

The Gospel Story: Enslaved to God

A Study of Romans

Romans 6:12-23

Pastor Bryan Clark

Years ago we had a dog, a Golden Retriever. In my opinion it's the best dog we ever had, and the reason for that is he was just so obedient. Very early on he figured out that if he surrendered his will to me, what he got back was almost unlimited freedom. You could do anything with this dog. You could go anywhere with this dog. At that time we lived in town at about 40th and Highway 2, and I used to go for walks through the neighborhood, down the bike paths; I'd even take my bicycle, and the dog would come and I never took a leash. I didn't have to take a leash. But every time we would go up through the neighborhoods we always encountered a neighborhood full of dogs. They were in kennels; they were in fenced yards. There were some of them that were actually chained to trees. And I remember thinking these dogs so want freedom, that the moment they have a little freedom, they go wild! And so what happens? They get chained to a tree! And ironically, Jacob, my dog, figured out that if he surrenders his will to me as his master, what he gets in return is almost unlimited freedom. And I often thought to myself: If a dog can figure this out, (laughter) then certainly we can, too.

That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Romans, Chapter 6. The first half of Romans 6, Paul taught us that the moment we trusted Christ as Savior, we died to sin. It's not something I *need* to do. It's not something I *should* do. It was automatic the moment I trusted Christ as Savior. Whether you knew that, whether you understood that, it's still true. That *me* that was in Adam, that *me* where the reigning principle was sin and death, that *me* died. How dead was he? He was so dead we buried him, and I was raised to new life—a new *me* where the reigning principle is grace and life. In verse 11 he sums up that discussion: **Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.** (*NASB, Romans 6:11)

We talked about the fact that is the first command in the book of Romans, and the command is simply to believe it—to believe that God tells the truth. Now a couple of weeks ago I made the comment that it's become my belief that, at the end of the day, everybody lives their belief system. We could have a conversation for hours about what you *say* you believe, but what you actually believe deep in your heart of hearts is evidenced every day by how you live, by the choices you make. So what if we were to think of that from a little different angle? If that is indeed true (and I believe it is), if we did come to believe that I actually died to sin, imagine the possibilities as it relates to freedom—in how I could live. That's what Paul talks about then starting in chapter 6, verse 12:

Therefore (in light of what he has just talked about) **do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.** (Vs. 12-13)

What he is saying there creates this metaphor of someone going before the king basically; it's a military metaphor. He's talking about your moral bodies. I think it's just a reality that every sin I could ever commit somehow, some way, has to come through this body, whether it's my mind or my hands or my feet. And so he's using it as a metaphor and saying that your members of your

body, they're like instruments, maybe better, weapons. It's a military metaphor. So you go before the king and you present yourself and your weapons—your skills—to the king. And so what he's saying is, "*Now that you're dead to sin, why would you present your weapons—the members of your body—your mind, your eyes, your ears, your hands your feet—why would you present those as weapons of unrighteousness? Now that you've been set free, why wouldn't you present your members as weapons of righteousness and experience the life that God offers?*" The point he is making, coming from the first part of the chapter, is that sin is no longer in charge. Sin is not the boss. Sin has no mastery over you. Sin is not the king anymore. Sin doesn't reign. So if that's true, why would you serve sin?

So let's imagine this scene. Let's imagine that you work for a retail store, and your boss is mean—verbally abusive, pushes you around, makes your life miserable every day, and every day you go home emotionally abused and miserable. It's a terrible way to live! And I'm your friend, and you keep telling me this, and I finally say, "Man, you need to find a different job! Nobody should live that way!" And so finally you do. You find a new job with a very nice boss, and you get paid more money, and everything is much better. We go several months and I happen to be out Christmas shopping. (At this point, that's the most unbelievable part of the story so far.) (Laughter) I'm out Christmas shopping, and in the process I bump into you in that retail store, and you're on your hands and knees cleaning up a mess. You're clearly feeling this sense of frenzy, and the boss is yelling at you and swearing at you and making your life miserable and abusing you. And I can't figure out what's going on. I say, "What's the deal? I thought you quit. I thought you had a much better job. What are you doing?" And you say, "The strangest thing happened. I was just out Christmas shopping, and as soon as I walked into this store, the boss started to yell at me and started to swear at me and started to abuse me and started to tell me what to do, and so I just had to do it." And I look you in the eye and I say, "You don't have to do it! He's not the boss anymore! He's not in charge! He's not your master! You don't have to live this way! Get up on your feet and walk away!"

