

## **Romans: Slaves of Righteousness**

**Romans 6:19-23**

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 6. Paul has made it very clear especially from Romans, chapter 3 to 5, that our justification is by God's grace. In other words, the forgiveness that we have, the acceptance that we have with God, is the product of God's work, not our own work. We don't save ourselves, we don't work our way back into God's good graces by attempting to be as good as we possibly can be, we don't attempt to make a new start in life, which gives us a new life with God. But God, in His mercy, freely forgives us because of what Jesus did. In other words, the reason why we're accepted with God has nothing to do with anything in us or about us, and everything to do with Jesus Christ, in His person, in His work; in His life obedience, and in His obedience on the cross. We are accepted by God freely, we're forgiven freely. Paul's been making that point in just about every different way that he can think of. God does that work. He does it by grace, and we receive it by the empty hand of faith. Paul has said that in numerous ways because sometimes it can be so difficult to believe that God's grace is for you. In fact, the deeper your sense of sin, the harder it will be to believe that God has truly extended his hand of mercy to you.

Perhaps, you can think back in a situation where you have not only made a mistake, but you have committed a sin, the implications which are so deep and so lasting that you can't imagine God or anyone else showing you grace. And perhaps under those very circumstances, you have seen the grace of God minister to you. And that's a reminder of why Paul has to spend so much time telling us about this free gift of mercy and the acceptance and forgiveness of God which is in Christ Jesus. That is why He has told it to us so many different ways.

But then getting to Romans, chapter 6, Paul wants to tell us something else. You realize that some people will hear this message of forgiveness and think that this means that God doesn't really care how we live; that God's grace doesn't bring with it any transforming power which changes our lives. So in Romans chapter 6, he's warning us to know that not only is there forgiveness by God's grace, but there's also a transformation of life because of God's grace. Not only is there forgiveness, by grace, there is holiness by grace. Not only is there justification by

grace, so also there is sanctification by grace. And so Paul has been stressing that.

Now in the very last verse that we looked at together, verse 18, Paul had introduced a very provocative phrase. The phrase *slaves of righteousness*. And he's going to expand on that in the passage that we're looking at today. Paul wants to shock us into one reality about life as unbelievers, and another reality about life as believers. And he's going to use this illustration, this metaphor, this analogy because he knows that it is not what we're expecting. He knows how shocking this will be for us to take in. So with that as introduction, let's hear God's Holy Word, beginning in Romans 6, 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. 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.

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

Our Lord and our God, give us hearing ears, believing hearts as we come to this Your Word. Challenge us, awaken us, teach us, transform us all by Your grace. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

One of the greatest challenges for affluent Christians living in an affluent society is to value the things of God more than the things of this world. Precisely because we have much of this world, it is possible to be distracted by the things of this world, to become preoccupied with them, to use them sort of like a spiritual pacifier as the answer to any particular calamity; to find a greater delight in them than in the riches of God.

Now in order to be an affluent Christian in an affluent society and not to value the things of this world more than the things of God, you need to do at least two things. The first thing you have to do is recognize the difference. There is a difference between temporal blessings, and earthly blessings and riches and wealth and spiritual blessings. Sometimes they come together. Some of the godliest people of the Scriptures were people who had both, Abraham and David. Sometimes of course they don't come together. Some of the godliest people in the Scriptures were people who had absolutely nothing. We think of Lazarus. But you need to recognize, as you try and keep the difference in your mind, that there

are many supposedly Christian preachers, who are doing their best to confuse you about that fact. In fact, if you turn on what is so-called 'Christian television,' most of the teaching that you will hear will be specifically designed to confuse you about these things and to lump together spiritual blessings and earthly blessings. So if you send in a five-dollar check, you'll get a five-dollar blessing. And if you send in a fifty-dollar check, you'll get a fifty-dollar blessing. And God promises you health and wealth if only you will just believe. So there are supposedly Christian teachers who are doing their best to confuse you about the difference. And the first thing you need to know in order not to value the blessings of this world over the greater spiritual blessings of God is that there is a difference.

