

Romans: Under Grace

Romans 6:15-18

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn to Romans 6. We're going to be looking at Romans 6, verses 15 through 18 today. I'd like to remind you of a couple of things before we read this passage. From Romans, chapter 3 through 5, Paul has especially reminded us that our forgiveness, our acceptance with God is grounded in His grace. Romans 6 has been stressing that grace transforms. In Romans chapter 6, he is stressing that we are not only forgiven by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, but we are transformed, we are changed; we are made a new creation.

That's been one of the great themes of the first fourteen verses of this particular chapter. You will remember, if you look back at verse 1 of chapter 6, that it begins with a question: Shall we continue to sin in order that grace may abound? Now, you'll notice that the passage that we're going to read today begins with basically the same question, slightly rephrased. In Romans 6:1 it says, "Shall we continue to sin?" In Romans 6:15, the question is, "Shall we sin?" Paul is coming back to a similar question because he's getting to this issue of the relationship between the free forgiveness and justification that we have in Jesus Christ, and acceptance with God not based upon anything in us, Not based upon our works, but based upon what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, and how that relates to God's transforming work in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. And so he's asking the question, once grace reigns, do we continue to live a life under the dominion and the mastery of sin? Or should we do so in order to show all the more the reign of grace? And this question has preoccupied his thoughts for the first fourteen verses. He's made it clear so far that when God comes to us in His grace, He breaks not only the penalty of sin, but He breaks the power of sin. He's going to assert that again in the passage today. And I just want you to note the relationship between the question in verse 15 and the question in verse 1.

The second thing I want you to note is in verse 14. Look back to that verse. At the end of the last section that we studied, Paul introduced an interesting phrase. The phrase is, "You are not under law, but you are under grace." Now it is that phrase which is going to spawn a misunderstanding of Paul's gospel, which he is going to correct by asking another question in the passage that we are studying

today. So with that introduction, let's look at God's holy word here in Romans 6, verses 15 through 18. This is the word of God:

"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. 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. Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Father, we before You, and we ask that You would open our eyes to behold wonderful truths from Your Word. This passage is one that has confused many, perhaps it has confused us in the past. We ask though that not merely for an understanding of it, but we ask, O God, that by the transforming grace of the Holy Spirit, we would become Your faithful servants, those who delight to do Your will, to the praise and the glory of Your Grace, and by its power. In Jesus' Name, we ask these things, Amen.

What does it mean to be free? We live in a culture that is obsessed with freedom. Freedom is a thing, a quantity, it's a concept that we value highly and rightly so. We should never take the freedoms that we have and which have been transferred to us and protected and handed on to us. We should never take those things lightly. But we tend to be slightly freedom obsessed. So what is it to be free? What does that mean? Paul is exploring that question in the passage before you. What does it mean to be free as a Christian. What does it mean to be out from under the bondage of the law. What does it mean to be under the reign of grace. It's that kind of question that Paul is exploring, because he's been talking about some of the tremendous freedoms of God. You remember especially in Romans 5, 1 through 11, he's cataloged for you a list of these freedoms that you have: you're freed from the wrath of God, you're freed from the penalty of sin, you're freed from the fear of condemnation. You've gotten this bank of freedoms handed to you. But in the meantime, in Romans, chapter 6, a shadow has cast itself across the page of Paul's gospel that is suggesting that some people have misunderstood these freedoms as a license to sin. They have understood these freedoms which we have been granted as an excuse to ignore the pursuit of holiness and godliness, and so in Romans, chapter 6, Paul has been correcting that misunderstanding. He started out by saying, are we to continue in sin so that grace might increase? And his answer has been an emphatic and an extended 'no.'

And now in verse 14, having just said to us that sin shall not be master over you because you are not under law but under grace, he is confronted with another misunderstanding of his teaching. And he states the objection, the misunderstanding of his teaching rhetorically: What should we say then? Shall

we sin because we are not under law, but under grace. Apparently there were some people who were saying, "That's right, Paul, we are not under the law, we're under grace, and, therefore, it doesn't matter how we live. We are freed from the law, oh happy condition, we can do as we please now that we have remission." And that was the philosophy of these people.

