

**ENSLAVED TO...?: OBEDIENCE IN LIGHT OF GOD'S GRACE (PT. 1)**  
**ROMANS 6:15-19**

When the word “slavery” is spoken, it inevitably produces a sense of shame, regret, and sorrow. We don’t have to have been slaves or slave owners to feel the pain that is in that word. And we are hardly the only country to associate “slavery” with “shame.” Virtually the entire world has some experience with slavery, either as those who have been enslaved or those who enslaved others. And it has been that way for most of the history of the world. And that story of slavery has never been a good story. For instance, Plato wrote this about the master’s relationship to his slave:

He is a troublesome piece of goods, as has been often shown by the frequent revolts of the Messenians...

Slaves ought to be punished as they deserve, and not admonished as if they were freemen, which will only make them conceited. The language used to a servant ought always to be that of a command, and we ought not to jest with them, whether they are males or females... [Laws VI, 777-8; cited by Yamuchi, “Slaves of God,” 37.]

Writing somewhat later, Roman philosopher Seneca noted the sad state of the slave:

The poor slaves may not move their lips, even to speak. The slightest murmur is repressed by the rod; even a chance sound,—a cough, a sneeze, or a hiccup,—is visited with the lash. There is a grievous penalty for the slightest breach of silence. All night long they must stand about, hungry and dumb. [Yamuchi, 38.]

It is well known that there were a great many slaves in the Roman empire — some estimate that there may have been as many as 60 million slaves. And in addition to slaves who did menial tasks and served as laborers, there were many slaves whom we would consider “white collar” — doctors, teachers, musicians, actors, slaves, stewards, and more. While there were free men in Rome, a vast number of the population was enslaved. And while some were treated well, they were still slaves, deprived of rights of personhood.

What is most remarkable is that Paul uses this word “slave” to indicate the believer’s relationship with Christ in **Romans 6:15-19**. He will note in v. 19, in a nod to the harshness of the term, slavery is inadequate to express our relationship with Christ, yet there *are* close corollaries that must be understood and embraced if we are to know the fullness of our fellowship with Christ.

Cultural slavery served as a helpful reminder for the believers of the early church of the spiritual principle that not just *many* men, but *all* men are slaves. All people everywhere are slaves. There are no free individuals. There are no autonomous individuals. No one who has the freedom to do what he wants. All men are enslaved. And all men are enslaved to one of only two rulers — either sin or God. There are no other options. The bad news is that if someone has rejected Christ, he is not his own master, but he is enslaved to sin and sin is his wicked and harsh taskmaster.

But the good news is that if one is a believer in Christ and united to Him, then he is not a slave to sin, but is a slave to Christ. And because he is a slave to Christ, he not only is enabled to obey Christ, but obeying Christ is the normal necessity of his life. That's what Paul will explain in Romans 6:15-23. And that explanation is really an explanation about grace and what it means to be "under grace" (Rom. 6:14).

We can say it this way...

**LIVING BY GRACE MEANS LIVING OBEDIENTLY TO GOD.**

What do we need to know about grace so that we can live obediently to the Lord? Here are four truths about grace the we must know and believe and live...

1. **A QUESTION About Grace (v. 15a)**
2. **A MISUNDERSTANDING About Grace (v. 15b)**
3. **A CORRECTION About Grace (v. 16)**
4. **What Grace DOES in Us (vv. 17-19)**
  - ✓ **Grace TRANSFORMS our hearts (v. 17a)**
  - ✓ **Grace makes us OBEDIENT (v. 17b)**
  - ✓ **Grace IMPRINTS itself on our lives (v. 17c)**
  - ✓ **Grace ENSLAVES us to righteousness (v. 18)**
  - ✓ **Grace FREEED us from sin's downward spiral (v. 19a)**
  - ✓ **Grace PRODUCES sanctification's upward spiral (v. 19b)**

What do we need to know about grace so that we can live obediently to the Lord?

