

Breaking Free of Bad Habits

From Romans

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Bible Text: Romans 6:19

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The text I have selected for this morning is verse nineteen in Romans chapter six. “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.”¹

We are all creatures of habit. To verify this just look around. Where are you sitting? You come each Lord’s Day and you sit—if not in exactly the same place—in approximately the same place. And after having been here over a few weeks and months I can pretty much depend upon seeing each of you in your place. Please don’t confuse me and move around.

We are creatures of habit. All you have to do is get in your car. If your mind wanders a little bit as you head off to the grocery store, you will find yourself on the road to work. Yes, we are creatures of habit.

But then the question comes. Are we able to change? Are we able to break those habits? And furthermore, the deeper question is: Are you able to break bad habits and form new habits, good habits? As the old saying goes, “You can take the horse to water but you cannot make him drink.” And so we would assume it is very difficult, and often it is, to break habits. It is difficult to break bad habits and to form new habits. But the Word of God this morning is given to you to encourage you and to encourage me that you can indeed form new habits. *Yes, because of what Christ has done you can form new habits through practice.*

Do you hear this? *You can form new habits through practice because of what Jesus Christ has done.* This is the burden of the text which is before you this morning in Romans chapter six and in verse nineteen. Paul says, again, “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.”²

¹ Romans 6:19.

² *Ibid.*

Paul is speaking about presenting your members. And what he has in mind is the members of your body, your hands, your feet, your ears, your eyes, and your mouth. He has in mind the various parts of your body, the various members of your body and how you utilizing them. In your former life, outside of Christ, you utilized the members of your body; you presented the members of your body to impurity and lawlessness.

I know not all of you have a life, a former life outside of Christ, but some of you do. And these words of the apostle Paul will resonate. Paul is speaking about *presenting* the members of the body. . . . And what he has in mind here is looking to the past and looking at your former life outside of Christ as a whole. It's like looking at the ballgame, the football game, that has just transpired, and all of the plays that were in that football game. And he is saying, "Just like a series of plays make up a football game, in just the same way, time after time, you presented the members of your body to lawlessness and uncleanness."

Look, again, at our text. "For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness..."³ The impurity he has in mind is uncleanness, uncleanness that verges on violence. For example, it wasn't that long ago here in Penn Hills when a young man stabbed his cheerleader girlfriend and she died. This is an extreme case but this is the kind of thing Paul is talking about. This is uncleanness that verges on violence.

And then he speaks about lawlessness. The apostle John tells us "sin is lawlessness."⁴ When you break the commands of God, the dictates of God, the will of God, you walk in sin. Let's just briefly review some of the commandments.

"You shall have no other gods before Me."⁵ This includes the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Pitt Panthers.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol..."⁶ The television show *American Idol* is a very big in our culture today, is it not? And it was just in the news. I think it was just this week where a young lady took her own life because she was so enamored one of the individuals involved with *American Idol*. This is, once again, an extreme case, you would say. But this shows how deeply we become attached to things in this life, things in this world.

"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain."⁷ It is very significant that when people use profanity and vulgarity on television, you hear those little bleeps where editors cover profane and vulgar language. But what about blasphemy? What about the frequent and vain uses of the name of God or the name of Jesus Christ? Editors do not cover these utterances. This blasphemy is broadcast for all to hear. How easily we listen to such language.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See 1 John 3:4.

⁵ Exodus 20:3.

⁶ Exodus 20:4.

⁷ Exodus 20:7.

“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.”⁸ I would submit to you that our nation is one mammoth example of the Sabbath breaking. The Lord’s Day has become like any other business day, any other sports day, more than any other business day in many respects. For the bulk of Americans it is not a day of worship. It is not a day of rest and worship. And, too often our churches are emptied in favor of the athletic events.

The Fifth Commandment, “Honor your father and your mother.”⁹ Authority structures are to be honored. Authority structures within the church, within the family, within the community, within business, and within government. Employers must respect employees. Employees must respect employers. Students must respect teachers and administrators. Teachers and administrators must have a proper respect for students.

