



Paul's Letter to The Romans

Bottom Rail on Top Now... Romans 6:15-23

Now, you will remember in our study that we have been tracking Paul's argument that a righteousness from God is available to men, women, boys and girls everywhere on the basis of faith in Christ alone. Paul set forth this wonderful truth in the opening verses of Romans. Listen to how he puts it in Romans 1:16-17.

^{ESV} **Romans 1:16**...For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

Of course, Paul's proposition that there is a righteousness from God available through faith in Christ leads fairly quickly to a really obvious question, **"Do people really and truly need this or any other righteousness from God?"**

But Paul anticipated that question and we spent quite a few weeks looking at his answer to that question in Romans 1:18-3:20 and his answer to that question can be summed up something like this, **"People need a righteousness from God because every single person on earth stands guilty before God and is under**

the weight of His relentless, abiding wrath and that guilt has come upon mankind because it has suppressed the truth about God and violated His law.”

Paul goes on to say that this guilt before God is just as widespread among the Jews as it is among the non-Jews, the Gentiles. In fact, Paul argues that the law that made the religious Jews so confident was really given to them not to make them cocky but rather to expose their guilt before God for not keeping the law. You will remember the way he summarized things in Romans 3:19.

^{ESV} **Romans 3:19**...Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

I love that.

I love it because the phrase, **“that every mouth might be silenced”** is so stunningly visual. It paints a dreadful picture of a defendant confronted with such an overwhelming mountain of evidence regarding their guilt that they can do is just stand there with their mouth hanging open, speechless and dumbstruck. That gets to me perhaps because it has happened to me personally so many times.

Now it is only here, after painting his dark and dismal picture of man’s sinful standing before God, that Paul goes on to explain the glory of the gospel and the wonder of the imputed righteousness of Christ that Christians possess through faith in His work on the cross. He starts his explanation in 3:21 and really goes all the way to the end of chapter four. I hope 3:21 is burned into your memories.

^{ESV} **Romans 3:21**...But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it--

You see after Romans 3:21, Paul goes on to explain how Christ's righteousness is credited to sinners and what happens as a result. In doing that, Paul expands on the wonderful theological concept of imputation, but quickly adds that the idea of imputation was not really anything new. In fact, he explains that the concept of imputation was recognized and taught all through the Old Testament and that it was especially clear in regard to both Abraham and David. I know you remember those wonderful verses in chapter 4 where Paul says:

^{ESV} **Romans 4:3**...For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ⁷ "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."

Then, in chapter five, after Paul finished explaining how this wonderful righteousness of God is imputed to sinners through faith in Christ, he speaks of the benefits of standing justified before God in the borrowed righteousness of Jesus. You will remember, I hope, the end result of that standing before God in Romans 5:1.

^{ESV} **Romans 5:1**...Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Peace with God, can you imagine that? "**Justified sinners**" are at peace with God. That means we are no longer trying to win Him over but are now free to

obey Him without having to worry about whether our obedience will be good enough to keep us in His good favor. But that is not all. Paul adds another result of being at peace with God. It is that we can endure suffering. We can endure it because we are no longer God's enemies but are now reconciled to Him and since we are reconciled we are no longer fearful but filled with hope and anticipation for all He has intended for us. And this hope is so strong that we can even rejoice in our sufferings because we know that even our sufferings are moving us along toward maturity and glorification.

And then two weeks ago, we came at last to Romans 5:12-21. There, Paul introduces the idea of our **"union with Christ."** Now the idea of being **"in union with Christ"** is tremendously important; it is the basis for all the blessings we receive from God. It is the basis of the overthrow of all the terrible things that happened to mankind because of our **"union with Adam."** In fact, the rest of Paul's argument is really based on the fact that the whole world falls into one of two groups. That is, every man, woman, boy and girl is either in Christ or in Adam. I hope you will remember that wonderful quote from Thomas Goodwin who said:

In God's sight, there are two men—Adam and Jesus Christ—and these two men have all other men hanging at their girdle strings.¹

You see what Paul was promoting was the idea that these two archetypal men are mankind's only two representatives. In effect he was saying, **"You are either in Adam or in Christ. If you are in Adam, you are in the camp of sin and death. On the other hand, if Christ is your representative, the whole order of death and wrath has been overturned and that is so not because of your**

righteousness but rather because of what Christ has done for you.” In fact, Paul uses the metaphor of two kingdoms to help us consider the full extent of what has actually happened to us in Christ. Paul says, and I love this so, that we, **“have been transferred from the reign of death under Adam to the reign of grace under Christ.”**

The **“reign of grace,”** isn't that a wonderful phrase? You see we have been transferred out from under Satan's dominion and have been moved over under the reign of grace of the Lord Jesus. Now for Christians that is just about the most profoundly wonderful thought on earth. But you know what? It's a difficult concept. You can tell from the way Paul repeatedly illustrates it.

