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Enjoying God Ministries
Romans #26
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Are You God's Slave or Sin's Slave? Romans 6:15-23

I want to tell you a story about an exceedingly odd Christian man. He is known to history as St. Simeon the Stylite. Simeon was born in 390 a.d. and died in 459. At the age of 13 he heard a sermon on the Beatitudes of Jesus from Matthew 5. He immediately cast himself down at the door of a monastery, begging to be granted entry. He lay there several days and refused to eat or drink. He grew accustomed to eating only on Sundays.

Simeon would punish his body by lacing it so tightly with cords that it pressed through to the bones. This extreme asceticism got him kicked out of the monastery. There is a limit to which even the most devoted monks might go.

Following his departure from the monastery, Simeon spent time on a mountain, living as a hermit. Countless people would make the arduous trek up the mountain to see this strange man and marvel at his dedication. But this did not bring peace or satisfaction to his soul, so Simeon traveled to an isolated area about 40 miles east of Antioch and spent the next 36 years on the top of a pillar. The Greek word for pillar is *stylus*, hence Simeon the Stylite.

The first pillar he constructed, on which he lived for four years, was some 9 ft. high. He eventually moved to a pillar 18 ft. high, then to one that was 33 ft. high. The last pillar on which he perched himself and lived for twenty years was 60 ft. tall. There was a small platform on the top of the pillar, 3 ft. in diameter. It was surrounded by a railing against which Simeon could lean if he got tired, and of course, against which he would rest his body in order to sleep. The ever-increasing height of the pillar was supposedly an indication of how much closer to God Simeon was rising. His followers and admirers would carry food up to him by means of a ladder.

While on top of the pillar, from which he never departed, he could never lie down or sit, but only stand, or lean against the railing. He would often spend entire days genuflecting, or bowing devoutly to the point that his head almost touched his feet. One observer counted no fewer than 1,244 such genuflections in one day and then quit counting. Simeon wore a covering of the skins of beasts and had a chain around his neck.

There he stood, exposed to the scorching heat of the desert, sometimes drenching rain, and even excessively cold weather. All the while he remained atop that pillar he groaned and moaned over his sin, striving after holiness but never achieving the peace and joy he so desperately desired.

If you wonder what in the world he did each day for those twenty years on top of the pillar, he preached and prayed. People would come from far away distances to marvel at him. There was a wall on the ground that surrounded the pillar, inside of which all were welcome, except for women. Evidently, he was fearful of seeing a woman and falling prey to the sin of lust. He preached about repentance, served as judge in the settling of disputes, defended orthodox theology, prayed for the sick, allegedly performed miracles, and by his proclamations led thousands of people to a saving knowledge of Christ.

He died in 459 at the age of 69, most likely from a cancer of some sort that formed on his leg. Before his death he was visited and admired by both Christians and pagans, church leaders and state officials. Even three Roman Emperors, Theodosius II, Leo, and Marcian, made the journey to seek his blessing. If there was one sin with which he struggled incessantly, not surprisingly, it was pride.

Simeon was not the only Stylite, but he was the most famous. Another, named Simeon the Younger, born in 592 a.d. is said to have spent 68 years on a pillar.

I know the question burning in your minds is: Why? Why would anyone choose to spend his earthly life atop a pillar, cut off from society, punishing his body? Aside from the fact that he was obviously a nut (!), he evidently believed that only by depriving himself of all physical comfort and pleasure could he ultimately conquer the power of sin in his life. If he withdrew from the surrounding world, he would not be tempted by what he might see or hear.

The apostle Paul was no less concerned with the presence and power of sin in his life and in the lives of other Christians, but his approach to solving the problem was altogether different from the path chosen by Simeon and other stylites. What, then, does Paul recommend? The answer to that question is found in Romans 6.

Whose Slave are You?

Although this may not sound appealing when you first hear it, we all need to come to grips with the fact that we are all slaves. I know that sounds a bit extreme, but the fact remains that ***we are all enslaved either to sin or to God.*** There is no neutrality or middle ground that can escape this reality. If you think you can obtain freedom by rejecting God, you will simply discover that you have become the slave of sin. I don't know how Paul could have said it with greater clarity than he does in v. 16 – “You are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness.” Again, in v. 22, Paul describes Christians as those “who have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God.”

This notion does not always meet with approval on the part of those who put a high value on freedom. We like to think of ourselves as the slaves of no one. We fancy ourselves free to make our own choices in life, apart from any coercion or compelling force from the outside. You can almost always hear someone say, “I am my own man. I don't belong to anyone. I am completely free and unfettered in the decisions I make and the direction I take.”

