

11. This final section of chapter six (6:19-23) effectively continues the previous argument. Together with the first part of the chapter it comprises a crucially important context in the Roman epistle. The sixth chapter has traditionally been viewed as the foremost text dealing with sanctification/mortification, but sadly its message is often missed because of the natural tendency to seek to find in it a “to do list” for mortifying sin. Far from providing such a list, this chapter establishes certain core principles that are vital and fundamental to living the Christian life as God intends.

The overarching principle that governs Christian sanctification is the two-sided reality of *slavery/freedom*. The obvious implication of this is that the Christian must approach his sanctification and the mortification of sin from the perspective of the fundamental reality that defines him as a believer in Jesus Christ. The first concern is not what must be done, but what is true. Until the Christian understands the slavery/freedom dynamic of his new life in Christ all practical efforts at personal holiness are misguided and empty.

- First and foremost, *Paul indicates that all people, regardless of circumstance, are defined by a form of slavery and freedom*. Everyone comes into this life as a slave of sin - that is, a slave of self - and so is “free” from the constraints of righteousness. But when a person is joined to Christ his slavery and freedom are not done away with; rather, they are *reversed*. He is set free from his former bondage to sin in order to become a slave of righteousness (6:1-18).
- The language of slavery is vital to Paul’s argument, for it captures the reality that every human being is constrained to serve a particular master, whether himself (sin) or God (righteousness). *The implication is that there is no such thing as autonomous freedom*. Freedom as conceived in the human mind is a delusion; every person is under subjugation throughout his life.
- New life in Christ is deliverance from slavery to sin. But if a person is freed from his bondage to sin, he is no longer obligated to serve it; it has no authority over him. But much more, the fact that this deliverance brings with it a *new* subjugation means that the Christian not only *need not* serve sin any longer, in the truest sense he *cannot* serve sin. He is “enslaved” to a new master and it is impossible for a person to be enslaved to and serve two masters at the same time.

This is why Paul was so careful to emphasize to the Romans that their deliverance from their former subjugation did not bring autonomous freedom but transference to a new lord. If Christ’s deliverance of the believer brought autonomy, there would be nothing to prevent him from serving and even returning to his former master. (In truth, were deliverance from sin (self) to bring the autonomy of self-determination, it would only perpetuate the person’s bondage, since self-determination *is* bondage to self.) But the Christian cannot return to his former master because he belongs to another. *Thus the crucial importance of Paul’s slavery language is that it shows that the Christian no longer is constrained to serve sin*. To some extent, he can *allow* himself to do so, but he is not forced to do so. And to the extent that he does “present his members to unrighteousness” he is actually lying against the truth and denying who he is in Christ.

The Christian not only has been liberated to serve a new master (who is God Himself), that new master has endowed him with “*everything that pertains to life and godliness.*” This is the reason that Paul could speak without qualification of the Christian life as *enslavement* to righteousness (6:17-19).

- The point of Paul’s language is that, as a slave of righteousness, the Christian’s service to it is not discretionary; He has no choice but to serve that master.
- But to speak in such a way is utter foolishness unless some outside power or enablement enters into the equation. For, as noble and proper as it may be in principle, the idea that sinful people can *really* live as those enslaved to righteousness is absurd. The very fact that they are sinful disproves their slavery to righteousness.

But Paul could speak in this way because he recognized and insisted upon two crucial truths that must inform every believer’s life.

- 1) The first is that every Christian does have the power of God Himself at work in him and on his behalf (Romans 15:13; cf. also 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, 3:16, 4:19-20; 2 Corinthians 4:6-7, 12:1-10, 13:1-4; Ephesians 1:18-23, 2:19-22, 3:14-21; Colossians 1:9-12; 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12; 2 Timothy 1:7-10; etc.).
- 2) Second, this power of the Spirit - which serves the effectuation of the believer’s conformity to Christ - cannot fail in its operation and final accomplishment. *The One who began this good work in a person will most assuredly complete it.* The Holy Spirit has clothed the Christian with Christ’s righteousness, and He is methodically and certainly perfecting that righteousness in him.

