the church. When Israel was first formed, the people were given the Ten Commandments before they were taught to worship in the book of Leviticus. This was done in order to teach them that ethics precede worship. When the people strayed from this and wanted to return to worship, the prophets said, "Shut the doors of the temple until your ethics are corrected." Jesus gave the same instructions: "If you come to the altar with a gift for God and your brother has something against you, leave your gift and go home! Correct your ethics before you worship."

We need to discover what it means to be free. What is the basis of true biblical freedom? This is what Paul addresses at the end of Romans 6. This was a critical issue in his day because many to whom he wrote were slaves living in oppressive situations. They wanted to know what it meant to have Christ set man free from law, sin and death.

In our text, Paul will explain the nature of true freedom and give us an example. Then he will tell us how to preserve our freedom.

Finally, he will motivate the free. Let us look at the nature of true freedom in verses 15-16.

I. The Nature of True Freedom (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? (NASB)

Paul introduces the issue of freedom with a question: "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" Remember he had just said in verse 14, "Sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace." The gospel of freedom says we are not only free from sin, we are free from law. Thus, someone might ask, "Does this mean we are free to sin?" The assumption is that being removed from the law means being free from ethics, free to do what we please. Of course, what we please to do is sin because sin is pleasurable.

This reminds me of a recent automobile commercial on TV. A beautiful teenage girl phones her boyfriend to tell him that her parents will be gone for the evening. He hangs up the phone with his eyes shining in heavenly bliss. He is no longer under law because her parents are gone. Therefore he can do what he pleases! He dashes outside, hops in his car, and makes his way to her house in a terrible storm. When he gets there, the parents greet him at the door, "What brings you out on a night like this, James?" He is back under law. This is the assumption behind this question.

Is our freedom in Christ freedom to do what we please? Paul has two answers—an emotional one from the heart and a rational one from the head. His emotional response is, "May it never be! God forbid!" This statement is filled with passion. Paul expresses revulsion from his heart that we would even ask and that he has to explain. Oh, that we would be more passionate!

Then he gives his rational response. In asking the question, we obviously do not understand the nature of our humanity, the nature of grace, or the nature of freedom. Paul says, "Do you not know that when you present yourselves as slaves unto obedience, you are slaves of the one you obey, whether of sin resulting in death or of obedience resulting in righteousness?" The key word, used eight times, is "slave." The point is obvious.

Being under God's grace does not change the basic nature of our humanity. We do not have the power to act; we only have the power to choose whom we will serve. Therefore, God's grace has not only granted forgiveness, it also gives us divine equipment, a new heart, which allows us to respond to God for the first time. We are not made free to do what we please but to respond to God and to do what is right for the first time in our lives. This is freedom indeed!

Let me illustrate this. For many years, I have wanted the same freedom on the piano as my friend Dave Burns has, but I was a slave to the keyboard, unable to produce anything of beauty no matter how many impulses I had. I found I could never have freedom until I presented myself to a piano teacher who put me under tutelage. She trained me to be obedient and trained my ear to hear the difference between different chords. As I presented myself to her, I found freedom and an increasing ability to play. The minute I quit my presentation, I returned to the same slavish three tunes I can plunk out by ear.

This is Paul's point. We are only free to choose whom we will serve. If we decide to present ourselves to sin, we are not committing ourselves to one act, we are presenting ourselves to an entire course of action because we become slaves again. Sin will carry on its desires through us, and we will eventually do far more than we ever thought possible. Have you ever shocked yourself as a Christian with regard to sin and ended up doing something which surprised you? Grace has not changed our humanity. We are still slaves, but now we are free to present ourselves to God.

One time, I came home from work filled with resentment about something that happened during the day. I was ticked off! Even though I talked to my wife about it, I still let bitterness enter my heart. Later on, my eldest daughter was disobedient about some trifle. In response, I raged at her. My wife said to me, "Brian, you are not mad at Becky. You have not dealt with your anger from work." I made a presentation to sin when I came home, and it came out in acts which had nothing to do with Becky's behavior. This is what Paul is saying here about sin.

The good news is that those under the grace of Christ share the life of Christ. As Christ was and is spontaneously and joyfully obedient to the Father, we can be too because his life is in our heart. We can do what is right. True freedom is a relationship with God which leads to righteous ethics. This is biblical freedom.

Is all this talk about Christ in us, this new heart and divine living, fictitious or is it true? Paul encourages these Roman Christians by giving them an example of true Christian freedom. Look at verses 17-18.

