

You Gotta Serve Somebody

Romans 6:15–23 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION: The year was around 1991, Mrs. Elaine Russell was given the extraordinary task of teaching me Algebra. As you may know, I work relatively well with words and ideas, but I struggle with numbers. In the first week of class, she introduced us to the concept of variables, which made sense to me, but then came *exponents* and *polynomials with variables*, which just seemed cruel.

I was working on my homework, and then I discovered it - down in the lower left of the page, in tiny print, upside down, were all the answers. I thought this had to be a trick; perhaps they are the wrong answers. But how would I know? So I used that little key, filled in the answers, and delivered it to Mrs. Russell the next day.

I will never forget what she said - she said, Mr. Terry, I couldn't care less about the answers; in fact, I gave them to you - I want to see the work. So the next day, I drew a line on the answer key to mark my work, which didn't please her either.

CONTEXT: Romans 6:15 is beginning to introduce us to the “**work**” of Christianity. Now, let me be clear - these first 6 chapters have gone to great lengths to prove that the **ANSWER** has already been provided, in that Christ has placed himself on the right side of the equation. So, **Justification** and **Redemption** are entirely His work.

Sanctification, on the other hand, is a cooperation with the Holy Spirit. It is the gradual process of becoming more like Christ throughout one's life. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 are about **showing your work**.

Martin Lloyd-Jones spent eight years on Romans 6-8, and he said chapter 6 is “*the chapter of all chapters (in the entire bible) that shows us the way to true liberty.*”

The last time we were together, Paul began to anticipate his critics' response. Ok Paul, if Jesus paid it all, and if where sin has abounded, grace has much more abounded, why not sin all we can, so that God's grace abounds all the more, thus bringing even greater glory to God? It was the common **reductio ad absurdum**, that is, to suggest that a proposition leads to an absurd or even contradictory conclusion. Paul answered that critique with the strongest language short of cursing in the Greek lexicon. God forbid! Or may it never be! Verse 14 introduces a different question - but Paul again employs the same answer.

1. Different Questions, Same Answer

Romans 6:1 (ESV)

¹ What shall we say then? Are we to **continue** in sin that grace may abound?

And Paul answered that question from God's side of our salvation. He took us down into the grave and up out of it again: we were united with Christ in His death and resurrection; the old self was crucified; the dominion of sin was broken. We cannot go on living in what we have died to.

Now look closely at verse 15, because Paul is not simply repeating himself.

Romans 6:15–23 (ESV)

¹⁵ What then? Are we **to sin** because we are not under law but under grace?

The question has shifted.

- Verse 1 asked about **continuing in sin** — persisting, abiding, settling down in it.
- Verse 15 asks a more subtle question: **may we sin — an act here, an act there — since we are not under law but under grace?**

GREEK NOTE: The two questions differ by **a single Greek tense**. This is complicated because verb tense doesn't mean the same in Greek as it does in English grammar.

- In verse 1, epi-menō-men (ἐπιμένωμεν), is a **present active sub-junctive**: "Shall we continue/remain in sin?" The present tense-form has **imperfective aspect**. It views the action from the inside, as something on going.
- In verse 15 he switches to the **ao-rist tense** — ha-martē-sōmen (ἁμαρτήσωμεν), "shall we commit an act of sin?" Here, the **ao-rist has a perfective aspect**. It views the action from the outside, as a whole, without emphasizing its continuation or internal progress.

It's the difference between a **permanent** residence and a **temporary** residence. In other words, since grace abounds, can we toy with sin? Allow for a sin here or there? Paul's answer is exactly the same.

^{15b} **By no means!**

ILLUSTRATION: We have all seen clips this week of the trial of **Tyler Robinson**, the man accused of killing Charlie Kirk. We've heard Erica weeping as the evidence was presented. Now, let's suppose that Tyler Robinson is sentenced to life in prison. Would it make any sense at all for Erica Kirk to ask the Judge how much time she will be allowed to spend with Tyler? No, you don't negotiate visiting hours with your husband's murderer. God forbid!

But Paul says that is what is happening when a Christian asks, "How much sin can I get away with?"

¹⁶ Do you not know (In other words, I presumed you understood this already. This is VBS-level comprehension in Paul's world.)

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?

Different Questions, Same Answer, secondly...

2. Different Masters, Same Slave

ILLUSTRATION: I can say something that very few pastors can say. One time, I was almost kicked out of a Bob Dylan Concert. That's a story for another day. But I will tell you today that, at that concert, Bob Dylan was introduced as a man who had given his life to Jesus Christ in 1978, after a fan threw a silver cross onstage. The following year he wrote these words:

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
 Well, it may be the Devil or it may be the Lord
 But you're gonna have to serve somebody

You may be a rock 'n' roll addict, prancing on the stage
 Money, drugs at your command, women in a cage
 You may be a businessman or some high degree thief
 They may call you doctor or they may call you chief

But you're gonna have to serve somebody

Dylan was right - he was saying, in essence, what Paul is saying here. You are serving somebody. Salvation is not a transaction you walk away from. It is a union you live within. The saved man is a bride to a Bridegroom, a branch in a Vine, a stone set upon a Foundation, a body joined to its Head.

