

WHOSE SLAVE ARE YOU?

by Ray C. Stedman

I invite you now to turn to the book of Romans, where we are going to pick up in the middle of Chapter 6.

In this chapter we are dealing with a very practical problem, one that every Christian must wrestle with. The problem is stated by the apostle very plainly in the first verse of this chapter: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?"

This whole sixth chapter deals with what happens when a believer sins. We do not like to think that believers do sin; but, unfortunately, we do. In Verses 1-14 of Chapter 6, we looked at the answer to this question. Now that you have become a Christian and Christ has entered your life -- you have been joined to him by faith in his work, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and by baptism into his death and being made a part of his resurrection -- the question arises: Can you go on living as you once did? Can you continue on in a lifestyle of sin, just as though nothing had really happened to you except that you will go to heaven when you die?

Paul's answer is: "Absolutely not!" You cannot do that; if you do, it is proof that you never really participated in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In other words, you are really not a Christian. Anyone who goes on in an unchanged life after having professed that they have come to Christ is simply giving testimony to everyone that he really has not been changed in his heart at all. He belongs to that crowd of people of whom our Lord Jesus himself said, "Many shall come to me in that day and say, 'Lord, Lord, did we not do many mighty works in your name and cast out devils?' And I shall say, 'Depart from me, I never knew you,'" {cf, Matt 7:22-23}.

The apostle is dealing with a very important subject here, one that we need to understand thoroughly. In Verse 14, Paul has just declared, "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace." In verse 15, he raises the question again, but in a slightly different way:

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? {Rom 6:15a NIV}

You can see that is a slightly different question than you have in Verse 1. In Verse 1, the question is: "Can we sin? Can we go on abiding in sin, living in a lifestyle of sin?" Paul's answer is: "Absolutely not! You cannot do it. If there has really been a change in your life, if Christ has entered your heart, there is no way that you can go on absolutely unchanged, justifying the same style of life that you have always had." But now the question is not "can we" but "shall we." Paul is raising the question of whether a Christian ought to choose to sin occasionally because he enjoys the momentary pleasure that sin gives.

That is the situation that every one of us faces from time to time. Sin is fun, isn't it? Sometimes we run up against some especially delicious temptations. At times, we all are confronted with the feeling "Why not give in? After all, I'm not going to hell because of this. My salvation rests on Christ and not on me. And actually, God is not going to reject me because of this, for the Law does not condemn me any longer. I am not under Law. It is love that will discipline me; Law will not condemn me. I can be forgiven; I can be restored -- so why not sin?" I have heard a lot of Christians talk that way, and I have felt the full force of this confrontation in my own experience. Why not give in and enjoy a sin -- we are not under law, but under grace. Do you see the thrust of the apostle's question? It is a very real, very practical one.

In the verses that follow, Paul answers that question. He asks, "Shall we sin?" His answer is: "No. By no means!" If you, as a Christian, go on and sin deliberately, even if it is only occasionally, you must face what sin will do to you. You must face the full results of what will happen when you and I, as believers, choose to do what we know to be wrong, even though we have been set free in Christ and need not do these things.

Paul's answer is three-fold:

Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! {Rom 6:15 NIV}

1. First, sin makes you a slave (Verses 16-19).
2. Second, sin will make you ashamed (Verses 20-21).
3. Finally, sin will spread death throughout your whole existence (Verses 22-23).

Let's look at the first part of Paul's answer. In Verses 16-19, he tells us that sin will make slaves out of us:

Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey -- whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were committed. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to every-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness and holiness. {Rom 6:16-19 NIV}

Paul says he has gone into the common experiences of the world of his day to give us a picture of what humanity is like. He uses the phrase "slaves" to describe us. In other words, he is dealing here with a very profound psychological fact: human beings are made to be mastered. Somebody has to master us.

Some years ago in Los Angeles I saw a man walking down the street with a sign on his shoulders. The front of it said, "I'M A SLAVE FOR CHRIST." On the back of it, as he passed, you read, "WHOSE SLAVE ARE YOU?" It is a good question because all of us are slaves to one or the other of these two masters -- sin or righteousness. We have no other choices. By the very nature of our humanity, we are made to serve and to be controlled by forces beyond our power.