### **1. A QUESTION About Grace (v. 15a)**

- When Paul asks, ***what then?***, he is transitioning between the last statement in v. 14 to this new idea in v. 15. It is a very similar transition as in 5:21 – 6:1. So to understand this question, we need to understand what Paul said in v. 14.
  - ✓ The believer is ***not under law***.
    - The Law brings knowledge of sin (3:20).
    - The Law, through the knowledge of sin, leads to an increase in the severity of sin (5:20; 7:8-9)
    - The Law produces condemnation (Gal. 3:10)
    - The Law brings wrath (4:15).
    - So the Law cannot save and the Law cannot empower the believer to overcome sin. And that is contrary to what many thought (e.g., 2:17-24; and the Pharisees, Mt. 5:20).
    - “To be ‘under law’ is to be subject to the constraining and sin-threatening regime of the old age.” [Moo] The law does not liberate from sin; it only “accentuates and confirms that bondage.” [Murray]
  - ✓ The believer is ***under grace***.
    - To be under grace goes back to 5:18-21 — to be under grace is to be justified (vv. 18-19), forgiven and cleansed (v. 20), and freed from sin’s power and placed under the domination of God’s transforming power (v. 21).
    - In summary, if the essence of the law is to condemn, then the essence of grace is to free the believer from condemnation (5:17; 8:1) and free from Adam as his master (5:18).
    - It is also helpful to notice that in Galatians Paul said that those who are not under the Law are being led by the Spirit (Gal. 5:18). So to be under grace (and not under Law) means that we are under the control and leading of the Spirit.
    - You have to think that the believer who hears that says “Thank God and Christ that the shackles of the Law have been removed!”
    - Unfortunately, some took that to mean that there was no longer any responsibility to keep any kind of law of God. But to not be under the Law has never meant that the believer could live “lawlessly” (or rebelliously against God’s moral commands). Cf. 1 Jn. 3:4-8.
      - ... Sin is lawlessness, the very thing Christ came to take away (vv. 4-5).
      - ... No one who is in Christ (united to Him) lives in a state of sin (v. 6a). No one who lives in a state of sin knows Christ (v. 6b).
      - ... Righteous deeds are the fruit of imputed righteousness (v. 7).
      - ... Living in a state of sin is evidence of belonging to Satan’s kingdom (v. 8).

- Being **under grace** has never meant that a believer could purposefully engage in a lifestyle of sin. But some have misunderstood and misconstrued the gospel to mean that very thing. So Paul asks the question in v. 15 — ***shall we sin because we are...under grace?***
  - ✓ The question is about the appropriateness of the action — “ought we engage in sin?” or even, “are we ‘obligated’ to sin...?”
  - ✓ The question seems to be a repeat of the question in v. 1, but there are some slight differences:
    - In **verse 1**, the emphasis is that by sinning more we might get more grace.
    - Here the emphasis is, “let’s sin *because of* grace.” That is, grace becomes the reason and excuse for sin. It doesn’t matter if we sin because of the grace we have received from God. The question implies that sin is not only permissible but that sin doesn’t matter. We have received sufficient grace from God, so no sin and no amount of sin matters to God.
  - ✓ A few years ago, *USA Today* reported a story about a man who came home to find his house being robbed by nine men, but the homeowner managed to shove one into his backyard pool. After realizing the robber couldn’t swim, the homeowner jumped in to save him. But once out of the pool, the wet thief called to his friends to come back. Then he pulled a knife and threatened the man who had just rescued him. “The homeowner said, “We were still standing near the pool, and when I saw the knife I just threw him back in. But he was gasping for air and was drowning. So I rescued him again. I thought he had a cheek trying to stab me after I had just saved his life.”
  - ✓ That’s just like those who say, “we can engage in any kind of sin because God’s grace will cover all our sins, no matter what we do.”
  - ✓ That is a misunderstanding of the nature of grace, which is the second truth we must understand.

## 2. **A MISUNDERSTANDING About Grace (v. 15b)**

- To his proposed question Paul answers, ***May it never be.*** As we noted in v. 1, the phrase has to do with time — “may it never happen,” or “may it never come to pass.” It is a phrase of abhorrence; such a condition should never exist because it is such an evil thought and idea.
  - ✓ It is also worth noting that the very way Paul asks the question he is anticipating a negative response. “NO!” In no way should the believer purposefully engage in sin.
  - ✓ **This is an abhorrent idea for two reasons:**
    - Nothing good ever comes from sin (until Christ redeems it). Sin is always detrimental and deadly. Remember what happens when licentious living infiltrates the church (**1 Cor. 5:1-2**). And remember what happens when godlessness in the church becomes pervasive (**1 Cor. 5:6**). Christ died for our ungodliness, not so that we would live in it (**1 Cor. 5:7**). As MacArthur said,

"Sin is most devastating, debilitating, degenerating power that ever entered the human stream....Sin is the terrible, life-wrecking, soul-damning reality that resides and grows in every unredeemed human heart like an incurable cancer. Even when men try to escape from sin, they cannot, and when they try to escape its guilt, they cannot." [Romans 1-8, 340-1.]