The second thing you need to know, however, is the nature of true blessedness. What is it to be truly blessed? What is it to be truly free? What is it to be truly happy? You have to know what that means before you are able to resist the way the world attempts to trick you into a false blessedness that looks true. You must understand what true blessedness is. You need to know the genuine article if you are to avoid being tricked by a false substitute. And that is basically what Paul is talking about in the final verses in this chapter. Paul is setting before us, right here, what true blessedness is, what true happiness entails, what true spiritual riches are. But he's ironically doing it using the example of slavery.

Now I suspect, my friends, that this would be the last example that you would choose were you desiring to illustrate true blessedness. And the apostle Paul knows that. Remember, there would have been people in this congregation to which he was originally writing who would have themselves been either former slaves, or still slaves. No, Paul is not using an abstract illustration in a way that is irreverent and disrespectful to the people who are hearing him. He knows how shocking this example is going to be. In fact, he apologizes for the illustration in verse 19. Have you noticed that? "I'm speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh." Paul knows that this is going to raise all sorts of questions in your mind when he says, "True blessedness is slavery." Paul knows there are going to be 15,000 objections and 35,000 qualifications that people want to make. But Paul is saying, "Bear me out."

So hear me out, my friends, I'd like to point to two or three things that Paul makes very clear to us in this passage.

### **I. Having known the bondage of wickedness, become slaves of righteousness that you might know the freedom of holiness.**

Look at verse 19. Paul argues here this. You were slaves of lawlessness and impurity. That's how you were apart from Christ. You were slaves of lawlessness and impurity. Now, however, present yourselves as slaves of righteousness. That's Paul's simple argument in verse 19. You were slaves of lawlessness and

impurity. That's what you were apart from Christ. "Now, however, present yourselves as slaves of righteousness." Paul is telling us here in verse 19, that we, having known the bondage of sin, must now present ourselves as slaves of righteousness in order that we would know the freedom of holiness. Now listen to the three parts of that: We have known the bondage of sin and we must now present ourselves as slaves of righteousness in order to know the freedom of holiness. That's the logic of Paul's argument here. Now Paul knows that there are limitations to this illustration, and that's why he says, "Brethren, I'm speaking in human terms, as I illustrate this to you. There are problems with this illustration. Human slavery is not an institution that one would naturally desire to be under." When you go around home room in second grade, and you ask, "Well, Bobby, what do you want to be when you grow up?" "Well, I want to be a doctor." "And Sally, what do you want to be when you grow up?" "Well, I want to be a lawyer." And you get to Joey, "Well, Joey, what do you want to be when you grow up?" "I want to be slave." My guess is no homeroom teacher has ever heard that here yet at First Presbyterian Day School, or anywhere else. This is not something that one generally longs for. But Paul chooses this illustration in order to shock us out of an illusion of which we are a part. And that illusion is that people are free apart from Christ. The illusion is that true freedom is doing what ever you want to do. The illusion is that we are freest when we are doing what we want to do apart from God's will, apart from God's word, apart from God's law, without regard to them. Freedom by this definition is doing your own thing, fulfilling your own desires, that's true freedom. And what the apostle Paul wants you to understand is that is not freedom at all: It's bondage, and it's bondage of the worst and most dire kind. Paul describes the nature of life apart from Christ in the starkest language. Here's his assessment. Here's the assessment who's apart from Christ: Well, you were giving your lives and using your bodies as slaves to impurity and to law breaking resulting in even more law breaking. You were slaves to your own wicked desires. That's not a very pretty picture.