I smiled when I first wrote this lesson because I received an advertisement from the Trinity Book Service. The masthead on the front cover read like this:

**ARMY SENT TO LIBERATE OPPRESSED PEOPLE; FREED CITIZENS PULL
DOWN IMAGE OF DEFEATED TYRANT; ENEMY REMAINS HIDDEN
WITHIN THE CITY²**

Now what does that bring to mind? Of course, the answer is Iraq. You don't have to be very clever to figure out that the advertisers at Trinity Book Service worded the heading just that way to make it sound like the situation in Iraq. But what they were actually advertising was a modern English rendition of a famous book by John Bunyan called, **“The Holy War.”** Bunyan's book, of course, is based upon this very thought here in Romans 5-8.

But there is a sense in which the situation in Iraq is very like the situation faced by every Christian, in every age. You see the people of Iraq are struggling to act

free and a part of that struggle is centered on coming to grips with the truth that the dominion of their oppressor has been broken. Part of the difficulty they face in being free, is just believing they are free and that is the same kind of struggle every Christian faces and clearly it was a struggle for many of those first century Christians working through the implications of Paul's gospel.

Now there is a bit of that in the argument of Romans 6:1-14. You'll remember that Paul acted as if he had some imaginary listener posing this question, **"Paul, are you saying that since we are under grace we ought to just go ahead and sin the living daylights out of our lives so that grace of God will be shown to be all that much greater? Is that what you are saying Paul?"**

I know you remember Paul's answer, **"God forbid! That is not what I am saying at all. In fact, that kind of statement betrays a thoroughly gummed up or muddled way of thinking. So don't think like that. Instead, think like this. That is, think of yourselves as dead to sin because you are in union with Christ. You are united to Him in His death and you are united to Christ in His life and all is made clear by the very practical illustration of your baptism?"**

You see in Romans 6:1 Paul raised the question:

^{ESV} **Romans 6:1**...What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

In Romans 6: 15, he asks a bit of a different question. There he asks:

^{ESV} **Romans 6:15**...What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

Do you see how similar the two ideas are?³ Still, the first verse is a little different in that it focuses on the extent of our sin and seems to be asking, **“Does that mean we ought to sin with abandon just so we can promote the graciousness of grace?”** The second verse, on the other hand, seems to focus on our being out from under the bondage of the law and seems to ask, **“Now that we are finished with the law does that mean we can we just keep on sinning?”** Of course, that question comes up in 6:15 because of something Paul says in 6:14. You see Paul there says this:

^{ESV} **Romans 6:14**...For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

I think you can that because of that Paul seems to be anticipating an objection or at very least a question about what it means to no longer be under law. Does being out from under the law mean that we are free to ignore the demands of the law? Does that mean that the commands like **“no murder”**, **“no adultery”** and **“no stealing”** no longer apply?

Does it mean that believers can go ahead and sin with impunity because they are no longer under law? Or does it mean that some other law, perhaps the law of Christ, has been introduced that is a kinder, gentler sort of law. Or does it mean that when it comes to standing justified before God, we are no longer under the impossible burden of the law but under grace? Now, of course, it means this last thing and that is very much in keeping with the whole theme of Romans. Paul is interested, and you must keep this mind all the way through Romans, in justification and the implications of justification and the outworking of justification and the life of a justified person.

Now finally let me make one more point and we will come at last to our verses, Romans 6:15-7:6, and that point is that the structure of Romans 6-7 is built around three questions. If you keep these three questions in mind, you will get a very good sense of what Paul is arguing. Last week we saw him answer this question, **“Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?”** And Paul’s answer was, **“No way, we are dead to sin!”** This week, Paul is asking the question, **“Shall we sin because we are no longer under law but under grace?”** And his answer is, **“No way! Just because we are no longer under law doesn’t mean that we are detached. In fact, you ought to think of it as having a new master or perhaps a new husband.”** Next week, we’ll get to Paul’s answer to a third question in this section and this is it, **“Are you saying then the law of God is sinful?”** I think you can anticipate what the answer will be.

