



The New Life 1: Free from Sin

Romans 6:15-18

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This week we will be looking at Romans, chapter 6, specifically verses 15-18. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. Romans 6, beginning at verse 15:

"What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness."

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we ask this morning that you would open up your Word for us. We ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit your Word would be illumined in our minds, would take deep root in our hearts, and would affect our wills, that we might do your will, O Lord. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

What is life in Christ like? It's a question that I think we've all asked at one point or another, usually very early in our conversion experience. "What can I look forward to?" Or perhaps put it this way: "What should I be moving toward?" Well, starting this week, in the next five sermons we're going to have a sort of miniseries within our series on the book of Romans. It's a series on the new life in Christ, and we're going to be looking at Paul's description of the new life in Christ from this point in chapter 6 all the way to the end of chapter 7.

This morning, we're going to be looking specifically at what it means to be free from sin. I'd like us this morning to ask two questions. First...*Is it law or grace?* Are we under law or under grace, and what does that mean? Secondly...*Obedient to what?* To what are we obedient? Paul gives us only two options, that we are either obedient to sin or obedient to God. Then finally, he concludes with a doxology. "Thanks be to God." This is helpful for us to see in the midst of our struggle, we must have thanksgiving to God. Law or grace? Obedient to what? And thanks be to God.

Law or Grace?

Let's start by looking at what it means to be under law. As we think about freedom, freedom specifically from sin and being free, we must realize that our culture is focused on freedom. We might even say *obsessed* with

freedom. What does it mean to be free? What are the essential aspects of freedom? This is especially timely and important for us today as we are in the middle of an election season.

I don't think we can go 10 or 15 minutes without seeing an ad from someone telling us what it means to be free, how they're going to help us be *more* free, and what we owe them for making us more free. That has been our lives for the past few weeks, hasn't it? For some people, what freedom means is "I get to do whatever I want." For other people, what freedom means is "I'm free from the constraints of authority." Again, in our current context, from the government. I'm free from the government.

It's important for us to understand this because we, as twenty-first century Americans, can without even understanding this import our ideas of freedom into the Bible's teaching on freedom, as if Paul was concerned with democracy and amendments to the Constitution or elections. No, Paul is talking about something that's a much greater reality: freedom from sin.

What Paul is doing here is addressing the practical questions that are of utmost importance to you and to me. He has already laid out the theology of how we are right with God. The next step for him to take that we've been looking at is to answer the question...*So what?* We're right with God. What does that mean? What does that look like? How does that affect me? So what?

Paul earlier in this chapter has answered objections that come to him. The first objection that came was, "We can continue to sin, Paul, because the more we sin, the more grace there is. So we're going to keep sinning so that there's more and more grace." Paul answered that by saying that this was the wrong way of thinking about it. We've actually died *with* Christ and we are dead *to* sin, so sin has no more dominion over us to make us obey its passions. This is what Paul says in verse 12.

Then in verse 14 he concludes with a statement that sin has no dominion over us because we are not under law but under grace. In verse 15 he's going to ask what looks to be the same kind of question, but it is in a different context. It is the same line of thinking. It is brought by the same kind of people: those who want to do whatever they want to do and those who want to accuse the gospel of promoting sin. These are always the two accusations that come against the gospel: "If the gospel is true, I can sin all I want." "If the gospel is true, you're encouraging people to sin all they want."

This question has a slightly different form to it. Paul's question in verse 15, "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?" follows directly from his statement in verse 14. Essentially, it's saying if we're not under law, then anything goes. We can sin all we want because it's only the law that restricts sin.

Paul's answer is the same as it was in verse 2. One of the things I love about Paul is he never leaves you guessing as to what he's thinking. Once again he says, "By no means!" "Certainly not! God forbid! There isn't a chance in the world!" It's the strongest negative he can use. He has been using it throughout this book. He wants us

to steer clear of thinking this way, because he wants to show us that this false conclusion arises from a false view of what it means to be under the law.