A couple of weeks ago, I watched the Republican Convention and was struck by the fact that as these people gathered in Kansas City to make a choice, they were aware that they had to decide between two men, Ronald Reagan or President Ford. The whole convention was gathered together for that one purpose -- to make a decision, to make a choice. Everybody there felt that he was free to make the choice he wanted to make, according to what he saw was important or what commitments he had made previously.

And yet, as I watched that convention, I was struck by the narrowness of the choice they had. There were only two men to choose from. There could have been -- and probably were -- many there who gladly would have chosen someone other than those two men, but they had no opportunity to do so. There may have been some there who would have chosen me, strange as that may seem. I don't know that there were, but they had no opportunity to do so. You can see what a fantastic loss the Republican Party has suffered because of that. We think we are creatures of sovereign choice, but we are not. Our choices are very narrow, very limited.

The great question is: Who controls the choices that we have to make? Who controls that narrow band? What forces are at work to limit us to such a narrow range throughout our lives? The answer is: It is always something beyond us that controls these choices. God is at work; Satan is at work. We are given very limited ability to choose.

Paul then speaks of these two kinds of slavery. He says that we Christians have been set free from the slavery to sin. Once we had to sin. Before we came to Christ, there was no choice; no matter whether we chose what we thought was good or chose what we thought was wrong, we ended up making a choice that led to evil. There was no other way out. Even the right things we tried to do were tainted with evil, with selfishness. We have seen experiences that confirm this in our own hearts.

Well then, what happens when we sin as believers? Now we are free, and yet we go back and choose to do something that is wrong. We are confronted with this temptation to give way for the moment and indulge ourselves in some sin we want to do. Most of us try to kid ourselves into believing it is not very serious. "It won't hurt us anyway," we reason, so we make the choice.

Paul says, "Let's look at what happens. First of all, don't you know that you have set in operation a basic principle of life?" The principle is this: If you yield yourself to sin, you become the slave of sin. Jesus stated this in John 8:34: "Verily, verily, I say unto you [that is a little formula that means he is stating basic, fundamental, absolutely foundational truth], he that commits sin is the slave of sin," {cf, John 8:34 KJV}

Now, what does this mean in practice? A slave, of course, is someone who is not in ultimate control of his own actions, someone who is at the disposal of another person, someone who has to do what that other person says. When we choose to tell a lie, we give one of the clearest evidences of the operation of this principle in our lives. Have you ever noticed what happens when you tell a lie?

A man said to me the other day, "I told what I thought was a little white lie. I thought that would handle the matter. But, you know, I found out that I had to tell 42 other lies -- I counted them -- before I finally woke up to what I was doing and admitted the whole thing and got out from under." You can't tell one lie. You see, you are not in control of the events. You choose to tell one lie, and before you know it, you have to tell another.

The same thing is true with anger. Have you noticed that? You decide you are going to put a little sharpness in your voice when you answer someone. You want to cut him down just a little bit. You don't want it to go too far -- after all, you do like him -- you just want to hurt him a little bit. So you do. What happens? He answers back in kind. So you cut a little deeper, and before you know it, you are embroiled in an argument and a battle that you did not want. It happened because you were a slave to sin. Sin pushed you further than you wanted to go. There was no way you could escape.

Secondly, sin not only takes you further than you desire to go, but it also infects others with the same attitude. Did you ever notice that? You wake up in the morning feeling surly and grouchy, and you snap at somebody. Then the other person snaps back, and soon the whole household is reflecting your attitude. You choose to do something a little shady in your business, and soon others begin to do the same thing. So sin begins to spread, like an infection. If you think the Legionnaires' Disease was a killer, you should watch what happens when sin begins to operate. Years ago I heard a little rhyme that said:

I said a very naughty word only the other day.
It was a truly naughty word I had not meant to say.
But then, it was not really lost, when from my lips it flew;
My little brother picked it up, and now he says it, too.

