

# **Romans: The Good News of God**

## **Only Two Masters**

*Romans 6:15-23*

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# Only Two Masters

## Scripture

Let us read Romans 6:15-23:

<sup>15</sup> What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! <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? <sup>17</sup> But 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, <sup>18</sup> and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. <sup>19</sup> I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

<sup>20</sup> For when you were slaves of sin, 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. <sup>22</sup> But 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. <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)

## Introduction

In his commentary on Romans, John MacArthur (from whom much of today's sermon is taken) says that "sin is the most devastating, debilitating, degenerating power that ever entered the human stream."<sup>1</sup> Sin has impacted every area of life; there is nothing that has not been impacted and affected by sin.

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *Romans* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996, c1991, c1994), 340.

Sin, however, is often misunderstood. Let me give you an example.

Last week I mentioned that Oprah Winfrey has teamed up with Eckhart Tolle on Monday evenings to teach an interactive Web event on how to have a better way of life. Eckhart Tolle's teaching is not at all compatible with Biblical truth. Chuck Colson, in his *Breakpoint* commentary, says it well, "Let me cut right to the chase: Tolle's supposedly groundbreaking message is simply the same old New Age thinking in pretty packaging. While Tolle acknowledges something wrong with the human condition (what Christians call 'sin'), he preaches the need not for repentance and salvation, but for a new 'awakening.'"<sup>2</sup>

Tolle admits that there is something fundamentally wrong with all humanity. He says that all religions call it something different, but they are essentially describing the same "inherited dysfunction." This is how he says that Christianity understands it:

According to Christian teachings, the normal collective state of humanity is one of "original sin." *Sin* is a word that has been greatly misunderstood and misinterpreted. Literally translated from the ancient Greek in which the New Testament was written, to sin means to miss the mark, as an archer who misses the target, so to sin means to *miss the point* of human existence. It means to live unskillfully, blindly, and thus to suffer and cause suffering. Again, the term, stripped of its cultural baggage and misinterpretations, points to the dysfunction inherent in the human condition.<sup>3</sup>

The problem with Tolle's view of sin is that he has explained only one facet of sin when in fact sin is multi-faceted. Sin is indeed "to miss the mark," but it is also "to fail in duty," "transgression," "overstepping set limits," "rebellion," "trespassing God's kingly prerogative," "incurring guilt," "a false step out of the appointed way," "trespass on forbidden ground," "iniquity," "perverseness,"

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<sup>2</sup> Chuck Colson, "Same Old Earth, New Disguise: Oprah and *A New Earth*" in *Breakpoint*, found at: [http://www.informz.net/pfm/archives/archive\\_592580.html](http://www.informz.net/pfm/archives/archive_592580.html).

<sup>3</sup> Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* (New York, NY: A Plume Book, 2006), 9.

“wrongness,” “lawlessness,” and “lawbreaking.”<sup>4</sup>

Sin is not merely a failure to live up to one’s potential; it is an inability to do anything at all that is pleasing to God.

And so, the greatest gift God could give to fallen sinners is freedom from sin, and it is that very gift that he offers through his Son, Jesus Christ.

## Lesson

In our study today, Paul teaches that there are only two masters in the spiritual world, and Christians are slaves—happy slaves—to obedience.

### I. The Question (6:15a)

Paul begins with a question in verse 15a: **“What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?”**

Paul anticipates the question of some that because we are the recipients of God’s amazing grace, we can now sin freely.

The doctrine of grace has always been subject to that false charge, which Paul first answered in the first half of chapter 6. But because the misunderstanding was so common and the issue so critical, he answers again from a slightly different perspective.

### II. The Answer (6:15b)

Paul gives the same forceful and unambiguous answer he gave in verse 2: **“By no means!”** (6:15b).

The idea is, “No, no, a thousand times no!” The mere suggestion that God’s grace is a license to sin is self-contradictory, a logical as well as a moral and spiritual absurdity.

The very purpose of God’s grace is to free people from sin. How then, could grace possibly justify continuing in sin?

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<sup>4</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale Reference Library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishers, 2001), 1203.

Grace not only justifies sinners, but also sanctifies sinners. Grace transforms sinners. A life that gives no evidence of transformation gives no evidence of salvation, which is the point of Paul's axiom in verse 16.

### III. The Axiom (6:16)

An axiom is a general truth that is so self-evident it needs no proof. **“Do you not know”** is clearly rhetorical, implying that his readers would readily acknowledge the truth of what he was about to say, if they gave it the least thought.

What could be more obvious than the fact **that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey (6:16)**? The phrase **“present yourselves”** indicates the *willing choice* of obedience to a master, and makes Paul's point even stronger.