This being so, Paul’s insistence to the Romans that they are slaves of righteousness is absolutely accurate and not at all overstated. Not simply freed from sin’s domination, the believer has been endowed with the divine power that secures his enslavement to righteousness: he is able to withstand sin’s overtures even as he can never again be brought under its mastery. By the delivering and renewing power of the Spirit the Christian is *truly* liberated to serve his new master.

This is the marrow of Paul’s argument in chapter six, and he was burdened for the Romans to grasp the significance of his language. He clearly was concerned that they live holy lives, and he addressed himself to the contention that the triumph of grace over the rule of law brings with it the increase of unrighteousness. *The key to the Christian’s holiness lies not in his applying himself to obedience to law, but in discerning and living according to a new and defining principle of slavery and freedom.* For, as it pertains to holy living, it is one thing for the believer to have a new *perspective* in which Christ, rather than self, is now the object of his trust and devotion (which new perspective is the very essence of repentance); it is something else for him to recognize and “live into” the reality that he has been *purchased* from his former master and given both the sure *promise* and effectual *power* by which to serve his new master all of his days.

a. But discerning and living into this reality is a constant challenge because of the “*weakness of the flesh*.” Thus in verse 6:19 Paul interjected a kind of parenthetical by which he explained and justified his use of slavery language in this context. The first part of this verse provides Paul’s *explanation* of his language, and the second part a reiteration of his essential *exhortation* in view of his language.

1) Paul gave as his reason for speaking in “human terms” the “weakness of the flesh” (6:19a). Not unexpectedly, this statement has been subject to differing interpretations. Some have understood Paul as here simply remarking to the Romans that he chose to use a common phenomenon in human experience - slavery - for the purpose of better illustrating truths about the Christian’s relationship to God. But if this were really the extent of his meaning, then it hardly seems necessary for him to have made his statement at all. For his readers would have readily discerned as much without his commentary. Additionally, the exhortation that immediately follows (6:19b) would seem to indicate a deeper significance to his words.

What is apparent is that he regarded his use of the language of enslavement as a form of *condescension*: in order to better communicate to the Romans the realities surrounding the Christian’s new life in Christ he felt it expedient to speak of it in terms of the ideas of slavery and freedom. This much is evident from his attributing his manner of speaking to their *human weakness*. But the sense in which he understood their weakness and the way in which it provoked the need for this condescension is not so clear.

- Some have understood this weakness in *intellectual* terms. In other words, Paul felt that he needed to use analogies because of people’s inability to grasp deep spiritual truths without them.
- Others maintain that the weakness he spoke of is *moral* and *ethical*, noting that Paul ascribed this weakness to the flesh, not the intellect. In this case, he was not simply explaining his use of analogies, but the need for the instruction of chapter six. Because Christians are still sinful, they need to be reminded of their obligation to “yield their members to righteousness.” This view appears to be supported by his follow-up statement in 6:19b.

In the end, it is not necessary to choose one over the other. It is reasonable to conclude that the human weakness Paul spoke of embraced both intellectual and moral factors. With respect to the former, human patterns of thinking do not naturally embrace the concepts he was seeking to communicate. The primary reason is that human beings are innately driven by the principle of self-righteousness, which is to say their sense of righteousness is determined by their own appraisal of their personal performance under a set of standards they have embraced.

But for the very same reason morality also plays into the weakness that motivated Paul's language. The Christian would not naturally regard himself as *freed* from sin when he *continues* to sin. Even more, the same awareness of personal sinfulness would never lead him on his own to conclude that he is defined and controlled by righteousness. And so, *in Paul's estimation, the language of slavery and freedom is uniquely suited to communicate and press into conscious conviction the crucial truths that every Christian must understand if he is to grow in his sanctification.*

In summary, he used the terminology he did because every Christian's natural weakness and ongoing sinfulness press him at every turn to deny what is true of himself in Christ. The believer's triumph and inexhaustible resource in Christ by the indwelling Spirit are easily obscured by the constant sense of personal infirmity. And where those truths are missed or neglected it is all too easy to live as if sin still retained its mastery.

