

No longer slaves of sin

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon
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What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey — whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6.15 – 23)

Introduction

In this passage, the apostle Paul says that those who are true Christians have been set free from slavery to sin – in order to become slaves of righteousness. Therefore true believers should stop serving sin, and instead serve God.

The passage continues the theme that the apostle has been speaking about since verse 1 of chapter 6: that we who have been saved by faith

in Christ alone are able to live a new life, because we have died to sin through our union with Christ, and have been raised to new life in Christ. Therefore we have been given the resources to fight the tendency to sin which still lives in our flesh, and we actively choose to use these resources, as befits the new life that we have in Christ.

This passage shows us that all men are slaves: either slaves of sin, leading to more and more corruption, and, ultimately, eternal death in hell, or slaves of righteousness, leading to more and more holiness, and eternal life in glory. It highlights the need to be saved, and also tells us how, once we are saved, we should serve God willingly.

There is a logical sequence that this passage follows, so my plan is to go through it verse by verse.

1. The question asked: shall we sin because we are not under law?

In verse 15, the apostle says, “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?”

If you have been with us as we have been going through Romans, you will be familiar by now with the method of Paul. The apostle is writing in a sort of “question and answer” style. He anticipates that someone will raise a question, based upon a distortion or misunderstanding of what he has said, and then proceeds to answer that question.

It is not hard to see where this question comes from. The apostle has just said in verse 14, “For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law but under grace.” The apostle has made a wonderful promise. “Sin shall not be your master”. Ultimately, sin will be defeated in the life of a believer. And the apostle has given the reason: “for you are not under law but under grace”. The way to interpret the phrase “you are not under law” is not to think that we are no longer expected by God to obey the moral laws of the Old Testament. Rather, the correct interpretation is that we are no longer under the condemnation of the law, and also that we are no longer under the enslaving power of the law. We are instead under the power of grace.

The reason that the apostle poses this question here is that he anticipates that someone will pick up the phrase “we are not under law but under grace” and will try to make this an excuse for sin.

2. You have got to serve somebody

The apostle answers in verse 16, "By no means!" The thought that we should sin on the basis that we are no longer under law but under grace should be unthinkable for us. The strength with which he answers confirms that he is certainly not saying that we do not need to obey the moral teaching of the law.

He continues, "Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey — whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?"

The apostle is saying that there are, essentially, two types of people in the world. There are those who are slaves to sin, and there are those who are slaves to obedience. If you are a slave to sin, you will become more and more corrupt, leading, ultimately, to eternal death in hell. If you are a slave of obedience to God, you will become, over time, more and more righteous, leading, ultimately, to eternal life in heaven.

This tells us something very important. Every person who lives in this world is a slave. There is no-one who is truly autonomous and free. Either we are slaves of sin, or we are slaves of obedience. If you have not been saved then you are still a slave of sin. If you have been set free from slavery to sin, you have become a slave of righteousness. There is no-one who is not a slave of either sin or righteousness.

This ties up with what Jesus said to the Jews, as recorded in John's Gospel chapter 8 and verses 31 – 36. This passage says,

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it for ever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Jesus promised those who believed in him, "If you hold to my teaching you really will be my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free". Jesus says that he will set free those who believe by means of the truth that he teaches. The Jews were puzzled. They thought that they were free because they were Abraham's descendants. But Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin". The emphasis in this saying should be on "everyone".

EVERYONE – Jew or Gentile – sins. Therefore everyone is a slave of sin. Being a descendant of Abraham does not release you from slavery to sin. But then he went on to promise, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” These words tell us that although we cannot free ourselves from sin, Christ can, that through his intervention, we can be totally liberated from slavery to sin. Until we are set free by Jesus, we are slaves of sin. So we cannot free ourselves from sin. It is only Christ who can set us free from slavery to sin.

This speaks strongly to anyone who is here who is not yet a Christian, who is not yet born again. If you are not yet born again, you are a slave of sin. You cannot stop yourself from sinning. Your life is heading to eternal death, and you cannot stop it. You desperately need to be saved, through Jesus Christ.

3. We used to be slaves of sin, but now we are slaves of righteousness

The apostle says in verse 17, “But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted.”

Something wonderful has happened to us who are born again. We used to be slaves of sin, but we are so no longer. We have become slaves of obedience. What happened to us? The apostle says, “you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted.”

We see from this verse that when a person believes on Christ he “obeys” the truth. Saving faith is obedience to God’s command to repent and believe the Gospel. From this we learn that unbelief is the stubborn refusal to repent and believe the salvation that God has provided.

But notice here the work of God in our salvation. The apostle says that we were “entrusted to the faith”. Who entrusted us? God. The word that is used here is interesting. It is the same word that is used in chapter 1 and verses 24, 26 and 28, where it talks about how God “handed men over” to the consequences of their refusal to worship him. It also used in chapter 4 and verse 25, which speaks of how Christ was “delivered over to death for our sins”. The word means “to hand someone over into the custody of another”. Think of a man living in the UK who is wanted for an offence in the United States. The United

States issues an international arrest warrant. The UK Police arrest the man. The United States begins extradition proceedings. When these are complete, the man is handed over to the custody of the United States Police.

