

Rom 6:1-23 Slaves of God

*Tim Anderson 10/9/23*

Sometimes I get telephone callers from telemarketing companies calling to offer me deals that seem to be too good to be true.

All that glitters is not gold.

What seems too good to be true usually is.

In Romans 5,

we read about all the good things that God is giving his people.

Peace with God.

Standing in God's grace.

The certain hope of sharing the glory of God.

That was the first half of Romans 5.

And last week,

Whatever bad things came to us through Adam,

the good things that come to us through Jesus exceed them by far.

When I'm explaining the Christian faith to people,

sometimes they look at me like I'm a telemarketer.

I can hear their thoughts.

"What you are saying is too good to be true!

I receive the gift of eternal life because of Jesus' death on the cross.

It's not about me living a good life.

It's just about putting my faith in him.

You sound like a telemarketer minister.

It's too easy to be believable."

And usually not too many stations down that train of thought is,

"Well surely if salvation comes by faith and nothing else,

then I can do whatever I want in the way I live my life.

In particular the parts of Christian practice that seem like hard work,

you know the parts like attending church

and being generous with money,

and being disciplined about reading the Bible and prayer.

I don't need any of those.  
I'll just put my faith in Jesus,  
Get my ticket to heaven  
and live how I want to."

Well I'm clearly not the first person to run into this sort of problem.  
Last week we read in Romans 5:20,  
"But where sin increased,  
grace increased all the more."

It's true.

Imagine your sin like a pile of manure.  
The more you heap it up and add to the pile,  
the more God shows how gracious he is in forgiving you.  
But it would be easy to misunderstand God's graciousness.  
To think that sin doesn't matter,  
or even more perversely that our sin is a good thing  
because it shows even more clearly how gracious God is.  
And it's to this potential misunderstanding Paul turns in Romans 6.  
And I'm sure that's it's more than a case  
of Paul merely trying to avoid  
the potential of some future person  
misunderstanding his words in chapter 5.  
I'm sure that on many occasions  
as he'd gone about explaining God's free offer of forgiveness,  
folk had drawn the conclusion  
that he was saying that sin doesn't matter.  
So he addresses the issue up front.

The big question of the chapter is  
"Does God's grace in providing free forgiveness encourage sin?"  
Paul structures his answer to this question around two separate  
questions.

In verse 1 we read,  
"Shall we go on sinning that grace may increase?"  
And a one sentence summary of his answer is,

“No. By grace we are united with Christ and so we are dead to sin.”

In verse 15 we read,

“Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?”

and a one sentence summary of his answer is,

“No. By grace we are slaves to God and so set free from sin.”

So we’ll have a look at each of these questions in turn.

“Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?”

It seems like such a ridiculous question that no one would ask it.

A bit like asking a medical specialist in accident and emergency,

“Should I go and cause a few traffic accidents,

so people can see what a wonderful doctor you are?”

What’s the point of putting a lot of time and energy into answering a silly question?

Very few people would ask the question in such a bald way

but it’s still worth answering.

The reason is even though few people would ask the question out loud, in practice many people live that way.

They believe that they have a saving faith,

but it makes not a jot of difference to the life they lead.

Well there’s another way of phrasing

‘it makes not a jot of difference to the life they lead’

in Paul’s words,

‘they go on sinning’.

Is it OK for someone to profess faith in Christ

and for it to make not a jot of difference to their life?

Paul’s answer in verse 2,

“By no means!

We died to sin;

how can we live in it any longer?”

The he goes on in verses 3-5 to described how in our conversion, symbolised here by our baptism,

we are united with Jesus Christ.

United with him in his death,

and united with him also in his resurrection.

Being a follower of Jesus isn't just saying "Thanks mate for the free forgiveness."

It is becoming one with Jesus.

We're part of him.

When he was nailed to that cross,  
we were there united with him,  
and our sin was nailed to the cross too.

In Galatians Paul puts it like this,  
"I have been crucified with Christ."