For some people, the law is only a set of rules that restrain sin. So if you take the rules away, then everyone can sin because the rules aren't applicable anymore. Now if we stop and think about this for a moment it makes absolutely no sense, because if sin is rebellion against God and God has sent Jesus Christ to do away with that rebellion and to restore our relationship with God, why would Jesus' work establish rebellion? It doesn't make any sense.

Why would the God of order, beauty, and harmony create chaos? Why would the work of Jesus in paying for sin promote even *more* sin? Do we really think Jesus came to bring anarchy, to promote ignoring God? Well, others take a bit of a different tactic. For others, it means the whole of the Old Testament is done away with. All of its laws and all of its rules are no longer enforced. The Ten Commandments are no longer binding. You no longer need to obey the Ten Commandments or the law of God.

Now, because they don't want chaos and they see Jesus telling us how to live in the New Testament, they come up with a *new* standard. They say, "Well, the law is no longer applicable. You don't *have* to obey the law, but you should *want* to do what God wants you to do." Godliness in this fashion is now optional. It's something we can do if we want. It's something if we want to reach a higher level of Christianity.

Of course, there's a problem with this. What if we don't *want* to obey in a given circumstance? We see this all the time in churches and with Christians. People don't obey because they don't want to, because obeying isn't easy. We see this even in our own lives. There are times when we don't want to obey. Does God really care so little about holiness, so little about sin that he leaves it up to us to decide whether or not we're going to obey? No.

The truth is that when Paul says we are no longer under the law he is using that phrase as a principle of salvation. He's not talking about the Mosaic code; he's talking about the principle whereby we attempt to be right with God by doing works that God has commanded. This makes sense from the context, because, remember, chapter 6 flows out of chapter 5.

Do you remember what we said led into this practical discussion? It was Paul's statement that we are either in covenant with Adam or we are in covenant with Christ. If a person is in Adam, Paul says, he is under the law. He is obligated to keep all of the law, not just because it's a set of rules but because that is the way of salvation. "Do this, and you shall live."

Paul has just spent a great deal of time telling us that this is a hopeless way, that there is no way we can do all that is commanded of us. Our salvation is not found in the law, but instead, Paul says, it's found in grace. It's

found in God sending Jesus Christ to obey on our behalf, to walk that walk to Calvary, to be put upon a cross, to shed his blood and to die as a propitiation for our sins, to pay the penalty of our disobedience.

The problem, you see, is not with the law. We'll see more about this in the future. The problem is in being under the law as a means of our relationship with God. Paul says this is no longer true. You are no longer under the law. We might put it in a summary fashion. Paul is saying, "You no longer have to perform in order to earn God's love." This, then, helps us to understand what Paul means by saying that we are under grace. Paul is setting up these two principles as opposites.

If he has just told us we're not under law, we don't have to earn our salvation, then we know what he means by saying that we are under grace. It is grace instead of works. Now, when Paul sets up these two opposite principles of being under law and under grace, he is not relating them to the life the believer has while *in* Christ. These two opposing principles are set up to relate to our way *to* God in Christ. That's an important distinction.

We've seen that one of the greatest theological difficulties is when we confuse justification with sanctification, when we think the only way we could be right with God is by working. We make justification the process of sanctification. We think it's something we must work at over a period of time and see closer and closer results.

Paul says, "No, absolutely not. We're justified by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone," and he has pushed us away from that error. But there's another equal error. It's of confusing sanctification with justification, that the process of us being made more and more like Jesus Christ by the grace of God is not something we must work at, that we can pay no attention to it because it's just like justification. Paul says we need to keep these things separate.

It's why he spent five chapters talking about how we can be right with God, and he's about to spend three chapters about what our lives *in* Christ look like. We are familiar with these errors. They're equally dangerous. The problem is if we fall into this error we set up the wrong enemy. If grace is opposed to law in Christian living, then what we see is that the rules are the problem. The rules are the enemy, and if we could only get rid of the rules everything will be all right. Life would be perfect.