Now we know some people who we can identify very easily that are in that kind of a trap. We could, for instance, look at a sports figure, like Darryl Strawberry. Frankly, we can substitute 500 other names as well, but he's in the news right now. Here's a person with enormous talents and potential. And because of his addiction to a narcotic, he continues to throw his life away. Now we can look at a person like that and see how they are enslaved to their desires and how that is destroying their life. They are not free because they are able to follow out their addictions, but they are slaves because they are enslaved to their addiction. That's very clear. And we can see an actor, like Robert Downey, Jr., and we can say, "Now here's a person who has potential, and he could really make it in the Hollywood scene, and yet he continues to throw his life away because of his addiction to a narcotic."

And we can see a person like that, and say, "That person is enslaved, but not me." Paul wants to say, "If you're apart from Christ, you are precisely in the same situation." It may be another desire, it may be more socially acceptable, but you

are still a slave to your desires, and thus a slave to sin if you are apart from Jesus Christ. It may be a slave to sexual immorality, it may be a slave to greed, it may be a slave to ambition, it can be any number of sins, but you are still a slave to those desires apart from Christ. We may think of ourselves as free as long as we are allowed to do whatever we want to do, whenever we want to do it, however we want to do it. But this, Paul says, is an illusion. True freedom is found elsewhere. And our society is in the grip of this kind of a struggle with our own desires, and our own seeking of self-fulfillment and slavery to it.

Many years ago, George Orwell wrote a book called *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Sounds old fashioned now. Now it's futuristic. He wrote the book long before the year 1984 came. And in that book he basically suggested that there was a possibility that in the future, because of the growth and technology and such, that there would be a day when there would be an impressive 'big brother' state which would be able to control every aspect of our lives. And he raised this as a problem of civil liberty. But before Orwell wrote that particular book, a man named Aldous Huxley wrote a book called *Brave New World*. And in his book he basically said, you know, the problem is not going to be in an impressive big brother state. The problem is that we're going to become slaves to our own desires. Neil Postman in the provocative introduction to his book, *Amusing Ourselves To Death*. And by the way, that's a book that we all need to read and think about in our own day and time, says this: "We were keeping our eye on 1984. When the year came and the prophecy didn't, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held wherever else the terror had happened, we at least had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares. But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell's dark vision, there was another, slightly older, slightly less well known, equally chilling." Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Contrary to common belief, even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally opposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no big brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppressions and to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think. In 1984 Huxley added, "People are controlled by inflicting pain." In the *Brave New World* they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us. This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right. I still get chills every time I think about that introduction because it's so apparent to us that our society is in that kind of a grip. We are enslaved to our desires, we're greedy, we're ambitious, and we're insecure because we find ultimate blessedness in things that we cannot hold on to.

In contrast to that situation, Paul comes along and he says something quite amazing. Look at the end of verse 19. He says, "You were enslaved to this kind of a life, so now I'm going to tell you the way of true freedom. I'm going to tell you the way of true blessedness. Are you ready for it? Here it is. 'Pursue slavery.'

You want true blessedness, you want true happiness, you want true freedom? Here's how you get it. Pursue slavery." Paul says, "Present yourself as slaves. Desire to be slaves. Give the members of your body over to slavery, to righteousness. This is unbelievable. We might have expected for Paul to characterize the Christian life as freedom in contrast to the slavery of bondage to sin. And he will do that elsewhere. But that's not what he does here. He says, "If you really want to be free, if you really want to be happy, if you really want to be blessed, give yourself as a slave to righteousness. The Christian is a slave to righteousness, and his slavery results in holiness which is the true freedom and blessedness." You see, it is what and who that you pursue that makes you free. It is what and who you pursue that makes you free. And the apostle is saying, "Pursue righteousness. Pursue God." And he's saying that the freest person in the world is the one who is a slave to righteousness and holiness. That's the first thing that Paul says in this great passage. But there's another thing I'd like you to see as well.