And the apostle once again says, "No, that's wrong." And he says it in a very helpful way. He says, "No, first, by re-asking their question in verse 15. Secondly, he says, "No," by counter-posing another question in verse 16. He offers another question in place of the question that's been asked of him. And then in verses 17 and 18, he gives this frankly shocking parallel between what it means to be a slave to sin, and what it means to be a slave to righteousness. I'd like to look at Paul's description of what true Christian freedom is by looking at the question in verse 15, the question in verse 16, and this parallel in verses 17 and 18. Let's attend to the passage. Look at verse 15 first.

I. What is God's grace designed to accomplish in us?

Paul is responding to a question. The question is basically this. Should we sin because we are under grace? It's a very similar question to the question in verse 1. Should we continue to sin in order that grace might increase? Should we sin because we are not under law, but under grace. That's the question that's being asked. Paul is raising the issue in your mind of what God's grace was designed to accomplish in me? What did God intend to do in me by His grace. Not simply for me, not simply in accepting me by the free justification which Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross has accomplished, but what does God's grace intend to do with me and in me? Paul is asking us to ask ourselves that question by posing this question in verse 15.

Now the question itself raises another question in our minds, and that is, what exactly does it mean that we're not under law, but under grace? What does it mean to 'not be under law?' Positively, what does it mean to 'be under grace?' More fully, what does it mean to be not under law, but rather to be under grace? A lot of people give a lot of different answers to that. So let's walk through three wrong answers to that question, and work our ways toward a right answer to that question. You'll appreciate what Paul is saying.

A lot of people believe that what it means as a Christian that you are not under law but under grace, means that there are no longer any rules. You know, rules are sort of cramping our style. The Pharisees, they have all these rules, and the great thing about Jesus is He gets rid of all the rules. There are no more rules. This is what I call 'Outback Steakhouse' theology. You've seen the ad. 'No rules, just right.' You know, I have been dying to go into an Outback Steakhouse, and when the waitress is serving another table, just walk up, introduce myself and say, "Blooming onion, right now. Drop those people. Blooming onion right now. I

make the rules here." No rules, just right. And just right for me is my blooming onion right now. And when she comes by to pick up, you know, my card to pay for the thing, I say, "Uh, uh, empty the cash register right here, right now." No rules, just right. You see, this whole idea that rules are the problem is one of the dumb ideas of all time. That's not what it means not to be under law, but under grace. It doesn't mean that the rules no longer exist. What a windless world it would be with no rules. We would all become our own little czars, you know, asserting our own individual wants and need at any particular time at the expense of everyone else. Being under law doesn't mean "Oh, you're under this terrible bondage of being order in the world, and now thank heavens, Jesus has gotten rid of all that order, and there are no rules now. Everything has just kind of fallen apart, and there's this divine anarchy going on." That's not what it means to not be under law, but under grace.

Secondly, some Christians say, "Well, it's like this. It's not that there are no rules, it's that in the Old Testament you had to obey the rules, and in the New Testament you don't have to, but you do anyway because you want to." In the Old Testament you had to, in the New Testament you don't have to but you want to. That's not what Paul is saying. You know I've had Christians who believe that and they say to me, "We don't have to obey the Ten commandments any more." We do because we want to, but we don't have to. I've even heard people say, "Well, we don't really have to obey the Sermon on the Mount. That's about the kingdom age to come. We might do those because we want to, but we don't have to." That's not what Paul is positing here either. If God's commands are how we love God with all our hearts, soul, mind and strength, and how we love our neighbor as ourselves, then they are not optional. The point of freedom for the Christian is not that godliness become optional, and we do it when we feel like it. That's not the freedom that Paul is talking about. That's a wrong response.

