



The New Life 2: Slaves to Righteousness

Romans 6:19-23

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This morning we will be looking at Romans, chapter 6, the last portion of the chapter from verses 19-23. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely without error, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. Romans, chapter 6, beginning at verse 19:

"I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let us pray to put his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we ask this morning that you would open up your Word to us, that by the power of your Holy Spirit, Lord, the author of your Word, our minds would be illuminated, that we would be shown the truth of your Word, that we would look in it and see the Lord Jesus Christ to see what he has done for us, to see the call he makes to us to follow him. 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.

We pick up this section of Romans 6, and Paul is continuing his discussion of new life in Christ. It is important for us to remember that Paul is not talking about what we need to do to be right with God. He has already established that. He's telling us what it means to be a child of God. We have that new life in Christ, and there is now no turning back at this point. There are only two ways of living. Either we are in Christ or we are dead in our sins. Either we have been set free from sin or we are enslaved to sin. Either we live for God and his glory or we live for ourselves and unrighteousness.

So this morning, as Paul continues to paint this distinction, I'd like us to see three things. First, Paul gives to us a *helpful illustration*. Paul brings to us an illustration to help us to understand what he has been telling us in chapter 6. Then in this illustration he highlights the substance of two ways of life. There is the *way of death* and there is the *way of life*. There are only two ways. Paul wants us to understand what that looks like, so he gives to us a picture of these ways of living. A helpful illustration, the way of death, and the way of life.

A Helpful Illustration

Paul now begins his discussion of the new life in Christ in verse 19 by telling us once again that we are free from sin, that sin no longer has any dominion over us. This is important for us because it shows that there are two ways, but it also shows us that sin is bondage, that sin is slavery. He says in verse 19, "For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness..."

He's describing the bondage that sin produces. We thought we were once free, but we weren't. What we didn't understand was what true freedom was. This concept of true freedom is not easy to understand. Paul has introduced it in chapter 6, verse 13, and he repeats it, basically, again in verse 19. He says basically, "You were once enslaved to sin, and you now must be slaves to righteousness so you can know the true freedom of holiness."

You can imagine how the Roman church might have responded to Paul. You might even imagine your *own* question for Paul. You would say to Paul, "What are you saying here? I need to be a slave so I can be free? What does that even mean? How can I be free by being a slave?" Paul does something very helpful for us here. He gives us an illustration to help.

It's passages like this that make me completely certain Paul was a preacher, because it's not just enough to convey the truth of the Bible; we must convey the truth of the Bible in a way so that it is understood. Paul goes the extra mile, as it were, giving us an illustration. He's very explicit. You don't need your pastor to dust off all sorts of fancy exegetical and Bible interpretation tools for you to see it. Paul is very up front.

Look at how verse 19 begins. He says, "I am speaking in human terms..." "I'm giving you an example so you can understand." The thing is we expect preachers to do this. If we're honest, we *demand* that preachers do this, but we don't expect the Bible to do this. We expect the Bible to just simply convey truth, but that's not what Paul is doing here. He's doing so much more than that. He wants us to know the truth, to be gripped by the truth, and to be changed by the truth.

The only way *that* happens is if we truly understand what Paul is saying. What we need to understand is that the Bible was written for us to know *and* apply God's truth. So Paul uses a picture. Now, why do we need this picture? Why do we need illustrations? Why do pastors provide us with illustrations other than perhaps that it is interesting, that we like interesting stories or we like something that connects with real life? Well, there's actually a reason for doing something like this. Paul says it's because of our natural limitations.

Now, we might translate it a bit more literally to give you more of the feel for this. What Paul says is it is because of the weakness of your flesh. *Natural limitations* really being the same thing. It's because of who you are, your humanity living in a sinful world. You need some help understanding God's Word. We're limited because of our observation of the world around us and because of our past life. We're used to seeing things a certain way. We're used to people talking about things in a certain way.

When we have made a break with the world and come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, we have to reorient ourselves to true reality. So Paul says, "Let me help you here." The thing is that your conception of freedom is off. The way we look at freedom is we think freedom is doing whatever we want to do. We don't think first of true freedom as being bound to Jesus Christ. The illusion of everyone around us just feeds into this. People think they are free apart from Jesus.

