

Romans 6:15-7:6
Working toward Eternal Life

Main idea: Whether as a slave or a bride, we are to be devoted to Jesus.

In the parable of the unforgiving servant, a king forgave one of his servants a huge debt.¹ But upon being forgiven, the servant went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a much smaller amount, grabbed him, choked him, and demanded to be paid back. When the king heard about this, the king called his first servant back to him, and said to him:

You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Shouldn't you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you? (Matthew 18:32-33)

We saw in Romans the week before last that it's a complete misunderstanding of God's grace to think that we can sin so that grace may abound.² To think that way is to treat grace as merely a transaction in which we get what we want from God, but then go on with our lives without being changed.

Jesus concluded the parable like this:

Because he was angry, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay everything that was owed. So also my heavenly Father will do to you unless every one of you forgives his brother or sister from your heart. (Matthew 18:34-35)

You see, God wants our hearts to change. He doesn't want us to see salvation as just a transaction in which we get what we want. God wants us to be transformed.³ And there are real consequences if we refuse to be transformed.⁴ God doesn't want us to change because we feel like we need to earn something, but because we recognize ourselves as completely different from who we used to be, because we are.⁵

It's the difference between life and death.⁶ It's the difference between living in darkness, and living in light.⁷ And this week, we're going to see with two analogies that it's the difference between serving ourselves, or serving God.

Who is your master? When you received Jesus, you received Him as your Lord and Savior. I think if we're honest, we would all say that we like the Savior part. That's fun! That's beneficial to us! That means all our sins are forgiven. But do you like the Lord part?

We should. Having Jesus as Lord means that we have the very best Master that we could ask for. He's kind. He loves us. He's the King who sacrifices for His subjects. We ought to be eager to embrace Jesus not just as our Savior, but as our Lord.⁸

¹ Matthew 18:21-35

² Romans 6:1-14

³ Romans 12:1-2

⁴ Matthew 25:44-46

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:17

⁶ Ephesians 2:1-10

⁷ 1 John 1:5-10

⁸ Luke 2:11

But in our flesh, we often want to cast off the Lordship of Christ and just have Him as our Savior. But that wouldn't be a correct picture of our new relationship with God.⁹ And, it wouldn't even be a correct picture of what it means to have Jesus as Savior. Yes, we're free in Christ, but we should also see ourselves as God's slaves.¹⁰

We should not consider ourselves to be free to live however we please. Instead, we should see ourselves as free from sin. We're free to live according to the righteousness that God now covers us with.¹¹

We're going to see this from Scripture today in two chunks. First, the end of Romans 6.

What then? Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? Absolutely not! Don't you know that if you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of that one you obey—either of sin leading to death or of obedience leading to righteousness? But thank God that, although you used to be slaves of sin, you obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching to which you were handed over, and having been set free from sin, you became enslaved to righteousness. I am using a human analogy because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you offered the parts of yourselves as slaves to impurity, and to greater and greater lawlessness, so now offer them as slaves to righteousness, which results in sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free with regard to righteousness. So what fruit was produced then from the things you are now ashamed of? The outcome of those things is death. But now, since you have been set free from sin and have become enslaved to God, you have your fruit, which results in sanctification—and the outcome is eternal life! For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:15-23)

Father, help us no longer to cling to our sin, which leads to death, but help us instead to live the life that You've given us by grace through faith. So thank You for Jesus. In Jesus's name, Amen.

At the beginning of verse 15, we see another one of those strong “absolutely not” declarations. Shall we sin because we're not under the law but under grace? By no means! God forbid! Absolutely not! Just substitute the strongest way of saying “no” that you can think of.

And yet, this is how our brains sometimes work. We think, “Oh, I'm forgiven! I don't really need to follow God's commands in the Old Testament, or even the New, because God has released me from the burden of the law.” But I hope that God convicts all of us this morning that this is not how a saved person thinks! A saved person ought to think about how righteous we can live, not about how unrighteous we can acceptably live.