Now other people will say, "Look, here's the freedom." In the Old Testament you had these ten commands. In the New Testament those commands are not repeated anywhere. That's actually wrong, but they think that. At any rate, you know, in the Old Testament you have these ten commands. Now you don't have them any more. We have the moral principles of the New Testament. Well, it's interesting if you look at those moral principles; they look a whole lot like the moral law of the Old Testament. Our freedom from the law means we're not under the Old Testament moral law, now we're under New Testament principles. That's not what Paul is saying either. Paul and the author of Hebrews in different places make it clear that the culminating purpose of God's grace in the covenant of grace can be typified in what Jeremiah said in Jeremiah 31:31 through 34. And what did he say? What is the mark of a person who is the ultimate new covenant Christian? The law is written on their hearts. Which law? God's moral law. Because God's moral law is the reflection of His own nature. It's what He's like, and He wants us to be morally like Him. Yes, it's true that the ceremonial law has been abrogated, because it has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and yes, it is true that the civil law of Israel no longer pertains because the state has expired. There

may be principles to learn from it, but the civil law is no longer binding, but the moral law is a reflection of God's character. And the freedom that we have as Christians is not a liberation from God's character. For surely we want to be like Him, we want to be like our Heavenly Father.

So if all those things are not what Paul means by not being under law but under grace, what does he mean? Well, some people might say this. It means that we're not under the condemnation of the law. That's true, but that's not what Paul is talking about now. He has talked about that, and he will talk about it again, but right now, he seems not so much to be talking about our forgiveness and our acceptance and our freedom from condemnation, as he is talking about the fact that we are no longer pawns of sin anymore. We are no longer dominated by this tyrannical master of sin. He's telling us, here, that we are not under the law, but under grace in this sense. We are free from the domination of sin, and we are supported by the strength, by the power of grace, in order to be like God. Morality, godliness, holiness, obedience flows from the work of the grace of the Holy Spirit in us.

You see, the problem is not rules. The problem is not obligation to those rules. The problem is not even Old Testament moral law. The problem is sin. And the strength of sin's dominion over us is found in the condemning aspects of the law. Paul makes that point. Turn with me to I Corinthians, chapter 15. In I Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 56, Paul says this: The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin, the strength of sin is the law, and, therefore, as a believer, God has liberated you from the dominion, from the power, from the strength of sin. In that sense you are not under law. You live under the reign of the grace of the Holy Spirit. So that the law is not now public enemy number one, because it's the number one source of your condemnation, and at the same time is totally unable to transform you. You live under the reign of grace where the power of the Holy Spirit becomes dynamic that enables you to say, "How I love Your law, O Lord. I meditate on it day and night, and I walk in those ways, because it's a lamp unto my feet, and it's a light to my path." And we sing about this all the time, and I think we probably miss it. Take your hymnal out and look at 499. I know most of you have this hymn memorized, and I thank God for that. But look closely because you may miss this wonderful statement or stanza one. "Rock of Ages, Cleft For Me," 499. First stanza. He's singing initially about justification isn't he? Well, Christ is the one who is our Mediator, Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me. By the way, this is the wonderful Calvinist Augustus Toplady who wrote this hymn. "Rock of Ages, Cleft For Me, let me hide myself in Thee. Let the water and the blood, from Thy wounded side which flowed be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its guilt and power." You see, Toplady there is not only desirous to be forgiven, not only desirous of being spared the penalty of sin, he's praising God that from the work of Christ also flows the breaking of the power of sin. It's not just the guilt of sin that's been dealt with by God and Jesus Christ, it's the power of sin. I've not only been forgiven; I've been transformed. I have a new master. There's a new power at work in me. The power of grace, the power of the grace

of the Holy Spirit. There's a new situation in my life; there's transformation.

And if you turn forward thirty hymns, to number 529, another one that many of you have memorized. "Love Divine, All Love's Excelling." And if you'll look in the second stanza in this hymn, "Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit into every troubled breast," let us all in Thee inherit, let us find the promised rest, take away the love of sinning, Alpha and Omega be, end of faith as its beginning set our hearts at liberty." Look at the juxtaposition of those phrases at the end of the third section of this stanza, and the fourth section. Take away the love of sinning, set our hearts at liberty. You know, we Calvinists don't always agree with Charles Wesley. But on this, we're in lock step. We agree entirely. 'Take away the love of sinning, set our hearts at liberty.' What's true freedom? When the dominion of sin is broken. When the love of sin has had its death grip loosed on us. We can breathe again, and we can seek after something greater and better. Take away the love of sinning, set our hearts at liberty.

