

## Practical Holiness

Romans 6:15–23<sup>1</sup>

### The Context.

As we saw a moment ago, Romans 6, verse 15 opens with the question,

<sup>15</sup> **What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?** Romans 6:15 ESV

and this is the precisely the question we've been considering throughout Romans 6. The chapter began with the question,

<sup>1</sup> **What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?** Romans 6:1 ESV

And just in case his readers didn't pick up what he was laying down in the first 14 verses, Paul asked it again, "Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?" Now, the obvious answer to both questions ought to be exactly the answer that the Holy Spirit caused Paul to write: by no means; certainly not; may it never be. (One scholar even suggested "Are you nuts?" as a paraphrase, which may seem harsh, but consider the fact that in both cases Paul followed the answer with another question. In verse 2, he asked:

<sup>2</sup> **...How can we who died to sin still live in it?** Romans 6:2 ESV

Again, the *answer* is so obvious as to go without saying, so he states it as yet another question.

<sup>3</sup> **Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?** Romans 6:2–3 ESV

He does the same in verse 16:

<sup>16</sup> **Do 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?** Romans 6:16 ESV

Now, if you didn't know before, that's OK, but now you do. Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Are we to sin—to go on sinning—because we are not under law but under grace? Does the assurance that we receive every time that we come to the table of the Lord, as we will do a little later in our service, mean that we can live and walk just as we did before we were in Christ? Absolutely, unequivocally **no**. We cannot. In fact, if we are Christians—if we are "in Christ", which is the preferred New Testament description—then, verse 17:

<sup>17</sup> **...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...** Romans 6:17 ESV

(that, by the way, would be the faith once for all delivered to the saints, as we saw last Lord's Day),

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> ...and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. Romans 6:18 ESV

### **True Conversion.**

In fact, conversion to Christ—becoming a Christian; being saved—is, according to our Heidelberg Catechism,

...the dying-away of the old self, and the coming-to-life of the new.

It is to be **genuinely sorry for sin...**

so, repentance, but more than merely being sorry for sin, it is

**to hate it more and more...**

on the negative side. “And” on the positive,

...to run away from it.<sup>2</sup>

Being in Christ means hating our sin—the sin that required His sacrificial death—to the extent that we not only turn, but literally run away from it. Remember at this point the story of Joseph. He was a slave in the household of Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard. Genesis 39:2 tells us that even in that circumstance,

<sup>2</sup> **The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master.** Genesis 39:2 ESV

But Joseph was “handsome in form and appearance”, and when his master’s wife decided that she would tempt him to join her in a sinful relationship, catching him on one occasion by taking hold of his garment,

<sup>12</sup> ...he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house. Genesis 39:12 ESV

This was probably in the background when Paul instructed his son in the faith, Timothy, in chapter 2 of his second letter, to

<sup>22</sup> ...flee from youthful lusts... 2 Timothy 2:22 NASB3

Paul was telling Timothy to run away from sin, like Joseph did, knowing that in the end, Joseph ran away from sin even at great cost to himself. Running away from sin in this case meant leaving a desirable “employment” situation and finding himself cast into prison very shortly thereafter. Like Moses, who, according to Hebrews 11, verse 25, chose

<sup>25</sup> ...rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. Hebrews 11:25 ESV

And if we hate sin—if we truly hate sin—then this is what we do. We see it coming and we run. We don’t flirt with it. We don’t dip a toe into the water to check the temperature. We

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<sup>2</sup> CRCNA, ed., “The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 33”, in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Publications, 1988), 54.

<sup>3</sup> *New American Standard Bible*, electronic edition. (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1986).

don't run a risk/benefit analysis to decide if it might be worth it just this once. We run, because being in Christ—being converted—means to hate sin “more and more.”

### A New Kind of Slavery.

It is, in the context of Romans 6, exchanging slavery to sin for a new kind of slavery—a new kind of service—which is described in verse 17 as obedience **from the heart** to the word and the will of God. Then, in verse 19 Paul wrote:

<sup>19</sup> I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. Romans 6:19 ESV

and he did so to make it clear that the idea of slavery to righteousness is not really like slavery to sin at all. For starters, verse 16 already made clear that slavery to sin leads to death, and this was important enough to merit repetition in verse 23, where he wrote:

<sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death... Romans 6:23 ESV

Of course, in verse 19 Paul already made clear that slavery to sin can also be understood as slavery to impurity (uncleanness), and to lawlessness (which is the very definition of sin), so, it's not just the end that's undesirable, it's the journey too. Furthermore, we're told that lawlessness leads inevitably to more lawlessness. One sin, in other words, will lead to another. This echoes the trajectory written of by James, who said in James 1, verses 14 and 15:

<sup>14</sup> But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. James 1:14 ESV

Even so,

<sup>15</sup> ...desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown... James 1:15  
ESV

(when it is “fully matured”<sup>4</sup>)

...sin...brings forth death. James 1:14–15 ESV

Which is to say that sin, when it reaches the point that we simply accept it and identify it as who we are and not what we do, brings forth death. See, when we come to the place where we say that we have no sin and therefore, that we have not sinned, then we make God a liar, and His word is not in us.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “...when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is **fully matured**, it brings forth death.” James 1:15 in the *Legacy Standard Bible* (Three Sixteen Publishing, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. 1 John 1:8-10.