I was originally going to title my last sermon, “Shall We Sin, Part 1,” and this week's sermon, “Shall We Sin, Part 2.” Because from the beginning of Romans 6 all the way through the beginning of Romans 7, it contains several arguments as to why it's completely inconsistent for people who have trusted in Jesus to continue in sin. But instead, I titled the last sermon, “Alive from the Dead,” because that's truly what we are when we receive Jesus, and this week's sermon, “Working toward Eternal Life,” which may confuse you. It confuses me, too, actually, because it doesn't neatly fit with our theology, and yet it comes straight out of our Scripture passage this morning.

I found it interesting that Paul wrote in verse 22 that the outcome of sanctification is eternal life. We would expect to read that the outcome of grace or the outcome of salvation is eternal life. That fits our theology better,

⁹ 2 Peter 2:20

¹⁰ Galatians 5:13

¹¹ Galatians 5:1

because we know that we can't earn eternal life.¹² And yet, Paul writes here that sanctification leads to eternal life.

Sanctification is the process through which we cooperate with God, so that we gradually become more obedient to Him.¹³ It's the actual process in which we have to deny ourselves.¹⁴ We have to turn from sin, not just in our mind, but in our actions. Sanctification is hard! And Paul writes that this process, which we definitely have a role in, leads to eternal life.

Now, because we know that salvation is by grace, how do we reconcile these things? I can think of two ways, and I think there's merit to both of them.

First, we should remember that heaven is not full of sinners. It's full of saints.¹⁵ It's full of people who God has cleansed and transformed through Jesus's sacrifice so that we no longer desire unrighteousness, but righteousness. So as we seek to be obedient to God here, we gradually become more like the person who we will be in heaven.¹⁶

But second, we should also remember that eternal life isn't just about heaven one day. It's about joy here, today. And if you're more obedient to God, you'll have more joy in Him.

In John 17:3, Jesus prayed this:

This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and the one you have sent —Jesus Christ. (John 17:3)

So eternal life isn't just about where we go, it's about who we know. According to John 17:3, eternal life isn't just a result of knowing Jesus, it is knowing Jesus. And that starts in this life.

The opposite is also true. We often think of condemnation to hell as being the punishment for those who don't receive Jesus before they die.¹⁷ But Jesus said that those who don't know Him are already condemned. John 3:36.

Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God. (John 3:18)

So condemnation isn't something that happens to unbelievers when they die. It's something that continues when they die, because they already stood condemned, as we all did before we received Jesus. And eternal life doesn't start when believers die. It's something that continues when we die, because we already have eternal life by knowing and trusting in Jesus.

And yet, we don't always live as if we have eternal life, do we?¹⁸ In fact, we often live as if we're still condemned and stuck in our sin, because we still so often cling to our sin.

¹² Ephesians 2:8-9

¹³ John 17:17, 2 Timothy 2:21

¹⁴ Matthew 16:24

¹⁵ Jesus does this for us. 1 John 1:9

¹⁶ Matthew 25:37-40

¹⁷ Hebrews 9:27

¹⁸ Romans 7:15

So our Scripture passage this morning uses two analogies to encourage us to break free from this pattern of sin. First, as we read, is the analogy of slavery.

Look at verse 16 again.

Don't you know that if you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of that one you obey—either of sin leading to death or of obedience leading to righteousness? But thank God that, although you used to be slaves of sin, you obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching to which you were handed over, and having been set free from sin, you became enslaved to righteousness.
(Romans 6:16-18)

So, who is your master? Are you obeying sin, leading to death, or Jesus, leading to righteousness?

You know, a slave doesn't have a choice in the matter. If a person is a slave, they are owned by their master, and their master decides what they do. By nature, we were slaves to sin.¹⁹ Before Jesus saved us, we sinned because we were sinners. That's who we were, and that's what we did. But now, if you've received Jesus as your Savior and Lord, you should no longer see yourself as a slaves to sin, but as a slave to righteousness.

It's kind of like a tadpole becoming a frog. As a tadpole, it is confined exclusively to swimming in water. But when it becomes a frog, it comes up out of the water, like a baptism, and it can begin to live a new life, free from its earlier restrictions.