The apostle Paul and other NT writers thought differently. But before I go any farther, I need to say something about how we make use of the words, “slave” and “slavery.” It is especially the case in our day when racial division is at a boiling point that these words evoke memories of American, race-based slavery. Therefore, to appeal no fewer than 8 times to the metaphor of slavery, as Paul does in vv. 15-23, all in the interests of making a good spiritual point is difficult. So, I hope you will all be patient with me as I try to remain true to Paul's language here in Romans 6. He wants us to understand that we are all “slaves” of either sin or righteousness. I was tempted to say, “needless to say,” but I think I do need to say it. This has nothing to do with race-based slavery. It has everything to do with that to which or the one to whom we have given the allegiance of our hearts and control over our lives.

I find it instructive that even Paul recognized the dangers in making use of the terminology of slavery to make his profoundly important spiritual point. If the imagery of slavery is unsettling to your heart, you should know that it was unsettling and bothersome to the apostle Paul as well. We see this in Romans 6:19 where he interrupts his argument and says,

“I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations” (Rom. 6:19).

I think what Paul means is that he doesn't want anyone to conclude that he is making light of the reality of slavery. He is not in any way endorsing it or turning a blind eye to its evils. He is using the imagery of slavery in his own day to illustrate the relationship that all of us sustain either to sin or to righteousness. So, with that being said, let's look at what the apostle has to say.

Paul is still responding to the scurrilous accusation that his doctrine of justification by grace through faith gives a person license or freedom to sin all the more. You will recall that he opened Romans 6 with this very thing. He said in v. 1 that some evidently were accusing him of endorsing the idea that we should “continue in sin that grace may abound.”

The same idea emerges here in v. 15 following Paul’s statement in v. 14 that we are “not under law but under grace” (v. 14b). Some evidently thought that in saying that Christians are not under the Law of Moses and bound by its dictates that Paul was declaring our freedom from any and all moral laws. Taken one step further, some accused Paul of saying that since grace will always bring forgiveness, we should sin as much as we please.

What is your motivation for obedience? (v. 15)

Let’s return for a moment to v. 15. What is it like to live one’s life “under law”? You will recall that this likely refers to two realities. One is that since we are now living under the New Covenant established by the death and resurrection of Jesus, neither the people living in Paul’s day nor in our day are bound by the dictates of the Old or Mosaic Covenant. But it also means that “law” as a principle is no longer the foundational or driving force in our relationship with God. There is something Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians that will help us understand what he means here in Romans 6.

“(19) For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. (20) To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. (21) To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. (22) To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. (23) I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings” (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

Clearly, then, Paul was not *law-less*. He was not opposed to obedience or in any way reluctant to speak of the “law of Christ,” the commandments that have been given to us who live under the authority of the New Covenant. But neither was his relationship dictated by “law” in the sense that he lived in fear that if he failed to keep the commandments of the New Covenant, he would suffer the consequences. A person who lives “under law” in this sense is motivated by fear, anxiety, and uncertainty.

I suspect that more than a few of you, although born-again and justified by faith in Jesus, to this day do not know what it is like to live “under grace” rather than “under law.” You continue to live under an ever-present cloud of anxiety, suspicion, and doubt about your relationship with God. To determine if you are still living “under law” you need to ask yourself several questions:

When I sin or fail in some way, is my initial instinct to run **from** God or **to** God? If you said “from” God, you are living under law.

Do you deeply desire to obey God **in order that** he might love you, or do you obey **because** you know he loves you? Again, if you said “in order that he might love” you, you are living under law.

Is your desire to please God driven by the **fear** of failing him or by **faith** in his acceptance of you?

When you sin or fail in some way, do you think that some form of **penance** is required, something you can do to atone for your sin or **make it up** to God? Or do you immediately pause and give thanks for the fact that God has already **forgiven** you in Christ?

Are you inclined to conclude from your sin that God now *loves you less* than he did before you sinned? Or do you live in confidence and joy in knowing that God's love for you never fluctuates, never diminishes, never changes?

Is your obedience to the law of Christ motivated by the belief that you need to *pay back* God for what he has done? Or is your obedience driven by the joyful realization that the only payment to God that was required was made by Jesus on the cross?

When you are asked to pray for someone's physical healing, do you hesitate or refuse to do so because of *your awareness of sin* in your life? Or do you come boldly to the throne of grace, knowing that it is the righteousness of Jesus, in whom you trust, who determines whether or not your prayers are answered?

Today, right now, as you hear me ask you these questions, are you languishing in fear or doubt or uncertainty as to whether or not you are acceptable and righteous in God's sight through faith in Jesus Christ?