Ask whether the bride may live as though unmarried, and you have not raised an interesting question about the marriage; you have only revealed that you do not know what a marriage is.

Paul is not the storyteller that Jesus was - Paul rarely illustrates his doctrine as vividly as he does here. In fact, in Romans, this is the first true Metaphor he has provided. But the illustration is that of **SLAVERY**. It was something that every single Roman could understand.

NOW, it was similar in some ways and very different in others from the Chattel Slavery of Pre-Civil War America. Roman Slavery was something that a person may, at times,

willingly prefer to a life of freedom.

ILLUSTRATION: In Paul's day, there were no pensions, no unemployment benefits, no safety net of any kind. A man facing starvation, or crushed by a debt he could never repay, would go to a wealthy household and offer himself. ***"I will be your slave. Feed me, house me, and I will obey you."*** A man might sell himself for five years, or ten, to work off what he owed. It was voluntary. It was understandable. And it was total — because the moment the bargain was struck, that master owned him.

Something similar happened occasionally during reconstruction in our own country. A slave owner would address his enslaved population, he would announce that the war is over, they are legally emancipated by constitutional amendment, and they are free to go and do as they please. However, what were they to do? They had been trained to do one thing: serve the old Master. In time, the government offered them some land to farm, but what about the tools for farming? Who would provide the mules, the cattle, etc?

So what often happened was they would offer themselves back to the old master as freedmen, because that seemed to be the only viable path forward.

NOW, Paul says, that is exactly what some of you are doing if you toy with sin. You are negotiating visitation privileges back on the Plantation.

One Commentator put it this way: in the great war between sin and God, there is no spiritual ***Switzerland*** — no neutral country sitting out the conflict, unenlisted and uninvaded. Everybody in this room this morning is either a slave of sin or a slave of God. There is no third category, no respectable middle ground where decent people serve no one but themselves.

Tim Keller points out that Paul here is simply preaching the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." Notice that even the commandment only recognizes two possibilities — the true God, or a substitute god.

Martin Luther, went so far as to say that *no one ever breaks commandments two through ten without first breaking commandment one.*

Beneath every lie, every theft, every adultery, every outburst of anger, there is already an idol, a pretender on the throne. ***Here's the deal: most slaves don't know they are slaves.***

Tim Keller offers three tests to find the master you cannot see — three symptoms of what Paul in verse 12 called "passions," epithumiai, over-desires: inordinate longings for good things that have become ultimate things.

- A. **What makes you angry?** I don't mean irritated or aggravated; I mean really angry. When something blocks a good thing, you get irritated; when something blocks your ultimate thing, you become bitter, explosive, unable to forgive.
- B. **What do you really fear?** When a good thing is threatened, you worry; when your ultimate thing is threatened, you are paralyzed, undone, awake at three in the morning, heart racing. What do you fear?
- C. **What tempts you to despair?** When you lose a good thing, you grieve; when you lose your ultimate thing, life itself empties of meaning. Why go on? What would you have to lose to despair of life?

Follow the trail of your uncontrollable anger, your paralyzing anxiety, your bottomless despondency — and at the end of the trail, you will find an altar, and on the altar, your master.

Verse 17, Paul says that would be all of us, but then he introduces that wonderful phrase again -

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,

Notice that Paul does not say, "Congratulations to you that you improved yourselves." He says, **"Thanks be to God."**

You were slaves of sin, past tense; you have become obedient, present tense — and God gets the glory for the change because God worked it.

Paul does not say the teaching was committed to you — as though truth were handed to us to file away. He says you were committed to the teaching. **God took you and handed you over to the gospel is literally what he is saying.**

GREEK NOTE: "Standard," as in the standard of teaching, is the word **typos** (τύπος) — which means a mold or a casting, a pattern, a form into which something is pressed or poured.

See the imagery? God takes your soul — melts it down, and pours it into the mold of the gospel, so that the metal takes the shape of the mold it fills. That is what sanctification is. NOW - justification is immediate and final, sanctification is gradual and takes a lifetime.

But I can tell you this - all the things you are going through and dealing with are ultimately designed to melt down your soul and pour it into the cast of the Gospel, so you could look like Jesus.

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

There is the paradox at the center of the Christian life, **freed — into slavery**. Emancipated from the old master — and immediately owned by a new one.

