

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
Paul's Letter to the Romans – Chapter 6, Verses 15-23
Notes from Tuesday October 12, 2010
Last Revised on October 18, 2010

Songs

Opening Prayer

Introduction

This evening we continue our study of the Letter of Paul to the Romans.

Last week we began Chapter 6 and got to Verse 14

Tonight we will probably finish Chapter 6

As usual I will begin with a little bit of review.

Review

For tonight's lesson it is worth remembering that Paul wrote this letter to Christians in Rome, a city which he had not yet visited .

These people knew the gospel, well enough to be saved by it.

And Paul seems to believe that they understood the gospel reasonably well.

Nevertheless Paul longs to visit them to explain the gospel face-to-face.

And in the meantime he has written them this long and rather difficult letter.

The overall theme of this letter is, the Gospel.

The gospel, then, must not be something that is easily understood or explained in a few words.

And it must be something that even believers are supposed to contemplate deeply, forever!

These and other things we can begin to discern from the introductory section of the letter which occupies the **first 15 1/2 verses of Chapter 1**.

In the latter half of **Verse 16 of Chapter 1**, Paul gets into the main body of the letter, where he begins by saying that the gospel is "the **power** of God for **salvation** to everyone who believes,"

By this he means that the **proclamation** of God's good news about his son Jesus, and what has been accomplished by Jesus on behalf of all who believe, is the very thing that saves those who believe.

In this gospel, Paul says, in **Verse 17 of Chapter 1**, believers see the **righteousness** of God revealed.

On the cross at Calvary believers also see the **wrath** of God revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. (**Verse 18 of Chapter 1**)

Paul spends the **remainder of Chapter 1** examining the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men which sent Jesus to the cross to receive God's wrath directed against it.

In **Chapter 2 and also the first 20 verses of Chapter 3**, Paul makes it clear that such ungodliness and unrighteousness has always pervaded all of humanity, even the most law-abiding among the Jews.

Then **in the remainder of Chapter 3**, Paul makes it plain that, insofar as nobody, not even the most law-abiding Jew, can ever justify themselves by keeping the Law,

God graciously purposed to put **Jesus** forward to satisfy the demands of the Law for everyone,

and all who **believe** in him are **justified** by their **faith**,

therefore **nobody** can boast,

because salvation is by **grace** through faith.

This situation, Paul goes on to explain in **Chapter 4**, is nothing new, but has always been so.

Chapter 4 is all about **Abraham** --- who is the prime example of **faith** in the Old Testament.

God **spoke** to Abraham and **promised** to bless him, in ways that seemed **impossible**.

Nevertheless Abraham **believed** God and it was counted to him as **righteousness**.

The same has been true for all of the **other** men of faith before and after Abraham.

They **believed** that God was willing and able to do what He said.

And this faith was counted to them as **righteousness**. (Cf. Hebrews 11)

And now **all** the promises of God have found their "yes" in **Christ**. (2 Cor 1:20)

Now this gospel of Jesus Christ, long hidden, has been fully and openly **revealed**.

This revelation is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.

For all who do believe and are justified, “*we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

Paul begins to explore this peace in **Chapter 5**.

In **the first 11 verses of Chapter 5**, Paul speaks of the peace, and joy, and hope, and love that believers experience, even in their suffering,

as we contemplate the fact that God in Christ came down to suffer **with** us and for us while we were still his enemies,

and now that we are **reconciled** with God we are all the more confident of our salvation.

In the remainder of Chapter 5 (**Verses 12-21**) Paul carefully illuminates the power and efficacy of the gospel, by discussing how it has overcome the Fall of Man.

The first Man, Adam, **disobeyed** God and so sin entered the world and with it came death for all men, because all men (save Christ alone) have sinned.

Yet the **obedience** of Christ unto death atones for every sin committed by those who trust in Him.

“What shall we say then?” Paul asks at the beginning of **Chapter 6 (last week’s lesson)**

“Are we to **continue** in sin that grace may abound?”

“*By no means!*” he answers himself in the first part of **Verse 2**,

and then asks the question “How can we who **died** to sin still **live** in it?”

He then refers in Verses 3 and 4 to the meaning of Christian **baptism**,

a rite in which we identify ourselves **personally** with the death and resurrection of Christ,

in order that we might walk in “*newness of life.*”

It is our **abhorrence** of sin, especially our **own** sin, and our desire to **die** to sin, that leads us first to **faith** in Christ and then into a public **profession** of faith through the rite of baptism.

It would be truly **absurd** to emerge from the waters of baptism with the sense that it is OK now to continue in sin.

Christians do **not** think this.