- 2) But sin's mastery and ultimate power have been broken, so that the Christian is not to live as if he were still powerless under its enslaving authority. This is the point of Paul's exhortation in verse 6:19b. This statement closely parallels verse 13, but whereas in the earlier verse Paul issued two *directives* - stop presenting your members to sin and present yourselves to God - here he issues his exhortation in the form of a *comparison*. In the same way that the Romans previously led lives characterized by giving themselves wholly to the service of impurity and lawlessness, they were now to give themselves to the service of righteousness as their new master. The same single-minded, tireless devotion that defined their previous allegiance to the god of *self* was to mark their new allegiance to God; they were to serve their new master in the same way they served their former one.

Another point of difference between 6:13 and the present statement is that Paul here added the immediate *results* that follow from yielding one's members to either unrighteousness or righteousness.

- Serving impurity and lawlessness results in *lawlessness*. It is interesting to note that Paul has lawlessness resulting in *itself*. Some have regarded this statement as equivalent to Paul saying that committing oneself to the service of lawlessness results in the doing of lawlessness. For its part, the NASB (and other versions) inserts the adjective "further," showing that its translators understood Paul as saying that the practice of lawlessness leads to an ever increasing and more thoroughly dominating lawlessness. Given that this statement exactly parallels Paul's next assertion that righteousness results in sanctification, the second view is probably correct. The result of serving sin as one's master is that the power of sin's dominion is only strengthened.

- As the service of impurity and lawlessness leads to further lawlessness, so the service of *righteousness* results in *sanctification*. Because this noun signifies “holiness,” it can be understood in terms of either the *state* of holiness or the *process* of sanctification. As before, the best indication of Paul’s meaning comes from the parallel he drew between righteousness leading to sanctification and lawlessness leading to lawlessness. If Paul did indeed mean that the practice of lawlessness leads to the increasing domination of lawlessness, then this same relation carries forward with righteousness and sanctification. In this way sanctification must be understood as a process rather than a state.

Paul’s point is then that the Christian’s yielding of his members to the practice of righteousness advances him in his sanctification. The obvious apparent problem with this conclusion is that it seems to imply sanctification *by works*, rather than by the sovereign, effectual power of the Holy Spirit. But in reality Paul was teaching no such thing (though there are many Christians who insist that works are the basis of sanctification); if he were, he would be contradicting his constant insistence upon sanctification solely as the work of God.

The key to discerning Paul’s meaning is to understand how the Bible views sanctification and its relation to personal righteousness. Paul’s statement that the practice of lawlessness “grows” a person with respect to his lawlessness is helpful in this respect. At the very least it substantiates the maxim that *sanctification is the life of justification*.

Just as the unregenerate person who is defined and determined by lawlessness advances in his “expertise” in lawlessness by the practice of it, so the Christian - who is defined and determined by the principle of true holiness - matures in his holy state by the practice of the righteousness that is the very essence of holiness.

Yielding his members to righteousness does not determine or improve the *state* of the believer’s sanctification; he is fully sanctified (holy) in Christ. But because he is now determined by the principle of holiness, his “living into” that new reality by yielding himself to righteousness does cultivate his expertise as a saint (“holy one”) of God. This dynamic is illustrated by the example of a doctor who grows in his expertise as a physician by practicing medicine. By properly “living out” his identity he matures with respect to it. In the same way, the practice of lawlessness “perfects” one in his state of lawlessness, just as the practice of righteousness “perfects” the saint in his sanctification.

To yield oneself in this way is to “walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:13-26). For the Holy Spirit’s work in the believer’s soul is to produce and perfect the life and likeness of Christ in him (cf. John 16:12-15; Romans 8:1-11, 28-30; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 1:9-14). This being so, two implications follow: the first is that *Christ-likeness is the definition of sanctification* (holiness); the second is that *the process of sanctification is the believer living out and cultivating the life of Christ within him*. Christ’s righteousness is the Christian’s by faith, and by yielding himself to the practice of righteousness he is simply living out what is true of him in Christ, and what is being perfected by the power of the indwelling Spirit.