Now, let’s look at Romans 6:15-23. What we are going to see is that Paul is going to make the point that we cannot live just any old way we choose. We cannot do that because we have been transferred from one slave master to another. We have been transferred from the ownership of a slave master named **“sin”** to the ownership of the slave master named **“God.”** Because that is true, we must seek to obey the law of God and we are actually free to do just that.

Next week, we are going to see in almost exactly the same way that Paul is going to make the point in 7:1-6 that we are free from our old relationship to the law just like a widow is free from her relationship to a formerly abusive husband who has died. Because he is dead, she does not have to satisfy him or kowtow to him at all. In fact, she is free from his dominion and from his abuse forever and is free to take up a new relationship and marry another and bear fruit with Him.

Now, those are the two illustrations Paul is going to use to explain our relationship to sin, a new master and a new husband. But you must remember that they are just illustrations and that is all. They are not exact parallels and are not intended to be exact parallels. They are illustrations and at some point break down in their usefulness to express the glory of our new standing before God. The safety is keeping the three analogies together, as a group, because when considered together they give us a balanced straightforward view of the wonder of what has happened to us in Christ. Now, that having been said, let's look finally at Romans 6:15-23.

^{ESV} **Romans 6:15**...What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

Paul's answer to that is question is very simple, "**Of course not!**" I think sometimes we read right past his response minimizing Paul's emphasis. It's really, "**May it never be!**" A few commentators even render it as, "**God forbid!**" My personal favorite is J.B. Phillips' paraphrase, "**What a terrible thought!**"⁴

Now in verse 16, Paul is going to explain why we cannot continue on in sin. But he is going to do that by using a general principle, almost a proverb to illustrate his point. Listen to what he says.

^{ESV} **Romans 6:16**...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?

Now don't you love that? There is something about that that is wonderfully homey. There is, and I mean this reverently, a sense in which it is almost folksy.

But don't lose his point because of that. In fact, how would you restate Paul's point? I mean what is it that Paul is saying? He is saying that you are a slave to the one you choose to obey. He is saying that you are either a slave to sin and are on your way to death, and by death here, he means hell or you are a slave to obedience and on your way to increasing righteousness and heaven. There is no third category.

Now, I think that is a point that really needs to be hammered all over again. There is no third category. A person is either in Adam or in Christ. A person is either a slave to sin or a slave to obedience. I love this little illustration Ray Stedman includes in his commentary on Romans. He writes this:

Some years ago in Los Angeles I saw a man walking down the street with a sign on his shoulders. The front of it said, **"I'M A SLAVE FOR CHRIST."** On the back of it, as he passed, you read, **"WHOSE SLAVE ARE YOU?"** It is a good question because all of us are slaves to one or the other of these two masters – sin or righteousness. We have no other choices.⁵

Paul does one other thing here to make this particular point emphatic. You see Paul switches gears and changes the contrast that he has been making to something else. You see Paul switches the contrast in verse 16 from **"sin"** and **"God"** to **"sin"** and **"obedience."**⁶ That is a pretty dramatic thing to do. Do you see what I mean? In verse 13, his contrast is between sin and God.

^{ESV} **Romans 6:13**...Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

In verse 23, his contrast is also between **"sin"** and **"God."**

^{ESV} **Romans 6:23**...For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But in verse 16, just where you expect Paul to say, **“You are either a slave to sin or a slave to God”** he doesn’t say it that way. Instead, he says, **“You are either a slave to sin or a slave to obedience.”** Now, the question is why does he do that?

