

Wages and Gifts

Romans 6:15-23

May 1, 2011

We are a Sunday people. We live in the light of the resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. We exist for the purpose of bringing glory to God and calling others to worship Him with us. This is who we are. It is what we are about. As we continue our journey through Romans this morning we look again as Paul calls us back to the reality and implications of being resurrection people.

We have seen that everybody sins and that we are all guilty before God as a result. Nobody has anything on which they can boast in God's presence. Salvation is by God's grace alone and is not based on anything we do. Several weeks ago we saw Paul address a common misconception, that since God forgives sin based on His grace, and His grace makes Him look good, then it is good to sin so that God can give more grace. We saw as Paul refuted that argument and showed how hollow it is. This week he takes it up again in a different way. Last time Paul argued that we are dead to sin because we are counted with Jesus in His crucifixion. If we are dead to sin, it should not reign over us.

Today we ask a similar question, "*Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?*" (v.15) As with the last argument, Paul answers, "*By no means!*" (v.15) It does not make God look good to just look the other way while we sin. It also is not the case that our actions do not matter just because we are saved through Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection instead of what we do. We cannot act to make our position before God better, but we can act to make it worse. Just because we

are under grace does not mean the law has no role to play in our lives. More to the point, once we have been freed from our degrading and death dealing slavery to sin, we are given over to a new **Master** to whom absolute obedience is due.

Instead of life and death, Paul switches to the imagery of slavery. We are all mastered by something. We are either mastered by sin, or we are mastered by God through His word. We are not autonomous. Paul asks if his readers know that, "*[Y]ou 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.*" (v.16) We either obey God or we don't. To not obey God is sin. Therefore, we either obey God or we **sin**. Those are the only options. If we obey sin, we die. If we obey God it leads to righteousness.

Thanks be to God that He has called us out of darkness into His light! He has called us from death to life. He has called us from slavery to sin to obedience. As Paul puts it, "*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.*" (v.17) We have been entrusted to the teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's interesting that Paul does not say here the teaching was entrusted to us. It is the other way around. We are entrusted to the teaching—we are placed under its authority—and in turn we give ourselves over to it. At least the readers in Rome wholeheartedly gave themselves to it. We are entrusted to the teaching that has been preserved in the scripture and which is to **mold** and guide us. Nowadays too many of us sort through it, picking and choosing what we want and discarding the

rest as not being for us. We half heartedly obey part of it. It's no wonder we do not have the presence of God we desire or the power of His Spirit in our midst more. We are not wholehearted in our obedience.

The result of our being entrusted to this teaching is in verse 18. *"You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."* We offer ourselves to God as His slaves, He entrusts us to His teaching, and we are set free from sin and become slaves to His righteousness. That is the way it is supposed to work. That's the plan.

Paul tells us he's been making a concession because our natural bodies and minds are weak. He's been talking in human terms to help us understand a concept he received in a spiritual state. Living in this sinful world, with the effects of sin still present on our minds, we have a really hard time understanding this. This is why there is so much false teaching in the church on this issue today. When we use the world's wisdom and our sinful desires to try and understand the freedom God has given us it leads to serious problems. We need to stop thinking in terms of human free will as if we have the absolute ability to choose and do what we want. The Bible knows nothing of that. We are **slaves**—either to sin or to God. Within our slavery our ability to choose is limited. Those who are in sin need to cry out to God to rescue them from it. Those who are in Christ need to thank God for saving them. As we saw in chapter four it is faith in God that brings salvation, not what we do. We all start off slaves to sin. We all deserve death. It is only God's grace available to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus that can save us.

Paul is talking about our responses here. If God has rescued us from the guilt and power of sin, if He has washed us clean by crucifying our sin in Jesus on the cross, and if He has applied Jesus' holiness and perfection to us, how should we then live? Well, when we were slaves to sin we offered our bodies to impurity and ever-increasing wickedness. We went looking for ways to make us feel better and have more fun, even when those ways did not honor God and led to death. We drank until we got drunk. We did drugs. We had sex with people to whom we were not married. We watched pornography. We told lies to cover our tracks. We cheated on our taxes. We stole—sometimes even from the places we worked. We were selfish and looked out for ourselves, not paying attention to the ways in which we hurt others. We used our hands, feet, mouths, and eyes to suit ourselves and get what we wanted.