- Consider how Paul characterizes sin in this book [cf. Piper, *Living in the Light*, 26]:
    - ... Sin is rebellion against God, a refusal to acknowledge what is known to be true about Him so that the sinner can be supreme and sovereign (Rom. 1:18, 20-21, 28).
    - ... Sin is a willful exchange of God's truth for Satan's lie (Rom. 1:25)
    - ... Sin is pervasive in every person and in every culture — not just Gentiles and not just Jews (Rom. 1:28ff; 2:2, 5; 3:10, 23)
    - ... Sin rules like a king in the lives of the rebellious — and it rules through death (5:21).
    - ... Sin has dominion like a lord (6:14)
    - ... Sin enslaves like a master (6:6, 16-17, 20)
    - ... Sin always produces more (and greater sin) because it never satisfies (7:8; Eph. 4:19)
    - ... Sin is a power that kills (7:11)
    - ... Sin is a bondage into which we have been sold (7:14)
    - ... Sin is a hostile tenant within us (7:17, 20) who takes us captive (7:23)
  - Friends, that's not a happy list. That's not the kind of thing an advertising executive wants said about his product. There's no enticement
  - And the second reason this is an abhorrent idea is that Christ's death was for the purpose of transforming the way we live and conduct ourselves (1 Cor. 5:9-11; cf. also 1 Jn. 3:4ff).
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- Ideas like the ones proposed in vv. 1, 15 arise because grace is misunderstood.
    - ✓ Grace is seen as "God's Riches At Christ's Expense" — meaning grace is forgiveness. It is true that God's grace includes forgiveness, but God's grace is *more* than forgiveness. Many assume that God's grace cleans the slate of our sin against God so that we can engage in any kind of sinful behavior without consequences.
    - ✓ But grace also is given so that our lives are transformed and changed. God's grace is given to us so that we can have the power to stand against and resist sin. This is particularly clear in Titus 2:
      - God's grace has brought salvation (v. 11)
      - God's grace *instructs* us (v. 12a)
      - God's grace instructs us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires (v. 12b)
      - God's grace instructs us to live godly in this present world (not just the one to come, v. 12c)
      - God's grace came through Christ, who died for us so that we would be pure for Him and zealous to do good works (v. 14).
      - God's grace is not given so that we can indulge in sin; God's grace is given so that we can escape from the tyrannical power of sin.

- It is worth noting that when we preach grace, some will inevitably misunderstand. Some will assume that grace and freedom means, “do whatever the flesh leads you to do.”
  - ✓ I have long appreciated Augustine’s statement, “Love God and do what you will.” That is, cultivate a deep and genuine love for God and then that love for Him will guide your actions by His Word and Spirit. When I shared that many years ago with a young adult she immediately exclaimed, “NO! If I do that I’ll go out and get drunk every weekend.” To which I said, “You didn’t listen to what I said — doing what you will (desire) is always governed by a deep love of God. And if you are engaging in sinful behavior, it is evident you aren’t loving God.”
  - ✓ Swindoll is correct: “Grace never means we’re free to live any way we wish, whatever the consequences. Grace does not mean God will smile on me, regardless.” [*Grace Awakening*]
  - ✓ Paul asks the questions he does in vv. 1, 15 for the very reason that some would misunderstand grace. We do well to anticipate similar questions and to prepare similar responses.
  - ✓ So what else should we know about grace? Here is the third truth we must know...

### 3. A CORRECTION About Grace (v. 16)

- Paul begins v. 16 similarly to v. 3 (he uses a different word for knowledge, but probably is using it in the same way) and similarly to v. 6.
  - ✓ Paul uses this phrase more than a dozen times; cf. **1 Cor. 6:2-3, 9, 15-16, 19**. He uses it to draw attention to something that is important and significant.
  - ✓ By this, Paul means that there is a body of truth that should be well known by all believers. This is not something that is special only for the most mature believers, but all believers should know this.
- Paul then gives us the general principle about the purpose of grace and our obedience: *whatever we obey is our master*. There are actually several aspects to this enslavement. Notice —
  - ✓ *Enslavement is self-inflicted*. The story of slavery in America is a sorrowful and sinful story of how men bought and sold other human beings into slavery. And those who were enslaved were not there by their own doing or choice. But that’s not true spiritually.
    - Notice that Paul emphasizes **when you present yourselves**... He is using the word **present** (v. 13) to again indicate offering oneself in service of another. And by using the pronoun **you**, he emphasizes that the enslavement is due to the sinner himself.
    - He is likely referring to the practice in the ancient world of some who sold themselves into slavery in order to either pay off debt or to keep from becoming indebted. And in the same way, everyone is enslaved to the master of their choosing; they do what they do because they want what they want and if they are disobedient to God it is because they do not want Him.