The Sixth Commandment, “You shall not murder.”¹⁰ Jesus says if you bear hatred in your heart you are already committing murder in your heart.¹¹ How easily we bear grudges and harbor hatred in our hearts.

The Seventh Commandment, “You shall not commit adultery.”¹² You are to find your satisfaction with your spouse. You are not to find satisfaction with pornographic literature, R rated and X rated movies. Paul says, “Husbands, love your wives.”¹³ He also says, “Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands.”¹⁴ Do you get this? Love your own wife, not someone else’s. Be subject to your own husband and not someone else’s.

The Eighth Commandment, “You shall not steal.”¹⁵ Pay your debts. Do not abuse the property of others. When you borrow something from your neighbor, return it promptly. When you take a book on loan from the school library, return it on time so other students have opportunity to use it for their study.

The Ninth Commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”¹⁶ Tell the truth. The truth is a priority. I am reminded of the bumper sticker that asks, “What would happen if everyone told the truth?” My candid answer is simple. The entire political establishment in the United States would collapse instantly.

“You shall not covet.”¹⁷ In other words, you shall be content. This is what the Tenth Commandment is all about, contentment. You shall be content in the life that the Lord gives you.

⁸ Exodus 20:8.

⁹ Exodus 20:12.

¹⁰ Exodus 20:13.

¹¹ See Matthew 5:21-26.

¹² Exodus 20:14.

¹³ See Ephesians 5:25, 28.

¹⁴ Ephesians 5:22.

¹⁵ Exodus 20:15.

¹⁶ Exodus 20:16.

¹⁷ Exodus 20:17.

These are the things that Paul is talking about in verse nineteen. “For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness...”¹⁸ And when you present your members to the various types of lawlessness over and over and over again, what happens? You become good at this lawlessness. You become an expert at sinning. This is what Paul is warning us about. “For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, *resulting in further lawlessness...*”¹⁹ This is a road down which you do not want to travel.

In my own life my father taught me to drink. And there was a drink of choice in our house. Every night after work my mom and dad would drink. And I was encouraged down that road of drinking. And this is a habit that you can form. Drugs are the same way. Taking drugs is a habit that you form. And pretty soon you are hooked. And what does Paul say? “For just as you presented your members as *slaves* to impurity and to lawlessness *resulting in further lawlessness...*”²⁰ You become a slave to sin through habitual sinning, through practice.

But now here is the good news. Jesus Christ, in his work, has affected a radical breach with sin in your life, if you are a Christian. Again, I say, Jesus Christ has affected a radical breach with sin in your life. This is part of the teaching of Romans chapter six.

Let’s just look at a few of these verses again beginning with verse one.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?²¹

If you have actually died to sin, how can you continue to live in it?

“Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?”²² You have been united to Jesus Christ in his death.

“Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”²³

Why were you united to Christ in his death? So that, having died with Christ, you might walk in newness of life. Because of the work of Christ, you now have the opportunity to walk in a new direction.

Verse five,

¹⁸ Romans 6:19.

¹⁹ Romans 6:19.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Romans 6:1-2.

²² Romans 6:3.

²³ Romans 6:4.

For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.²⁴

“So we would no longer be slaves to sin...”²⁵ Do you hear these words? You are no longer a slave to sin because of what Jesus Christ has done. These words need to burn in our hearts. These words need to burn in your heart; a good understanding of these words need to pierce your hearts.

Verse seven, “For he who has died...”²⁶ Listen to these words. “For he who has died is freed [is freed] from sin.”²⁷ He who has died is free from the power of sin. You are no longer a slave to sin.

Drop down, if you will, to verse 18. “And having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.”²⁸

This is the dynamic. This is the picture that Paul is painting. He is using this metaphor, this comparison with slavery. And slaves being brought out from under the dominion of a cruel master are set free to live a different life. This is the dynamic, the picture that Paul is presenting to us. “And having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.”²⁹ You have a new master. Sin is no longer your master. Do you realize this? Sin is not your master any longer.