It's as if we thought if we lived in our homes and did away with every rule everything would be perfect for the children. Right, kids? Don't you think about that sometimes? "If we didn't have to have all of these rules that Mom and Dad gave us, everything would be perfect." But do you know what it would look like? It would look like you'd have no clothes to wear because there would be no rule to clean up your clothes and wash your clothes.

There would be no food to eat and no dishes to put the food on because the rules about coming and eating dinner and eating lunch would be gone, and the rules about cleaning up your plates would be gone. It would

be chaos. How much more in our spiritual lives do we think that just getting away with the rules will not lead to chaos? There is a way to understand this: to see that the law is not our real enemy. Our real enemy, Paul says, is sin.

Sin is the cause of our condemnation. Sin is the cause of our death. Sin is what separates us from God. It is true that the law *highlights* our sin, but the law is not our enemy. We should not be doing anything to promote sin or to excuse sin. Sin is our enemy. That's why Paul is so forceful in verse 15. He spent all this time telling us how bad sin is, how much we need to be freed from sin, how Jesus came and died to deal with sin, and now he has people telling him that Jesus' work was to promote more sin.

You can see that Paul does not take this very well, because being under grace does not mean freedom from obligation to holiness. It does not mean freedom from God's law. It means being free from having to keep God's law to be right with God. This is a crucial distinction. We're going to see more in passages to come in greater detail that God's law is an expression of his character, who he is. The law of God is not simply a series of random or arbitrary rules for us to follow.

Just think about this for a moment. Why is there a first commandment? "You shall have no other gods before me." Is it an arbitrary rule set up by God or is it a reflection of a reality that the Lord God is the only true and living God and to deny that is to deny reality itself and live a falsehood that is dangerous and deadly? Why is there a sixth commandment? "You shall not murder." Isn't it because God is life itself and he is the Creator and giver of all life in the universe? It reflects his character.

Why is there a ninth commandment? "You shall not bear false witness." Isn't it because God is truth and that commandment reflects who God is? So if we are going to be more and more like Jesus, if we are going to be more and more like God, we must understand that the law is a part of that because it reflects who God is. It's a guideline, guidepost, a track, as it were, to know we are on the path to being more like Jesus.

To live under grace is to actually have the power to keep God's law where before we had none. So do not make excuses for your disobedience. Don't cover your rebellion up with the robes of Jesus. Jesus died so we might be under grace, being freed from having to earn our relationship with God, because we cannot do that.

Obedient to What?

Secondly, then, Paul shows that there are only two ways to live related to the two ways of relating to God himself. We are either obedient to sin or we're obedient to God. This, again, flows from his principles in Romans, chapter 5. He has told us that we're either in Christ or we're in Adam. Either we are trying to earn God's love in Adam or we are resting in the gift of his love in Christ.

He has further shown us that because of sin we are unable to earn God's love. Even more, we are unable to even stop sinning. We are dead, powerless. It's only because of the work of Jesus who gives us new life and his

Spirit that we are able to obey. The great truth here that we must understand is that there is no neutrality in life. We've already seen that there's no third way. We are either in Adam where we inherit sin, disobedience, and death or we are in Christ where we inherit righteousness, obedience, and life.

This is also true of our actions. We are always obligated to something. We are always obedient to someone. Now this does take away our notion of freedom. We think freedom is the complete lack of influence or obligation, but that doesn't exist. Paul says it's clear. Whom do you obey? Someone might say to Paul, "Wait a minute here. I don't obey anyone. I do what I want, when I want, how I want. I am totally free." But what's the end of that?

The person who says that ends up serving sin. They live a life of sin. They rebel against God. So Paul would say either you're obeying and serving God or you're obeying and serving sin. There's no third way. If you are committing sin then you are obeying sin, and if you are obeying sin then you are a slave to sin. Paul says it's like night follows day. There's no avoiding it at all. We may think we are free when we sin, but we're really just showing our bondage. We're showing that we're enslaved to sin.

