

# The Outcome of our New Slavery

## Romans 6:15-23

**Series:** Romans 2022: Righteousness from God – Yay!

**Preaching Date:** May 15, 2022

**Worship:** Set Free

**Key Sentence:**

There is a wonderful contrast between our old slavery and our new slavery

**Outline:**

I. Slavery leading to death or righteousness (Romans 6:15-16)

II. Slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:17-18)

III. Leading to sanctification (Romans 6:19)

IV. And to eternal life (Romans 6:20-22)

V. Sin earns death, but life is the gift of God. (Romans 6:23)

**Romans 6:15–23** What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! <sup>16</sup>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?

<sup>17</sup>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, <sup>18</sup>and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

<sup>19</sup>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.

<sup>20</sup>For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. <sup>21</sup>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. <sup>22</sup>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.

<sup>23</sup>For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

## The Outcome of our New Slavery Romans 6:15-23

Bob Dylan, who is now 81, has been an icon of rock, folk and even country music for over sixty years. Songs like *Blowin' in the Wind* and *The Times They are a-Changin'* became icons of the 1960's protest movement. His styles and influences have changed multiple times, including a long period in the 1970's where he mostly wrote music coming out of much-publicized conversion to Christianity. Is Dylan really a Christian? There is no doubt his music has been strongly influenced by Scripture. But he's very introverted and private and no one in recent years has been able to get him to say, one way or the other. Nonetheless, some of the songs he wrote in those years were real testimony. The album "Slow Train Coming" has several, including the famous plea "Shine your light, shine your light on me. You know I just couldn't make it by myself. I'm a little too blind to see."

But my favorite is "Gotta Serve Somebody." I like it best in a scene from one of my favorite old movies, "The Ultimate Gift." The premise of the story is that Jason's billionaire grandfather dies and leaves him an inheritance, but he's got to earn it by passing a series of tests, some small, some large. One of the early ones is the value of work, because Jason's never had to work a day in his life. So, he gets sent to a ranch in Texas, owned by a close friend of his grandfather's, and Gus puts him to work, putting in a long line of fence poles, by hand. Jason finally figures out that he has to really work to get out of there, and he begins to find that it's satisfying. So what song do they play for that scene. "You're gonna have to serve somebody."

You may be an ambassador to England or France; You may like to gamble, you might like to dance; You may be the heavyweight champion of the world; You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls; But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed You're gonna have to serve somebody; Serve somebody, yes you're gonna have to serve somebody; Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord; But you're gonna have to serve somebody; It may be the devil or it may be the Lord; But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

Bob Dylan didn't make that up. He got it from Scripture. It's possible he got it from today's text, Romans 6:15-23, which teaches two kinds of slavery and shows us the wonderful contrast between our old slavery and our new slavery. Let's read the passage, then we'll look at the outline. Romans 6:15-23 *What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!*

<sup>16</sup>*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?*<sup>17</sup>*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,*<sup>18</sup>*and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.*<sup>19</sup>*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.*<sup>20</sup>*For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.*<sup>21</sup>*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.*<sup>22</sup>*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.*<sup>23</sup>*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Our outline looks like this: First Paul asserts that there are two kinds of slavery. One leads to death, the other to righteousness. Then he walks through the positive process we enter as slaves. We're slaves of righteousness, point II, which leads to sanctification, point III, and to eternal life, point IV. In verse 23 he summarizes the whole contrast: sin earns death, but life is the gift of God.

Paul begins by restating the question that opened the whole chapter. Verse 1 "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" Verse 15 "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?" In verse 1 it is a question of sinning to gain more grace. In verse 15 it is a question of sinning because we already have grace. Verse 15 is different because it comes after Paul's proclamation that the believer is not "under the law" but "under grace." His answer to the verse 15 question uses completely different imagery. In the first half of chapter 6 the primary image was baptism. We've died to sin by faith in unity with the death of Christ, we've been buried with him as symbolized by immersion baptism, and we've been raised to walk in newness. That's great imagery, but this time Paul is going to use the imagery of slavery. Verse 16: 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?

Slavery would have been a very familiar situation for the Christians in Rome. Kent Hughes points out that the population of Rome was about one-third slaves. That doesn't count free men who had once with slaves, which makes it likely that nearly one-half of the Roman church either were or had been enslaved.

