

Main Idea: By the grace of God, people can change. But if change is to occur, according to Romans 6:15-18, we have two basic obligations to meet if we are to be set free from sin.

- I. Obligation #1: We must not rationalize (15).
 - A. We must not excuse sin in our lives.
 - B. We must not adopt a cheap view of grace.
 - II. Obligation #2: We must recognize the truth (16-18).
 - A. All people are slaves (16).
 1. I may be a slave to sin.
 2. I may be a slave to righteousness.
 - Real freedom is not living without a master.
 - Real freedom is living with the right master.
 - B. All who are in Christ have experienced a change (17-18).
 1. I was enslaved to sin.
 2. I have been delivered from sin.
 - True change involves the heart.
 - True change involves the mind.
 - True change involves the will.
 3. I am now a slave to righteousness.
- Implications: What does this mean practically?
1. I am not free to do my own thing.
 2. I am free to do what is right.
 3. I am free to change, by the power of God to the glory of God.

There was a buzz in the crowd when the bidding began. "I'll give you \$10 for him," a voice at the edge of the crowd said. "Make it \$15," chipped in another. I stood there beside the auctioneer and before the crowd of potential buyers. I don't even remember the final bid, but I do remember that as the result of the bidding, I became a slave for a day. I was at my new "master's" disposal for one day's work.

The "slave auction" was a fund-raiser for the Future Farmers of America, a group I belonged to in High School. The plan was simple. Citizens from the community were invited to "buy" a young person--a slave per se--for a day's work. The person who bid the highest amount won the rights to a day's labor out of his subject.

There was no getting out of the deal after the auctioneer shouted, "Sold!" Though it would only be for a few hours, I recall a sort of helpless feeling when I contemplated the loss of my "freedom." Thankfully, my new "master" was a kind and gracious man (who in fact owned a candy shop!).

That experience revealed a simple, basic truth. A slave is at the mercy of his master. His life is controlled by the one who owns him.

Think about something that may, at first, strike you as sounding odd. *All of us are slaves.* We may not think so, but according to the Bible, it's true. We are all slaves.

You may be saying to yourself, "What? Are you crazy? I'm free! I can do whatever I want. I can do my own thing. I'm free, not a slave!" To which I must ask, "Really? Could you really do whatever you wanted?"

Answer this. Did you sin this past week? Did you lose your temper at all? Did you utter an unkind word to anyone? Did you think any unwholesome thought? Did you mind wander during any prayer time?

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

Why did you do those things? Was it because you *wanted* to do them? The fact is, we are in a battle. The Bible asserts that *we are all slaves*. I am. You are. We all are. The question is, “Who is our master?” In Romans 6 terminology, I am either a slave to sin, or a slave to righteousness. Who is your master today?

With that question in mind, I invite you to continue to explore the message of Romans 6. Last week, in our study of verses 8-14, we learned about going to war against personal sin. We discovered that if we are going to overcome sin, we need to grasp two issues. The first is our position (8-10). To overcome sin, we must be in Christ. If we are in Christ, we have died with Christ, and what's more, we live with Christ. We have the potential to overcome sin—because of our *position* in Christ.

We also learned about a second issue, developed in verses 11-14, our *practice*. If we are going to be overcomers in life, we must take four daily steps. First, we must *reckon* (11). That is, we must affirm the truth: I am dead to sin, and I am alive to God. Second, we must *reject* (12). We must not give sin a foothold in our lives. Third, we must *relinquish* (13). That means we must yield ourselves to God and our members as instruments for right living. Step four, we must *realize* (14). God has given us reasons as to why we must not yield to sin. one reason is that sin is not to be our master, and another is that we are not under law but grace.

Arriving at verse 15, we come to the second major section in chapter 6. The question which God's Word addresses for us is this. What must we do if we want to break the patterns of sin that enslave us?

By the grace of God, *people can change*. We can change. But if change is to occur, we have a specific responsibility. According to Romans 6:15-18, we have two basic obligations to meet if we are to be set free from sin. Of these two obligations, the first is negative (what we must not do) and the second positive (what we must do).

I. Obligation #1: We must not rationalize (15).

Notice Paul's rhetorical question in verse 15, “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” It sounds similar to the question he posed in verse 1, “What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” Actually the questions differ slightly, and both are used to identify the objections that Paul knew his readers might raise.