In the same way, God has taken us Christians out of our former slavery to unbelief. He has handed us over to the custody of the Gospel, moved us to believe upon Christ. God has done all the work to save us. He has taken us captive by the Gospel. We cannot boast about our salvation because our salvation is due to God's work in us.

Now consider verse 18: "You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."

God has done this wonderful work in those of us who are Christians. He has set us free from sin. It is not that we never sin any more. We still have a tendency to sin that dwells in our bodies, a tendency that the apostle calls the "body of sin" and "the flesh". But we have a new heart, that wants to please God. We no longer have to sin. We have been given the resources we need to live a godly life. Instead of being slaves to sin, we are now slaves to righteousness.

Being a slave of righteousness is not some miserable or horrible thing. For the Christian who is truly born again, it is wonderful and liberating. This is summed up well by a phrase in a prayer in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer which says that God is one "whose service is perfect freedom." The true Christian does not resent being a slave of God. The service of God is a now delight, because God has changed his heart so that he now wants to serve God. John writes in his first letter, chapter 5 and verse 3 that God's "commands are not burdensome". To the born again Christian, God's commands are not burdensome, nor a chore, but a delight, because he now loves God.

4. Application: offer yourselves in slavery to God

The apostle says, in verse 19, "I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves." He explains that, knowing the weakness of his readers, he is using the human analogy of slavery to help them to understand. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostle uses this idea of slavery in order to help us to understand spiritual reality of our lives.

Then he comes to the application. He says “Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness.”

He says to his readers, effectively, just as you used to be devoted slaves to your old master, sin, giving the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and ever-increasing wickedness, now be a devoted slave to your new master, righteousness, which will lead you to ever increasing holiness.”

Note once again the importance of the right use of the body. Our bodies have been in the past the means of doing much that is wrong. But now they are to be used in the service of God.

Note also that sanctification, becoming holy, is a progressive thing. It is not that you have some experience that makes you suddenly perfect. Rather, as, day by day, we make the deliberate choice to serve righteousness rather than sin, we become more and more holy.

Once more we see that becoming holy is something that we must do, in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is not going to be done for us by God, or anyone else. The onus is on us to offer the parts of our body in slavery to righteousness.

5. Encouragement to serve God

In verses 20 to 22 the apostle seeks to strengthen the resolve of his readers to serve God by reminding them of the misery that was caused by serving sin, and by pointing to the benefits of serving God now.

He says in verses 20 and 21, “When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!” In these verses it is as if he the apostle is saying, “Think back to the old days, before you were converted. Yes, you were “free” from righteousness. But what good did that do you? In that condition you were slaves of sin. Being a slave of sin did you no good at all. It just led you to do things that ruined your life, and made you deeply ashamed afterwards. The things that you were doing then were leading you to eternal death in hell. So why would you want to carry on doing those things now? Of course you do not want to live that way any longer!”

Then the apostle says, in verse 22, “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap

leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.” Now you have been set free from sin, he says. You have become slaves to God. Think of the tremendous benefits you are now gaining from being a slave of God. What a blessing holiness is! You have been saved from the ravages of sin, and instead you live as God intended you to live. You know his love, his joy, his peace. When you walk with God in the power of the Holy Spirit you have the satisfaction of knowing that what you are doing is good and right. All that is done for the sake of the Lord, out of love for him, has eternal significance and value. When you remember these things, of course you will want to live for God, rather than continue to live for sin.

Conclusion

We have seen from this passage that everybody in this world is a slave. You are either a slave of sin, leading to hell, or you are a slave of obedience, leading to eternal life.

Which are you? If you have not yet been born again, the answer from Scripture is clear: you are a slave of sin, and, unless you get saved, you will land up in hell. You might say, “But I am not as bad as lots of people.” That may be true, at least from your outward behaviour. But God will judge you, not by the standard of men, but by the standard of his holy law, and, by that standard, you are guilty. Moreover, you cannot stop yourself from sinning. You are a slave of sin.

What should you do if you are not saved, or if you think you might not be? Stop pretending that you are OK. Realise that you are a hell-deserving sinner. Come to God and confess your sin to him. Ask him to save you, through Jesus Christ. Depend upon what Jesus did on the Cross to save you, and upon that alone. Do not rely on anything you have done, or might do in the future. God’s promise to you is that if you do these things you will be saved. You will be saved from the guilt of your sin. And you will be saved from the power of sin.

If you believe that you have been saved, and that you have been born again, then this passage is good news for you. You have been delivered from slavery to sin. You are now a slave of righteousness. The practical application to you is that, now you are a slave of righteousness, you should more and more serve righteousness in your life, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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