Of course, people tend to think of this as true freedom—the freedom to do and to be whatever we want; to be gods to ourselves; to decide for ourselves what we will define as good and evil;<sup>6</sup> think here of the temptation of Adam and Eve in Eden. Like them, we're even pretty good at pretending, in spite of the evidence of our eyes, that sin leads only to shiny, wonderful, happy places. And how many people have walked this road? Just one more drink, just one more pill, just a quick little affair, just a little bit more of whatever it is that we covet, and all will be well. How easily we forget that

<sup>25</sup> There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death Proverbs 16:25 ESV

because

<sup>15</sup> ...[lust] when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. James 1:14–15 ESV

### Wholehearted Joy.

That's why true conversion means to hate sin more and more, and, as necessary, to literally run away from it. But since we have returned to the catechism, we also need to understand that being in Christ is more than that. Being *in* Christ is also

...a wholehearted joy in God through Christ, and a delight to do every kind of good as God wants us to.<sup>7</sup>

This is why Paul's slavery analogy ultimately falls a bit short due to our natural limitations. See, we always think of slavery as being forced to do all kinds of things that we don't really want to do, but Romans 6 makes clear that when we were dead in trespasses and sin, we really did do exactly what we thought would please us. The end of these things is death, but failing to realize that at the time, we freely "presented"—we offered—the parts of our body

<sup>19</sup> ...as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness... Romans 6:19 ESV

We thought we were serving ourselves, and perhaps even others—we thought these things would lead ultimately to happiness—but in reality, we were just giving ourselves up to sin, leading to more sin, leading in the end to death not happiness and fulfillment. In contrast, Paul exhorts us as those who have been saved—as those who have been brought from death to life—to freely present ourselves to God, and to

<sup>19</sup> ...present [our] members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification Romans 6:19 ESV

leading, that is, to practical holiness—lived-out in this world holiness. This is what we were created for. This is what we mean when we say that our chief and highest end is to glorify God. We were created, and further, we were redeemed—we were saved—not to be like the world but to be like Christ.

<sup>20</sup> For when you were slaves of sin...

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Genesis 3:1–7.

<sup>7</sup> CRCNA, *Ecumenical Creeds*, 54.

(verse 20),

...you were free in regard to righteousness. <sup>21</sup> **But what fruit** were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? **For the end of those things is death.**

Romans 6:20–21 ESV

<sup>22</sup> **But now...** Romans 6:22 ESV

And what majestic, wonderful words; that was then...

<sup>22</sup> **But now...** Romans 6:22 ESV

<sup>22</sup> ...**now that you have been set free from sin** and have become slaves of God, **the fruit you get leads to sanctification...** Romans 6:22 ESV

to practical, lived holiness,

...**and its end...** Romans 6:22 ESV

the end—the result—of holiness, of sanctification,

...**eternal life.** <sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:15–23 ESV

See, there is a kind of freedom which is actually slavery—slavery to the passions, the desires, the lusts of the flesh. And, as Paul said elsewhere:

<sup>19</sup> ...the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, <sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. Galatians 5:19–21 ESV

And if any of that sounds good, trust me, it shouldn't. The end of such things—of all such thing—is death. Even in Galatians, Paul went on:

I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Galatians 5:19–21 ESV

Of course not,

<sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death... Romans 6:15–23 ESV

And we know this—deep down inside we know this. That's why it's never enough. The pleasures of sin are fleeting. They satisfy for a minute and then they're gone, inevitably leaving us desiring more. That's why lawlessness leads to more lawlessness.

<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit... Galatians 5:22 ESV

(as we read in Galatians 5),

...is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Galatians 5:22–23 ESV

And this is the fruit of being a slave to God. This is the fruit of being a slave to righteousness. This is the fruit that leads to sanctification—the fruit that is demonstrated in holy living—and that leads to eternal life. For those who are in Christ, it is a wholehearted joy to live and walk in this way. And of course it is,

<sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death... Romans 6:23 ESV

always and inevitably,

...but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23 ESV

And this is the gift—the indescribable gift—that we receive and celebrate as we come to the table of the Lord this morning. And our response? Romans 6, verses 11 – 14.

<sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. <sup>12</sup> Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.

<sup>13</sup> Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

<sup>14</sup> For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. Romans 6:11–14 ESV