The first five chapters of Romans deal with the doctrine of justification. The question addressed is, “How can unholy people ever be right with a holy God?” By keeping the Law? By living a good life? Is that how we get right with God? The resounding answer in Romans 1-5 is, “No, a person can never be reconciled to God on the basis of personal merit. Justification is by faith alone, in Christ alone, through grace alone.” A sinner can't make himself righteous. He can be declared righteous by God, and that happens if he believes in the finished, redemptive work of Christ (3:23-26). That's justification.

Some might hear about this doctrine of justification, misunderstand it, and come to the conclusion, “Wait a minute. Is Paul saying that if I am justified by God, then I can sin and still be okay? Can I murder someone and still go to heaven? Is he saying that obedience doesn't matter since I'm saved by grace?” Paul answers that line of reasoning twice in chapter 6 (in verse 1 and again in verse 15), “By no means!” [KJV, "God forbid!"]

Why not? Because justification (the theme of chapters 1-5) leads to sanctification (the theme of chapters 6-8). Those who have been justified by faith in Christ will live in obedience to Christ.

Which brings us back to the question: What must we do if we want to be set free from sin in our lives? Here's our first obligation—we must not rationalize. What does that mean in specific terms? It involves two things...

A. We must not excuse sin in our lives. Any sin, no matter how “small.”

I'm convinced that we who believe that salvation is the work of God need this reminder. Yes, the Bible teaches that salvation is God's work, not ours. It also teaches that when God saves people, they are secure, *eternally* secure. They can't be lost.

But that truth leads some to assume, “Well, since I've professed Christ, I'm going to heaven no matter how I live. I may not be the best Christian, but I've got fire insurance. I can't be lost.”

Hold on. It's true that a saved person can't be lost (1 John 5:11-13; John 10:27-29), but neither will a truly saved person want to live like he's lost. If that's what you want to do, you have every reason to doubt.

I urge every one of us to follow Paul's exhortation in 2 Corinthians 13:5, “*Examine yourselves* to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?”

Peter gave a similar charge in 2 Peter 1:10-11, “Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to *make your calling and election sure*. For if you do these things, you will never fall, ¹¹ and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

We must not excuse sin in our lives. In addition...

B. We must not adopt a cheap view of grace. Romans 6-8 is all about how to live the Christian life. To live successfully, we must have a proper view of grace (ch 6), of the law (ch 7), and of the Christian life itself (ch 8).

The tense of the verb used in verse 15 is different from the one in verse 1. In verse 1, it's present tense, hence the question, “Shall we *go on sinning*?” That is, shall we live a life of sin so we can give God lots more opportunities to display His grace? In verse 15, the Greek verb is aorist tense. The aorist indicates sinning, not continuously, but every now and then.¹ Some would see living a life of sin as being wrong, but would tolerate a little sin every now and then. “Nobody's perfect, you know!” Is that okay, since we're under grace and not under law? Paul's answer, “Forbid the thought.”

All of us are prone to rationalize sin, aren't we? Especially if in my eyes my sin isn't as big as yours! “God knows I can't be perfect. He'll understand a little sin, now and then. He's a God of grace.” Beloved, we will never see the patterns of sin broken in our lives until we stop rationalizing. That's our first obligation.

Do you have a sinful habit in your life? We will never experience victory until we call the habit what God calls it. Any pattern of behavior which would not be found in the life of Christ is a sin. May I be specific and name a few habits you would not find in Jesus' life? Gluttony, indebtedness, laziness, violent behavior, stealing, drunkenness, pornography, lying, impulsive buying, fantasizing, gossiping, nicotine, and sloppiness. Can you even imagine seeing any of those in the life of Christ? Nor should they be in the life of a follower of Christ.

¹ Observation by *Bible Knowledge Commentary*

Some of you may be thinking, “I know what I’m doing is wrong and I want to change, but my problem is too big.” My friend, change is possible. Perhaps you have been trapped in a sinful habit for years, but through the power of Christ, you can change. I need to tell you, yes, change is hard, but there’s a big difference between hard and impossible!

How can we be set free from sin? First of all, we must not rationalize. That’s where we must begin. Then we must meet a second obligation.

