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Whom do you Serve?

But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness. (Ro 6:17-18)

Only the most irresponsible of theologians would dare to imply that Paul thanked God because the Romans—or anyone for that matter—was a slave to sin. Paul's thankfulness rather related to the present fact. No longer were the Romans serving sin as its slaves, but now they had escaped that slavery and were the servants of righteousness, the reason for Paul's thanksgiving to God.

In his commentary on this verse John Gill draws an analogy. A soldier may for a time become a prisoner of war, held by hostile forces in a prison camp. Eventually the prisoner escapes, returns to friendly territory and rejoins his own forces. At that time he has every reason to be thankful for his escape and for his present situation.

Paul's emphasis in this section of the Roman letter focuses on Christian service, discipleship not the transformation from death to life. He thanks God that the Romans are now "servants of righteousness," not children but servants. We do not become children of God by our faithful service, but by birth, a birth effected by God immediately and sovereignly without our works or other contributions. However, we become servants of God by a conscious, willing, and altogether voluntary decision to serve God, not sin.

...ye have obeyed from the heart.... Christian obedience cannot be coerced or reluctant obedience. God only accepts and blesses obedience that grows out of a joyful and willing obedience, obedience from the heart. On occasion I have listened to very sincere people describe their initial experience of turning from sin to serve God in terms that contradict this passage altogether. They describe convictions and conflict, often acknowledging their reluctant decision to serve God more out of fear of consequences than out of joyful willingness. A reluctant decision to serve God based more on fear of consequences than on a conviction of rightness falls distinctly short of the obedience that Paul describes in this passage. Scripture rejects superficial, external, and legalistic obedience. Consider this passage from Paul's letter to a group of churches that had learned the gospel from him, but rather quickly fell prey to legalistic teaching that lead them away from Paul's gospel to "another gospel" ([Ga 1:6](#)).

For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love. (Ga 5:6)

To get a vivid sense of this passage consider the wording if you were to express the mirror opposite to it. What word might you substitute for "faith"? In the Galatian letter Paul repeatedly draws a contrast between faith and law, or, to put it in simple terms for us, legalism. What word might express the opposite to "love" in this sentence? Perhaps the most significant word might be "fear." Let's restate the sentence in its opposite form. "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but legalism which worketh by fear." To observe and listen to many Christians describe their view of discipleship, they have embraced this mirror opposite interpretation of the passage!

When discussing the fundamental concepts of the doctrines of grace with Christians who hold to salvation by some form of cooperation between God and man, you often hear the protest, "Well, if I

believed that doctrine, I'd just go out and live my fill of sin." In making such statements people reveal their own motives far more than they realize. Do they practice righteousness only because they think they will gain heaven or something else of great value to them by such practice? In other words is their practice of righteousness exclusively for self-gain? Or do they practice righteousness based on the simple fact that it is right? If something is right to do, should we not practice it regardless of whether it means gain for us personally or not? If we expect our criticism—our just criticism—of the health and wealth heresy to be credibly accepted, we need to practice our righteousness solely because such conduct is right, whether we gain by it or not.

I sometimes wonder. Do folks who practice righteousness out of a legalistic motive not trust the Biblical concept of faith working by love? Did Paul trust it? He must have trusted it fully since he summarized his whole Galatian letter with this principle of right Christian conduct. Perhaps the person who appears to distrust the principle of faith working by love actually doesn't trust him/herself or God.

...that form of doctrine.... The word form is translated from a Greek word whose primary meaning is a mold. Dr. Tom Constable describes this verse—I believe—correctly.

The form of teaching Paul had in mind was the teaching that the Lord Jesus Himself gave during His earthly ministry and then through His apostles (cf. [Ga 6:2](#)) in contrast to the Mosaic Law. God had not forced Paul's readers to yield to it as to law. They had willingly embraced it as law for themselves. They had committed themselves to it from their hearts. Paul was not stressing the fact that the Lord had committed His teachings to his readers, as the AV translation implies, but that they had committed themselves to it.⁵⁵

Notice especially Constable's closing thought, "Paul was not stressing the fact that the Lord had committed His teachings to his readers...but that they had committed themselves to it." Men build forms in the desired shape before they begin to pour cement. Women used molds to make Jello desserts, and then pour the liquid Jello into them. Paul here describes the fixed mold of truth to which a faithful believer commits his/her service to God.

Constable further describes this concept of Christian obedience.

The slavery of the readers to righteousness was therefore voluntary. It seems that because of his very nature man must be the slave of something. "Righteousness" here is the result of following Christian teaching, and it is the equivalent of godly living. It is righteous character and conduct.

Paul did not say that every believer takes advantage of his or her freedom from sin's tyranny to become a slave of God. He said his readers had done so, and in this he rejoiced. Dedication to God is voluntary, not automatic for the Christian (cf. v. 13; 12:1). If a believer does not truly dedicate himself or herself to God, he or she will continue to practice sin (v. 16).

[Ro 6:19](#) Paul had put his teaching in human terms. He had compared the believer's situation to that of a free person on the one hand and to a slave on the other. He did this to help his readers grasp his point but evidently also to make a strong impact on them. Paul felt constrained to be very graphic and direct in view of their past. They had formerly deliberately yielded to sin. Now they needed to deliberately present (offer) themselves as slaves to God (cf. vv. 13, 16). This would result in their progressive sanctification. Note again that progressive sanctification is not totally passive or automatic. It requires some human action.⁵⁶

Notice Constable's point that our Christian service—literally our slavery—to righteousness is wholly voluntary, not coerced. Also notice that it is not universal to the family of God. Only those regenerate elect who consciously make the voluntary choice to serve righteousness discover and enjoy the blessing of this noble service.

Paul reasons that in exactly the same way we consciously and voluntarily chose sin prior to our relationship with God, now we are commanded to make a similar conscious and voluntary choice to serve God and righteousness.

...that form of doctrine.... We should also pay special attention to the point that Paul makes in this simple expression. The doctrine of true Christianity is not a form of doctrine that we choose. It is not “our own truth,” New Age relativism style. It is a fixed mold or form of doctrine. We do not reform or mold the doctrine to fit our ideas. Rather we mold our lives to fit the mold of Biblical doctrine or teaching. If some of our thoughts or actions fall outside the mold of doctrine set forth in Scripture, we are not to redesign the mold, but we are commanded to redesign our lives so that our conduct fits the fixed mold of Christian truth set forth in Scripture.

Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness. Paul emphasizes the point already made in the prior verse and underscored by Constable’s comments. We were legally freed from the eternal and damning consequences of sin by the substitutionary sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. We personally received the benefit of this work at the new birth. However, we gain the sense of personal freedom from sin only to the extent that we choose to walk away from slavery to sin and commit ourselves to the service of righteousness. Acceptable service to God cannot be a coerced or involuntary obedience. It must be a conscious obedience voluntarily chosen by us. In these thoughts Paul is repeating the same point that he made in 6:11, “Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The army of Christian soldiers is a “voluntary” army, not a conscripted collection of rebellious and reluctant soldiers who serve because they were drafted and had no choice other than serve or go to jail! They serve because they believe in the principle of faith working by love. They serve because they believe in the cause for which their army does battle. It is right! Whether they end their tour of service with medals and a hero’s welcome home or they die a tortured death as a result of injuries sustained in faithful service, they serve because they believe their service is right. They do not serve for reward, though reward or blessing is promised to faithful service ([1Co 9:17](#)).

Let us serve our tour of duty faithfully, joyfully, loyally, and willingly—because it is right and without any motive for personal gain or any sense of divine conscription or coercion.

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