On the other hand, a person who lives "under grace" is motivated by love and joy and gratitude and a desire to glorify God in his/her life. We obey because we are immeasurably grateful for what God has done for us in Christ and we delight in his delight in us. We obey because of the joy, peace, and assurance we experience when our lives are aligned with what God desires for us. We obey because we long to display the image of Christ in us so that he might be honored and praised and glorified.

As we saw last week, some evidently took Paul's words to mean that obedience was irrelevant. Worse than that, they distorted Paul's intent as suggesting that, since we are under grace rather than under law, and since we have the assurance that God will not condemn us for our sin, we should sin all the more so that grace can be magnified and glorified all the more. To which Paul responds in v. 15 with the same words he used in v. 2 – "Heck no! God forbid! Are you nuts?"

Spiritual Slavery (vv. 16-19)

In vv. 1-14, Paul clearly and repeatedly affirmed that the reason why we must not continue to live in sin is because we, by virtue of our spiritual union with Christ, have died to sin. Now, in vv. 16-23, Paul says we must not continue in sin because by God's saving grace we have become slaves to him and to righteousness.

The reality of spiritual slavery is unpacked by Paul in vv. 16-19. It's actually quite simple. If you give yourself over to your fleshly lusts and follow their prompting, you become a slave to your sin. You obey its dictates. You are held in bondage to its passions and desires.

On the other hand, if you choose to present yourselves to God and submit your life, thoughts, actions, and words to him, you are his slave. You are held captive to his will and ways. But if slavery sounds too negative at this point, please realize that obedience to God's revealed will is the greatest and most satisfying experience of true freedom that anyone can attain.

We became the slaves of God and righteousness when he purchased us by the blood of his Son. When God redeemed us, he didn't put a piece of paper in our hand and declare: "This is documented proof of your freedom. You are now at liberty to go and do as you please. You are free to live however you wish." No. He said: "I purchased you with the precious blood of my Son. You now belong to me. Enter into the true freedom of being empowered to live in accordance with my will and for my glory." We must never forget the truth of 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, and its echo in Revelation 5.

"You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19b-20).

“And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth’” (Rev. 5:9).

There are only two possibilities. *Either you are living as a slave to sin or as a slave to God.* If you choose the former, you should understand that you don’t rule sin. Sin rules you. The idea that as long as you refuse to embrace and believe the gospel you remain free; you remain your own lord and master, is a delusion. There is no person anywhere at any time who has not lived as the slave of someone. There is no such thing as unconditional, unequivocal, unfettered freedom. Either you are a slave to your sin, or you are a slave to God and his righteousness. Jesus said it well:

“(31) So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, (32) and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ (33) They answered him, ‘We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, “You will become free”?’

(34) Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. (35) The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. (36) So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed’” (John 8:31-36).

There is a glorious paradox in the words of Jesus and Paul. *If you are “free” from God, you are “enslaved” to sin. And if you are “enslaved” to God, you are “free” for his righteousness!*

These Jewish religious leaders who interacted with Jesus, just like all unbelieving, non-Christian people today, vehemently deny that they are anyone’s slave. But they are in fact enslaved to their own ego, their own distorted desires, their own sinful disposition and inclination. Of course, that doesn’t mean that they are coerced to sin. No one sins from a sense of duty. But their choices are a reflection or expression of their fallen nature. They sin because they enjoy it. They sin because they prefer it to submission to God.

So, how did we who believe in Jesus enter into this true freedom of which Jesus speaks? Paul answers that in vv. 17-18 where he gives “thanks 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, and having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness” (vv. 17-18). *It was God’s doing!* While we were unregenerate and living in unbelief, we saw nothing in the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ that we found appealing. Sin and idolatry and self-determination were more attractive and alluring than the righteousness of God.

But Paul says down in v. 22 that we “have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God.” We don’t ultimately free ourselves. We *“have been”* set free by God and his sovereign grace! God’s saving power transforms our minds and writes his law upon our hearts and gives us his Spirit by whose work we see the beauty of Christ and treasure his ways above those of the world, the flesh, and the Devil.

Of course, there is still something we do. As Paul says in v. 17, we “have become *obedient* from the heart to the standard of teaching to which” we have committed ourselves. The phrase, “standard of teaching,” refers to the well-defined body of Christian truth, both the doctrinal concepts and the ethical precepts of his Word. And our grace-empowered obedient faith was “from the heart,” which is to say, it was sincere and passionate and deep and oh so very real; not forced or in any way coerced.