II. Obligation #2: We must recognize the truth (16-18).

Notice verse 16, “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?”

In first century Corinth, which was where Paul was living when he wrote this epistle, at least one-third of the population would have been slaves, and almost as many again may have been former slaves who had been set free.² Certainly, Paul’s readers knew all about slavery as well. It was a fact of life in the Roman Empire. Though the apostle did not condone slavery, he used the image of slavery to illustrate two key truths in verses 16-18.

A. All people are slaves (16). As I mentioned earlier, that statement may shock us, but according to Romans 6, it’s true. All of us are slaves, the question being, who is our master? According to verse 16, there are only two possibilities.

1. *I may be a slave to sin.* Notice the text again, “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?” Here’s the first possibility. I may be a slave to sin. What is the end result of being a slave to sin? Paul says being a slave to sin “leads to death.”

Don’t miss that. The apostle is describing what was true of us before we believed in Christ. The old man—the man we once were before regeneration—was a slave to sin, a slave doomed to die. But in Christ, that has all changed. Why? Because we died to sin (remember verses 6-7).

Think about it. When a slave is dead, his master can go on giving orders to the corpse until he is blue in the face, yet the slave will pay no attention.³ Here’s the connection. Once, we were slaves to sin. Sin was our master, and we had no power to say “no” to sin’s wicked commands. But since we have been identified with Christ, guess what has happened? We’ve died to sin and sin is no longer our master. We don’t need to follow the dictates of sin any longer. We are free!

Now watch this carefully. Do you know what the result of our freedom is? Surprise! It’s a new slave relationship. Which brings us to the second option. I may be a slave to sin, *or...*

2. *I may be a slave to righteousness.* That’s Paul’s point at the end of verse 16. I may be a slave to sin which leads to death, *or* a slave to obedience which leads to righteousness. The old man was a slave to sin, condemned to die. The new man (that’s who I am in Christ) is a slave to obedience which results in righteousness.

² Dunn, 341.

³ Bruce, 140.

Please don't miss this. Freedom in Christ is not a license to do whatever I want. It means I have a new master!

Ironically, in a sense an unsaved person is free. He is free from righteousness. That's what verse 20 indicates, "When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness." But like the prodigal son, the "freedom" of the unsaved person leads him deeper and deeper into slavery. Remember what happened to the wayward son in Jesus' story? He decided he wanted his freedom so he left his father to live it up. But where did his pursuit of freedom take him? Deeper and deeper into slavery to sin. He became the slave of his own desires. What he thought was freedom turned out to be the worst kind of slavery. It was not until he repented, returned home and submitted to his father that he found true freedom.⁴

Let's set the record straight about "real" freedom...

- Real freedom is not living without a master. Rather...
- Real freedom is living with the right master.

In the beginning, man was created by God to serve his Maker. But Adam's sin short-circuited that design. Man became the slave of sin. Here's the beauty of salvation. As believers in Christ, we are free to live the way God designed us to live, not as our own masters, but as servants of righteousness. Your non-Christian friend can't live that way, and doesn't want to do so. But in Christ, we are set free to serve God.

If we want to be set free from sin, here's the first truth we must realize. All people are slaves. Would you contemplate an important question. Is Christ really your Master today? Just because I don't steal, don't lie, and don't do other things the Law prohibits, doesn't mean I am living the Christian life. I may be living a moral life and not the *Christian* life. I may be living a good life (in the eyes of people) and not know Christ. The Christian life is a life in which we know and obey Christ. So is He your Master?

If He is you can appreciate a second truth which is vital if we are to be set free.

B. All who are in Christ have experienced a change (17-18). Paul's readers had. Listen to how he described their change in verses 17-18, "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 entrusted. ¹⁸ You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."

This is a great section for in it we see how a person can be set free from the stranglehold of sin. If I am in Christ, I have experienced three steps of change.

1. *I was enslaved to sin.* Let these words from verse 17 sink in, "You *used to be* slaves to sin." The KJV says, "You were servants of sin." You WERE, past tense.