What is Paul telling us here when he says that we are not under law, we're under grace? He's saying that grace is designed to answer sin in its penalty and power. Justification and sanctification were the other code words that we could use for that. Grace designs not only to forgive us, to freely justify us, but grace designs to transform us, to sanctify us. It's a beautiful thing. That's the first thing that Paul draws our attention to. Grace is designed to answer sin in its penalty and power. That's what it means to be not under law, but under grace.

II. Obligation is not optional in this world, the issue is to what/whom are you obligated.

Secondly, look at verse 16. Paul, you know this question is put out there, well should we sin, since we're not under law but under grace? Well, in light of what we just said, that's sort of a ridiculous question. Paul knows that, and so he poses a counter-question. He says, "Let me give you a really good question. That's not a very good question. Let me give you a little better one to think about." Verse 16. Here's my paraphrase of it. Don't you know that you are a slave of the one you obey? Don't you know that that's a reality of life? You are a slave of the one you obey. What's Paul getting at here? Paul is telling you that obligation is not optional in this world. The issue is to what or to whom will you be obligated. Obligation is not an option in this world. You see, we live in a day and time where freedom means freedom from obligations. Freedom means, "Hey, I will do what I jolly well please to do whenever I want to do it, wherever I want to do it, however I want to do it." And unfortunately many Christians think, "Hey, that's Christian freedom. You know, I'm forgiven now. I'll do what I jolly well please, whenever I want to do it, wherever I want to do it, however I want to do it." And the apostle Paul is saying, "That view of freedom is a myth. It does not exist. There is no such thing as non-obligation in life. You are always obligated to that which you are pursuing. Whether it be sin or righteousness, whether it be

Satan's agenda or self-agenda or God's agenda.

That's why, by the way, parents, it's so important that as we encourage our children to pursue their gifts we do not to give them the advice of the world which says, you can be anything you want to be. My friends, that is a lie. You know, you may have a 5'2" son. I'm afraid he is never going to be an NBA center banging around with Zoe (Jerome Moiso) in the paint. It's not going to happen. Now I understand that sometimes we say that to mean, "Look, if you're going to do anything in life, you've got to be committed to it. You've got to want to do it. But strictly speaking, the counsel that 'you can be anything that you want to be' is utter folly. But you see it on commercials, you see it on sports motivation, you see it in business, you can be anything you want to be. That's terrible counsel. And let me say that is bondage for a child. That's not freedom for a child. A child could go off pursuing something that they are not capable of pursuing out of belief in this myth that you can do anything that you want to do. No, You can do anything that God wants you to be, but you can't be anything that you want to be. And so we need to put that in context. That's myth that we believe in our culture, that you can just sort of define yourself as you go along.

And the apostle Paul basically in verse 16 is exploding the myth, and he is saying there's no such thing as that kind of freedom, folks. There's no such thing as freedom that has no obligations, that has no claims upon it. You always pay the piper, Paul is saying. You may be bound to sin, you may think you're free, but you're bound to sin. Paul says you are slaves of the one whom you obey. Either of sin resulting in death or obedience resulting in righteousness. Paul is reminding you here that sin often presents itself as 'you do exactly what you want to do, just because you want to do it,' and, therefore, it's the ultimate expression of freedom and is actually very enticing, very seductive and very tyrannical. Now a young person lies to get out of a problem. Their parents said, "Now look, don't do such and such." And the young person has done it. And the young person doesn't want to get in trouble, so when there's a possibility that person's going to get caught, he says, "Well, I didn't do it." And maybe he gets by with it. The lie works. He gets off the hook. And then another lie is produced in order to cover for that lie. And that worked pretty well, and so you begin to do it in other places; because it's getting you what you want. And suddenly you find yourself in a web of lies that you make, and then you find a few years later that you were living in lies all the time. And you know what, you're not the commander, the lies are. Because you're always the slave of the one you obey; and if you obey the lie, you will be a slave of the lie. And that's what the apostle is saying here. It may look like it's freedom, it make look like you're calling the shots, but you're not. You're never calling the shots. Paul's point here is that nobody is ultimately their own boss. You either serve a beneficent, generous, loving master whose commands are always and only for your own good, or you serve a tyrannical master, self, and Satan and sin. And those are your choices. Everybody serves someone.