The world hears that and calls it a contradiction. The Christian hears it and calls it freedom. **Because true freedom is never the absence of a master; it is the gift of a good one.**

ILLUSTRATION: I have a saltwater aquarium. Those fish have it made; they are free to do as they wish within that tank. I feed them, and I provide fresh water for them. NOW, occasionally one might get the idea that he would be more free outside the tank - but it never works out well.

ILLUSTRATION: If a train builds up speed on a track, it is near unstoppable, but you place that same train in a ditch, and it can't move an inch.

Just as the fish is most free in the water and the train is most free on the track, you are most free as a slave to Christ.

ILLUSTRATION: Church history preserves a story about Augustine of Hippo. Before his conversion, Augustine was a man utterly mastered by sensuality; by his own confession, he could not imagine life without a woman in his bed. Some time after Christ laid hold of him, he was walking through the city when one of his former mistresses saw him and called out to him. Augustine greeted her kindly — and kept walking. Puzzled, she ran after him, thinking he had failed to recognize her.

“Augustine, it is I!” He turned, smiled, and answered, **“Yes, I know. But it is not I.”**

In five words, Augustine preached the whole of **Romans 6**. He was not claiming he felt no pull. He was declaring an identity: the man you knew — the man who had to have this — died. I am not he. The old master was still calling, but the old slave no longer lived at that address.

Different Questions, Same Answer, Different Masters, Same Slave...

3. Different Wages, Same Payday

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.

Paul asks us to do something we Baptists are not very good at. He is asking us to think back on what it was like to be lost - B.C. Before Christ.

Now, some of you were converted at an early age, and you came to Christ not out of conviction of some deep-seated sin, but rather out of a sense of emptiness, a longing for something that was missing. But others of you experienced the **WAGES OF SIN** a great deal before you were saved. Do you remember them? Audit those books.

- Do you remember what the old master promised and what he actually paid?
- Do you remember that it never satisfied the longing of your soul?
- Do you remember that it left you feeling ugly, used, wasted?
- Do you remember that there were always strings attached that enslaved you more and more?
- Do you remember that it never affected only you; it drove wedges between those who loved you and whom you at one time loved?
- Do you remember how you felt the next morning?
- Do you remember the loss of innocence? Joy?

Contemplate the wages of sin for a moment.

ILLUSTRATION: Historically, the Christian calendar always placed a fast before a feast - this is why. Now, we've drifted so far from it that even those who practice such things often fail to grasp their meaning. But the intention was that we were to contemplate life, the old life from which we were saved, before we could adequately celebrate the new Master we have received. There is LENT before EASTER, you see.

Look at what the new Master pays in fruit even now:

- How do you spend your time now?
- Whom do you love now?
- What kind of friends do you have now — true ones, who would give you the shirt off their backs?
- How do you feel about your past now? Forgiven.
- About your future? brighter and brighter, heaven, and then forevermore.
- There are no regrets in the service of this Master, no bitter memories, no album you are afraid to open. His yoke is easy and His burden is light.

Yes, the process at times can be painful - he must melt us down to mold us. But the result is glorious.

ILLUSTRATION: C. S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, said, imagine yourself as a living house, and God comes in to rebuild it. At first, you understand what He is doing, fixing the drains, stopping the leaks in the roof; you knew those jobs needed doing. But then, He starts knocking down walls in a way that doesn't make sense.

What on earth is He up to? The explanation, Lewis says, is that He is building something entirely different from what you expected, throwing up a new wing here, adding an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards.

You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage. But He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION:

I read the story of a young lady this week. Years ago, in the college district of a Texas town— an artist, a self-styled free spirit, the kind the world writes songs about.

She had heard the gospel as a girl at a church camp, and she had spent the years since running from it into everything the sixties and seventies had to offer.

And her car told her whole story. She drove an old blue Mustang, and the bumper wore her civil war: on one side, the slogans of her defiance. *My Body, My Choice, Love is Love, Keep Your Theology Off My Biology.*

And on the other side, a sticker from some Christian season of her life had been left behind: *In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned. An ichthus symbol with the word "Jesus" inscribed.*

Everyone in that artsy neighborhood knew that car, and knew the divided woman who drove it.

One afternoon, she came out of the grocery store and found a note under her windshield wiper. She figured it was a friend arranging dinner. She unfolded it. It contained one word: "Decide."

No name. No argument. Just some anonymous believer who had looked at that bumper, felt what Elijah felt on Carmel — "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21) — and wrote the only word her soul was still waiting for.

She stood in that parking lot and wept. She surrendered to Jesus Christ that day, and she served Him for the rest of her life.

So let me be the note under your windshield this morning. You have heard the audit of the two masters. Christian: Stop negotiating with the old paymaster. He has nothing left to pay you but the same old coin. You are not under law but under grace — so report for duty to the Master who loves you. Present your members — these hands, these eyes, this tongue, this week — as slaves to righteousness, and watch the palette of your life keep brightening until the day the fruit ripens into glory.