Further, Paul says, that in relation to God's will, you have only two choices: **you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?**

There are only two masters in this world: **sin** and **obedience**. If your life is characterized by sin, which is opposed to God's will, then you are a slave **of sin**.

But if your life is characterized by obedience, which reflects God's will, then you are a slave **of obedience**.

These are the only two choices. There is no alternative, no neutral ground. All people are slaves, **either of sin**, which is to say that Satan is their master, or they are slaves **of obedience**, which is to say that Christ is their master.

As the well-known commentator Matthew Henry observed, **“Now, if we would know to which of these families we belong, we must enquire to which of these masters we yield obedience.”**<sup>5</sup>

Most people think that they are their own masters. Satan de-

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1996, c1991), Romans 6:16.

ceived Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden into thinking that they could be independent like God (Genesis 3:5), and be the masters of their own souls. People throughout the ages still believe this lie.

In June 2001 Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, was executed in Terre Haute, Indiana for the deaths of 168 people. Now, it is customary to ask a person, just before he is about to be executed, if he has any final statement. You may recall that for his final statement Timothy McVeigh simply released a handwritten copy of the 1875 poem by William Ernest Henley (1849-1903), titled “Invictus.” The poem concludes with these lines: “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.” Timothy McVeigh bought Satan’s lie, believing that he was his own master.

Every person in this world is, in a spiritual sense, a slave. Every person is a slave to the master **of sin**, or a slave to the master **of obedience**.

Paul is saying exactly what the apostle John says in 1 John 3:9-10, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.”

In other words, sin is not characteristic of a Christian. The old sinful way of life does not continue to characterize a true Christian. Obedience to God is the characteristic of a Christian.

But, because sin is not eradicated in the life of a Christian, a Christian still sins. Nevertheless, the direction of a Christian’s life is not toward sin but toward obedience.

### **III. The Argument—Explaining the Two Slaveries (6:17-22)**

Paul now explains and applies the axiom he has just stated (6:16), namely, that a person is a slave either to sin and Satan, or is a slave to obedience and God.

In doing so, he contrasts three aspects of each of those two

domains of servanthood: their position, their practice, and their promise.

A. *Their Position (6:17-18)*

First, the apostle Paul gives thanks to God that Christians are no longer subject to the slavery that leads to death. Paul says in verses 17-18, **“But 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, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”**

You are saved solely by the grace and power of **God**. And by his grace, habitual disobedience to him is in the past tense. That is why Paul says that you **“were once slaves of sin”**—but, by God’s grace, that is true no longer! Now, you have **been set free from sin**, and you **have become slaves of righteousness**.

I remember reading a story of a well-known atheist attacking a Christian preacher. The atheist wanted the preacher to debate him on the merits of Christianity. The preacher finally agreed to debate the atheist.

“But,” said the preacher, “When we debate, I want you to bring just 1 person who has lived a life of sin and misery who has been helped and changed by your atheistic teaching. And I will bring 100 people who used to be slaves to sin but now have been radically changed by the gospel of God’s grace.”

The atheist declined to debate.

You see, the gospel always produces obedience. The gospel never leads to more sin. And nothing else produces that change.

B. *Their Practice (6:19)*

It is difficult to put divine principles and truths into terms that finite human minds can comprehend. In saying, **“I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations”** (Romans

6:19a), Paul meant that the analogy of masters and slaves was used as an accommodation to his readers' humanness.

Paul changes the focus from position to practice, admonishing Christians to make their living correspond to their new natures. Although it is still possible for Christians to sin, they no longer are slaves of sin. Now they are free not to sin, and they should exercise that divinely provided ability in obedience to their new Master. Paul says in verse 19b, **“For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification”**

Before becoming Christians, you added sin upon sin. Sin was like a cancer that spread unimpeded.

Last week I attended the Gideon's International Pastor's Appreciation Banquet. A young man named Asif Hassan gave his testimony. He grew up in British Guyana. His father was an alcoholic and drank the family money away. Eventually, Asif and his brother were sent to live in Canada. They were teased and mocked and made fun of because of their background and heritage. One day, when Asif and his brother were in High School, they got tired of all the teasing and bullying. They lured one of the bullies away from his friends and stabbed him with a knife. For the next several years Asif lived in gangs, and got involved in gang warfare, drugs and all kinds of escalating immorality and sin. Eventually, he was caught and jailed. While in jail he was given a Gideon's Bible, which he read. He was converted, and eventually he got out of prison. Today he is an evangelist proclaiming the good news of God!