Also, there was such a thing as voluntary slavery. People in dire poverty could offer themselves as slaves to someone simply in order to be fed and housed. So the image of giving yourself to someone as a slave would have been familiar. In this context Paul points out to them that habitually “presenting” oneself to something or someone makes one a slave of that something or someone. People who “present themselves” to a master become slaves of that master. Christians, who have been set free from sin by their union with Christ, must recognize that, were they constantly to yield to the voice of temptation, they would effectively become slaves of sin again. Slavery is ultimately not just a legal status but a living experience. Christians, who are no longer legally slaves of sin, must no longer live as slaves of sin.

Yet we are still slaves and must be slaves. Paul says there are two slaveries. “You are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness.” We understand the first slavery. Sin is habit-forming, even addictive. Not just substance abuse, but any sin: anger, lust, selfishness, indifference. The more you do these things the more you can’t not do them. You are enslaved to the sins that addict you. This is exactly what Jesus had taught. “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples,<sup>32</sup> and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”<sup>33</sup> They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?”<sup>34</sup> Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” In the same way Peter says “people are slaves to whatever has mastered them.”

The wording of the second slavery, though, is interesting. You would expect the contrast to be between serving sin or serving God, which it is in verse 23. Or it might be a contrast between serving sin or serving righteousness, which it appears to be in verses 18 and 20. But the contrast Paul makes here is between serving sin and serving obedience. As he did earlier in the chapter, Paul wants us to know that this abundant grace we’ve received is intended to lead to life change. He now wants us to become addicted to obedience. That’s a great slavery, and paradoxically, that’s a freeing slavery. Moo says “Paul is out to emphasize the significance of obedience in the Christian life, in a context where such an emphasis is necessary to counter antinomianism. The freedom of the Christian is not freedom to do what one wants, but freedom to obey God—willingly, joyfully, naturally.”

Elizabeth Elliot tells a great story that nails the freedom of this “obedience.” She was visiting Scotland and saw a Scottish collie in his glory—tending sheep. He was doing what he was bred for and trained to do.

He was beautiful to watch as he circled right and left, "... barking, crouching, racing along, herding a stray sheep here, nipping at a stubborn one there, his eyes always glued to the sheep, his ears listening for a tiny metal whistle from his master." As she watched, she reflected, "I saw two creatures who were in the fullest sense 'in their glory': A man who had given his life to sheep, who loved them and loved his dog; and a dog whose trust in man was absolute, whose obedience was instant and unconditional, and whose very meat and drink was to do the will of his master." Kent Hughes shares this story in his commentary and then says "through obedience [we find] a human glory which comes through being what he made us to be. As our Master, he completely knows us. He wrote the manual. Obedience to him liberates us to be all we can be."

So, we have before us the two slaveries. There is no middle ground. To underscore the seriousness of the choice between these masters, Paul specifies the consequences of the respective "slaveries": death and righteousness. We either choose to obey the world and thus death, or we choose obedience to Christ and eternal righteousness. "Death" includes physical death and present spiritual death, but in this context it means mainly eternal death: the final and eternal exclusion from God's presence, the ultimate result of sin. Since it is contrasted with death, "righteousness" refers to our status of righteousness, with a focus on final justification: ultimate acquittal from sins and entry into eternal life, which is the ultimate inheritance of the believer. Yet this righteousness also refers to the moral righteousness that is the outcome of our obedience to Christ, our placing ourselves under his authority to do right.

In verses 17 and 18 we see that this present obedience is focus of the first step in the journey of our new slavery. We used to be slaves to sin and now we are slaves to righteousness. Verse 17: "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, <sup>18</sup>and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness." You and I and Paul's Roman readers used to be slaves of sin. But thanks to God we turned from that to faith in Christ. But again Paul surprises us by describing this as obedience from the heart to a standard of teaching. Paul is not changing his mind here. He still believes that we are declared right before God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But Paul does not divorce the gift of righteousness from the life of righteousness, as we are often tempted to do. When the believers in Rome turned to Jesus they turned, with all their hearts, to a life of glorious obedience to Jesus as set forth in the teaching of Jesus, transmitted to them by Paul and the other apostles. The Apostles were teaching them all that Jesus had commanded, as they had been commissioned to do.

“Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me,” Paul says to Timothy, “in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” But the fascinating thing here is that Paul writes not that this teaching was committed to them, but that they were committed or entrusted to it. One expects that the basic doctrine and moral ethics of the faith would be handed over to the hearers, not the hearers to the doctrine. But Christians are not, like the Jews of Paul’s day, masters of a tradition. We are instead vessels, shaped and formed and created by the tradition, which is the word of God, and we remain in subjection to it. We might illustrate this with parachutes. Christians are not to be like those pack parachutes, though they must know all there is about the structure and folding of those. But Christians are to be like those who use parachutes, who entrust themselves to parachutes by actually jumping out of the plane.

Verse 18: “and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.” You have been set free from sin. It’s not that you and I will never sin. We still do. We’re in a process here. But the fundamental truth that allows the process to move forward is that the chains of sin have been broken. Being set free from sin here is the same as the dying to sin we studied last week. You are no longer bound by sin, no longer obligated to serve its evil ends. Instead, you have become slaves to righteousness. This new slavery is a heartfelt obedience to Christ and his Word, and it is an obedience which brings true freedom and true purpose, just as the sheep dog finds in purpose in obedience to the master.

So we’ve become slaves of righteousness. We’re free to turn from walking in the direction sin takes us, and we’ve free to walk in the direction righteousness takes us. That journey is called sanctification, and Paul reaches that part of the process in 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.”

The verse begins with a kind of apology by Paul for the human terms in which he has been describing salvation. Slavery, he may be thinking, is not an altogether accurate or appropriate metaphor of the Christ in life. It indicates well the reality of obedience in the Christian life, but it does not tell us that the yoke of this obedience is easy, that the burden is light and that the hand of our master is gentle. It cannot communicate that this slavery is really freedom. But Paul uses this human term because we in our human limitations need stark contrasts. We need to be told “not this, but this.” Freedom from slavery to sin leaves only one other option: obedient slavery to Christ in the freedom of his abundant grace and according to his word.

This slavery to righteousness, Paul says, leads to sanctification. Sanctification is holiness. That is, holiness is the endpoint and sanctification is the process. Justification, which is the word Paul has been using up to now, is being declared right with God though having spiritually died with Christ as he bore our sins and spiritually, ultimately physically, being raised in Christ to new life. But until that day, we are still in a battle with the old nature. Though disconnected from its power by the death of the cross it is still able to speak and influence our lives. It can still bind us by our desires and habits. This sin remaining in our lives must be cleansed in the process of sanctification.

A picture of this might be a car wash. Your car enters the car wash soiled by pollen and dirt and the mud of the road. And it gets pulled through a process. First it gets a light rinse to wet all its surfaces. Then it gets sprayed with soap and detergent. Then it gets scrubbed by those rotating wet brushes that are designed to reach every inch and nook and cranny of the car's surface. Then you get sprayed again with powerful rinse water that sends all the dirt straight down the drain. Finally, you get jets of hot air directed at the car to flash dry it, so it's looking like new. Now a car wash doesn't always work as advertised. But sanctification does. God meets us where we are and takes us through a process that sprays and soaps and scrubs and polishes us. We can imagine that the car doesn't particularly embrace all these things that are happening to it. Sometimes we don't embrace all these steps in the process of sanctification. But the goal is good: holiness, perfect cleansing, perfect separation to God, perfect freedom in obedience.

So, having turned to obedience, having entered this process of sanctification, Paul now gives us more insight into this process and its outcome, eternal life. Verse 20: "For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. <sup>21</sup>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. <sup>22</sup>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." In our lives prior to Christ we were slaves to sin. The only thing we were free from was the obedience of righteousness. The way Paul is using the word free here is a little like the labels you see on foods and products. This food is gluten free. There is no trace of gluten. This plastic is bpa free. There is no trace of biphenol A. Some people drive by our sign and they think that our church is evangelical free. And for some people that sounds like a good thing. But when you were slaves of sin you were righteousness free. There was no trace of righteousness in you. You only get righteousness as a free gift of God, and you only practice righteousness after receiving that free gift.