It is fascinating that Paul does not say this form or standard of teaching was delivered to us, but that we were delivered over into it. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, famous pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, now with the Lord, said it best:

“Think of a great mould [that’s the British spelling of ‘mold’]. A man comes along and pours molten metal into that mould. Because the metal is molten it now takes the form of the mould, so that when it cools he can lift it out in its solid form. It will be exactly the same shape as the mould into which he put it. That is the idea conveyed by the Apostle. ‘You,’ he says, ‘who have become believers, have been delivered over, you have been poured into the mould of this form of doctrine.’ ‘That is why you are what you are’” (215).

Do you see the picture Paul is painting? You and your life, your habits, your beliefs, your activities, everything about you, is designed by God to be shaped and formed and molded by the truth and principles of the “teaching” or the doctrinal concepts that God has put in his written Word.

What, then, is our response to this? How should it affect our lives? Paul has said it repeatedly in Romans 6. ***Start right now living in conformity with who God has graciously made you to be.*** Or as Paul puts it,

“consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (v. 11).

“let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions” (v. 12).

“do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness” (v. 13a).

“present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and [present] your members to God as instruments for righteousness” (v. 13b).

“present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification” (v. 19b).

What are these “members” (vv. 13, 19) that he calls on us to present to God? Our senses: what we see, listen to, smell, taste, and touch. It also includes our actions, our words, our time, our energy, and perhaps even especially our sexual organs. All these belong to God. So don’t give them over to be used by sin!

The Free Gift of God (vv. 20-23)

What is the result or outcome of spiritual slavery? Does it really matter all that much that I give myself over into slavery to sin or, conversely, to God? Well, yes! Paul himself asks the question in v. 21 when he refers to “the fruit” you were getting when you were enslaved to sin. What might that “fruit” be? Death (v. 21b)! What “fruit” comes from slavery to God and his righteousness? Eternal life (v. 22)! Since the “life” we gain by being enslaved to God is “eternal” it stands to reason that the “death” one experiences by being enslaved to sin is “eternal” (i.e., hell).

I can’t let pass what Paul says in v. 21. There is a proper place for feeling “shame” in the Christian life. It has to do with the way you lived before you became a child of God by faith in Jesus. He isn’t telling you to be ashamed of who you are or to embrace shame as part of your identity or to let shame lead you to conclude that you are worthless to God and others. He is telling us that we should be able to look into our past, into that time when we were enslaved to sin and say, “Lord, I am truly ashamed of the things I believed and the kind of sinful life I lived. Thank you for forgiving me!”

Through the words of the OT prophet Jeremiah, God described his people when they fell into idolatry and immorality. He said of them,

“Were they ashamed when they committed abominations? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush” (Jer. 8:12).

Once again, Lloyd-Jones says it best:

“There is hope for men and women as long as they can still blush; there is still something of moral sensibility left in them. But when they reach the stage in which they cannot even blush, it represents the very depth of iniquity. They have reached a stage in which they have lost the very sense of good and evil. They gloat over that which is wrong, they boast in iniquity. [Yes, think of “Pride Month” and “Pride Parades”] The shamefulness of it all!” (282).

But praise God that we can conclude, as Paul does, on the hopeful and encouraging note of eternal life through Jesus Christ! This is what we find in v. 23. Sin pays a wage, whereas God bestows a gift. The wage sin pays is eternal death. The gift God bestows is eternal life. You have to work to earn a wage. You have only to believe to receive a gift.

Can you see the difference between a wage and a gift? A wage is something you work to earn. A gift is something you believe to receive. You deserve your wages. And trust me. Sin will pay you fully and on time. But you don't deserve a free gift. That's why we call it a gift! And it only comes to a person “in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 23b). Apart from Christ there is no gift of eternal life. It doesn't matter that you are religious or sincere or hard-working. The free gift of eternal life only is found in Jesus!

Conclusion

What have we learned about the Christian life from Romans 1-6? Three principles:

- 1) ***THOSE WHOM GOD CHOOSES, HE CHANGES.*** This is the remedy for *passivity*. Holiness is not optional, God commands it.
- 2) ***WHATEVER GOD REQUIRES, HE PROVIDES.*** This is the remedy for *powerlessness*. Holiness is not impossible, God creates it.
- 3) ***WHATEVER GOD STARTS, HE FINISHES.*** This is the remedy for *pessimism*. Holiness is not fleeting, God completes it.

A story is told of the Christians who were mercilessly slaughtered in the arenas of Rome. They seemed always to go to their cruel and painful deaths with smiles on their faces, singing hymns of praise. One spectator turned to another and asked: “Is there no way to make these people suffer?” To which he replied: “Only by causing them to sin.” Would that such might be true of us all!