That's exactly what Paul is saying. Sin is not the boss anymore! Sin is not the master! Sin is not in charge! You don't have to take it anymore! You don't have to live in that bondage! Take your new life and walk away! Verse 14:

For sin shall not be master over you,

The verb tense is future. It's a promise. Regardless of whether you *get this* today and live this way today, the promise is that because of Jesus, one day you *will live* that way. Sin will not be the master. God has defeated it, and you will live in alignment with what is true. But the point is: If that is true, if that's your future, and if it's possible today, why not live that way today? And then he says something very interesting:

...for you are not under law but under grace. (Vs. 14b)

In other words, when you were under the Law, there was no freedom; there was no possibility of that. You were enslaved. There was bondage. That's the way the system worked. Now he's talked a lot about the Law in Romans. In chapter 3 he reminded us that the Law reveals our sin; the Law exposes us; the Law reminds us of our desperate need for a Savior. But the Law has no ability to save us; the Law has no ability to make us free either, because when you look in the mirror of the Law, what you see is a struggler. What you see is a sinner. What you see is a reminder of all your messes and all your mistakes and all the things you're doing wrong.

You could say the exact same principle applies to legalism. Legalism is just kind of the new law, and it's the same idea that when our life is dominated by legalism, we have no chance at freedom. And this is the irony: People under the Law, the Law did not make them sin less; it actually made them sin more. The same is true of legalism. Legalism, at the end of the day, doesn't make you sin less; it actually makes you sin more. Why is that? Because when I look in the mirror of legalism, what I see are the rules and the regulations and the boundaries that remind me that I am a sinner—that I mess up. These are my struggles; this is my failure—this is all the stuff that's going on in my life, and that's what I focus on. That's the nature of legalism. I think about it; I focus on it; I remind myself of it all the time; and if that's what I dwell on, that's going to define the way I live. It doesn't set you free. It actually keeps you in bondage and, at the core there is a misunderstanding. I believe legalism is well intended, but there is a theological error at the core of that belief system. The legalist, at the end of the day, doesn't really believe you died to sin. The legalist doesn't really believe that there has been deep radical change. *I have my ticket to Heaven; when I die, that's where I'm going. But until that time, I'm still a dirty, rotten sinner. I'm a wild dog, and if you take me off the chain, I am going to run wild.* And the only way to stop that is we need to put a ball and chain on you; we need to chain you to a tree. We need to put up lots of fences and boundaries because, at the core, you're still a sinner and you want to sin.

But what Paul is saying is, "That simply isn't true." There's a radical change under grace. Under grace, the reigning principle is not sin and death. It is grace and life. Something has dramatically and radically changed. *I died to sin and have been made alive to God.* At the core of my being, as a new person in Christ, is not someone who wants to sin. I'm not someone who wants to continue to live in bondage. That isn't my heart. That isn't my *new heart*. When I look in the mirror of God's grace, instead of focusing constantly on all the ways that I fail, all the ways that I mess up, this view that I'm a wild dog out of control if someone doesn't chain me to a tree, what I see is God's grace. What I see is I've been made alive in God. What I see is I'm a new creation in Christ. What I see is I've been radically changed, and at the core of my being is not a person that wants to continue to sin. It's a person that wants to be passionate about righteousness, that wants this freedom, that wants a whole new life. And as I look into the mirror of God's grace, what I see is God, what I see is Jesus. What I see is His grace, what I see is His righteousness, what I see is freedom and, because that's what I think about and dwell on, that's how I live. The rest of the chapter is Paul explaining that. Verse 15:

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!

I think the reason he brings it up again, just like he did in verse 1, is because the more one understands the truth about grace, the more ridiculous that charge becomes. He brings it up here because now it almost seems silly that the accusation be made, because of the life-changing power of grace. Verse 16:

Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone *as slaves for obedience*, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?