God desires that we leave our old lives of sin, and live new lives of righteousness. But that often means leaving things that feel comfortable, like the tadpole in water, or sitting in a pew, so that God might use us in scary and exciting new ways as we walk with Him, having Jesus as our Lord.²⁰

And God doesn't want you to do this reluctantly, but joyfully.²¹ Note that Paul writes that as God transforms you, you begin to obey not merely out of duty, but as it says in verse 17, you obey from the heart. That means that you want to obey God. You love to obey God.²² You eagerly begin to not only read the Bible, but do what it says because God has set you free, and yet you joyfully choose to become God's servant.

Our second chunk of Scripture this morning is going to give us another analogy of how we should see our new life in Jesus. Romans chapter 7.

Since I am speaking to those who know the law, brothers and sisters, don't you know that the law rules over someone as long as he lives? For example, a married woman is legally bound to her husband while he lives. But if her husband dies, she is released from the law regarding the husband. So then, if she is married to another man while her husband is living, she will be called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law. Then, if she is married to another man, she is not an adulteress. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you also were put to death in relation to the law through the body of Christ so that you may belong to another. You belong to him who was raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions aroused through the law were working in us to bear fruit for death. But now we have been released from the law, since we have died to what held us, so that we may serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the old letter of the law. (Romans 7:1-6)

¹⁹ John 8:34

²⁰ Galatians 5:16-18

²¹ Psalm 100:2

²² Matthew 22:37

Before we received Jesus, it's like we were married to sin. For the Jews, that meant that no matter how much they tried to obey the Hebrew law, the law only proved how sinful they were, because they failed to obey it perfectly.²³ And that's true of us, too. No matter how good we try to be, no matter how good we think we are, outside of faith in Jesus, our greatest acts of righteousness are filthy rags in light of God's holiness and perfect standard.²⁴ So without God's grace, we would all rightly be condemned to hell, because we've all sinned.

But when we received Jesus, we died. Or, to be more accurate, we realized we were dead.²⁵ Therefore, God raised us up and claimed us as His own. We don't belong to sin anymore. We don't belong to death. We don't even belong to the law, as if the law has the final say over us. No, Jesus claimed us as His own, and we belong to Him.²⁶

We saw at the end of chapter 6 that this means we should consider ourselves as slaves to righteousness. Slaves, who serve Jesus because He's our Lord. But at the beginning of chapter 7, we see that we're not just Jesus's slaves, but His spouse.

So what are you married to? And I'm not just asking about what you're emotionally attached to, but in terms of your actual life, when you look at how you live, who or what are you devoted to?

If I were to say to my wife, "Abby, I love you, but I'm going to keep playing the field," what would she say to me? She'd tell me, "That's not love!" Right? And yet, that's how a lot of us treat God! We say that we love Him, we say that we're married to Him, to use this analogy, and yet we continue to play the field. We continue to act like we're still married to our sin, or I've even heard of Christians continuing to dabble with other religions, as if they're trying to hedge their bets. But Jesus said very clearly in John 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

We need to be all in with Jesus. We're to give ourselves first to the Lord.²⁷ He calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him.²⁸ That means we need to die to everything else. Die to your sin. Die to other belief systems. Even die to your plans, your goals, your ambitions, so that you can truly come alive in Christ.

Church, you are the Bride of Christ.²⁹ Be devoted to Him.

I want to end with one more analogy, which isn't found in the Bible, but on YouTube.

[Clip of Takis Shelter]



²³ Romans 3:20

²⁴ Isaiah 64:6

²⁵ Ephesians 2:1-2

²⁶ Ephesians 2:13

²⁷ 2 Corinthians 8:5

²⁸ Matthew 16:24

²⁹ Ephesians 5:25-27, Revelation 19:7-8

You see, the dog's first master was evil, just like our first master was evil when we were enslaved to sin and Satan. And because of that, the dog thought that his new master was also evil. And sometimes we think God is just a big bully, so we fight against what He wants to do in us. But the good master loves the dog and is patient even when he bites. He knows he can win him over with love and time.

And even when we continue to sin against Him, God knows that He can win you over with love and time. God is love, so He wants to do it, and God is strong, so He's able to do it, just as Jesus said talking about going to the cross, "And if I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself."³⁰

Eventually, this dog became a new dog, a happier dog. And God wants you to be a new and happier you as you trust Him.³¹

So whether as a slave or a bride or a dog, we are to be devoted to our Master Jesus.

³⁰ John 12:32

³¹ Psalm 34:8