You see, some of us walk around in this world saying, “Oh, poor me. Oh, poor me. I don’t have the strength. I don’t have the power. I don’t have the ability. I am stuck in this pattern of life.”

But Paul is saying, God is saying through the apostle Paul, “If you are, indeed, united to Christ in his death, then sin, the power of sin, has been broken over your life. You are no longer its servant. You are no longer its slave.”

Verse 22, “But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God...”³⁰ Freed from that previous master, you now have a new Lord; you now have a new master that you serve. This is the truth of God.

And then verse 14. Go back up into verse 14. Notice how firmly the apostle Paul puts this. “For sin shall not be master over you.”³¹

²⁴ Romans 6:5-6.

²⁵ Romans 6:6.

²⁶ Romans 6:7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Romans 6:18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Romans 6:22.

³¹ Romans 6:14.

This is not just a vague statement with regard to the future. This is a definitive statement with regard to the actuality surrounding your life. Sin *shall* not be master—and the word here is “Lord.” I think part of the reason the apostle Paul uses this word “Lord” is that Jesus Christ is now your Lord. Do you not confess him as Lord? Are you a Christian? Then Jesus Christ *is* your Lord. Sin is not your lord.

If this is the case, the power of sin has been broken; a radical breach with sin has been affected by the work of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is actually your Lord. This is not a confession that you simply make with your mouth. This is the reality.

And so now notice what Paul says in verse nineteen. “I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh.”³² Paul recognizes that we have some difficulties with spiritual things. So he uses this word picture, this metaphor, if you will, with regard to slavery. He puts it this way so that we can understand the truth of God. The spiritual reality is that you are no longer a slave to sin.

And so Paul says, “For just as...” notice the language. “For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness.”³³ Just as you used to do that; just as this was the case before. Now since you have come to Christ; since you are united to Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection; since a radical breach from sin has been affected in your life and sin is no longer the Lord over your life; since Jesus Christ is the Lord over your life; you are to live a new and different life. Notice the words of Paul. “So now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.”³⁴ Present your hands, your feet, your eyes, your ears, your mouth, the members of your body, to righteousness.

I give you another little example from my own life. As I mentioned, my dad taught me to drink. And I could have gone down that road into alcoholism. When I went to Korea years ago one of the first things I did was to purchase a bottle of bourbon and a bottle of vermouth for the officer’s club bar. My drink of choice was the Manhattan, a combination of bourbon and vermouth. Then I was converted to faith in Christ. A miraculous thing happened. There was actually a radical breach with this sin of drinking heavily that occurred in my life. I no longer had a desire for alcoholic beverages.

But that wasn’t enough. A new habit had to be cultivated. Other men would invite me to the bar and say, “Can I buy you a drink?” I would say, “Yes. I’ll take a Pepsi.” And it was the beginning of the cultivation of a new habit. Paul say, present your members over and over and over again to righteousness. And what is the outcome? Look at verse nineteen again. “So now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.”³⁵

³² Romans 6:19.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

What Paul has in mind here is progressive sanctification, growth in Christ. What is sanctification? “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and to live unto righteousness.”³⁶

By God’s work of grace, you are enabled to die to sin and live unto righteousness. And Paul is saying, friends, that this route to sanctification involves practice, the practice of righteousness. Paul is saying to you and to me, because of the radical breach with sin that has occurred in your life, you are able now, by the grace of God, to form new habits. You are able to break old habits and to form new habits.

Let me show you a companion verse. Turn to Philippians two, verses twelve and thirteen. “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”³⁷

You are a Christian. You confess Christ as Lord. Work out the implications of that confession in your life. And are you able to do so? Look at verse 13. “For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”³⁸

God’s good pleasure is that righteousness that we rehearsed just a little bit ago. Let’s just take one of those commandments, the Fourth Commandment. “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.”³⁹ In other words, the day is to be a day of rest and worship.

Do you know how Calvin understood that day? He said something like this. When you retire from your labor and enter into worship on the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day, the Christian Sabbath, you are testifying to the world that your relationship with God is not based upon your works, but it is based upon grace.