Part of this is the habit of our hearts. We're used to living like this, especially in America. We're used to not being beholden to anyone. What is the famous truth that is drilled into our heads in civics classes from when we were very young? Who is the ruler in America? *We* are. We vote. We're in charge. We don't have a king. As a matter of fact, if you ask us about kings, we'll tell you about the time we threw the king out. America has no king. We're used to thinking about ourselves as being in charge.

Part of it is also our misunderstanding of sin. We don't really see sin in all of its blackness. We don't see sin in all of its bondage. We don't see sin for as horrible as it is. We tend to minimize sin, especially our own interactions with sin. Finally, part of it is the way sin affects the way we think. Sin affects every part of you. It's not just that sin is involved with the will, with the decision-making part of who we are, so we make bad decisions. We do things we ought not. We lie when we should tell the truth. We steal when we should be generous.

Actually, sin also affects our minds. It affects our minds such that we think things that are sinful are *not* sinful, and we actually think things that are holy are wrong. We call right *wrong*, and we call wrong *right*. It's because our minds have been affected by sin. If we apply that to what we're looking at this morning, one of the main reasons we do not understand what freedom really is is because sin has affected our minds. Sin wants to hide true freedom from us, so we need to work through that and past that.

What is the picture Paul paints here? He says, "I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification." Notice what Paul is doing here. Paul first presents something that is behind us, something that is in the past. He sets up a comparison. "Just as...so now."

The *just as* portion of the comparison is clearly in the past tense. He says that we *presented* our members. This is something that happened in the past. This is important, because slavery is a state. Paul says our state is over

now. It is no longer our reality. He wants to make sure we see this is not who we are now. He uses language that is very descriptive. He not only uses a past tense verb. Do you see the other word that's used in this sentence? He says, "*Once* you did this."

I don't know about you, but whenever I hear the word *once* I think of growing up and something like Grimm's fairy tales. "Once upon a time..." When was once upon a time? Once upon a time was so long ago that we talk about woodcutters and maids and people churning butter and no automobiles. We think it was a long, long time ago. It was so long ago we don't even understand entirely the lives of the people in the stories, how they lived.

That's what Paul is saying here. I want you to get that sense. Your bondage to sin was so long ago you shouldn't even really want or remember to live like that now. It's in your past. It's something we think about but not where we dwell. In that past we were willing to be enslaved. It is good for us that this state is in the past, because that state of bondage to sin was bad for us. I think that's why Paul uses the human analogy to slavery.

We don't need to be convinced that slavery is bad. Honestly, kids, have any of you sat and thought to yourself, "You know what I want to be when I grow up? I want to be a slave." Nobody does that. Nobody thinks of that when they grow up. People think of things they want to be when they grow up that maybe *we* wouldn't want to be. I'm sure there are some of you here saying, "When I grow up and get a job I hope to be an engineer."

You need to know that for your pastor that's like one compartment of purgatory, a place where you have to live with math all the time. I don't want to grow up and be an engineer, but I'm sure there are some of you who would think, "Why would anybody want to be a preacher? Why would you want to stand up and have people look at you? That's horrifying. I would faint." The point is no matter what that is we can look and say, "I can understand why someone *else* would want to do that," but no one should say, "I want to be a slave." If someone said that, we would think they were crazy.

So what Paul does is he makes this analogy so that sin for us is something we should know we do not want to go back to, we should not find fulfillment in. It is not only in the past but it is *bad* in the past. Sin had blinded us to its true nature. Paul is stripping back the curtain, as it were, so we can see it. What we can see is that sin led to destruction and rebellion. Do you see how Paul says this in verse 19? He says, "You once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness."

What he means is when you gave yourselves to sin, sin furthered its own ends, not yours. What does sin want? Well, what sin wants is impurity, and it wants lawlessness. *Impurity* refers to the corruption that sin brings to us. The word is very strong. It means uncleanness, filth, unnaturalness. It can actually refer to garbage or even to the contents of a grave. This is not something we would desire to be around, to handle, to touch, to take close to us.

Lawlessness, on the other hand, means rebellion against God's law. It actually means no law. We wanted no part of God. We wanted no part of his order. We did not want any part of his righteousness. This is what sin desired. Finally, Paul tells us that in the past what sin brought was something progressively more and more wicked. He says it led to lawlessness leading to *more* lawlessness.