## **II. Freedom from righteousness is no freedom at all but the worst kind of slavery.**

Look at verses 20 and 21. Here Paul again argues this. People apart from Christ are slaves to sin. That's what they are. That's a strong indictment, but that's how he describes them. People apart from Christ are slaves to sin. And the things they love and the freedoms they pursue will kill them. They may think those things are good, they may think those things are self-fulfilling, but they find in the end, however, that those things will kill them. Paul is telling us in verses 20 and 21 that freedom from righteousness is no freedom at all, but it is the worst kind of slavery possible. He characterizes life apart from Christ not as unchecked freedom, but as slavery of the worst sort. It's a kind of freedom, but it's a false freedom, and it's a false freedom that leads to death.

Now Paul isn't saying anything new here. Jesus in John 8:34 had talked about this same thing when he said truly, truly I say to you. And whenever Jesus said that buckle your seat belts, because He had something important. Truly, truly I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. Slaves of temporal desire and temporal urges, slaves of earthly riches and earthly blessings, die more and more as the days go on, as they pursue those temporal desires and earthly treasures. And we see people like this all around us. We may be thinking, for instance, of a person who engages in sexual immorality in order to fulfill some deep need of satisfaction and fulfillment in his or her life. And yet that person contracts a terminal sexually transmitted disease. And we watch that person that we knew with great talent and energy and spirit shrivel and die before our eyes. And we can see how sin and misery and death is connected in a situation like that.

But my friend, there are all sorts of people around us who are dying, who don't

look like it. I mean they look wonderful. They look tanned, they look fat, they look happy; but they're dying because they're seeking after the wrong thing. They are consumed by those things and they are seeking after things that will ultimately destroy them. And the apostle Paul is saying here that those who are wrapped up in that life are in the worst kind of slavery. They think that they are free because they have chosen what they wanted to do. They have pursued their own course. They've done it their way. But they are slaves. They are in bondage. They are in bondage to something that will kill them.

Just yesterday Don Breazeale sent me a copy of a speech that George Will gave at the United States Naval Academy. It is a remarkable speech. You need to read it. In the course of arguing about some other things, Will made some very canny observations about our society. I might just share some of them with you, because I think they will show you just how this kind of slavery has wrecked our society. He says this: "We live, it is said, in a 'me' and 'now' age. I want things for me, and I want them right now." Now, we also have an astonishingly low pain threshold in our society. We just went through Christmas retailing season, and all the papers said we had a bad, disappointing, sad, terrible Christmas retailing season. Now this Christmas retailing season was slightly better than last year. And last year's retail Christmas season was the best in ten years, and yet this was a bad, sad, terrible thing. After that worst year in its twenty-nine year history, the NASDAQ, it is said, had its worst year in its twenty-nine years history. After that worst year in its twenty-nine year history, the NASDAQ is 16% higher than it was two years ago. It is said that one day last fall, October 12, the stock market lost 379.36 percent of its value in one day. The sell off started minutes after Home Depot, that great retailing chain, announced that its growth would be four percent instead seven percent. Now I don't know when four- percent growth became a national calamity. The trouble is, expectations were for seven percent. Who sets those expectations? Stock analysts. What do stock analysts sell? Stock. They sell expectations. The country is becoming slight neurotic. Last summer you may recall that we had a slight up tick in a gallon of gasoline price. Why? Well at one point, the price of a gallon of gasoline soared to about 40% of what it is in Europe. And so the government of the United States, a government that exists to feel our pain, tapped into the strategic reserve, a reserve which exists to protect this country against a major interruption of supplies, and this reserve was used instead to knock a nickel off the price of a gallon of gasoline. Think of this country. Americans driving around in their Lincoln Navigators, lurching, barely making it from one gas station to another, sipping designer water that costs more than a gallon of gasoline, and talking on their cell phones to one another about how much they are suffering." And he goes on. It's really astounding. But the point he makes is this: With all that we now have we have become a nation of whiners. We're so addicted to the things that we have, that when just a little of it is taken away, we go berserk. Well, my friends, you don't have to be addicted to cocaine in order to see addiction to sin. All you have to do is just look around you. The apostle Paul says those who are slaves of those temporal desires and urges, they die more and more every day.