How foolish is this, to be freed from the bondage of sin and to run back to it? We're given a wonderful example of what this looks like in the Bible in the freedom of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites are freed by Moses leading them out by the power of God and his mighty arm, the 10 plagues upon Egypt. The Israelites go out, and every time they meet with the smallest problem, what do they say? "Oh, Moses, we never should have followed you. If only we were back in Egypt."

They start to fantasize about Egypt. It's one of the things that really catches me. You want to just say to the Israelites, "Are you serious?" They start going on and on about how much they loved the leeks and the onions in Egypt. Who *says* that? It's not like they said, "We want to go back to Egypt where the cake and the pie was." No, they're all misty-eyed for leeks and onions. Kids, would you ever eat a leek? No. If you're ever given a leek, hope you have a dog. Just hand the leek over to the dog.

But it's even worse than that. They start to fantasize about the life they had. They say, "We didn't have it so bad." They forgot they were slaves. They forgot they had to make bricks. They forgot they had to make bricks without straw. They forgot the beatings. They forgot the killing of all of the male children. But if you see that and say to yourself, "Wow! That is really dumb," then you need to apply that to your view of sin, because if you think you can go back to sin and it's better than being with Jesus, I have a word for you: that's really dumb. It doesn't work out that way. We don't go back to that slavery.

We see it even in our own lives. We think we have to be free. Especially in modern America, how do you know you're free? Teens, you're free from the influence of your parents. You are completely free, which means you are able to dress like everyone else around you dresses. You are completely free so you can do what everyone

else does. Right? Parents, before you chuckle too hard, we do this as adults too. "Why are you buying that car?" "Well, I have to have that car. Everybody in my office has a car like that."

"Why are you going *there* for vacation?" "Well, everybody in our neighborhood goes on vacation there. We've got to go on vacation there."

We think that's being free when all we're doing is tying ourselves down, enslaving ourselves. That's what it means to be obedient to sin. We may think we're being free, but we're really slaves. It's worse than that, because if we go back to sin we're not only slaves to sin, but sin leads to death. We may think there's no harm in sin because we're free, but all we're doing by sinning is showing that we're *not* free, that we're enslaved to sin. Sin is deceptive. It always hides the consequences. It wants us to think we are free when we are not.

I think there's a wonderful example of this from a film that's a few years old now but raises good philosophical questions. It's a film called *The Truman Show*. You may recall that Truman is the star of a television show except for he's the only one on earth who doesn't know it. He lives in a town that is actually a set that's in a bubble, and he thinks he's completely free. He gets up when he wants. He goes to work how he wants. He talks to who he wants. He works where he wants to. He goes where he wants to.

He's sure he's free, except everything around him is manipulated. Even the man who hands him the paper has a role to play. They say, "Cue the bikes," and people come across the street at certain times. He thinks he can leave, but what happens when he actually tries to leave the set? They do everything in their power to prevent it, to manipulate him. That's what sin is like. We may walk along in our lives, sinning, thinking we're free, but actually sin is manipulating us into doing things.

We may think we are free to do whatever we want, and we don't realize we're destroying our families, we're destroying our finances, we're destroying our health, because sin manipulates us. This shouldn't surprise us, because the Enemy is deceptive. What's the very first thing the Enemy of your soul said to Eve when Eve told him, "We can't eat of the fruit of this tree, because if we do we will die"? The Enemy's first statement was, "Oh, no, you won't die."

What happened when Adam and Eve ate the fruit? In the moment they did, they died spiritually...at *that* moment, and they began to die physically. Their bodies began to decay. Sin is manipulative and deceptive. It is a harsh master. The gospel tells us that we have been freed from sin's slavery. No longer does sin have dominion over you, Paul says in verse 14. No longer does it reign in death, in chapter 5, verse 21. That is because Jesus has paid the price of our redemption.