Obviously, he does it to be emphatic. Of course, when he says **“slaves of obedience”** he means **“slaves of obedience to God”** and that is true even though the word **“God”** is not actually in the text. I think you have to say that because if ask the question, **“O.K., we are slaves to obedience, but obedient to whom?”** the answer has to be God. That is, we are duty bound to do what God says we are to do.⁷ Still, the way Paul put it makes it clear that obedience is crucial.⁸ Some commentators try to smooth it all out by saying that Paul doesn’t really mean **“obedience”** here but really means **“to believe.”** That is, that we are either **“slaves to sin”** or we are **“slaves connected to God by believing.”** And certainly, there is a sense in which that is true. But the problem with that is that changing the word **“obedience”** to the word **“believe”** really downplays the whole slave metaphor that Paul has purposely chosen to make this emphatic statement about Christian behavior. Listen to what Boice says:

One reason why Paul uses the word *obedience* is that it carries through the he has been developing, namely that of being a slave either to sin or Jesus Christ. It is the function of a slave to obey his or her master. But the use of the term goes beyond this, since obedience is an essential requirement of all who would follow Christ. And not just afterward, as if we are first to believe and then to obey. Obedience is the very essence of believing. It is what belief is all about.⁹

You see that is the point. There is no such thing in the world as an autonomous, independent, go their own way, Christian. A person that just goes his or her own way, in disobedience to Christ without shame or guilt, without any appreciation for the reign of grace in Christ is not a slave to obedience. That person is a slave to sin. I mean didn't Jesus make that crystal clear when he said:

^{ESV} **John 8:34**...Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

And it is the same thing where He said:

^{ESV} **John 14:15**..."If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Now I hate to belabor the point and I am not advocating sinless perfection or anything like that but I want to make sure I am understood here because I know someone will ask, **"Are you saying that Christians really and truly want to live godly lives and want to obey Christ and are sick with grief and shame when they do not?"** Yes, that is what I am saying.

And someone will also ask, **"Are you saying that a person that lives their life in the selfish pursuit of their own lusts is not a Christian but is instead a 'slave to sin' even if they may have made a profession of faith and have walked an aisle some place?"** Yes, that is what I am saying.

And finally, someone will ask, **"Are you saying that all Christian lives look alike?"** No, I am not saying that at all. Sanctification or Christian growth starts where a person lives. The spiritual growth of genteel stiffly starched, moralistic

southern belle will look a lot different than the sanctification of a New Orleans streetwalker but the affection for Christ and the desire to please Him will look very much the same. Now look at verse 17 where Paul breaks into joyous praise on behalf of the Romans.

^{ESV} **Romans 6:17**...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.

Now, I only want to make two observations here. First, the obedience of the Romans was wholehearted. That means that it produced an emotive affection and response. Secondly, they obeyed a form of teaching. I think that means the teaching had form or content. Here's my point. Paul is not describing here some sort of empty-headed emotionalism; nor is he describing some sort of stodgy scholasticism. Rather, what he is grateful for is that the Romans obeyed a form of teaching and that form of teaching impacted both their hearts and their minds.

The other thing I want you to notice is that they were entrusted to a form of teaching rather than having a form of teaching entrusted to them. Do you see what I mean? Normally, you expect teaching to be entrusted to a person but here Paul says the Romans were entrusted to a form of teaching and that they wound up being transformed by it. I think Paul is speaking here of the gospel and I think he is alluding back to the point he made at the very beginning of Romans. You see the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. In the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed that changes hearts and lives. It changes lives by changing men's status before God and then works itself out in converting their hearts to a

living, visible obedience based upon gratitude and affection for what Christ has done.

Now look at verse 19.

^{ESV} **Romans 6:19**...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. 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.

I am so grateful to God for the inclusion here of verse 19. You see what Paul says is, **“I have cast this whole discussion in a manner that you will be able to understand. That is, I have used the illustration of slavery to make clear what I mean and what I mean is, stop acting like slaves to sin and start acting like what you are, the blood bought servants of Jesus Christ.”**

Now the last verse, verse 23, is especially precious to me. I grew up in Arlington and my family used to attend a little fundamentalist, Baptist church over on the corner of Division and Davis. Our church only had about a hundred members but we did have a gigantic billboard, as big as any billboard out on Interstate 30 today. That billboard was right up against our church building, it basically covered our church up, and it faced directly west on Division. That meant that anybody driving into Arlington from Ft. Worth on Division, which used to be the

only way you get into Arlington from Ft. Worth, had to read it. That billboard only ever had one verse on it and this was it.