This gives us a truth that sin is never static. It is never something we can control. We *think* we can. We think we can sin just a little, that we can tell little lies, that we can steal small things, that we can watch just a little bit of things we shouldn't be watching and we'll be just fine. We can control it. We can stop whenever we want. It won't affect us at all.

But Paul tells us that sin is like slavery. It's like being in chains, not being free. We can't stop sin. It always gets worse. Sin leads to more sin, further enslaving us. In short, outside of Jesus Christ, our lives were marked by bondage, not freedom; by harm, not good. Any reasonable person should see that that is not how we should live. If that's this case and we can escape it, why don't we?

So how do we break those chains? How can we be free of the enslaving power of sin? Is there a way to true freedom? Paul says, "Yes." He says there is a way to true freedom and that is found in obeying in the present day now. It's a *yes* that at first we don't really understand. As a matter of fact, he has already tried to explain it in verse 13, and he picks it up again in verse 19. He tries again. He says the way to be free from slavery from sin is to pursue slavery to God.

What we expect is for Paul to tell us how we can be free, how to be ourselves, how to do what we want, but the truth is that is not the ultimate aim. We are not the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is true freedom, which is only found in righteousness. To be and to remain truly free we must bind ourselves to God and righteousness. Let me give you an illustration, to speak in human terms because of your limitations. Let me give you some thoughts here.

It's like stories of these horrible storms out on the sea in a nineteenth-century wooden ship. As the storm battered the ship, what did the sailors do? They tied themselves to objects on the deck. The one who was steering was tied with a rope to the wheel so he would not be brushed overboard. The captain would tie himself to the mast so he would not lose and be thrown astray.

That's a picture of the spiritual reality of dealing with sin. Unless we are bound to God, unless we are lashed to Jesus Christ, we will not survive against sin. We cannot be free and independent. Paul says there are only two ways. There is either slavery to God or you are a slave to sin. The kind of slavery Paul is talking about here, being a slave to righteousness, has an end in itself also. Paul continues his parallel.

Do you remember how impurity and lawlessness led to more lawlessness? Paul says that slavery to righteousness leads to something also: holiness. This is the dedication of the believer to righteousness. It leads to holiness of

heart and of life. This is very practical. Without this kind of holiness we will not see the Lord. Hebrews 12:14 says, "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."

Do you see now what that verse means? It doesn't mean "Be holy so you can see the Lord." It means that to see the Lord you must first be freed from sin, bought by the blood of Jesus Christ and bound to God. If that is true of you, your life will be one of service to God and righteousness, and it will show in your life. People will see it.

Brothers and sisters, this is not optional. Paul doesn't say, "I think it would be a good idea if you thought more about righteousness" or "Hey, you really would flourish in life if you thought about righteousness." No, he gives us a direct command. In verse 19 he says, "...so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification." It is a direct command from Paul.

It is a practical command from Paul. Paul doesn't leave us to wonder how we are to implement it. I've told you this before: vagueness is the enemy of the Christian life. I put it like this: nobody grows in "fuzzyland." We need direct practical advice. Paul doesn't just say to you, "You know, think about being holy" and we say, "Well, how, Paul? What does that look like? What do I do?" Paul says, "No, present your members as slaves to righteousness."

Now what does that mean? We've looked at this word *members* before. What it means is you need to be presenting your eyes to righteousness. You need to say to yourself, "What am I looking at? Am I looking at what is good and just and honest and pure?" Present your tongue as a slave to righteousness. What are you saying? Are you speaking things that tear down? Are you gossiping? Are you running other people down?

Are you lying? Are you putting yourself in the best light and putting others in the worst light so that you look good? What about your ears? What are you hearing? Are you listening to the truth or are you listening to lies and furthering lies? What about our hands and our feet? Are we active in building people up and moving toward righteousness? Are our feet swift to run to places where the gospel is?

Paul is giving us very practical advice. You can go home this afternoon and around lunch as a family say, "How can we look in a more righteous way? How can we talk to promote righteousness? How can we act to promote righteousness?" That's what Paul is giving to us, and it's based on something God has already done to and for us. Our present obedience is based on the past change. Look at all of the past-tense verbs in chapter 6. "You once. You were. You have been set free."