This is your confession, salvation by grace through faith. And one of the ways, friends, one of the ways that you make this confession before the world is by setting aside your weekly labors and by entering into rest and worship on the Lord’s Day. This is in part how you make your confession visible to the world.

Now is this hard? For some of us it is. But what does Paul say? It is God who is at work in you both to make you willing and able to do his good pleasure.⁴⁰ God makes you willing to carry out the Fourth Commandment and he gives you the ability to follow through. God is at work in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. And so friends, you can practice, yes, you can practice the good pleasure of God.

³⁶ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Answer 35.

³⁷ Philippians 2:12

³⁸ Philippians 2:13

³⁹ Exodus 20:8

⁴⁰ See Philippians 2:13

Go back with me now to Romans chapter six and verse nineteen. Here is the lesson. “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.”⁴¹ Change in life is possible because of what Christ has done. But as a result of the work of Christ in your life, you must take action. You must practice that which God would have you do.

Think about daily devotions. Think about worship in the church, morning and evening on the Lord’s Day. Think about holding your tongue when you feel like—shall I say it—mouthing off at the boss. Hold your tongue. Practice holding your tongue. You children ought to practice obeying your parents. Practice these things. And what does this practice do? It results in a change of life. It results in sanctification.

Now I think I could give you a little examination at this point and the examination would be something like this. Look back over your life. And as you look back five years, ten years, fifteen years, twenty years, is it not true that you are a different person than you were five years ago, ten years ago, fifteen years ago, or twenty years ago. Be honest. Is it not true that there have actually been changes made in your life? Why have these changes been made? Christ affected a radical breach from sin in your life. As a result, you began to live differently and you began to form new habits. You began to grow in Christ and to change. This is what happened. Praise God this *is* what happens.

And so I say to you, friends, new habits can be formed. Old habits can be broken because of what Christ has done. And you need to practice those new habits to form them.

Some of you know I am somewhat of a basketball fan. Tyler Hansborough, senior forward for the University of North Carolina, has an amazing free throw record. He has dropped the ball into the basket from the charity stripe more times than he has made field goals. He has scored over two thousand points in three seasons. Over seven hundred of these are from the free throw line. Why? Well, one reason is that before every practice he goes out and stands at that free throw line and he puts the ball in the basket ten times, twenty times, thirty times, forty times, fifty times, sixty times, seventy times, eighty times, one hundred times, one hundred and fifty times. Every day before regular practice he shoots free throws. And if you practice, what is going to happen? You get better.

And I submit to you, friends, it is the same thing in the Christian life. I am speaking to you in human terms, you see. It is the same thing in the Christian life. *You are able to form new habits through practice because of the work of Jesus Christ.* What is the besetting problem you have? I say to you, in the name of Jesus Christ, the power of sin has been broken over your life. Understand that this is the case. And you are able—because of the work of Christ—to form new habits. Understand the gospel and understand the Word of God and understand that God has not put you in a cul-de-sac. He has put you on the road of sanctification. *You are able to form new habits through practice because of the work of Jesus Christ.*

⁴¹ Romans 6:19

Look at verse nineteen once again. “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.”⁴²

You are able to form new habits through practice because of the work of Jesus Christ.

Let’s pray together.

Father, this is a lesson we all have to learn. Forgive us where we have not taken the gospel seriously, where we have not understood adequately the work of your Son, Jesus Christ, on our behalf and, and as we have said, the radical breach from sin affected in our lives. Forgive us that we so often confess Jesus as Lord, but live as though various sins and difficulties are actually the masters over our lives. Give us a new perspective on these things we pray. Wipe away the cloud of misunderstanding and let the gospel, the light of the gospel, shine through brilliantly so that we may see that sin is no longer our master, but Christ is, indeed, Lord in every respect. And since this is the case, Father, teach us, we pray, through an active Christian life, teach us that we are—because of the work of Christ—able to break old habits and to form new habits through practice. We pray these things in the good name of Jesus Christ who is, indeed, the Lord. Amen.

⁴² Ibid.