Here in verse 6 he says,

"We know that our old self was crucified with him  
so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with,  
that we should no longer be slaves to sin."

We know and we celebrate that Jesus died on the cross to free us from  
the penalty of sin.

We don't have to pay the price any more.

What we sometimes forget is that he died to free us from the power of  
sin too.

All sin's hold on us is gone.

As A.M. Toplady put it in the famous hymn 'Rock of Ages'

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in Thee;  
Let the water and the blood,  
From Thy wounded side which flowed,  
Be for sin the double cure;  
Save from its guilt and power.

Jesus' death was a double cure –  
from sin's penalty and its power.

We are no longer slaves to sin.

We had an old life,  
and in that life we were held captive by sin.  
But that life died when we put our faith in Jesus.

and now we have a new life.  
It's a life to be lived to God.

In verse 11 Paul says,  
“In the same way,  
(that is in the same way as Jesus)  
count yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

Some of you might have seen the movie “Pretty Woman”.  
It's about a woman who is a prostitute working the streets.  
She has a chance meeting with a wealthy business man.  
He employs her for a week to be his partner at social engagements.  
And they fall in love and live happily ever after.  
A typical nuanced, true to life, Hollywood plot.  
Anyway it illustrates well a life with a before and an after.  
Before: life as a prostitute on the streets  
After: life as the wife of a wealthy business man.  
If you wanted to push the religious analogy,  
you could say that the pretty woman was saved from prostitution.

Think about the pretty woman after she's married to the business man.  
She should think about herself as a married woman.  
It's no good her thinking about herself as still a prostitute.  
She's left that life behind.  
Whatever bad memories and guilt she carries from that former life,  
her husband doesn't hold them against her.  
In Paul's words she must count herself dead to prostitution  
and alive to her husband.

And think about this,  
how utterly inappropriate would it be,  
for the married pretty woman to wake up one morning,  
and say to herself,  
“My husband doesn't hold my life of prostitution against me.  
I think I'll go back to the street and do a couple of jobs

just for old time's sake.”  
She would never countenance the idea!  
Her old life disgusts her.  
She's left that life in the past and there it will stay!  
And of course that's the attitude  
that the Christian person should take to sin.  
That was the old me.  
My old life disgusts me.  
Jesus has dealt with that.  
I am dead to sin  
but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Well every analogy breaks down at some point.  
And the analogy of the pretty woman's life for the Christian's life  
breaks down at the point of temptation.  
The pretty woman is not likely to be tempted  
to fall back into prostitution,  
but the Christian is often tempted to fall back into sin.  
And we need to resist that temptation!  
As Paul puts it in verse 12,  
“Do not let sin reign in your mortal body  
so that you obey its evil desires.”

But what is the best strategy to resist temptation?  
You could set up a whole lot of rules to follow.  
And hope that by following that rules faithfully,  
you might be able to stand firm against temptation.  
Or the alternative would be to make a conscious effort  
to think about yourself as free from the power of sin.  
Every time you have a slip up it's a set back.  
But the truth is still there.  
You were united with Christ in his death.  
Your old self has been crucified.  
You are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.  
Which strategy will help us resist sin?

In chapter 5:20 Paul says,  
 “The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase.”  
 A whole lot of rules won’t be of any use in restraining sin.  
 But here in chapter 6:11-12,  
 “Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.  
Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies.”  
 Paul is telling us that if we think about who we really are,  
 “I am a child of God.  
 I have been set free from the power of sin.  
 Jesus crucified my old self on the cross,  
 and that’s where it stays.”  
 If we think about it that way,  
 then the blood of Jesus shed on the cross  
 and his spirit living in our hearts  
 will aid us in our struggle.

Does God’s grace,  
 his free forgiveness given to followers of Jesus,  
 encourage sin?  
 No. Indeed not.  
 It is only because by God’s grace that we are made new people,  
 that we can oppose sin.

Paul’s second question of the chapter is not much different from the first.