The Way of Death

But what if someone says, "I don't want to be a slave to righteousness. Slavery is bad. I think I should be free"? Paul says there is a state that exists when you are *not* a slave to righteousness. There is a freedom from

righteousness, but it's when you were under sin. It's when you were a slave to sin, he says in verse 20. "For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness."

Again, Paul is hammering home the fact that there are only two ways. There is wickedness and righteousness. There is death and there is life. There is serving sin or there is serving God. You may think you have found a third way. You may think you have come up with something that no one else has found when you can be free from God completely and totally and not be a slave to sin, but Paul says that's not reality.

If I might again speak in human terms with you, it would be as if someone came up to you and said, "You know, I've figured out a new way to live. I can float. I just think good and light thoughts, and gravity doesn't affect me. I just float, and I'm really happy with this." All the while their feet are firmly on the ground. Would you say to them, "Please teach me about this marvelous third way; I would love to participate in this" or would you say to them, "How long have you been this crazy? Because that's not reality. You may think this is what's going on, but that's not the experience of everybody in the world"?

Yet in the same way, at times, we think spiritually we can deny reality. Paul is giving us a reality check here. There are only two ways. The only way you can be free from righteousness is to be a slave to sin. When we live carefree of God's Word, when we live carefree of his law, we think we're the ones in control, but we are not. Paul tells us that it is a principle that when we are free from righteousness it is because we were slaves to sin. There is no way around this. You have to choose one or the other.

What does that mean, then, for your daily life? It means if you are failing to live a life of holiness there are really only two possible causes, and it's actually likely that both are at work. First, it's because you are lazy. You act like you are not the slaves of righteousness. To use an example of an employee to kind of modernize slavery, it's like you're on the clock and all you do is play solitaire and scroll through Facebook, and then you're surprised when the work doesn't get done because you haven't done any work because you haven't applied the principle that is at hand.

Secondly, I think it's because we don't realize the truth of what Paul is telling us. We don't focus on the fact that Jesus has delivered us from sin, that he has given us his Spirit so we might fight against sin, that we might be free from sin. This morning, if you have believed on Jesus Christ, you have all the power you need to resist sin. You have all the motivation you need to resist sin. You just need to live in accordance with reality. Freedom from righteousness is not true freedom. It's actually slavery. It's slavery to sin. Don't fall for the Devil's trick.

Paul then reminds you of what your life was like before Jesus, of the end that was shameful. He says, "But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death." It's important for us to remember that Paul is talking to believers here. He has already spent a great deal of time telling us what it means to be saved, how we can *be* saved, and what Jesus means to the believer.

In *this* part of the letter Paul is telling us about the consequences of salvation, so his audience here should remember what their life was like before Christ and would never go back to it. He's speaking to Roman Christians. As we read it, we're reading it as believers. Now why would they not want to go back? Well, Paul says, "Do you remember what it was like? Were you happy? Were you free? Did you have purpose? Did you long to remain that way?"

Of course, the answer to all of those questions is "No, that's why I left." This is a rhetorical device. The kids amongst us understand this. Kids, have you ever been asked a question by Mom where you knew although it sounded like a question there was really only one answer you could give? There was no real alternative. If Mom says, "Are you going to finish your meal before you have dessert?" you really don't get to say, "No." Oftentimes, Mom won't even wait around to hear the answer. She just walks away, because everybody knows the answer is "Yes."

That's what Paul is doing here. He doesn't even give us the answer it's so obvious. "What fruit did you have from this? I'm waiting. I'll stick around for a while. Come on, tell me. Any fruit that you might have had?" "Nothing" is the answer. There is no fruit from it. That's why you believed on Jesus Christ: so he could make you a new creation, so you could know the forgiveness of sins, so you would no longer be enslaved to sin, bound to do things that were destructive.

So Paul asks this very practical question. "What fruit did you get?" In other words, "If it was so great to be a slave to sin, tell me about all of the great things that came about from that." We already know what the answer is just from the way Paul has asked the question. "Nothing." Isn't that our answer too? What good came to you from sin? Were your relationships strengthened by sin? Did you sleep better at night? Were you happier in your life? Of course not. That's why you left it behind.

Paul presses on. He says, "Aren't you now ashamed of those things that were fruitless?" It's not just that your life is better now, that the end of following Jesus is not just to realize your potential. We don't follow Jesus so we can be all that we can be. If that's what you want, join the army. Don't follow Jesus to be all that you can be. No. You don't want to excuse your past sin and life. You're ashamed of it because God has shown you how harmful it is, how destructive it was. He has shown you your rebellion against him. He has shown you what those actions have cost. They cost the life of Jesus.