Before we trusted Christ, do you know why we sinned? It was the natural thing to do. Nobody needed to teach us how to sin. We were slaves to sin. And even if we did do good things, we did them for the wrong reasons. Maybe we thought we could impress God, or people, or at least ourselves. But we were slaves. We couldn't change the real us, the us on the inside. We may not have been "as bad as" we could have been, but we were "as bad off" as we could have been. Why? Because we were enslaved to sin and powerless to break the chains by ourselves.

Never forget this. Sin enslaves. William Barclay gives the following accurate description of sin, "Sin begets sin. The first time we may do a wrong thing, we may do it with hesitation and a tremor and a shudder. The second time we do it, it is easier; and if

⁴ Wiersbe, 533.

we go on doing it, it becomes effortless; sin loses its terror.”⁵ He's right. Sin leads to more sin.

If that weren't bad enough, something else is also true. More sin doesn't satisfy. Barclay continues, “The first time we allow ourselves some indulgence, we may be satisfied with very little of it; but the time comes when we need more and more of it to produce the same thrill. Sin leads to sin; lawlessness produces lawlessness. To start on the path of sin is to go on to more and more.”⁶

That's how pornography works. And the love of money. Sin never satisfies. We just can't get enough. Sin is a cruel taskmaster.

And that's exactly what WAS true of us. We were enslaved to sin. But if I am in Christ, something's happened...

2. *I have been delivered from sin.* Don't miss the first words of verse 17, “But thanks be to God!” We didn't change ourselves. We couldn't. We were slaves. God took the initiative. God set us free from sin (as verse 18 will explain). God delivered us by His grace, so thank Him!

But how did He do it? How does change take place? True change results when we allow God to transform three areas of our lives mentioned in verses 17-18.

- True change involves the heart.

“You wholeheartedly obeyed,” Paul says concerning the Roman Christians. The KJV puts it this way, “You have obeyed from the heart.” Breaking sin patterns involves more than behavior. It must start in the *kardia*, the heart. It's not just external conformity. It requires internal transformation, something that only the Spirit of God can do.

- True change involves the mind.

What must we obey to experience change? Verse 17 says, “You wholeheartedly obeyed *the form of teaching* to which you were entrusted.” The Greek term is *didache*. It refers to “teaching” and “instruction.” It has to do with “doctrine.”

Please don't miss this. True change doesn't come from a *zap*. The consistent intake and application of biblical truth sets people free. Sound doctrine is not only vital, but extremely practical. The teaching of the Word of God alone can bring lasting change.

Do we believe that? Is the Word of God sufficient to bring change to our lives? Are we convinced that it really can break destructive habits that paralyze us? Paul was convinced. He knew that the Spirit of God uses the Word of God to bring change. And change involves the mind.

- True change involves the will.

We see this in verse 17 in the words, “you obeyed.” Change involves the heart, the mind, but the bottom line is the volition. I must choose to do something with the truth. *Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus*, as the songwriter said.

I can't underscore this enough. Change is linked to obedience. When a person says, “My life's a mess. My marriage is crumbling. There's a wall between me and my kids. I can't sleep at night. What should I do?” the question that must be answered first is this. Have you been *obeying* God's Word? When God's Word says, “Love your spouse,” it's not giving a suggestion. When it says, “Don't forsake the assembly of the church,” it's not giving a negotiable. When it says, “Don't let any root of bitterness be in your heart,” and exhorts us to forgive, only one thing is needed. Not our approval, but our *obedience*.

⁵ Barclay, p. 90.

⁶ Barclay, p. 91.

This is critical. You can't disobey God's Word without reaping serious consequences.

So true change involves three areas: my heart, my mind, and my will. In order to break a habit, I must yield all three to God.

By the way, does this understanding of how people change affect how we do church? It sure does. What is the purpose of a Sunday morning worship service? Is it to see unsaved people get saved? That's thrilling, but I would suggest that evangelism is a secondary by-product. The primary reason we preach God's Word on Sunday mornings is to help believers know how to live. Believers gather to change and grow and then scatter to sow.

Did you come to church this morning expecting to grow? Did you come with your mind in tune to learn? Sadly, that's not the reason a lot of people attend church in our culture. They don't come to learn God's Word, but to get an emotional high. That's not only an unbiblical goal, it's very dangerous.