Nonetheless, your unrighteousness had fruit. Our translation of verse 21 says “But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed?” making the whole phrase a question? Douglas Moo says it might be better translated, or punctuated “What fruit were you getting at that time? The things of which you are now ashamed.” Either way the fruit is sin, sin leading to more sin and only sin. The fruit then is the very thing we are ashamed of now. By the way, notice in this verse that shame is OK. In recent generations we’ve tended to think of shame as something false, as something not related to sin, but a sense of inadequacy imposed on you by the cruelty of others, which becomes the narrative of your own heart. That kind of shame is not good. But when true guilt over true sin leads to a sense of inadequacy, it’s a good thing. That’s how Paul is using it. It’s a shame that reminds you that sin leads to death. It’s a wake up call that invites you to turn to the one who bore our sin, our guilt and our shame.

Verse 22 is the contrast, and it’s wonderful “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.” Moo diagrams the contrast this way. Verse 21 is the “then.” Then our status was slaves of sin and free from righteousness. The result of that status was the fruit of sin bringing shame, and the final outcome was death – eternal death. But now, verse 22, our status is that we are free from sin and slaves of God. The fruit is right behavior bringing not shame but sanctification, increasing holiness. And the final outcome is eternal life. John Stott puts it succinctly “there is a freedom which spells death and bondage which spells life.” I would rather be a slave who is able to live for what he was made for and whose slavery leads to an eternity of such glory than to revel in the so-called freedom of rebellion against God.

Kent Hughes, after telling Elizabeth Elliot’s story about the collie dog, tells one of his own. Christians, he says, can still live as if we were slaves to sin. As such we never know the glory of obedience or living the way God designed us to be. Then he says “My family’s dog, Chad, is a beloved animal. But it has been years since he knew anything like the glorious freedom of the Scottish collie mentioned earlier. Why so? Well, he used to play with our children in the front yard without a leash. However, one day when he was called, he took off on a dead run. When he returned, he was duly repentant, was disciplined, and was reinstated. But he did it again and again and again! Now poor Chad never goes outside without a leash around his neck. Some of us are like that. God loves us. We are his forever. But it has been years since we have really been free. We know little of the liberty of obedience.”

There is a wonderful contrast between our old slavery and our new slavery. As slaves of righteousness we are on the path of sanctification and our path leads to the glorious freedom of eternal life in the presence of God.

Romans 6:23, one of the most famous verses in Scripture is the summary and plainest statement of this contrast: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The amazing thing about this verse is that it is a tremendous summary of what we’ve just studied, but also stands alone wonderfully. Romans 3:23 which we also use constantly, is deeply embedded in the most intricate moment of Paul’s argument. By pulling it out we do it a bit of injustice. But this verse is a plain summary that stands really well alone. “The wages of sin is death.” You sin, you die. The fruit of slavery to sin is called it’s wages. The word was used of the ration money, the “per diem” given to soldiers or the pocket money given to slaves. But the point is that it was earned, it’s merited. You get what you deserve.

In the contrast, eternal life is free gift. This is a phrase Paul’s been using throughout these two chapters. God gives you what you don’t deserve: righteousness and sanctification and eternal life. The only ground on which this gift is bestowed is the atoning death of Christ, and the only condition of receiving it is that we are in Christ Jesus our Lord, that is, personally united to him by faith. Paul began with the rhetorical question and answer, “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!” Why? Because there is a wonderful contrast between our old slavery and our new slavery. As slaves of Christ, we have been called to a profound obedience and have become the recipients of the glorious benefits that are ours as his slaves.

So, I have to ask, how is that going for you? Are you like that Scottish Collie, reveling in obedience? Or are you more like Kent Hughes’ dog, always straining at the leash because you haven’t learned the freedom of obedience. I’d love to brag on my dog here, because he knows the freedom of obedience. But that’s not the point. It’s not about the dog, it’s about you and me. Have we, have I, have you, rejected with our whole hearts the slavery that leads to death? Have we embraced with our whole hearts the obedience that leads to freedom? Or are we still torn between the two? It helps to remind yourself that “I’m no longer a slave to sin. I’ve got a new master. And obedience to him leads to righteousness, sanctification and the freedom of eternal life.”