This is a metaphor for the work of Jesus Christ throughout the New Testament: *redemption*. This word actually means the buying back of a slave from the slave market so he could be set free. It's not a surprise that Paul uses this metaphor of slavery to explain the work of Jesus. Jesus purchased us with his blood, so we no longer

need to act as if we are slaves. The work of Jesus translates us from sin to righteousness. We are no longer bound to sin. Instead, we are bound to God.

This is a good thing. We're no longer obedient to sin; we are now obedient to God. Our freedom is not an autonomous independence. We are not left on our own. We are brought into the family of God and given all that is Christ's. What is real freedom? Real freedom is not a license to do anything at all. That way actually leads back to sin and bondage. Instead, freedom is the freedom to be who we really are, who we were created to be, to be the most human, to be the most us.

Freedom means doing what is right and finding our true purpose. Have you ever wondered what your true purpose is? Your true purpose is not to watch football. Your true purpose is not to do crafts. Your true purpose is not gardening. It's not traveling. Your true purpose is to glorify God. That's summarized for us in the first famous question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. "What is man's chief end? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."

When we think about that, that means we all have the same purpose. It doesn't matter where we're from, where we live, what language we speak, what clothes we wear, what food we eat. We all have the same chief purpose: to glorify God and enjoy him forever. This is why Jesus could say to the Jews who believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

It was interesting that as soon as he said that, the Pharisees, the ones who were under the law (the definition that Paul is using of *under the law*...they were trying to work their way into God's love by what they did), looked at Jesus and said, "Why are you saying that to *us*? We're nobody's slaves." We might say, "Guys, did you forget about Egypt? Did you forget about the Babylonian captivity?" We might even go and make a spiritual application of it, which I think we should and will.

But what I often wonder is if someone standing around would have said to the Pharisees, "Do you see that Roman centurion over there? Do you really think you're free to do whatever you want? Give me some money that's out of your pocket. Whose image is on the money you have to use? It's Caesar's. Do you really think you're free?"

Yet even more than that we see that Jesus isn't talking about a physical reality; he's talking about a spiritual reality. He says the only way to be free is to be free from sin. The only way to be free from sin is to serve Jesus. He says, "Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." This is what Jesus says to us.

Now a brief aside. The next time someone comes up to you and says, "Well, Christianity was just all made up by Paul; it's not what Jesus taught," take him to Romans 6 and take him to John 8 where Paul is teaching the exact same thing that Jesus is. There are many, many other examples, but we happen to be *here*. The point is

that the Bible is consistent in its message, from the Old Testament to the Gospels and Jesus to Pauline Epistles. The way to be free is to be obedient to God. That's where true freedom is found.

We see this with those who are addicted. Those who are addicted say, "Oh, I don't need to take another drink," while they're drinking. "Oh, I can stop the drugs anytime I want. I'm in complete control." The more they protest, the more addicted you know they are. That's how we are with sin. We insist that we can control it and we can stop whenever we want, and the only way to be free from sin is to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanks Be to God

There is a final point here worth exploring. How do we make this change from obedience to sin to obedience to God? How do we go from being under law to being under grace? Again, we have to be careful with our notions of freedom, because we think that in order to be really free we have to be responsible for our own freedom. Popular culture is filled with examples of this, of people who have escaped slavery, those who have fought for freedom.

Even in our nation's founding, it has seemed to be an example of us working and obtaining our own freedom. This simply is not the case. Just for one instance, if you do any study of the founding fathers and the founding of the American republic, you will see that they acknowledged the work of the Sovereign God. One of George Washington's favorite phrases was *divine providence*, by which he meant the working out of the will of God in the actions of history.

We may think it's all up to us, but Paul tells us we should know better. Paul does it by saying something interesting here in verse 17. He says, "Thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart..." Paul breaks out into a praise here, into a doxology; that is, a praise of God. It seems unusual here. He's going from exhortation and theology, and he just breaks in, "Thanks be to God!"