- ✓ *In the physical world, there are many potential masters; in the spiritual world there are only two masters: sin or God.* And everyone is enslaved to one of those two masters.
- So our text says a person is enslaved to **someone**, and then it says we are all slaves of **one** — either **sin** or of **obedience** (God). There are no alternatives.
- As one writer said, “The choice with which people are faced is not ‘Should I retain my freedom or give it up and submit to God?’ but ‘Should I serve sin or should I serve God?’” [Moo, 399.] It is rightly said, “...no human being is his own master.” [MacArthur]
- So notice this — no one is in control of his own life. He is controlled by that to which he has offered and sacrificed himself. He is controlled by the object of his worship and where he finds his refuge. He is controlled either by sin or by God. *Every* person you encounter every day is either controlled by sin or God. Many seek to be in control and sovereign, but they are simply worshipping themselves and dismissing God.
- ✓ *It is impossible to be enslaved to both those masters at the same time;* either we are enslaved to sin or we are enslaved to God, but we cannot be enslaved to both.
- Notice Paul says **either...or**. You will have a master and there are only two options and it *will be* one of those two options. And only one of them, so he emphasizes **you are slaves of the one...** Jesus similarly says you cannot have two masters — **Mt. 6:24**. It is impossible to have two different natures or two different masters at the same time.
- And it is essential to observe this — Paul is not saying we *ought to* be slaves of righteousness; he is saying that if we are in Christ, we *are slaves of righteousness and God*. Paul is not speaking about our responsibility, but about our reality — we *are slaves of God* (and not sin). And we do not do this ourselves, but we have had this done for us by our union with Christ (vv. 3-11).
- And friend, if you have trusted and are trusting Christ as your Savior, this should give you great hope. You still fight against sin, but even your fight is indicative of your transformation. That you are resisting sin and hating evil and loving and desiring to please God is indicative of your change, for the man who is in Adam (unsaved), cannot do that. Only a follower of Christ can desire and do acts of righteousness that please the Lord.
- ✓ *We know who our master is by what we do.* Who we obey is whose we are. Paul is not making a social comment on slavery and he certainly is not suggesting that slavery is good; he is simply pointing to its reality and how it functioned in that society. And one of the realities of slavery is that the slave has no choice about what he will do. In Rome he might be a doctor or lawyer, but if he is a slave he still can only obey his master; he has no will of his own to do as he pleases. He must obey and he can only obey his only master. And the same is true spiritually. Every person is enslaved and every person *will* obey his master. So if you want to know the identity of their master, just look at what they do. (Which is also what Jesus said: **Mt. 7:15-20**.)

- Following the general principle, Paul gives us two particular principles:

✓ **Enslavement to sin produces *death*.**

- Certainly this includes physical death; but we know it is more than that because of v. 23, where death is contrasted with *eternal* life. So if the life is eternal, so the death also must be eternal. So sin condemns eternally. (Let that thought rest on you for a moment.) “Sin leads to the loss of everything that can really be called life.” [Morris]
- Because sin produces death (nothing good ever comes directly from sin), God admonishes us to not let sin reign as master over us (v. 12). So we must think about sin and death in new ways.
- While we hate war because of the inevitable loss of life that comes from it, war also tends to reveal remarkable instances of courage and bravery from soldiers who do the right thing amidst the most difficult circumstances. For instance, there are a great many stories of heroes with uncommon courage from World War II. One enlisted man who became particularly well known through that war was Audie Murphy. Audie enlisted before he turned 18, became a leader among his men, had a book written about his life that was turned into a movie and then became a movie star himself (starring first in his own autobiographical movie!). This week I began reading a book about his life and early on this account is given about an early battle in which he found himself:

[I was] head of the company with a group of scouts [and] we flushed a couple of Italian officers. They should have surrendered; instead they mount two magnificent white horses and gallop madly away. My act is instinctive. Dropping to one knee, I fire twice. The men tumble from the horses, roll over, and lie still. “Now why did you do that?” asks a lieutenant. “What should I have done? Stood here with egg on my face waving them goodbye?”

“You shouldn’t have fired.”

“That’s our job, isn’t it? They would have killed us if they’d had the chance. That’s their job. Or have I been wrongly informed?”

“[Never mind.] I guess you did the right thing.”

I later discover that such mental confusion is common among new men. In the training areas, we talk toughly, thought toughly, and finally believe we really were tough. But it’s not easy to shed the idea that human life is sacred. The lieutenant has not yet shed the idea that we’ve been put into the field to deal out death. I have.