### **III. Holiness is life, real living, true blessedness/happiness, true freedom.**

So what is the solution when he tells you in verses 22 and 23. He says this: "That being a slave of God results in holiness of character and eternal life." He broaches a profound truth, and that truth is simply this: Holiness is life. Holiness is real life. Holiness is true blessedness and happiness and true freedom.

Look at what he says in verse 22. "Because we were slaves, and have been freed, and have become bond slaves to God, we receive an amazing benefit." You derive your benefit, he says. Now this is tremendous language. Perhaps some of the people who were literally slaves or who were former slaves in the congregation to whom he was first writing were slaves because of their debts. They had not been able to pay debts, they had to sell themselves into indentured slavery in order to pay off those debts. They knew that they were worth more and their labor was worth more to them out of slavery than in slavery. So to talk to slaves about benefits, was a little bit ironic, because if they had been non-slaves, their labor would have gotten them a lot more than as slaves.

But he says, "If you're slaves to God of righteousness, let me tell you about your benefits. Look at the package. Our new wage, our new benefit, our new income is what? Sanctification, holiness, the state of and progress in holiness. And what is it inextricably connected to? Eternal life. The apostle is saying, it's a package deal. Holiness equals life, and God grants to us in Christ Jesus, by His grace, holiness and eternal life. Sin, on the one hand, leads to misery, and eventually to death. Grace, on the other hand, leads to holiness and eternal life.

Notice, by the way, the contrast in how you receive those wages. The wages of sin is death. You want what you deserve? Here's what it is. Death. Everybody in this line for the death penalty. Right over here. Okay. The wages of sin is death. The free gift of God is eternal life. This is not an earned benefit. At least it's not earned by you. It's a granted benefit given by God in His grace, earned by Jesus Christ for all those who trust in Him. The free gift of God is eternal life. Grace not only leads to forgiveness, but grace leads to holiness and eternal life. And so when the world looks at the Christians, and it sees the man living in sexual fidelity in his marriage, and it says, "Oh, but think of what you're missing," it is the man who is faithful who is blessed, the not who is doing what he wants to do. And when the world looks at the Christian and says look what you could be doing with your money instead of giving all that stuff to charity, and to mission and to other type of charities. You could be having fun for yourself. It is the man who gives who is blessed. When the world says, but look how much fun you could be having on the Lord's Day instead of being in church with those people and hearing all those boring preachers, it is the one who is honoring the Lord's Day who is blessed.



It is the man who is a slave to righteousness that knows true blessedness, and the false freedom that passes for freedom in the world that says I can do anything I want to anytime I want, any place I want to, any way I want to, is not freedom at all the apostle says. Remember what Jesus says? The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His Life as a ransom for many. And He said that immediately after He had said this. Whoever wants to become first among you, must become the slave of all. It is the man who dies who lives. It is the man who is a slave, who is free. If you want to become free, Paul says, become a slave. If you want to live, die to your sinful desires. If you want to become first, become a slave. Robert Murray McCheyne, that great young minister last century, once prayed a very simple prayer, and I'm glad somebody wrote it down. It went like this: "Lord, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be." Lord, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be. That beautifully sums up what Paul has been saying in Romans 3 to Romans 6.

There are two great blessings that come from God's grace, justification and sanctification. Acceptance and forgiveness, holiness and righteousness. Both of these flow from the grace of God. We're incapable of giving them or receiving them apart from His grace. And so it ought to be every Christian's desire not only to experience the forgiveness of God, but also to be a slave of righteousness. And in that slavery find true freedom. You know, Brister prayed during the morning prayer about Monica. She had prayed for her son, Augustin, many years as he lived a life of infidelity, as he cohabitated with a woman. And as she prayed for him, her prayers to God were not only for his forgiveness, but for his transformation. She wanted to see his life turned inside out. And God in His mercy answered the prayers of that woman. Should those be the prayers that we lift up for one another and for us? That God would grant us to be as holy as a pardoned sinner can be. May God make that a reality in all your lives. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word. Make it a reality by Your grace. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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