On the contrary, Paul continues in **Verses 5-11 of Chapter 6**, by becoming **united** with Christ,

we are set **free** from sin and death,

and assured a blessed eternal life **with** God in Christ, which surely **will** be a life eternally without sin!

Therefore he concludes this thought in **Verses 12-14** of Chapter 6 with this admonition for our present life on earth:

that we **must not** allow sin to reign in our mortal bodies,

and we now have the **freedom** not to sin,

because **now**, by the grace of God, we belong to **Christ** and his eternal Kingdom,

and we no longer belong to the realm of Satan, sin, and death,

which has already been defeated, and is presently passing away.

A similar set of issues is examined in today's reading, but using a different metaphor.

Whereas Verses 1-14 (last week's lesson) are centered on the images of **death and resurrection** as these are figured in the rite of baptism and actually seen in the death and resurrection of Christ and those who follow him.

Verses 15 - 23 (today's lesson) are preoccupied with the metaphor of slavery, although thoughts of life and death also enter in.

Let's read.

Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 6, Verses 15 - 19

Will someone please read Verses 15 - 19 of Chapter 6 in Japanese.

Thank you. Will someone please read those same verses in English.

**15 What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?
By no means!**

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?

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,

18 and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

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.

Thank you.

Verse 15 starts out kind of the same way that Verse 1 does.

It reads:

(Verse 15a)

What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?

This question follows from the preceding verse (Verse 14), which says "...sin will have no dominion over us because we are **not under law** but under grace."

So Paul wishes to explore whether such freedom from the law constitutes permission to sin.

Similarly, as we have seen, Verse 1 asks, "Are are we to continue to sin that grace may **abound**."

This question followed from the reference to grace in Verse 20 of Chapter 5: "...where **sin** increased, grace **abounded** all the more,"

In either case, Paul is interested in articulating and then opposing the idea that God's "grace" is a kind of freedom which **allows** sin.

Once again he answers this question with an **emphatic** negative:

(Verse 15b)

By no means!

Again, as in Verse 3, Paul proceeds to support this denial with the phrase "Do you not know that?"

Verse 16 reads:

(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?

This (i.e. slavery) is a strange and difficult metaphor for Paul to be using to describe the Kingdom of God, as he himself will admit presently.

But this metaphor is effective for making the two points Paul mainly wants to make here.

Point number 1 is that men can not be free of both obedience and disobedience to God.

Please think about this carefully: there is no neutral, third position available.

Either you obey God, or you disobey God.

Which is the same thing as saying either you obey God or you obey sin.

Obedience to sin --- that is continuing to live in sin --- leads to death.

Obedience to God, leads to righteousness.

Notice carefully that Paul does not say that obedience to God leads to life

This would run the risk of being misunderstood here as “works righteousness”

Which is clearly not ever something that the Apostle Paul is teaching.

Here all Paul wants to say is that you can't remain neutral.

The other main point Paul wishes to make with this slavery metaphor, is that you can't be the slave of two masters at the same time.

You logically must pick one, or the other, sin or obedience.

You cannot pick neither. (That's Point Number 1)

You cannot pick both. (That's Point Number 2)

You must pick one.

and that means you must reject the other one.

In the end, there are only wheat and weeds, sheep and goats, heaven and hell, life and death.

I dare say that all of creation, and all of human history is involved in the process of moving everyone and everything to one side of the line or the other --- The line that separates good and evil --- the line which divides God's will from that which God ultimately opposes.

Verse 17 continues:

(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,

Verse 16 made it really plain that we cannot sit on the fence,

and we cannot avoid standing one side or the other,

Here Paul is addressing to Christians

and he thanks God that this is the case.

Like all men, those to whom he is writing were once slaves of sin,

now they are believers in Christ, baptized into his death and resurrection unto newness of life..

Now they have become "obedient from the heart"

This expression is used only here in the Pauline Epistles,

but it suits the context very well I think.

Paul mean to say that in their heart they truly long to obey the way of life demanded by the gospel.

That Paul thanks God for this, rather than congratulating them, is significant.

It is God Himself who has transformed them from being slaves to sin to being slaves to obedience,

and this does not mean slaves operating under the compulsion of law or fear of punishment,

but slaves obedient from their innermost hearts and therefore freely obedient.

And it is the proclamation of the gospel, and the faith which the gospel met in these people, by which this transformation has been accomplished.

Verse 18 reads:

(Verse 18)

and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

One cannot, by the way, be an unwilling slave of righteousness.

Indeed it would be the unwilling slave of righteousness who would ask perverse questions such as Paul has been answering (i.e. regarding whether the gospel permits us to sin).

No slave of righteousness would ever even conceive of such a question, much less ask it.

So then, this is where the slavery metaphor becomes a little awkward.

To be a “**slave to righteousness**” is better by far than being free!

Indeed it is a better kind of freedom.