Now to make sense of what he says here, you have to understand in the first century Roman Empire, about one-third of the empire was made up of slaves. There were times when people would willingly present themselves to a master to become a slave. Now that doesn't make a lot of sense to us today, but you have to understand there *were* masters that were abusive—that made the lives of the slaves miserable, but there were also many masters who weren't abusive. As a matter of fact,

they took very good care of their slaves and they gave them a very good life. If you were an individual or a family in first century Rome, and you simply weren't making it—you weren't surviving, (they didn't have all kinds of programs to rescue you); you just weren't going to make it. You didn't have a roof over your head; you didn't have food to eat; you didn't have protection—it was a very dangerous culture—people would choose to present themselves to a master to be their slave in order to have a life, in order to have a shelter, in order to have food, in order to have protection and, in many ways, to live much better than they were living before. So what he's saying is: if you were to choose to present yourself as a slave for obedience, wouldn't you carefully choose the master? If you had a choice in the matter, you wouldn't choose an abusive master. You'd carefully choose a master who would take care of you, who would offer you what you're looking for.

So he says there are two choices, and there are only two choices: Either you can become a slave of sin, so sin becomes your master, and the end result of that is death, OR you can choose obedience as the master, and the end result of that is righteousness. Either you choose to be a slave of God or you choose to be a slave of sin. There's no other choice. If you had such a choice, what choice would you make? When you were in Adam, you had no choice. But now that you're in Christ, it is your choice to make! So the question he is raising is: Why would you choose sin? Sin is abusive, and sin will ultimately destroy. Verse 17:

But thanks be to God that though you were (past tense) slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (Vs. 17-18)

Now verse 17 is an interesting verse. **You were slaves of sin, but you became obedient from the heart** (and I'll talk about that in just a minute) **to that form of teaching to which you were committed.** It's a very odd phrase. That Greek word translated **form of teaching** is a word that meant like a *tradition*, and specifically *something that was handed down*, probably referring to this body of doctrine, this body of truth. But what he is saying is, "This truth is true simply because it's true." He's not saying that this is something Paul, as a religious leader, made up and then has been passed down through the generations. If you talk to most people on the street, that's their view of religion. Some religious leader makes something up. It becomes this body of doctrine, and then it's passed down from generation to generation. That's not what the text is saying. The text is saying this is true simply because it's true! It is a fact of history that God Himself became a man, and through His death on the cross, sin and death were defeated and conquered once for all. That's true! It's just true because it's true! And when we trust Christ as Savior, we enter into that body of truth. We are committed to it.

Now that phrase *the truth to which you were committed* is a little bit confusing because the word **committed** there, the voice there is not active—it's passive, which means this is not a truth that you actively committed to, but rather this is a truth that you *were* committed to. In other words, God committed you to it! This is not an action *you* took; it was an action that was taken *to you*, that was done to you. Basically, the idea is that what's passed down is not the truth; what's passed down is *you*. You're what was committed to this truth that's true, simply because it's true. It's what God did.

So you have this body of life-changing truth of what God was willing to do to defeat sin and death once for all. When you trusted Christ as Savior, He took you and He committed you to it. He passed *you* down to it so that it would now be true of *you*; therefore, you're no longer enslaved to

sin, but rather, you've been set free. "Having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness." Verse 19:

I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh...

Now what he's saying there is: he's imagining some objection to the terminology of slavery. The idea of slavery is a metaphor, and like every metaphor, it's imperfect. You can't over-analyze any metaphor, just as a simple point to be made. So in the Roman Empire there were those who would have viewed slavery as evil and bad, and he's acknowledging: *It's not the perfect metaphor, but I have to use some way to help us understand, as humans, this divine truth. And the metaphor of the day was that you are either a slave to sin or a slave to God. Don't over-analyze the metaphor.*

...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. (Vs. 19b)

Sanctification is a word often translated *holiness*. It just means to be *set apart*. *If this is how life looked in Adam, and enslaved to sin—all that went with that*—what he's saying is: as a result of your faith in Christ, as a result of the radical change of being handed down to that truth, you now have the chance to live set apart from that—a whole different way of life, a whole different operating system, a whole different heart. Your life can be radically different!