It reminds me of a Science experiment one of my daughters participated in during a Junior High Science class. The students were instructed to have a caffeine fast for three. They took their pulse rates and recorded them. Then they broke the caffeine fast with a caffeine feast by drinking Mountain Dew. When she retook her pulse rate, her heart rate soared more than forty beats per minute faster than before the caffeine intake (to about 120 bpm). Her energy level soared, too.

Then, not long afterwards, before the morning was over, something happened. Once the caffeine rush was gone, the pulse rate dropped. The energy level dipped way down, too. She felt sluggish. The artificial boost to the system was gone.

In my estimation, that's how many people try to live the Christian life. The reason they go to church is to "get a high, a spiritual caffeine fix." They want music that stirs the emotions, stories that warm the heart, and jokes that make them laugh. They want to feel good when they leave. In fact, they judge whether a church is good or not based on that criteria—*Did it stir my feelings?*

When they leave the church building on Sunday noon, they feel just great. They're whistling praises to God for how great it is to be a Christian. That changes when a car cuts them off as they're leaving the parking lot. Then the whistling stops and a different feeling comes over them—and it's not a good one. And by the time the boss hassles them on Monday morning, the good feeling of Sunday morning is long gone, now replaced by anger they can't control and feelings of frustration and despair they can't shake. The spiritual "fix" has worn off.

My friend, God never intended for us to live on spiritual fixes. An emotional high won't change us. Learning and applying the meat-and-potatoes of God's Word will.

One of the things we'll learn are these three steps of change. One, if I am a Christian I was enslaved to sin. Two, I have been delivered from sin. And three...

3. *I am now a slave to righteousness.* That's what verse 18 says, "You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."

Some Christians seem to have the notion, "I am saved, and I can do as I please." The truth is I cannot do as I please. I belong to Christ. According to verse 18, I am now a slave for righteous purposes. I have been set free from sin so I can please God with my life.

In my estimation, here's where a lot of the popular support groups miss the mark in a subtle but dangerous way. Take A.A. for example. Though A.A. emphasizes self-control

and the need to change behavior, it doesn't teach biblical self-control. Quite often, participants in A.A. are motivated for reasons such as, "I want to get rid of alcohol so I won't lose my job or my family. I want to stop drinking so I can make my life better."

That's not what Romans 6 is talking about. Biblical self-control is always motivated, not for selfish reasons, but to please God. As a Christian, the reason I should want to see bad habits kicked in my life is not to make my life easier, but to please my Master. I belong to Christ, and I am a slave of righteousness. Do you see the difference?

Take weight loss as another example. A Christian who is trying to shed a few pounds needs to ask a question, "Why do I want to lose weight?" So I can look good? So people will adore me? So I can feel better about myself? Those are the wrong reasons for a Christian. The right reason is to please Christ, my Master.

The truth is we are slaves, either to sin or to Christ. Now an important question...

Implications: What does this mean practically?

It's not how much we know that will produce holiness in our lives. It's how much we *use* what we know that produces holiness. Plato said, "Knowledge is virtue," but that's not true. Education alone doesn't produce godliness. Hearing a message on breaking sinful habits doesn't produce godliness. The biblical model is this—if I learn something, I must use it. Use it or lose it. So here are three bottom-line implications.

1. *I am not free to do my own thing.* There's so much talk about "freedom" these days, that we can't emphasize this too much. If we are in Christ, we have been freed to be enslaved. We are free from sin, and free to serve Christ.

When is a train free, when it says, "I can't stand these restrictive tracks," and veers off them? No, then it's a runaway, doomed to destruction. A train is free when it runs on the tracks designed by its maker.

Is a person who has multiple sex partners free, like Hollywood says? No, that person is a slave to passion. The free person is the person who submits to God's standard. Will you affirm this today? "I am not free to do my own thing. Yes, I agree." What's more...

2. *I am free to do what is right.* There is no middle ground, no other alternative this morning. We are either slaves of sin or slaves of righteousness. The Psalmist recognized this when he wrote in Ps 116:16, "O Lord, truly I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant. You have freed me from my chains." That's why God sets us free, so we can serve Him. One final implication...

3. *I am free to change, by the power of God to the glory of God.* Are you in bondage to sin today? Do you want the chains to be broken? Then surrender to the Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will set you free from your slavery to sin so you can serve Him as you were created to do.