What struck me about Asif's testimony is how true God's word is—**lawlessness leading to more lawlessness**. That is true of every non-Christian.

But that is not true for the Christian. Paul says that you must **now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification**.

Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones summarized this truth well when



he wrote, “As you go on living this righteous life, and practicing it with all your might and energy and all your time. . . you will find that the process that went on before, in which you went on from bad to worse and became viler and viler, is entirely reversed. You will become cleaner and cleaner, and purer and purer, and holier and holier, and more and more conformed unto the image of the Son of God.”<sup>6</sup> Isn’t that a great promise!

God’s purpose in redeeming you from sin is not to give you freedom to do as you please but freedom to do as *he* pleases, which is to live righteously.

When God commanded Pharaoh to let his people go, he also made clear his purpose for their deliverance: “that they may serve me in the wilderness” (Exodus 7:16). God delivers us from slavery to sin for the sole purpose of our becoming slaves to obedience that leads to righteousness.

### *C. Their Promise (6:20-22)*

Before you were a Christian, Paul says, **when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness** (6:20). That is, you had no connection to righteousness. You possessed neither the desire nor the ability to meet its requirements.

**But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed?** (6:21a). What were you getting that was so great? When your eyes were opened to God’s truth, you discovered, to your horror, that **the end of those things is death** (6:21b).

One of the marks of true salvation is a sense of being **ashamed** of one’s life before coming to Christ. Whether the previous life was marked by sordid immorality or great propriety, by heinous crimes or sacrificial service to others, by extreme selfishness or extreme generosity, it is a life about which the true believer is only ashamed. No matter how it may appear before the world,

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<sup>6</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter Six* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1972), 268-269.

the life apart from God is a life apart from righteousness.

**But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God**, through faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone, **the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life** (6:22).

Having been **set free from sin** does not mean that you are no longer capable of sinning but that you are no longer enslaved to sin, no longer its helpless subject.

The freedom from sin about which Paul is speaking here is not a long-range objective or an ultimate ideal but an already accomplished fact. Without exception, every person who is a Christian is freed from sin and enslaved to God.

Obviously some Christians are more obedient than others, but Christians are equally freed from bondage to sin and equally enslaved to God, equally granted holiness and equally granted eternal life.

#### **IV. The Absolutes (6:23)**

Finally, verse 23 expresses two absolutes.

The first is that **the wages of sin is death**. Spiritual death is earned. It is the just and rightful compensation for a life that is characterized by sin, which is every life apart from God.

The second absolute is that **the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord**. By definition, a gift is free.

Salvation cannot be earned by works, by human goodness, by religious ritual, or by any other thing that you can do. “For by grace you have been saved through faith,” the apostle Paul reminded the Ephesian Christians, “And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

If a person wants what he deserves—eternal death—God will give that to him as his just wages.

And if person wants what he does not deserve—eternal life—God offers that to him as well, but as a gift, the only source of

which is Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is Paul's great climax to chapter 6 of Romans: Jesus Christ is the only way from sin to righteousness, from damnation to salvation, from eternal death to eternal life.

### Conclusion

And if you have become a Christian, you are a new creation in Christ. You are no longer a slave to sin. You are now a slave to obedience.

You have changed masters. You have a new identity.

On May 28, 1972 the Duke of Windsor, the uncrowned King Edward VIII, died in Paris. That same evening a television program rehearsed the main events of his life. Extracts from earlier films were shown, in which he answered questions about his upbringing, brief reign and abdication. Recalling his boyhood as Prince of Wales, he said: "My father [King George V] was a strict disciplinarian. Sometimes when I had done something wrong, he would admonish me saying, 'My dear boy, you must always remember who you are.'"<sup>7</sup>

If you are a Christian, be aware that your heavenly Father says that to you every day, now that you are a slave of obedience. He says to you, "My dear child, you must always remember who you are." Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 187-188.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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**PRAAYER:**

From Ray Ortlund's, *A Passion for God*:

Our Master and our Lord, you leave us no choice. If we want to be Christians at all, we must serve you with holy lives. That is non-negotiable.

So, how may we enslave ourselves more fully, more particularly, to you? How may our obedience be made more precise, more thorough?

Put your finger on definite attitudes, habits, perceptions, feelings and desires which displease you. Identify them for us and root them out of us.

We cannot take our sins to heaven with us, and we have little time now to become holy. Our souls are of infinite worth. Our obligation to you is absolute.

So let us work out our salvation, as you work in us.

Take our sins, one by one, and build new persons out of the wreckage we offer to you.

We open ourselves to you now.

And all of this I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.