- The believer also must maintain a wartime mentality — recognizing that he is in a battle and at war with sin and that he must obey Christ and in obeying Christ must deal out death to sin; he must mortify sin. As John Owen so famously said, “Be killing sin, or it will be killing you...” And it will be killing us because that’s what sin does. It’s deadly.

✓ Enslavement to obedience produces **righteousness**.

- From 3:21 – 4:5 we know that Paul doesn't mean that righteousness produces life (as if our works merit our justification). But he does mean the opposite — that our life produces righteous works — our justification will be accompanied by obedience and righteous living (progressive sanctification, something that will be expanded in v. 18).
  - Notice also the contrast Paul makes in this verse — either obeying sin resulting in death, or obeying obedience resulting in righteousness. The contrast is between sin and obedience, not sin and God or sin and righteousness. Why does Paul do that? To emphasize that obedience is the essence of slavery. As John Stott says, "once we have offered ourselves to him as his slaves, we are permanently and unconditionally at his disposal. There is no possibility of going back on this. Having chosen our master, we have no further choice but to obey him." Obedience to God is not optional. Obedience is not secondary to the gospel; it is central to the gospel. Christ died so that we would be free from sin's penalty and so that we would be free from sin's tyranny and able to obey Christ (and enjoy the blessings that can only come from obedience to Him). MacArthur said it very simply in his book *Slave*: "To be a slave of Jesus Christ is true freedom." We are enslaved, but there is freedom in that slavery.
- So many believers have misunderstood grace, not knowing that everyone is enslaved to one of two masters, sin or Christ. And grace has come, not to keep us in sin, but to free us from sin so that we can be enslaved to Christ. There is one more truth about what grace does and that is given in vv. 17-19.

#### 4. What Grace **DOES** in Us (vv. 17-19)

- As Paul thinks about the believer's spiritual life in general and the Romans in particular, he cannot help but explode in an expression of great gratitude — notice he says, **thanks be to God**.
  - ✓ His gratitude is for the work *of God*... Notice that he gives his thanks to God.
    - And his gratitude is not for their previous sinful lives.
    - But this is an encouragement about how to think about our lives before Christ and how we should always think about sin. Our thought about sin should be gratitude for what God has forgiven and redeemed (e.g., Eph. 2).
      - ... Gratitude for sins that we committed and have been forgiven
      - ... Gratitude for sins that used to control us that have now been redeemed and are being used for the glory of God (restored marriages, reconciled friendships, etc.)
      - ... Gratitude for sins that God preemptively has kept us from committing
  - ✓ His gratitude is for the progress of salvation — what you were (**slaves**, v. 17a), what you became (**obedient**, through justification and conversion), and what you are becoming (**slaves of righteousness**, v. 18).

- ✓ What does God's grace do in us? It declares us just (righteous) so that we can do acts of righteousness. And then it equips us and works those righteous acts and deeds in our lives. I like to say that God saves us *from* Him (from His wrath) and *to* Him (to obey Him and enjoy Him).
  - ✓ Then in the following verses, Paul draws out a number of other implications of what God's grace does in us (but that's for next week) —
- Grace TRANSFORMS our hearts (v. 17a)
  - Grace makes us OBEY (v. 17b)
  - Grace IMPRINTS itself on our lives (v. 17c)
  - Grace ENSLAVES us to righteousness (v. 18)
  - Grace FREEED us from sin's downward spiral (v. 19a)
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**CONCLUSION:** In his book *Simplify Your Spiritual Life*, Don Whitney writes the following, answering the question, "What will a man do to gain his freedom?:"

In the early morning dim of March 29, 1849, a sympathetic storekeeper in Richmond, Virginia, nailed the lid on a crate containing a slave. A two-hundred pound man had folded himself into a wooden box just three-foot-one-inch long, two-feet wide, and two and-a-half feet deep. Cramped in suffocating darkness, the slave endured — often upside down — a grueling three-hundred-and-fifty mile shipment via railroad freight car, steamboat, and wagon. Twenty-seven hours later in a Philadelphia abolitionist's office, Henry 'Box' Brown emerged from his coffin-like confinement as a free man. The news of his stunning appearance encouraged the hopes of freedom in countless slaves. [p. 22]

Like Henry Brown, we have been enslaved; but our slavery was so much more tragic and binding. Our enslavement was to sin. But we did not have to endure a 27-hour trip in a confining box to gain our freedom. Our freedom comes not in what we do but in whose we are. And when we are in Christ, the shackles of sin are removed and we are set free — not to indulge in sin — but we are gloriously set free to obey our Savior. This is the good news of the gospel.

**BENEDICTION:** Jude 24-25