
Answering a Wrong Assumption

Romans 6:15-19

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Why do so many Christians struggle with sin? I am not talking about new believers. I am not talking about believers who have no teaching. I am talking about Christians who sit in teaching churches and have a good working knowledge of the Bible – why is there a steady parade of them in our counseling ministry? Christians are enslaved to vices of the heart and the body.

How should we think about this? Do we just say, “Well, they must not be Christians...” Yet they repent of their sin. They try to work hard to overcome it. And have difficulty. Why? Listen, we can discuss this and what comes to mind are the big sins, the stuff you don’t do. But what about you? Do you have a sin that keeps coming back? You hate it. You fight it. You ask God to help you with it. You talk to people about it. You read the best books on overcoming sin. You have accountability partner. You carry around a picture of Jesus in your pocket... Ok, just kidding.

Does the Bible help us understand this? Yes, I think so. In many texts we are taught about how sin can enslave people. We are also taught how to deal with the potential and even the problem of enslaving sins. We have one of those texts before us. But we do not open this text without some context. What have we learned that prepares us for these helpful and freeing verses?

We are a part of two worlds. We were born in Adam and are now in Christ. We are a part of this world and we have within us the Spirit who belongs to the new creation. We no longer live under law. We live under grace. We have been given and are still being given the power to overcome sinning. This comes because we have been placed into Christ. Since we are in Christ, we have died and have been raised. We must believe these truths. They are our present realities.

The first half of Romans 6 teaches us:

We have union and identification with Christ.

We may not live as though sin does not matter.

We may not live as though sin has control.

We have been delivered from the old life and are empowered for the new life (v.4-11).

We have been delivered from the condemnation of the law to the freedom and power of grace (v.14ff).

We must not let sin master us because sin is not going to master us (v.13-14).

I have come to see Romans 6-8 as absolutely essential for people who have a right standing with God – that is, they are justified – to please and glorify God in every aspect of life – that is, they are growing in grace. You must not only understand the meaning of the text, but the essential structure that frames it in and the two major doctrines taught in it. All of this informs and builds our faith – what we believe – so that we will have grace to obey.

By way of an extended illustration Paul clarifies for us how our union with Christ and our surrender/yielding to Him is functioning. Paul helps us by using an illustration that would be quite familiar to his hearers and listeners. For us today, this is a bit more difficult since most of you are not personally familiar with slavery.

In its Context (v.14)

What has Paul said that will raise a wrong assumption? Remember Romans 6:14.

¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

What is Paul saying here ?

Sin – Depravity as a Drive

The sin that remains in you and around you is what Paul is referring here. It is “sinning” as a verb, as what you do. Rather, it is sin as a power, a principle that had control over you when you were a sinner. That power, that principle that moved in and around you has been broken through your being placed into Christ.

Dominion - The Ruling Power

The word dominion means both authority and power, who has the authority to command and the ability to cause. This is a declaration of a truth. This is to be believed. The old powers that ruled your life no longer will rule your life. They won't rule because of truth that you will believe.

The implication is that if you do not believe them then they will begin to assert dominion over you.

Under – the Overarching Domain

Why is this true? What has made this true? Since you have been converted, since you have been saved, you are no longer under law. You are now under grace. So, what do these words mean? We can repeat them, but do we know what they so that we can believe them. In believing them we can grow to understand them and live in their truth.

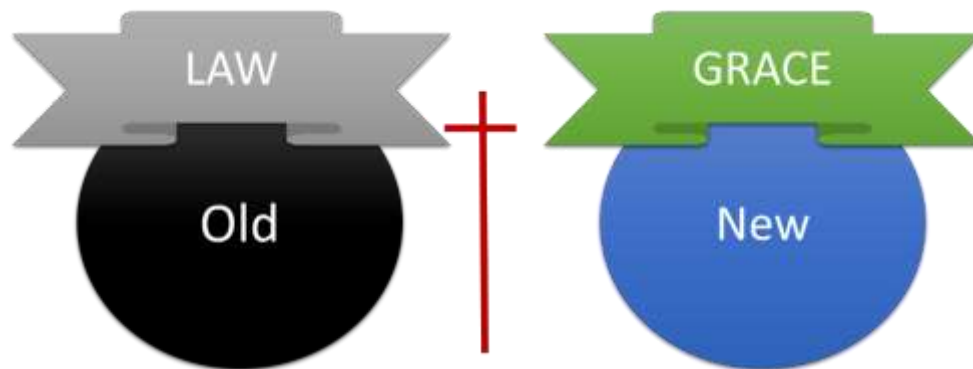
In the first paragraph, Paul has taught us that we are no longer the person we used to be. Therefore, we do not have to sin. We are freed from the necessity of sinning, though we still do. So it is matter of ontology, of our being as persons. We have died to the old person and now are made alive as new persons. So, as new persons in Christ, we will keep on sinning only when we present ourselves to temptations and sin. There is no saying, “I could not help myself.”