II. The Example of True Freedom (6:17-18)

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.

What example does Paul use to encourage these Christians that this divine miracle is true? He uses their own conversion! He says, "Go back to those early days when you accepted Christ. Before you met Christ, what was your life like? Though you thought you had freedom and did what you pleased, your choices always lead to sin." When people express their freedom, they give themselves to the things which always end up being sinister. Have you noticed that? When you expressed your freedom before you met Christ, it was always in anger, lust, pride, or some vanity. You felt you had to do it. Although you thought this was an expression of your freedom, it was slavery.

Paul adds, "Then you heard the wonderful teaching about Christ and became obedient from the heart." This is a miraculous text! Moses commanded his people "Circumcise your heart." David prayed after he committed adultery, "Lord, create in me a new heart." Eze-

kiel predicted in 36:26, speaking for God, "The day is coming when I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." All of these statements came true on the day of Pentecost. We embraced the same truth when we received Christ. Paul is exhorting the Romans, "Think about what happened. You were once a slave to sin, and you gave your heart to Jesus Christ. All of a sudden, you had a new heart to respond to a living Lord."

We must remember those fine days as well. It is easy for us who are older in the Lord to slip back into old habits. We forget that the divine life is a reality and begin to think that it is an illusion. We put up with each others' weaknesses as if we cannot change. But God says, "Remember your conversion." Then he allows new Christians to be born in our midst, who rebuke us because they lay hold of the divine life we think unattainable.

My friend Jim does this for me. He came to Christ three years ago out of a painful background, but when he gave his life to Christ, he put his hand on the plow and never looked back. He is serious about holiness, ethics, witnessing. Whenever I am with him, I am encouraged that this miracle is no fiction. It is reality! I need his encouragement to continue to walk this way.

The apostle Paul goes on to say that it is not enough that Christ won our freedom and gave it to us as a gift at our conversion. This freedom must be preserved. A nation cannot win its freedom once and for all; every generation has to preserve it. Paul tells how to do this in verses 19-20.

III. Preserving our Freedom (6:19-20)

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. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

Paul first apologizes for using the analogy of slavery. As Cranfield has said in his commentary on Romans:

In almost every aspect the image is inappropriate to Paul's purpose. Of course, the Christian's relation to righteousness, to obedience, to God, is not at all the unjust, humiliating, degrading, frivolous thing that slavery has always been. On the contrary, it is 'perfect freedom', or, as Chrysostom put it, 'better than freedom'.

Because of the human weakness of the Roman Christians, Paul cannot dispense with the figure of slavery, harsh and unworthy though it is. Having said that, I think this illustration makes two emphatic points.

First, the fact that we are slaves tells us that our holiness requires a continual presentation to God. If a slave wants to fulfill the desires of his master, he must wake up every morning ready to obey his orders. One-time commitments, renewed activity, and emotional appeals do not work. Our holiness requires daily, continual presentation to God. Even though we have a new identity and a new heart, this does not make righteous living automatic. We must engage our will by presenting our lives to God every day, all day. This is why Paul says, "You made a presentation to the old man, and he lived out his desires through you. So now, in the day of grace, present your life to God every day."

Have you noticed that yesterday's victories are no help for today? Let me tell you about the orange tree I bought two years ago. Since I wanted to get the best, I sought the advice of my friend Patrick Cunningham who said I needed a Valencia Dwarf Orange tree. I planted it in the best spot in my yard and watered, pruned and fertilized it. By the second year, I was ready for my first crop, but I neglected the tree for two days. My wife warned me to cover the tree because of frost, but I did not think it was cold enough. Now we have forty dry oranges. I lost my crop in two days because I failed to present myself to care for the tree.

Our generation is especially vulnerable to this. We think that if we worship and enter into a state of ecstasy God will be pleased. But God wants habits not rapture! He is concerned about our little choices. This is why at Peninsula Bible Church we do not have many altar calls. In the Christian life, there is only one altar call, and that is to baptism, when a person comes forward to declare that Christ is Lord. This is our public confession. From that point on, every day and every moment are presentations. We cannot weigh one choice more heavily than another.

In fact, in Psalm 4 when David rebukes sinners and calls them to repentance, he does not say to come forward in worship. Rather, he says, "Go home and repent when you are alone with God." There is no emotionalism or public pressure involved. When we are alone with God and he speaks to us, we are to present our lives to him. Then we can come forward to worship and offer sacrifices of righteousness.