Why does he do this? Well, I think it's first because he's overwhelmed by the grace of God, but I think he also wants us to pay attention to what he's saying. He's thanking God for the reality of the freedom he has, the same freedom *we* have in Christ. First, he grounds that freedom in the past. He reminds us that we are no longer slaves to sin. That is over. He says, "You *were* once slaves of sin."

There are many phrases in the Bible that are encouraging: when the Bible tells us that we are in Christ, when the Bible tells us that we are forgiven, that we are redeemed, but I think one of the most marvelous phrases in all of the Bible is "You *were*..." No longer. Those days are over. God has worked.

Are you discouraged today? Do you need hope? Are you ashamed of some of the things you've done in your life? I have to tell you the truth. Those things cannot be undone, but they no longer have any hold over you if you are in Jesus. Jesus changes you by his life and his death so that you are no longer defined by your past. You are now free.

What does this look like? We long for this kind of freedom. It's the kind of experience we get when we go to a new school. We decide when we go into a new school we can change our nickname if we want because the people there don't know us. We can make up a new nickname. We can change the way we dress, how we talk. We can even change our favorite sport if we want. We're not defined by our past.

Or if we move to a new neighborhood we could pick up new hobbies and no one is going to say to us, "What are *you* doing doing that?" "No, this is what I do." "Okay." What Paul is talking about here is not just changes on the outside. Paul is talking about changes on the inside, a true break with the past. That's real freedom.

Secondly, Paul is very clear that this is a passive event for us. He uses an interesting phrase in verse 17. He says, "You have become obedient..." If we were writing this with Paul, we would write, "You obeyed," but Paul, instead, uses this odd phrase: "You have become obedient." Why does he do this? Well, we get a clue from the next phrase: "...from the heart." What does *that* mean? That means we've been given a new heart.

Just as the Bible describes, the Holy Spirit takes our heart of stone, which is unfeeling and dead, and gives us a heart of flesh that beats with life for God. We are made anew. We are made obedient. Stop and think about that for a moment. God doesn't wait for you to obey; he makes you obedient. He doesn't say, "I wonder if you can cut the mustard." He says, "I'm going to change you so that you *will* be obedient." That's why Paul says, "Thanks be to God." This is a summary of what the Bible teaches. God is the transformer. God is the liberator.

Paul writes it this way in 2 Timothy 1: "God saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace." Then, of course, that famous passage in Ephesians 2: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works." That's why Paul says, "Thanks be to God," because he has been delivered *by* God. This work is a work *of* God.

Thirdly, Paul tells us that this change comes from God's Word. What is it that we are obedient to? It is the standard of teaching. This is more than just the law. This is more than just what Paul is teaching here. This is Paul's summary phrase to describe the gospel. In other places he calls it *sound teaching* or *sound doctrine*. It's what Paul references over and over again, especially in his Pastoral Epistles: we have become obedient to God through the means of God's Word. That's one of the means God uses to bring us to himself.

Notice how this phrase is put in verse 17 about the standard of teaching. "...to which you have been committed." Again, this seems odd. We would think it would be, "The standard of teaching that was committed to you." You give somebody teaching, and they take it and hold onto it. Paul says the exact opposite. He says you were committed *to* this teaching.

Why does he say that? Well, this is the gospel pattern. We are delivered *by* the gospel *to* the Lord. We are not just delivered *from* something; we are delivered *to* something. That's why Paul with one breath can say we are free from sin and then we are slaves to righteousness. There is no pause. There is no way station. It is an immediate transformation.

In conclusion, God is not finished with you yet. If you have put your faith in Jesus Christ to deliver you from sin he *will* accomplish that, but he is accomplishing so much more. He is making you more and more like Jesus, freeing you from the power of sin and binding you to himself in righteousness. Thanks be to God for the work of Jesus Christ.