Now, Paul's technique is a familiar one. He says in verse 19...**just as...**and later in 19...**so now**. Now this is really important to understand because what he's saying is: at one time in your life you were enslaved to sin, and so you lived as a sinner; and that brought lawlessness, and lawlessness brings more lawlessness. Sin always brings about more sin, and it just compounds and it kills our life. But when you trusted Christ as Savior, when that person died, you're now alive in God. It isn't just that you're dead to sin; you're alive to God, which means you should be just as passionate now for righteousness as you were for sin before. This goes back to understanding what's at the core of our lives. It's not just that I'm dead to sin; it's that I'm alive to God. And because I'm alive to God, I'm as passionate today about righteousness as I was at one time about sin, because this is now who I am. This is at the core of my being. This is who I want to be. This is where I find my freedom. This is why, at the end of the day, my life doesn't have to be dominated by legalism. It's not dominated by the rules and the chains and the fences. I'm not a wild dog that wants to sin if I get a chance. I have a new heart! I want to do the right thing. I want to walk in righteousness. I want to be passionate about righteousness.

So think of it this way: Patti and I have been married for thirty-one years. In thirty-one years I have never committed adultery, and I don't plan to commit adultery today. As a matter of fact, in thirty-one years I never even contemplated the possibility. I have never considered it as an option. Why is that? Oh, because there's rules. Oh, because I'd lose my job. Oh, because there's social pressure. Oh, because there's punishment. I can honestly say, "It doesn't have to do with any of that." At one time the culture thought adultery was bad. Now the culture seems to think adultery is good. I don't care what the culture thinks. The reason I've never committed adultery is simple: I don't want to...I don't want to! I am passionately in love with the woman I'm married to. I don't want to! I don't need the rules and the boundaries and the chains and all that stuff. I just don't want to! I can't imagine devastating her with that. I just don't want to sin. That's why Paul says it's **obedience from the heart**. It's what's in your heart. You want to do the right thing; you're passionate for righteousness. I don't go home at night and lock the door and the turn off the lights

and get on a computer and watch things I shouldn't watch. Why? Because I have a filter on my computer? Because somebody comes in once a month and checks? Because I might lose my job? Because of shame and guilt? It doesn't have to do any of that. It has to do with the fact I don't want to! I don't want to live that way. I don't want to live in that bondage. I don't want to sneak around. I don't want to have a dark side. I don't want to have cockroaches in the corner. I don't want to be one person on the platform and somebody else at home. I don't want to constantly wonder if somebody's going to discover me and pull off my mask and I'll be busted. I don't want to live that way. I don't do it because I don't want to, because that's what's in my heart.

In the heart of every believer something has radically changed. If I keep thinking of myself as a wild dog who wants to sin, and if it isn't for all these management things I'm gonna spin out of control, I tend to live that way. But if I can understand something radically has changed, and it's so radically changed that I should have as much passion for righteousness as for sinning. I don't need a bunch of rules and chains and boundaries. I just want to be passionate to do the right thing. Do I sin? Of course I sin! I'm just like you. I sin and I make mistakes, but it grieves me. There's something in my heart that says, "*I don't want to be that way! I don't want to live that way! I don't want to treat people that way! That's not the way I want to be!*" And it convicts me of my sin and it renews my commitment and my passion for righteousness. It's only then you begin to experience the freedom that God has for you, when I'm not trying to daily manage all these things in my life, but I have a passion for righteousness—that I can live my life with integrity. I can take off the mask. I can be me and say, "*I do make mistakes, but I confess those sins, and the passion of my heart is to be a person of righteousness.*" But you have to believe that. You have to focus on that. You have to believe that that is you and that is your story. Verse 20:

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit (or what fruit) were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. (Vs. 20-21)

Verse 20 is a bit of a play on words. When you were enslaved to sin, you were free from righteousness, meaning you didn't even have the moral capacity to think that way. The idea of doing the right thing didn't get in the way of your sinning. You didn't even have that capacity. You were free. How free were you? You were so free that you could do all kinds of things that later you would look back on and be ashamed of and what ultimately would bring you death. It's getting a little bit sarcastic there, but that's what he's saying. "*Yeah, you were free to destroy your life, but obviously that's no freedom at all.*"

But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. (Vs. 22)

Now you have a new choice. Now you can choose righteousness. You can be passionate for righteousness. You can be set apart to live a totally different life than the slavery that was yours in Adam. What is the result of that? It's life! It's eternal life! Eternal life isn't just a duration of life; it's a quality of life. It's a life of righteousness. It's a life of obedience. It's a life of freedom. It's a life to get up in the morning and have a purpose and a reason for living other than hiding and sneaking around and wearing masks—and all the stuff that goes with sin. It's a freedom that can only be found in Christ. Verse 23:

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

A very familiar verse often used to share with unbelievers. But it's worth noting this is actually a verse *for believers*. The wages of sin is death. That used to define us. That's how we lived in Adam. But the free gift of God is eternal life, and it's found in Christ Jesus. I'm not in Adam anymore. I've been radically changed, and the potential for freedom is unimaginable to those who are in bondage in Adam.