Now we took a great deal of pride in the proclamation of the truth contained in that verse and I don't mean that in any sort of snotty way at all. Our church was not ashamed of the gospel and it was not afraid to hammer the reality God's judgment upon sin. But I have to tell you I grew up because of that billboard thinking the emphasis of Romans 6:23 was on the first part of the verse. That is, I thought that Paul's emphasis was on the fact that **"the wages of sin is death."**

But you see the emphasis is on the last part of the verse. The whole section has been devoted to helping the Romans understand that they cannot live just however they want. They are **"slaves to obedience"** and no longer **"slaves to sin."** The result of that is that they have a new master and a new focus and the end of all that is that they have received the gift of God, which is eternal life. Paul is exhorting them to come up to what they are. I cannot tell you how important I think Paul's thought is here, how crucial it is to right view of the Christian life. But let me try to illustrate what I mean, by using a wonderful little story taken from Ken Burns' *The Civil War*. Near the end of the Civil War black soldiers began to view themselves for the first time in their lives as actual men. I think it was Shelby Foote who related the following in his deep, resonant Mississippi drawl:

Black soldiers took great pride in their new status as soldiers fighting for the freedom of their race. One *soldier* celebrated his newfound ability to **"walk fearlessly and boldly through the streets [of New Orleans]... without being required to take off his cap at every step."** Another found himself face to face with his former owner, now a prisoner of war and looked him straight in the eye

and something he would have never dreamed of saying before, **“Hello, Massa,”** he said, **“bottom rail on top now.”**¹⁰

Do you get that? And you ought not think of what this young black man says there as prideful. I don't think he was being indignant or mean at all. What he was doing was stating as plainly as he knew how that the status of things had changed. Where his white master had once exercised dominion over him, there was now freedom. His dominion and power had been broken and was now replaced with chains and shame. And that is Paul's point don't you think, **“Bottom rail on top now”** only that bottom rail is not just one person but every man, woman, boy and girl in Christ's Kingdom who has been redeemed from sin. We have a new master and a new calling and a new obligation to live in the reality of all that Christ has done for us. That means that you are called to live in keeping with who we are. Will you do it?

¹ F.F. Bruce, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Tyndale Press, 1963), 127.

² Trinity Book Service Catalog, September 2003, 1.

³ John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News For the World*, (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 182.

⁴ J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English* (New York: MacMillan, 1958; reprinted 1972), 319.

⁵ Ray C. Stedman, *Whose Slave are You: Romans 6:15-23 From the Guilt to Glory Series* (Palo Alto, California: Palo Alto Bible Church, 1976), 93.

⁶ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans: Volume 1, Introduction and Commentary on Romans 1-8* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975; reprint, 1992), 322.

⁷ John Calvin, *Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 235. “The language is not strictly correct; for if he wished to have the clauses correspondent, he would have said, “or of righteousness unto life.” But as the change in the words does not prevent the understanding of the subject, he preferred to express what righteousness is by the word *obedience*; in which however there is a metonymy, for it is to be taken for the very commandments of God; and by mentioning this without addition, he

intimated that it is God alone, to whose authority consciences ought to be subject. Obedience then, though the name of God is suppressed, is yet to be referred to him, for it cannot be a divided obedience.”

⁸ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* in the New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 399. Moo writes, “In this contrast, it is surprising to find sin and obedience rather than sin and God (cf. v. 22) or sin and righteousness (cf. vv. 18, 20) as the competing “masters.” “Obedience” here obviously has a positive meaning, as opposed to the neutral meaning earlier in the verse (“slaves for obedience”). Some interpreters think that “obedience” here refers mainly to the act of believing rather than to moral activity. Support for this is found in the formula “the obedience of faith” (cf. 1:5), and in the following verse where, it is claimed, “obedience” may also mean basically “accept in faith.” But this interpretation moves too far from the meaning of “obedience” earlier in the verse and does not square with Paul’s obvious interest in concrete behavior. Paul is out to emphasize the significance of obedience in the Christian life, in a context where such an emphasis is necessary to counter a false libertinism. The freedom of the Christian is not freedom to do what one wants, but freedom to obey God — willingly, joyfully, naturally. “Obedience,” says Calvin, “is the mother of true knowledge of God.”

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans Volume 2: Reign of Grace, Romans 5-8* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 695.

¹⁰ Geoffrey C. Ward, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History Based On A Documentary Filmscript by Geoffrey C. Ward, Ric Burns and Ken Burns* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1990), 253.