That is the way sin begins to spread. And part of the slavery is that when you yield yourself to something, and do it two or three times before you wake up to what is going on -- it is getting out of control and going beyond what you wanted -- it becomes difficult to begin to change.

Something resists every opportunity you take to try to change. It is hard to go back. A habit has begun that is hard to change. Just as an illustration, somebody said to me the other day, "It's easy to quit smoking; I've done it dozens of times!" What a testimony that is to the power these things have to grip us and to control us. Paul is right, for we become the slaves of that which we obey.

Paul continues in Verses 20-21:

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit [or what fruit] did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of?
{Rom 6:20-21 NIV}

Each of us can look back in our lives at something we are ashamed of. It leaves a stain in our minds when we think about it. Shame is the awareness of unworthy actions and irreparable damage that we do to others and our painful feeling about it. We have all experienced shame at times. Sin -- no matter what it is or how small it seems -- always leads to shame. The memories of the past are stained and blotted by this sense of shame that we experience. We all know what it is like -- those shameful deeds that we would like to forget, but can't; hurtful words that we wish we had never said; strained relationships that go on for years, so that whenever we

meet certain people we feel uncomfortable in their presence.

This is the inevitable fruit of sin, something that Paul reminds us of many times. In Galatians 6:7-8 he says, "Do not be deceived [don't kid yourself]; God is not mocked," {Gal 6:7a RSV}. "For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption;" {Gal 6:8a RSV}. You can't drop the seed of evil into your heart without reaping from it the harvest, the fruit of corruption; "but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life," {Gal 6:8b RSV}. That is exactly what we see here in Romans 6.

The third reason why we should not give way to sin is found in Verses 21-23:

Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. {Rom 6:21-23 NIV}

Life and death -- the two results. What is death? When Paul talks about death here, he is not talking about a funeral which comes at the end of your life (though that certainly is what death is). He is talking about something that you experience right now while you are alive. Death is both physical and moral; the one is a picture of the other. Physical death always involves darkness, the end of light and life. It involves limitation, for a corpse is helpless -- what can it do for itself? And it involves, ultimately, corruption -- the corpse begins to stink and smell, it becomes foul and decayed, rotteness sets in.

That is what happens when we sin as believers. These same elements of death are present. There is, first of all, darkness. I can look back in my own life and see how, as a young Christian, there were times when I struggled and struggled to understand passages of Scripture. I couldn't seem to grasp them; they were closed to me. Others understood them and seemed to be rejoicing in them, but I couldn't -- until God, in his mercy, began to deal with me about things that I was doing that I knew were wrong. Finally, God led me to the place where I would be free. I would repent and turn from these things and come into the freedom that God had given me in Christ. Then I would discover that the Scriptures began to open up, and light came into my darkness.

I meet Christians all the time who do not seem to understand many of the truths of the Word of God. I don't know if this is always the explanation, but in many cases it is -- because they are deliberately allowing things in their lives that they know are wrong. They don't realize that these things spread death. Darkness sets in, and they cannot see the light. Paul reminds us in Second Corinthians, "The god of this world has blinded the minds of them that believe not, so that they cannot see the light of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ," {cf, 2 Cor 4:4}.

Not only does darkness set in when we sin, but there are limitations, too. Remember the account in the Old Testament about Moses in the wilderness. He became angry one day when the people tested him and frustrated him. God told him to speak to the rock and it would give water. Instead, in his anger, Moses struck the rock with the rod, {cf, Num 20:8-11}. That was just a little thing, a momentary blowup. For a few seconds, he lost his temper. But God said, "Moses, because you have done this, you will not be able to enter the Promised Land. When the people enter the land, you must stay behind because you have done this thing," {cf, Num 20:12}.

I am not suggesting that there are things that we do that forever limit the opportunities God gives us. But I know that as long as we cling to things that we know are wrong, justifying them in our lives and refusing to enter into the freedom that God gives us, there is a loss of opportunity. That is why many Christians never seem to have occasion to discover the adventure of serving God. They sit with folded arms, watching other people having fun and excitement, while nothing opens for them. Oftentimes it is because of this very thing -- the choices of sin that we make.