So now let's go back to the question when we started: If it is true that, at the end of the day, you actually *live* your belief system, what is the possibility for freedom if you actually believe this? It is staggering. One of the reasons so many Christians continue to live in bondage is because their thinking is messed up. You look in the mirror and what you see is wrong. What you see is a lie; it's a deception. But that's how you define yourself. That's what you think about. That's what you dwell on, so that's how you live. But it's not true! If you could understand you have been set free; that person died. How dead? We buried him!

Some of you here this morning that have trusted Christ as Savior still need to grab sin by the collar and shake him a little bit and look him in the eye and say, "*Listen fella! You're not the boss! You're not the master! You're not in charge of me anymore! You're not the king! I don't have to listen to you, and I'm NOT going to listen to you!*" and begin to experience the freedom that is yours in Christ. Obedience that comes from heart. Obedience that's passionate about doing righteousness—that every day is about wanting to do the right thing.

One of the big problems with legalism is legalism tends to define very black and white lines, and so what people do is they go right up to the line. *I wanna get as close to the line as possible without going over*. But someone that's passionate about righteousness could care less about the lines. It isn't about: how close to the world can I get without stepping over the boundary? It's about what does it mean to be righteous? What does it mean to be like Jesus? What does it mean to be passionate about the things that are right and good and eternal in such a way that it sets me free from the bondage that defined me before?

It isn't enough just to be *dead to sin*. It's dead to sin and *alive to God*. It's to be as passionate for righteousness as you were about sinning. Ironically, in our longing to be free, we will only ultimately be free when we are enslaved to God, when we willingly choose to give up our will and be passionate for obedience and righteousness. And in so doing that, we will finally find the freedom that we have longed for. It's why Jesus said, "You shall know the truth, and it's the truth that sets you free."

Our Father, we're thankful this morning that You tell us the truth. The enemy is a liar and a deceiver. Lord, I'm going to guess there are a lot of people here this morning who, if the truth was known deep in their hearts, they still believe sin is master, sin is in charge, sin's the boss. And without all these ways to manage our lives, we're just going to be a wild dog out of control. Lord, help us to understand that just isn't true. As a result of being committed to this truth, something deep inside has radically changed. Lord, help us to be as passionate for righteousness as we used to be about sin, and there to find the freedom that You long for us to know. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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The Gospel Story: Enslaved To God

A Study of Romans

Romans 6:12-23

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. How does our culture define freedom? Are people really free? What's the evidence to support your conclusion?
2. Is it true that the more rules we have the better our behavior will be? Why or why not?
3. If we all ultimately live what we believe, what is the best way to change bad behavior?

Bible Study

1. Review Romans 6:10, 11. What do we need to "know" from Romans 6:1-11?
2. Read Romans 6:12-19. "Therefore" as a result of what's true, how should we live as those alive in Christ?
3. What does Paul mean by the promise in verse 14, "For sin shall not be master over you"? (notice that's future tense)
4. Paul states that sin shall not be master over you "for" you are not under law but under grace. Review what Paul said about the law in 3:19, 20. When Christians are focused on "the law" or legalism, what are you ultimately focused on? Does this make us sin more or less? Why? Can this approach ever lead to freedom? Why or why not?
5. What does it mean to be "obedient from the heart"? Is that the same as being a slave to righteousness? How is this approach different from legalism? What is the focus now? Does this approach lead to freedom or bondage? Why?

6. Read Romans 6:20-23. What does Paul mean when he says we were, “free in regard to righteousness” when we were slaves to sin? What did this lead to?
7. Paul states, “But now...” in verse 22. But now what? What is the result?
8. Rewrite 6:23 in your own words.

Application

1. Would you say your Christian life reflects the belief that you are under grace or under law? Why?
2. At this point in your Christian walk are you enslaved to sin or enslaved to obedience from the heart? Based on Romans 6, what is the best thing we can do to help other Christians who seem to be enslaved to sin?
3. How should you live each day as a Christian having been freed from slavery to sin?