“Shall we sin because we aren’t under law but under grace?”  
 The Christian is not under the law.  
 The people of God in Old Testament times  
 were given the Law on Mount Sinai.  
 And the Law regulated their relationship with God.  
 It told them what sort of food they could eat,  
 what sort of clothes they could wear,  
 how they needed to care for the poor in the land,  
 what sort of rituals were appropriate in their worship of God,  
 where they could go to the toilet,

what to do when there was mould in their houses.  
It regulated every aspect of their lives.  
The Christian is not subject to that kind of regulation.  
We're told to love God with our whole heart.  
But it isn't spelt out for us in detail what that love ought to look like.  
We have freedom to decide.

But you can understand that especially to folk  
who have been used to having their lives regulated,  
that freedom could become intoxicating,  
and some might think of their freedom as a licence to sin.  
"Shall we sin because we aren't under law but under grace?"  
I remember in my first semester at Melbourne Uni,  
students like me  
who had come from the highly regulated environment of private schools  
did far worse in our results than students  
who had studied at government schools.  
They were used to needing to be self motivated.  
We were used to having someone drive us,  
someone to chart our course and keep a watchful eye on us.  
It took time to recognise that freedom is a privilege for the mature  
and requires maturity to use it.

Paul's answer to those who are tempted to abuse their freedom  
is to encourage them to think of themselves as slaves.  
In verse 16, he reminds the Christian  
that in becoming a follower of Jesus,  
they have offered their lives to obey Jesus as a slave.  
A slave to obedience in verse 16,  
a slave to righteousness in verse 18 and verse 19,  
and a slave to God in verse 20.  
Now it might well come as a shock to you  
that slavery could be a metaphor for the Christian life.  
Only half a minute ago I was equating grace with freedom.  
And freedom and slavery are not easy bedfellows.



I think Paul is aware that the usefulness of slavery as a metaphor for the Christian life is limited.

That's why in verse 19,

he prefaces his comments with the words,

“I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitation.”

In other words,

because some of his readers

might be tempted to abuse their freedom as Christians,

he is explaining in really stark terms

that the Christian life is a life of utter submission to the will of God.

Now every analogy breaks down at some point.

The value of the slavery analogy is that it conveys really well that the Christian life is lived with exclusive allegiance to Jesus.

Where the analogy doesn't work is that it fails to convey an image like that contained in the words of Jesus,

“My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Jesus is not a hard task master to those who serve him.

Does grace encourage sin?

No. Because those who are the recipients of God's grace have committed themselves to absolute allegiance to Jesus.

I want to apply the teaching of this passage to one issue regarding how we think and talk about people's faith.

Often when we speak of people's faith,

we distinguish between ‘nominal Christians’

and ‘committed Christians’.

A nominal Christian is someone who in the old days

when the Anglican church was called the church of England, the C of E,

was called a C&E.

Because you saw them at Christmas and Easter.

Well times have changed.

The Anglican church is no longer called the Church of England,  
and the nominal Christians no longer come at Easter.

You are lucky if you see them at Christmas.

But if they are in hospital,

they will still mark down Anglican on their medical record.

And they will tick that box on the Census every five years.

What does this passage tell us about nominal Christians?

It tells us that they are not Christians.

A Christian is someone who gives over their whole life to Jesus.

In the words of this passage,

they are slaves of God.

That's not a description that fits

if you are thinking of a nominal Christian.

As painful as it might be,

because these folk will include some of your loved ones and mine,

we must recognise that a nominal Christian

if they stay in their current situation will not be saved on the last day.

If we pretend about it,

we might suppose that we are doing them a kindness.

Charitably believing something good to be true of them.

But it's no kindness.

Because it leaves us no urgency to reach them with the good news.

We get caught in the sleepy state of complacency.

So let's not kid ourselves.

Let's be brave and face the facts.

And let's do so trusting in the God who gave us life

by uniting us with Jesus.

Crucifying our old selves with him on the cross,

and raising us to life with him in his resurrection.

If God has done that for us,

he will do it for others too.