

# Freedom for Obedience

Jeremiah 28:5-9 | Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18 | Romans 6:12-23 | Matthew 10:40-24

## ROMANS 6:12-23

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. <sup>13</sup> No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. <sup>14</sup> For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. <sup>15</sup> What then? Should we 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, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, <sup>18</sup> and that you, 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 greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. <sup>20</sup> When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. <sup>21</sup> So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. <sup>22</sup> But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is 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.

## INTRODUCTION

Most of you will not know that I am a wingnut, a term used of fans of a now somewhat older television show called the West Wing. It's been off the air for 17 years, but I think about it often, in part because it painted such an idealized, romantic picture of American politics—red or blue—that appealed to our highest and noblest aspirations, where intelligence and virtue reigned—exactly like reality today. Toward the end of the third season, there is a strange little dialogue between the President and his psychiatrist.

President: Let me ask you something. Is there a crime, which if it wasn't illegal, you'd do?  
 Psychiatrist: I'd park anywhere I wanted to.  
 President: Right, but you wouldn't rob a bank?  
 Psychiatrist: No.<sup>1</sup>

I wonder the same thing for you and for me. What crime, which if it wasn't illegal, would you do? Or better yet, what crime, even though it is illegal, do you do? I think I would set fire to the MA35—of course at night when nobody is around or will get hurt.

This morning, we shall take a look at the Romans 6 reading, a complex passage about the interplay between the law and obedience. For those of you who were in the *Soundings* session this last Tuesday, you will have heard a decent amount of Romans already and this will hopefully add a dimension to what was discussed. But for everyone, we will consider the Apostle Paul's argument here in light of the whole book. And this is what I think we will see:

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Sorkin, "Posse Comitatus," in *The West Wing* (Season 3, Episode 22).

*Our freedom from the law—from religious requirements—is freedom to obey Christ. Our freedom from the law is freedom to obey Christ. And in the course of making this argument, he begins with a question. He then answers the question using an illustration, explaining how the Romans came to be and so are free to live in a particular way. Question. Illustration. Let's take a look.*

## 1. QUESTION

Skipping the first few verses of our passage for a moment, Paul begins with a rhetorical question in verse 15. He asks: *“What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace?”*<sup>2</sup> Paul has been explaining the basics of the faith throughout the book up to this point, centred around the three concepts in this question, so let's consider what precisely he means by them here.

Sin, right there at the beginning, is all the evil that humans do. It is our bad deeds and thoughts, our rebellion against God, our wicked ways. And indeed, all humans are sinful.<sup>3</sup> Sin permeates our very being, from birth to death. It is overwhelming and inescapable.<sup>4</sup> The very image of God in us, is marred by sin. In fact, this is what he argues in the first three chapters: all humanity is universally sinful. And so, all humanity is hopeless.

Throughout these preceding chapters, Paul not only addresses the concept of sin and its universal hold on humanity, but he also addresses the concept of the law—a way of talking about the revealed Word of God. In Romans, the law has many functions. But in this section, it has two primary functions, to reveal sin and to show us a plan for righteousness. Firstly, the requirements of God's Word show us how far we fall short of perfection. Listen to how Paul puts in chapter 3: *“For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.”*<sup>5</sup> Listen to that last phrase again: *“through the law comes the knowledge of sin.”* The law reveals to us our sin, and so, because of the universality of sin, reveals the whole world to be accountable to God in our transgressions. This is the hopeless estate of humanity.

Except, then there is also the gospel of Jesus Christ—the third concept in that question from Romans 6, captured in the word *grace*. In Romans 3, Paul explains that though *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”* those who believe *“are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”*<sup>6</sup> Through faith, we can be the recipients of God's grace and not face the consequences of our sin. It is not by our own merit or work, not by our own efforts, but by his grace. It is something we neither deserve nor earned. And it is accessed through faith.

Given all this, we are now able to understand Paul's question. He's wrestling with the notion that we, who are no longer bound by the law that reveals our sin, are tempted to use that grace as an excuse to keep sinning. If we no longer have rules or laws telling us what to do, should we keep living in sin? And what is his answer? The most emphatic *no* possible. *“By no means!” May it never be! Absolutely not! Simply put: No!*

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<sup>2</sup> Rom 6:15.

<sup>3</sup> He's just explained in the previous chapter, Romans 5, that through Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden back in Genesis 3, all humans are now tainted by the corruption of sin. Rom 5:12-21. Cf. Gen 3:1-21.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, all of creation is tainted by sin, as we will see in chapter 8. See Rom 8:19-21.

<sup>5</sup> Rom 3:20.