This is the thrust of Scripture. I would liken this presentation to the precious gifts my mother has given us as a family. She loves to needlepoint and has given each of our daughters a pillow with her initial on it. I knew when my mother sent these pillows to us that they were a labor of love because of the time involved in making them. She did not go to Saks Fifth Avenue and charge them. She had to sit through thousands of stitches to make something of beauty. These pillows are not only beautiful, their fabric is strong because of all the individual stitches bound together.

We have a tapestry in our soul which is made up of millions of choices. We cannot weigh one more heavily than another. If we want to be strong in the Lord, then we must present ourselves to him all day, every day—little choice after little choice. Correct ethics make proper servanthood. Then our souls become a beautiful tapestry. If we want to be godly, we must present ourselves continually. This is like dieting; fads do not work.

The second thing this analogy teaches us is that when we present ourselves to a master this guarantees the fulfillment of the master's desires. Was that not true of the old life? When we presented ourselves to sin, sin had no trouble carrying out its desires through us. Presenting ourselves to impurity and lawlessness leads to further lawlessness.

Think of the first time you were really tempted. Remember how pleasure loomed great on the horizon. In order to taste the pleasure, you had to violate a known ethical standard in your conscience. How did you get the pleasure and your conscience together? We have a great technique for this called rationalization—wonderful, mental gymnastics used to prostitute the facts to fit the wrong desire. It may have taken hours, days or weeks to get that rationalization to work, but you eventually indulged in the pleasure.

Then what happened? The next time pleasure came around, it did not need the same rationalization because you had memory and as-

sociations to back it up. You could partake more easily. But now you needed more of the pleasure to be satisfied. The bottom-line ethics you thought you had began to dwindle away until the once hidden, crooked path to sin became an open highway. Your conscience dropped out altogether. Why is this? Sin was carrying out its desires through you. You were not committing yourself to an action, you were committing yourself to a relationship.

Paul says what is true of the old life is true of the new. If we present our lives to God, he will accept us as his servants and will empower us to do his will. He will carry out his desires through us in the same way. As we starve the flesh and feed the spirit, the spirit will become stronger and stronger until we have a highway to righteousness. Paul says before we had no power to be righteous; we were free in regard to righteousness. Now we have no excuse. We do not need another experience to be more righteous than we are today. We do not need an ounce more of God's grace. Since we have a new heart, all we need to do is present ourselves to God daily and continually.

In college, I led a friend to Christ out of a background of drugs. When he turned around and became a Bible teacher, he had a wonderful testimony in our fraternity house. After we graduated, he went East to work construction. Occasionally, I would get a phone call from him. One night, he confessed, "Brian, I have sinned." When I asked him what he had done, he said he had been with a prostitute. While working, he had been overcome with lust and gave in. He thought he had lost his salvation and wanted to know if God would forgive him. I assured him God had. He continued to call me regarding the same sin. He had developed a pattern of going out with the guys to drink, and when he was drunk he could not handle his sexual desires. Finally, I confronted him, "Your problem is not with sexual sins. You made a presentation to sin long before you ended up in the prostitute's bed. Look back at your drinking and even before. Your real problem is that you never presented yourself to Jesus Christ to be his soldier. The guys you work with need to know Christ. Why are you not sharing with them? Why are you not teaching the Scripture?" If he had made that kind of presentation, God would have fulfilled his desires through him. He would have been more aggressive and active. Instead he went to work passively and became one of guys. That was the problem.

Scripture says that though our freedom has been won in Christ, it has to be preserved moment by moment with a presentation to God that guarantees the cultivation of our freedom. In verses 21-23, Paul motivates us so that we might remain free.

IV. Motivating the Free: Look to the Outcome! (6:21-23)

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 [fruit], 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.

Paul's method of motivating us is to replay the old movies of our sin. He says, "I want you to remember the futility of sin, its shame, and its cost." Rather than looking at the beginning of the matter, at the pleasures sin offers in the night, he wants us to look at the morning after.

When I was 19, I visited Amsterdam which is noted for its red light district. While walking through the streets one day, I noticed a businessman in a three-piece suit coming out of a prostitute's house.

As he walked down her steps, our eyes met. He pulled a handkerchief out to clean his mouth, stuck it back in his pocket, and walked off. Despite his immaculate dress, I saw death in his eyes. This left a lasting impression on me, for I saw what his ounce of pleasure had cost him.