Death means a lessening of our experience of freedom and delight in the things of God and an increase in boredom and banality. Sometimes our lives become utterly nauseating to us. Have you ever felt that way? Sometimes your whole Christian experience almost stinks in your own nostrils. That is a sign of the death that

sin brings with it.

Now, throughout this account, Paul stresses over and over again the words "set free." "You have been set free," he says. "You no longer are the slaves of sin. When you came to the Lord Jesus, a change occurred; you have been freed. You are no longer a slave to evil, but a slave to righteousness." Paul says, "Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness and holiness."

Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, all this business of being limited, of experiencing death and shame, is totally unnecessary to a believer. That is the tragedy of sin in a believer's life. We don't have to experience death in our lives; we only have it because we choose to. Therefore, any experience of these things in our lives is something that has come because we have chosen to let it, although we were free to choose otherwise.

A member of our family is currently learning to ride a bicycle. I won't say who it is, but she is learning how to balance herself on the wheels and pedal down the street. And she is doing very well at it. But so far, the only way she has ever found to stop is by running into something. I am constantly picking her up out of bushes and off the sidewalk because the only way she has been able to stop is by running into something. The other day I was helping her, and said, "You don't have to run into things to stop; there is another way to do it. A provision has been made so that you can stop this bicycle without having to run into things." I showed her that all she had to do was to reverse the pedals and the coaster brake would bring her to a stop. I had shown her this before, so when I said that to her, she looked at me and said, "Well, I am sure relieved to know that there's another way to stop." I realized that she didn't need me to tell her that. What she did need was to actually do it when it was time to stop. What good does it do to have a bicycle that has a provision for stopping if you never use it? You might just as well not have it.

The question the apostle raises in this passage is: "What good is it to be set free from sin by Jesus Christ and have every opportunity and every possibility of walking in holiness (wholeness, a whole person, one who has got it all together) and in righteousness (a sense of worth, a sense of security, and assurance that you are loved by God and are valuable to him), if, at the moment of choice, we ignore these things and go right on as though we were slaves to sin?"

As I travel across America, I am often struck by the fact that the various cities into which I come are always cities filled with churches. In almost every corner you can find a church. And those churches are often filled with Christians. It seems as if this country has a fantastic opportunity to see a new quality of life demonstrated -- a quality of life so uniquely different from how the world lives that we ought to have people stopping us on the street to ask, "What goes with you? How come you have such peace in your eyes? How come you have such love in your heart? Why are you so different?" Instead, with our cities filled with churches and our churches filled with people, all the world sees is the same old, tired reactions that they themselves are so familiar with and so tired of.

The challenge of Romans 6 is this: Christ has made you free, free to be a king, free to have a sense of worth, free to be secure in your own personhood, knowing who you are before God. He set you free to be a whole person, so that you are not torn by a dozen different conflicting interests, but, with a single eye, you can live to the glory of God, free from the control or the blame or the censure or the praise of men. You are free at last to respond to the greatest calling that a man can have -- the call to know God, this amazing Being.

That is what this closing verse means. "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." Jesus described eternal life in John 17:3: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent," {John 17:3 NIV}. Here we are, called to this kind of living, called to this quality of existence, and yet, because of the foolishness of our hearts and the weakness of our spirits, we choose to give way to these momentary indulgences that lock us into slavery and shame and death.

May God help us to set sin aside and to live as the free men and women God has made us to be. As Paul said in Galatians 5:1: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of bondage," {cf, Gal 5:1 NIV}

You have been freed from the slave market; now walk as new men. This is Paul's exhortation to us.

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that there may be among us today, young and old alike, men and women who will dare to respond to the challenge of your Word, to be what we are capable of being in Christ, who will dare to say, "Yes, by the grace of God, I want to enter into this freedom," who will dare to live according to this and turn away from the subtle, silken claims of evil in our lives, and say "Yes!" to you. We pray that we might manifest this wholeness, this beauty, this reality, this liberty of the children of God. Lord, help us here at Peninsula Bible Church, and those at other churches across this land, to begin to respond to this truth. We pray that this nation, under God, may have a new birth of freedom and that men may come to see the unique quality that Jesus Christ brings into a life. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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