III. God's grace brings power for whole-hearted obedience.

Finally, look at what Paul says in 17 and 18. It's a shocking parallel, and we're going to pick this up, because Paul knows this is a shocking parallel; and he's going to try and explain himself in verses 19 through 23. Listen to what he says: "You were slaves to sin, now you are slaves of righteousness." What a shocking way to talk about freedom. Paul says, "Let's see, in order to illustrate to you what true Christian freedom is, I would like to introduce the subject of slavery. Now Paul wasn't being flippant in this, because very likely in the congregation that he is writing to, there are people who are either slaves or former slaves. They know what it is to be a bond slave. Paul's not being flippant. Paul is being deliberately shocking, because he wants to shock us into a reality.

And he says three things that I'd like you to see in just these two verses. He's explaining here that God's grace is the thing which liberates, and true liberation is found in obedience, not in doing what we jolly well please. He's telling us here that God's grace brings power for whole-hearted obedience.

First of all, look at the very first phrase of 17: "Thanks be to God that though you were slaves to sin, you became obedient. Notice that Paul is thanking God for the conversion of these Christians. Now look, if we save ourselves, either by our faith or by our works, what are you thanking God for? But if it is God's grace who saves, who grants you the faith to believe, and who provides for us the works of righteousness in his son, then that's a really good reason to thank God. In other words, even in this first phrase in verse 17, Paul proving that salvation is by grace alone. Thanks be to God that though you were slaves to sin, now you're slaves to righteousness. He's just proved that salvation is by grace alone. Or why would you thank God?

Secondly, notice what he says. "I give thanks to God that though you were slaves to sin, you became obedient from the heart." Paul is saying that the obedience that was produced in these Roman Christians and is produced in all those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior, is whole-souled obedience. It's not, "Uh, I'm going to do it. I hate this, every step of the way, but I'm going to do it. I'm just going to bite my life and I'm going to be obedient." This is whole-souled obedience where you say, "How I love Your law, O Lord." I don't want to be your reverend at all, but have you ever thought about the creation mandates that God gave to Adam in the garden? I mean, first he comes to Adam, and he says, "Now Adam, here's the situation. I want you to take dominion over the entire known universe. I want you to be my vice-ruler, and I want you to command creation, bring order to it, make it fruitful." You're kidding? Why? That's command number one. Okay. Next one. The second command is this: "Eve, I want you to fill the earth." You've got to be joking. This is command number two. Right. That's command number two. "And then, remember, there's mandatory rest for you every week, I don't want you to work like the work-alcoholic slaves. Every seven days you rest on My day, following My pattern." So there's a

mandate to Adam for seven and a half weeks vacation every year. You've got to be kidding? Right. "Now, next, I want you to get married." That's the command? Right. Yes. God's commands are good, and it's only sin that makes us think that they are binding us, they are cramping our style. God's sovereignty over us as His servants is always not only for His glory, but in our best interests. No wonder we are able to give whole-souled obedience.

Finally, look at what he says in verse 18. "Having been free from sin, you became sins of righteousness." In other words, God's given you a new master. He's your Master, righteousness is master. Sin was a tyrannical, dominating, taskmaster. It promised a lot, it delivered very little; may have wrecked your life; certainly would eternally. But He is a gracious master.

You know, I think that a lot of Christians think that freedom is getting to call their own shots; getting to call their own shots. Freedom from obedience, not obedience to obedience. Freedom from obligation, not freedom for obedience. Paul though reminds us here that to be a son is to obey. To be a child of God is to obey. To be a servant of God most high, is to serve Him. You remember what Satan said to Adam in the garden? If you want to be like God, disobey. Do you remember what the author of Hebrews teaches in Hebrews 5, chapter 8? "Although, He was a Son, He learned obedience through that which He suffered." In other words, if you want to be like God, if you want to be like His Son, what did His Son do? He obeyed. Paul is saying the freedom of grace is for obedience, and that's what it means what it means not be to under law, but under grace. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word, and we ask that by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we would be able to say with the Psalmist how we love Your Law, oh Lord, and not only with lip service, but with the whole of our hearts. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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