
Affirming the Great Change

Romans 6:20-23

Russ Kennedy

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".

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.

From its Context (v.17-18)

¹⁷But 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, ¹⁸and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

Note that 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.

This section develops the implications of our union and surrender to Christ. So, while there are our responsibilities, there is also God's initiative. He unites us with Christ and places us in the realm of grace so that we do not have to sin. Being in the realm of sin leads to death. Being surrendered to God, being God's slave yields the fruit of growing in grace and holiness.

In its Contrast (v.20-22)

We are shown an important contrast using the extended metaphor of slavery.

Our Sinful Past (v.20-21)

First, note our sinful past as one side of the contrast.

²⁰When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹
But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you
are now ashamed? The end of those things is death.

There was a time when every single person who has ever been born was a slave of sin.

This was our identity and our state. We were (note the past tense) sinners...

This does not mean that we were as bad in sinning as we could be...

This does not mean that we necessarily were enslaved to deep, moral sins...

In that condition we were “free” of God’s kind of true righteousness...

That does not mean we did no moral good...

That does mean that we did not have the Spirit in us producing true righteousness...

Paul wants us to see the terms of our slavery in order to motivate us to serve God. When we were in sin, we were without righteousness. That produced all kinds of fruit, evil thoughts, desires, and actions of which we are ashamed now and resulted in death. But now, having died to sin, we are truly alive for righteousness. Its final outcome is life eternal.

Further, there is the great paradox here, as Stott points out. Each freedom to sin has its corresponding slavery. And our slavery to God has its corresponding freedom to live and please God.

Our Sanctified Present (v.22)

²²But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.

Paul is contrasting the results of our former life to our present life...

Notice Paul’s startling assertion, “Now that you have been set free from sin...”
Have we? Are truly “set free” from sin? What is he talking about? Everyone knows that Christians still sin. So how are we “set free” from sin?

The next phrase helps us. We have been unchained, set free from sin as a controlling master and have become the slaves of God. These are simply statements of fact.

Since these things are true, then the outcome leads to being set apart from sin and unto God. Sanctification has as its end, eternal life. Most would think if these as a process. Over time, one leads to the other. There is an obvious problem with that.

Eternal life is not something we can through a process of change. What misleads many is the phrase, "leads to sanctification". This is read as a process.

I contend that this is not a process *in this case, in this text*. This is a one-time event. We are set free and immediately indentured, enslaved to our Lord. That is not a process; it is an event at our conversion. Knowing this leads us to understand what sanctification is. To be sanctified is to be set apart from... and set apart to...

Sanctification first and foremost is a word that describes, at our conversion, what God does in moving us from the old to the new in all its aspects. We once were sinners. We once were enslaved to sin. We once were in sin, under law, dead, enslaved to lusts, under the control of depravity. Now we are saints. We have been, once for all, sanctified. We now enslaved to God, in His kingdom, alive in Christ, in the spirit, under grace.

The essence of the Christian life is life. It is eternal life. Once we were... then we were given life, the life of God in our souls by the Spirit. Application of the cross, the application of the death and resurrection of Christ, separates us from the all that we were and separates unto all the we are becoming. This is not merely positional and functional. No. This is reality. This is eternal life. Without it you are going to hell forever. But, since you have been raised from the dead and made alive in Christ, you now have been sanctified which is eternal life. No longer a sinner, you are now a saint. Since you are a saint, you must live a saintly, sanctified life. You must now live who and what you are.

In its Cause (v.23)

Let me say first, that though it may be used in evangelism, verse 23 is telling the believer a very important contrast in the context of being slaves to a master.

²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Why is this so? Because sin has wages, but eternal life is a gift. Once again, he points us to the importance of not banking on works but believing and receiving the gift of life.

But there is more to that here. Eternal life is not merely a future life with God in the heaven and in new heavens and new earth. We often think of eternal life as beginning at our death and going on for eternity as though it is something we enter. *The Bible never speaks of it this way.*

Eternal life is your present possession. You have it now. It is the life of God in the soul through the union of the Word and Spirit in your soul. When you were born from above, raised from spiritual deadness and given spiritual life, you received the life that is eternal at that instant. The gift of God is His life into your soul so that you spiritually live forever.

Now, this is why we do not grow in grace by Law. The Law brings death. The Law kills. The Law rules over the realm of death. To sin is to step into the place where sin rules, law reigns and death results. But we have been made alive. We live by life.

Growing in grace and holiness is simply living the life, the eternal life that God has given you.

Reflect and Respond

All of us by nature are enslaved to sin – we don't rule sin, sin rules us. God is the decisive deliverer from sin – and our efforts, though real and crucial, are dependent on Him. Without this deliverance from sin and the resulting new direction of righteousness and sanctification, we have not and will not inherit eternal life.

- 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).
- We must obey truth from the heart, having been freed from sin and become God's slaves (v.17-18).

We must present ourselves to God for His use, rather than presenting ourselves to sin for its use.

We must understand that we may not live as though sin were not deadly and sanctification were not demanded.

Justification always brings transformation leading to glorification. Our transformation is decisively God's work and dependently our work. So, those who have been justified by grace will grow in grace. Sin is deadly and holiness is demanded. Isn't it glorious then that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.