Now Paul is teaching us that we have also been moved from one sphere of rule to another sphere of rule. In a sense, Paul is thinking in terms of location. That change from the old to the new puts us under a different authority. We have passed from death to life, the domain of Satan to the kingdom of Jesus, from the old to the new, from the realm where law governs to the realm where grace rules.

Let me illustrate this in two ways.

National Law - In USA, under USA Law, in Germany, under German Law. In USA there are speed limits on the Interstate. In Germany, in many places, there are no speed limits on the autobahn. The USA speed limits have no jurisdiction over me when I am driving in Germany. The laws exist, but just in a different realm.

In a graphic...



What is represented by these is *true*. It is a spiritual fact. It is just as true as the fact that your sins have been washed away by the blood of Jesus. It is just as true as the fact that you are regenerated by the Holy Spirit. There are facts. You either believe them or not.

In its Concern (v.15-16)

What then is the issue? How do people wrongly respond to this truth?

¹⁵What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

He begins by raising and answering the second major question. Since we are not under law, but under grace, then can we continue to do what the Law called sin? Since we are not under law, we can now do anything we want? Paul's answer is an emphatic, "NO".

But his explanation is not at all how we tend to answer. We would tend to say "No, because sin is sin is sin. You cannot sin because it is wrong." While true, that is not how Paul wants us to think.

Paul states that since we are under grace and not law, we do not have license to sin. Now once again, notice the Bible's way of reasoning. Paul turns our thinking a bit on

its head. Christians are not supposed to sin. But this is not because we have laws that tell us what to do and what not to do. Rather, we are not to keep on sinning because we have a Master, the Lord Jesus to whom we yield and surrender. We make sin our master when we yield to it. We make Christ our master when we yield to Him.

Christians then do not sin because of Law, but because of their Lord.

In its Contrast (v.17-18)

¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

What graciousness here as Paul acknowledges their good beginning in these things. Though he has those in Rome who will raise the questions, he is glad to be able to express gratitude that they are not dominated by that thinking.

Verses 17-18 are at the heart of Romans 6. There is little to add to the simplicity of how they summarize what we need to learn. Listen again to those verses: *“Thank God! Once you were slaves of sin, but now you wholeheartedly obey this teaching we have given you. Now you are free from your slavery to sin, and you have become slaves to righteous living.”* We were once slaves to sin. We now have an obedience from the heart by faith.

This obedience from the heart is a reference to Deuteronomy 8. God had tested Israel, chastening her as loving father to see if she would obey God from the heart. The obedience however is rooted in knowing and believing the “standard of truth” they have been committed to. What is that standard of teaching? It is the teaching about grace and the New Covenant. It is the standard of the gospel for all of life. The death and resurrection of the incarnated Son of God is what saves us and what transforms us. It is not the authority of law; rather, it is the principle and power of grace.

We are believing and being committed to truth. Thus, once for all, at the cross, having been set free from sin, its realm, rule and ruin, we have become mastered by righteousness.

In its Command (v.19)

¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

These are difficult spiritual truths to understand. So, Paul has used human analogies like marriage and slavery and realms of authority to help us. This is the gracious way God has revealed Himself to us. Much in the Bible is spiritual truth taught through natural and physical analogies. Paul used them to help us. But those analogies are limited. They are not the truth itself. So, even in this truth on the meaning and application of the work of Jesus, multiple analogies have been used.

At the heart of this is a command. Just like you used to continually present yourself to sin for its use, so now continually present yourself to God for His use. While the one resulted in slavery to sin and impurity, the other leads to slavery to righteousness resulting in transformation or growth in grace.

This is an intentional obedience. It does not happen to you. The truths that frame it do. But the command here is something you set yourself in many practical ways to obey.

Reflect and Respond

Do you know, believe and are growing in understanding these truths?

You have been placed into Christ at salvation and have been joined to Him.

His history has become yours.

You have died with Christ and have been made alive in Him through the Spirit.

The Christian life is lived by faith. We believe what God says is true.

You have died to the old person you were.

You are now alive as the new person you are becoming.

So what does this mean?

- We have union and identification with Christ.
- We may not live as though sin does not matter.
- We may not live as though sin has control.
- We have been delivered from the old life and are empowered for the new life (v.4-11).
- We have been delivered from the condemnation of the law to the freedom and power of grace (v.14ff).
- We must not let sin master us because sin is not going to master us (v.13-14).
- Whoever we submit ourselves to will be the one we will be enslaved to.

May God grant that the eyes of your souls will be opened to see with faith these truths. May you believe them and live them. May you submit yourself to the Lord and the righteousness you have through life so that you will become mastered by righteousness.