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 leading to holiness."* (v.19) We must take the same parts of our bodies we used to offer to sin and offer them to God. We must stop moving toward wickedness and offer ourselves in slavery to righteousness, because that leads to holiness. Now, this oversimplifies it, but righteousness is right **standing** before God. It is a position of being forgiven and welcome in His presence. Holiness is right **behavior** before God. It is the pattern of life that results from knowing and living out our righteousness. If we are right with God, and we are slaves to the righteousness

He gives us, then we will be becoming more and more holy.

In case we missed it, Paul reviews and then asks a question. *“When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of?”* (vv.20,21) When we were slaves to sin we were not mastered by God’s righteousness. We did the things we were just talking about. The question Paul has is, what good came of all that? We gave ourselves over to drink, drugs, sex, money, and all the other trapping of the world. Are our lives better as a result? Are we healthier because of the alcohol and drugs? Are we better off financially because we spent our money and time on these things? Has sex led to stability in life or has it prevented us from doing things we wanted to do, or that God might have been calling us to do? How are our lives better because we followed our way and not God’s? If we are honest we will have to admit that our lives are not better because of sin. Some of us have already acknowledged that it is a miracle from God that we are still alive. It is true for all of us. Paul reminds us that these things result in death. Car accidents, crime, overdoses, diseases, all these things destroy lives that are given over to sin instead of given over to obedience to God.

Paul reminds us there is an alternative. *“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.”* (v.22) You can’t put it any better than that. Slavery to **God** means freedom from sin. We change from paths that lead from death—both

physical death and the slow emotional death that traps so many—to the path that leads to holiness. The result of holiness, as our lives are transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit, is eternal life. Paul is calling us to work toward and cooperate with this transformation instead of fighting it.

Paul sums up his argument in this chapter with the next verse. Back in chapter three we learned, *“[A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* (Romans 3:23) Paul now fills that in some more. *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (v.23) Our **wages**, what we earn in God’s economy, is death. What we do leads to death. We sin. We fall short. We do not, indeed, we cannot measure up to God’s exacting standards. That is why Jesus died on the cross. He paid the penalty that was due to us—death. Jesus rose from the dead that we might have eternal life. This is what we celebrate every Sunday. It is why Easter (better called Resurrection Sunday) is such a big deal! Eternal life is found in Jesus Christ and is offered as a **gift** from God. We cannot earn it. We do not deserve it. We cannot pay for it. It is freely available to all who will receive it. Our God paid for it for us!

We must be careful we do not fall into one of two traps. The first is legalism. We are called to be slaves to righteousness. Jesus spent much of His time talking about behavior and what we ought to do and ought not to do. The problem becomes that we confuse God’s work with ours and think what we do saves us. This can be true in both conservative and liberal churches as their study and time together are driven by moral teaching on

the kind of life you have to live to be acceptable to God and, therefore, a good Christian.

The second trap is licentiousness. Jesus paid the penalty for our sins. He died that we might have life, and there is nothing we can do to add to that sacrifice or pay for our own sins. We dare not think, however, that sin loses all meaning as a result. This is the problem Paul is combating in this chapter. Because Jesus saved us, and we are free in Him, does not give us permission to do whatever we want. If we are in Christ, declared righteous by God, and the recipients of eternal life, then we are also slaves to righteousness. We are still required to obey God, not so that we might be right before Him, but because we are right before Him. We do not obey to earn salvation. We obey because God has given us His grace and saved us.

The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. The gift is not ours to do whatever we want with it. The gift is ours to cherish, nurture, grow, and **explore**. If you have eternal life, live a life in keeping with it, thanking God for the mercy and grace He has given you. Stop sinning and living like the world. Give yourself wholeheartedly to the God who gave so much to you!