This is what Paul is saying. We are to remember the futility of our sin. What fruit did we gain? What benefit did we enjoy? There was no benefit! Our life was vain and empty. Lord Byron, the licentious poet, expressed this honestly at the age of 29:

My days are in yellow leaf
The fruit of life is gone,
The worm, the canker, and
The grief are mine alone.

Once we remember the futility, then we are to remember the shame of sin. What causes our shame is that we know we were meant for better things. This was the motivation Abigail used on King David when he wanted to kill her foolish husband Nabal. Abigail said, "David, you are king of Israel. Do not do this stupid thing. This is not an action of a king." The way we motivate ourselves is to remember we are kings. We are not meant to be slaves drug around by our impulses!

In fact, the shame we are to remember is the shame which lead us to Christ in the first place. Why go through it again? As John Calvin says, "Only those...who have learned well to be earnestly dissatisfied with themselves, and to be confounded with shame at their wretchedness, are imbued with the principles of Christian philosophy." How true!

Paul finally says we are to remember the cost of sin. Sin is an exacting bookkeeper. When we sow to sin, we get our wage. But sin pays at the end not at the beginning. This is why we are fooled. We do not get the paycheck until the end of the month after all the deeds are sown. And she pays out her wages in death.

Nothing is more beautiful than a godly home with a wife who loves her husband and children around the table. Yet this ideal is so difficult to attain. We can never relax because we never arrive at the ideal. We are always going against the grain of normal life. There is so much work involved in cultivating a righteous home. Yet with all our effort, we can ruin our home in one act—with one affair. Look at the cost! Is it worth it? Sin not only affects this generation, it affects the children for countless generations.

Then Paul says, having played back the old tape, we are to contemplate the outcome of righteousness. We are free from sin. Jesus is a model of this freedom. He never answered to any man. He did not answer to Peter or to the devil. He did not respond to the Pharisees. He was no man's man but the Lord's. That is freedom. He was free sexually. He was free from ambition, pride, guilt, and shame. Look at the book of Acts for more models. Those Christians were free from materialism and were free to love one another. Contemplate the joyous freedom that is yours.

Then Paul says we are to contemplate the fruit of righteousness. There were not many bright spots for America at the Olympics this year. We probably needed the humility. But the one bright spot was Brian Boitano's ice-skating performance. As they played "The Star-Spangled Banner," he cried. That was his fruit. All his work brought him the acclaim and honor that was his due for what he had accomplished. As Christians, we want the same acclaim from God. We want the Father to say, "Job well done!" We want our lives to be a tapestry filled with gentleness, patience, love, service, kindness, and self-control. This is what we are to contemplate when we present ourselves to Jesus Christ.

Finally, we are to contemplate the gift of righteousness. Unlike death which is a wage paid at the end of the matter, eternal life is a gift given before our work and before we die. In fact, eternal life does not refer to living forever. It more accurately describes the life characterized by the age to come in the new heavens and the new earth. Amos describes this life as being so rich the plowman overtakes the reaper, and the reaper cannot harvest all of the grapes before it is time to plant again. This is how fertile life is in heaven. The Holy Spirit gives us this life now before it has come in history.

When we come together and serve the Lord Jesus Christ, we enter into fellowship with him and experience eternal life now as a gift. My friend Bruce Rosenstock is a classics professor at Stanford. He is a Jew, and I have enjoyed our being able to study many of the new Testament texts together. Once he said to me, "You Christians have an advantage over us Jews because you have one foot in the eschaton, in eternal life, before its time. We do not have that." Even though most Christians do not realize this, my Jewish friend does!

This is how Paul would motivate us. To help us, he asks us to play our old movie of sin which is in black and white. It has the same characters, the same dull plot, the same monotonous monologue, and the same stupid ending. If you are motivated to sin, play this film.

Then if we want to walk in righteousness, we are to play another film which is in color. It is a musical filled with a cast of thousands. The plot is always changing, and the movie is filled with surprises. Although you know the ending, the movie gets richer and never ceases to move you to tears of joy. Play this movie, and you will be motivated to righteousness.

How free are you? Has your expression of freedom become an excuse for licentious living? If so, you are a slave! My final words to you would be what Joshua told the people after they conquered the land and still had idolatry in their midst, "Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the idols beyond the rivers or the living Lord Jesus Christ. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

"Give me liberty or give me death!" The words of Patrick Henry are more profound than he may have known. We either choose liberty which is freedom in Christ unto righteous ethics, or we choose to do what we please which leads to death—either liberty in Christ or death.

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