Understanding sanctification in this way shows the absolute absurdity of “sanctification by works.” No person can transform himself in the inner man into the likeness of Christ, no matter what he does or how hard he works. As the Spirit quickens a man to new life in Christ, so He alone perfects him in that life. The believer’s responsibility is to “keep in step” with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25); to “serve” righteousness by growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, who is his righteousness (cf. 6:11-13, 17-19; Ephesians 3:14-19; Philippians 3:7-14; 2 Peter 3:17-18).

- b. Paul reinforced this perspective on sanctification by directing his slavery/freedom language specifically toward the *benefit* and *final outcome* incurred by enslavement to sin and enslavement to God (6:20-22).
- 1) His first observation is so obvious that it is easily overlooked. Nevertheless, it carries profound implications. That observation is that *every form of enslavement implies some form of freedom*. The reason is that the slave is constrained to serve only his master. Therefore, he is “free” from the service of all other potential masters. So it is that the slave of sin is “*free in regard to righteousness*” (6:20). The one who is a slave of sin is bound over to serve it alone, and so has no interaction with righteousness, which is associated with the service of another master.
 - 2) Furthermore, in his service to his master every slave derives some “benefit” (6:21). Paul has already indicated that the service of sin results in the cultivation of lawlessness. This, together with the fact that the slave of sin is “free” from righteousness, explains why the benefit this slave receives from his service is *shame*. Guilt and shame are the ongoing payment that men enjoy from their service of sin (self); but much worse, their servitude is earning for them the final recompense of eternal *death*.

All people by nature freely serve themselves and rejoice in their freedom from serving God. But the Christian is able to understand and appraise that way of life for what it is: “*freedom*” to serve oneself is only freedom from the presence of righteousness; it is not true freedom, for it is enslavement to sin, and the service of that master brings only shame and death.

- 3) As every form of enslavement entails a dimension of freedom, so every form of freedom entails a dimension of slavery. The one who is free from God is a slave of sin with its rewards of shame and death; conversely, the one who is free from sin's mastery is not autonomous; he is a slave of God (6:22). The Spirit of God has delivered him from his former master in order to bring him into His own servitude. And just as sin supplies its benefits to its servants, so also does God. Sin bestows shame and death, but service to God results in *sanctification* and *life*.

Paul's insight is profound when it is closely considered. His central thesis is that every human being is a slave, and that each person's service to his master *necessarily* brings its own reward. What people believe to be freedom - namely the right to serve themselves free of divine constraint - is actually enslavement to sin, for sin is nothing more than self-idolatry. And this form of slavery brings its recompense of life-long shame and ultimate death; *a recompense that he cannot refuse any more than he can refuse the service of his master*.

Conversely, the one who forsakes his supposed "freedom" to serve God finds true freedom: *the freedom to be who he was created to be*. In Christ he finds the restoration of his true humanity as divine image-bearer. This is authentic *holiness*, and in the service of the holy Master whose image he bears the Christian enjoys the present benefit of the progressive perfecting of his new nature. Moreover, he does so with the sure promise of God that the outcome of that work of the Spirit will be *eternal life* - that is, the consummation of what is presently his in Christ.

- c. Finally, verse 6:23 serves both to explain 6:22 and to bring the instruction of chapter six to a focal summary. Sin and God are presented again as the two possible masters, one of which every person must serve, and the emphasis is again on the benefits each master provides. But what is crucial to note is that Paul here referred to the benefit bestowed by sin as a *wage*, whereas that bestowed by God is a *gift*. Paul has insisted that every person necessarily receives a recompense for his service to his master, and the natural human tendency is to view this recompense as an earned commodity. But Paul makes an important distinction: *the reward bestowed by sin is indeed an earned wage, but the reward bestowed by God is a gift of grace*. Sin bestows shame and death upon its servants as the just recompense they have labored to earn; God bestows holiness and life as that which is *contrary* to what has been worked for and earned: it is entirely a gift.

This truth leaves no doubt as to how Paul conceived the "service of righteousness" as resulting in sanctification. Lest anyone among the saints at Rome conclude that his own labors in righteousness secure or contribute to his holy condition, Paul would have him consider again that his holiness - in its inception, its continued existence and progress, and its consummation in eternal life - is entirely a gift of God grounded in the righteousness of Christ Jesus.