As if that were not enough, Paul presses the point home all the way. What is the end of all this fruitless, shameful living? He says the end of these things is death. It's true hopelessness. That's the end of sin. Look at the first part of verse 23. Romans 6:23 is one of the most famous verses in the Bible. If I asked you all to look up from your Bibles and recite this verse, a great many of you could by heart, but the danger with a verse like this is we assume we know exactly what it's saying.

Paul says, "For the wages of sin is death..." What does it mean? I think we often look at it as the wages *for* sin. That is, namely, I get paid for my sins *with* death. That is bad, but I think the reality is even something worse. It's the wages we get *from* sin, because after all, that's what Paul has been talking about: sin as our taskmaster, sin as our slave master, and sin pays us in death. It's all it has to give. That's what sin provides to us: death.

The word *wages* here means provision. It refers to what a soldier would earn while he was on campaign, his daily provision. One of the ways this word could be translated would be "the thing that goes along with the bread you eat." That's kind of wordy, so we don't put that in a Bible translation, but it could be fish. It could be beef. It could be goat. It could be lamb.

It was something the soldier was given each and every day to feed on, to live on, along with the bread that was a staple. What Paul is saying is this is what you survive on, so to speak, from sin. You survive on death. That's all you get. There's no good news at all. When we live in the way of death, slavery to sin, all we have to look forward to is death. It's not freedom in any sense of the word at all. It's only slavery and death.

The Way of Life

Then Paul goes to contrast the way of death with the way of life. He talks about the fruit of the way of life as being the fruit of righteousness. Look at verse 22. "...the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life." Now that you have been set free from sin, the fruit you have from this is righteousness, sanctification, and eternal life. Notice once again the past-tense language. He is telling you what you have already received as a blessing. He's not saying what you must do in order to receive the blessing.

He says you *have* been set free from sin, the same way he has spoken about this in verse 18. There is no transitional period. Having been freed from sin means you have become slaves of God. It's something that has already happened. Now you may say, "Well, I didn't choose to be a slave of God. I just wanted to be free from sin." The reality is you can't have one without the other. The only way to be free from sin is to be a slave of God. The way of that life has fruit. Paul doesn't even ask you, "What fruit did you get?" He just assumes what the fruit is.

The word he uses is actually a very practical word. It's not just what you get in the sense that you obtain it. It's actually the word for *have*, that you possess it *now*. If you have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, you are made right with God by the work of Jesus. You are adopted into God's family. You are being made more and more into the image of Jesus every day. What this means is that the Lord is bearing fruit in your life *now*.

Now what *is* that fruit? We need to see that the idea of slavery to righteousness is not just an abstract quality. It's not just something we think about and hope about. It's something that flows from our relationship with the Lord. It shows itself in the practical and concrete demands of righteousness. The fruit is sanctification, Paul says. By that he means holiness, but we can never forget that holiness has its own end: eternal life.

Don't think about eternal life just as something you will experience in the future. No. It's the fullness of life we have right now in Jesus Christ. It's knowing that sin has no dominion over us, that death has no sting, that we belong to the Lord and that he will never forsake us. Paul contrasts life in Christ with the life of sin, bondage to God with bondage to sin. If our provision from sin is death, what is it that we get from God? What's the alternative?

I want you to notice, first, the second half of verse 23, that God does not set up an alternative pay scale. He does not say, "The wages of sin are death, but the wages of righteousness are *this*." He doesn't say that at all, because the whole idea of the pay scale is the principle by which we receive death. It's not how we receive eternal life. Eternal life is completely gratuitous. It is not just a gift, but the word here means a free gift, a gracious free gift. There is no way we can earn it. This free gift we get from God is eternal life.

All of your dealings with God are by the means of grace. This also puts in context the idea of slavery to God. It's not a job that we toil away at to try to scrape together some forgiveness and some love from God. No, it's that we are bound to God so he might lavish his love upon us, more than we could possibly ever imagine. That free gift, that grace, comes to us only, Paul says, in Christ Jesus our Lord. Jesus has purchased it. Jesus has redeemed us. Jesus is the one for whom we live.