It Verse 19, Paul says:

(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.

Here Paul is, clearly I think, recognizing and admitting the limitations of his figure of speech.

The metaphor of slavery does not work very well for a believer’s “slavery to righteousness”

because we tend to think of slavery as a bad thing, but such slavery is infinitely better than any kind of freedom, indeed infinitely better than anything whatsoever, which can be contrasted with it.

slavery to righteousness is a better kind of freedom.

slavery to righteousness is the freedom NOT to sin,

this is the same freedom Jesus had.

It is the freedom God has!

It is holiness!!

To underscore this point, we must recognize that God himself is a slave to righteousness!

The slavery metaphor works better for “slavery to sin”

insofar as slavery and sin are both usually understood to be bad things.

But even here this metaphor is imperfect

because sin is willful disobedience to God

It is a slavery into which we enter willingly.

and in which we willingly remain.

We are not forced into sin

Neither are we forced to remain in sin.

We choose to sin because we like it.

We choose to sin because we are fallen and depraved.

Yet there is also a sense in which we can become trapped in sin,

sucked into a kind of “death spiral” in which lawlessness leads to more lawlessness, from which there may finally be no escape,

Paul refers to such a situation here, and also in Chapter 1 of Romans and elsewhere in his writing.

And on the other side of the “death spiral of lawlessness” there is a “virtuous cycle” that Paul recommends to his readers, one in which “slavery to righteous” leads to sanctification.

Notice this is a process which Paul has in mind here:

In verse 16 he speaks of obedience which leads to righteousness, which he further characterizes in verse 17 as an obedience from the heart to the standard of teaching to which they were committed, which I understand to be a life consistent with the gospel, and in verses 18 and 19 he refers to this as a slavery to righteousness, leading to sanctification. In verse 22, as we shall see, sanctification has an end and it is eternal life!

Let’s read on.

Paul’s Letter to the Romans, Chapter 6, Verses 20-23

Will someone please read Verses 20-23 in Japanese.

Thank you. Now will someone please read these same verses in English.

20 For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

21 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.

22 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.

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

Thank you.

I am not sure if there is a full stop between verse 19 and 20,

or if Verse 20 somehow follows, grammatically, from what went before.

In any case what Paul says here is fully consistent with what he has already said.

Verse 20 reads:

(Verse 20)

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

When we are slaves to sin, we are indeed free in regard to righteousness.

This is a freedom that we may sometimes remember with fondness. (May God forgive us!)

But Paul urges us to remember more carefully just how awful and how shameful those things were!

(Verse 21)

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.

I have occasionally met Christians who take the position that we should not, as believers, feel any shame, because this would diminish the work that Jesus has completed on the cross.

But this is a misunderstanding.

And the verse before us makes this point. When we think back on how we were **before** we became slaves to righteousness, a sense of **shame** and **aversion** is the **proper** response.

This is a **healthy** response, because the end of those things is death.

And we only love Jesus more for having stopped those things in us.

Verse 22 reads:

(Verse 22)

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.

As I mentioned before, we see here in this passage before us today, a **progression**

Men are not saved because they **have** become good.

We are saved so that we **can** become good.

Having been set free from the dominion of sin, we become slaves of God. As slaves to God our lives change **over time** in ways that make us increasingly holy.

This **process** is called **sanctification**.

The goal and purpose of this process is **eternal life**.

And now we come to one of the most memorized verses in the New Testament, and one that I have always misunderstood until now.

Verse 23 reads:

(Verse 23)

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

This is the summary of Verses 21 and 22.

“*The wages of sin is death*” is the first thought capturing what was said in Verse 21.

I had always understood this to mean that death is the wages paid “**for sin**,”

or in other words, if you **sin**, then **death** is what you will get [from God] as a result.

I realize now that this is **not** what Paul means to say here..

He has been talking all along, metaphorically, about two **kinds** of slavery --- two different slave **masters**: sin and obedience --- and he has been saying that every man can and must pick only one of these masters.

Now when Paul says that the “wages of sin is death,” what he means is that the wages “**which sin pays**” to **its** slaves is death.

In other words, you can work for sin if you want to, and some people like the working conditions, but nobody who works for sin will be happy on payday, because the wages which **sin** pays is death.

OK. So we don't want to work for sin. It would be better to work for obedience, that is for God, and so to earn eternal life.

But that is impossible. We **can't** earn eternal life!!!

If we have learned **anything** from reading the first six chapters of Romans, it is this!

The **only** way to eternal life is in Jesus Christ our Lord,

as a **free gift** from God!

By grace through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, God sets us free from sin and death and then leads us through a process called sanctification whereby he prepares us for a blessed eternal life.

Questions? Comments?

Closing Prayer