<sup>6</sup> Rom 3:23-24.

## 2. ILLUSTRATION AND EXPLANATION

Why? He goes on to explain through an illustration in the following verses, the metaphor of *slavery*. That is a difficult word for a lot of us given the last few hundred years of history and race relations in my home country and here in Europe. So, I need to be clear about a few things. Firstly, the picture of slavery he paints is first, and foremost, a metaphor. He's illustrating something. Secondly, the kind of slavery being referenced is not that of trans-Atlantic, ethnicity-based, violently forced labour of an entire people. In Rome, at this point in history, there is another kind of slavery, a kind of indentured servitude. Paul is contemplating, as the metaphor makes clear, a person who would voluntarily enslave themselves, usually out of economic need, typically for a period of time or fixed amount of earnings. The metaphor, picking up in verse 17, then explains, very briefly: *"But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient.. and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness."*<sup>7</sup> They were slaves to sin, without hope. But then, through grace, they were freed from slavery to sin. The law which showed them their sin was no longer their masters because grace had saved them from the consequences of sin and its power of them. In other words, to continue sinning after being free from enslavement to sin—just because you're free from the law—is to re-enslave yourself the very thing from which grace freed you. That's the logic here. But it's not just freedom. With the rules and laws no longer binding, on what basis shall they live? No longer slaves to sin, they became slaves to righteousness instead. And this is to where he drives in his argument, picking up with verse 22: *"But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life."*<sup>8</sup> For those who have believed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, who know that his death is what has freed us from the power of sin, we are free from the law and from sin, free to offer ourselves to righteousness through obedience to God, and so gain life.

## 3. EXHORTATION

So what? Why does it matter? Paul applies his point in the first few verses of our passage.

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.<sup>9</sup>

If his argument is that we don't need to keep sinning, because we are free not just from the law but also sin, then his application is so beautifully logical and overwhelmingly simple. Stop. You have been brought from death to life, so stopping living like you're dead *in* sin, but start living like you're dead *to* sin, and alive in God. You have been made righteous through grace, so start living like it. You have been justified, so start living like. We don't need to keep sinning.

Indeed, if you have not before, perhaps today might just be the day for you to realise that you are in fact enslaved to sin and in need of grace. Only you know yourself, and are far more aware than anyone else of the breadth of secret sins, the inadequacies, the flaws in body and soul, the

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<sup>7</sup> Rom 6:17-18.

<sup>8</sup> Rom 6:22.

<sup>9</sup> Rom 6:12-14.

exhaustion and contemptibility of your being. Know that there is light in the dark. Come and believe. Christ died for us. So, if you have not already, put your faith in him. Repent and believe. And you will no longer be enslaved to sin. You'll be free to live in obedience to Christ.

If you do have faith already, there is an opportunity today to commit yourself once again to putting sin behind you, to living in the hope of resurrection. Just as Christ died for us, we must put to death the self-justifying Christian that is inside each of us. We must not let our freedom be the excuse to let lingering sinful impulses, habitual sins and temptations, persist—including the temptation to park anywhere you want or commit arson against a government agency—which I would never do, by the way, just in case they are listening. It includes all the sins we hide from our loved ones as well as the things we try to justify to ourselves and everyone around us. It includes the sins that have become socially acceptable—the ones we love and can't stop. If the Word of God has revealed to you a sin and you do anything other than repent and run from it, if you try to justify it or count on grace to keep saving you while you embrace it, then we might as well have stayed slaves to sin. And believe me, I'm sympathetic. It's so easy to justify these sins. After all, nobody's perfect. But deep down, they are the ones that make us feel like we are in prison, the ones beyond our control, like they are a part of our nature. But don't cheapen what Christ did in the cross, giving his life to release from slavery to sin, by continuing to sin just because you think you're free from the law. No, Paul would have us to remember: *Our freedom from the law—from religious requirements—is freedom to obey Christ.*

## CONCLUSION

German theologian and Nazi-dissident, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, reflecting in part on this chapter of Romans and what it takes to live out the faith, famously wrote:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.<sup>10</sup>

When we continue in sin, dear friends, trying to hide behind freedom from the law, and forgetting that we are no longer slaves to sin, but free to be obedient to Christ, we make his grace cheap. Let us, as Paul exhorted us, present ourselves *“to God as those who have been brought from death to life.”*<sup>11</sup>

Let me pray: *May almighty God, who has given us a desire to follow Christ, give us the strength to continue in that way—helping us to present ourselves as obedient to Christ. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>10</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1937), 44-45.

<sup>11</sup> Rom 6:12.