

# Liberated | Week

## Romans 6:15-23

*Matt Morrison, Communications Pastor*

Before coming on staff at Christ Fellowship, I had the honor of managing communications for e3 Partners, a global missions organization based in Plano. At the time, the ministry had over 400 field staff operating in 65 countries. We were sending upwards of 150 short-term mission teams each year with the primary task of launching new churches. As a teenager, I had worked on one of those teams in Romania so I was pretty excited to come on staff.

When I started the job, I expected I'd stay confined to the home office, working from my cubicle and bouncing from meeting to meeting. While I knew I might have to travel occasionally to one of our branch offices in other parts of the country, I didn't expect I'd ever head overseas. Little did I know, a news story from the other side of the world was about to grip my heart.

Around the time I was joining the team, the Arab Spring was hitting the Middle East like a wave. While it resulted in swift regime change in some countries, it was only fueling violence in others. The rapid changes were resulting in tectonic shifts to our strategies in the region.

In Syria, the Arab Spring protests had given way to all-out civil war. Whether it be the rebels, the Assad-backed forces, or ISIS, all of the sides fought (and still fight) with an evil ruthlessness that destroyed lives and tore families apart.

By 2015, 10.9 million Syrians (half the population) had been displaced. Turkey took in 1.7 million people that year alone. Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon were running out space and thousands more were streaming over the borders every day. The Syrians were so desperate that they set their sights beyond the neighboring countries and on to Europe. Families were embarking on nine-month treks from one continent to the next, often paying human traffickers to get them through each checkpoint. The majority of these people were headed to Germany where the government had instituted an enthusiastically welcoming policy toward them.

Within the next 18 months, Germany had accepted over one million refugees, and they weren't all coming from Syria. People were streaming in from places like Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, and Yemen as well.

For missions agencies like ours, this movement was one of the most significant migrations in modern history. Many of the people coming into Germany were arriving from areas where Christianity was restricted. A significant portion were from Unreached People Groups (UPG), a designation used to describe cultures with so few Christians that it's almost statistically

impossible for the gospel to advance. In other words, people who have never heard the story of Jesus, and likely never would if they stayed home, were arriving in a country that would freely allow us to reach them. The opportunity was so significant that missionaries in the Middle East were packing up and following them to Germany!

The next year, I found myself hopping back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean, both to record the incredible ministry happening in Germany and to play my own part in it. God was using the greatest humanitarian crisis since the Holocaust to advance his gospel in unprecedented ways and I was determined not to sit on the sidelines for it.

On the ground in Germany, I had the opportunity to meet these people and I was stunned by what they had each experienced. One family had crossed the Aegean Sea on a small raft with dozens of others, piloted by a human trafficking ring. Another mother lost one of her children in the desert because he died on the journey. She had to quickly bury his body and keep moving, just to keep her other children alive. The majority of refugees had logged thousands of miles of travel, mostly by foot.

The hellish journey only underscores the hellish reality they left behind. Imagine how desperate you'd have to be to leave everything, give up all of your financial security, and escape the only place you've ever called home. Each person I met had his or her own terrifying tale. They weren't fleeing situations that were less than ideal. They were fleeing a life of captivity, endless risk, and absolute despair. Their old lives had been gripped by evil forces and they were in need of a rescue.

## Day 1

In our focal passage this week, Paul uses the language of captivity and slavery to describe the sin we once lived in before Christ, and contrasts it to the freedom we now enjoy in him. Take a moment to read this week's focal passage in its entirety. Throughout the week, we will break it down in smaller segments.

### Read the Word

#### Romans 6:15-23 (NIV)

*What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*

*I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

## **Reflect**

As we consider this concept of spiritual slavery vs. freedom, I often wonder what it must have been like for the refugees I met when they first realized they were out of danger. Many of them left behind middle-class lifestyles that they'll never experience again. They'll never see their old homes. They'll never see their old friends. They'll forever be foreigners.

The lives they've always known are over, but the sacrifice is still worth it. Why? *Because they are finally free.*

They gave up everything they had for that freedom, and I can't imagine the relief they must have felt in knowing they had finally reached it. Sure, the journey ahead would be risky, if not impossible. They still had to rebuild in a totally different culture. Their kids would suffer PTSD for the foreseeable future. But, as they crossed the border and took their first steps outside their homeland, the forces working against them were now powerless to reach them.

When Paul writes about our old lives in terms of spiritual slavery, he references a life that once overwhelmed us. We were powerless to overcome or escape it. But Jesus loved us enough to rescue us from it. In our passage this week, Paul is strongly encouraging his readers to fully grasp the weight from which we were saved and stop living as if we were still enslaved. As we grow spiritually, we must constantly remember the oppression that once held us and the freedom we now experience in Christ.

- Take a moment to reflect on your life before Jesus. What would your life be like today if it weren't for his grace?
- What often keeps you from fully recognizing the slavery you once experienced? How can you regularly remind yourself of Jesus' power in your own life?

## Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your prayer time with God.

*Dear Father, thank you for your rescue. I confess I don't always appreciate all that you've saved me from. Please remind me today of my former brokenness and the freedom I now enjoy in you. Amen.*

## Day 2

*Matt Morrison, Communications Pastor*

When Germany began taking in refugees by the masses, they had to quickly establish systems for housing and processing them. They didn't want the people to be segmented away from society, but they also needed to provide housing, food, and assistance while the refugees waited for their status to be determined. In rapid fashion, the Germans converted old World War II air bases into makeshift camps along the countryside. In the major cities, they quickly converted old schools and government buildings into housing units. The refugee centers today blend so easily into the cityscape that you can walk by one of them and never know it. That took care of the housing, but they still needed to prepare the refugees for their new lives.

One day, while transferring trains at a U-Bahn station in Frankfurt, I noticed two middle eastern men talking with two heavily-armed police officers. They weren't in trouble. Rather, they had just arrived in the city and were turning themselves in to the officers so they could begin the asylum process.

Once processed, these men will go on to receive a monthly food stipend, an U-Bahn pass to get around, a room in one of the new refugee centers, and a cell phone. The rule is simple: wait. They won't be allowed to work or live anywhere else until their status is confirmed. It's a type of government-induced purgatory. When the phone rings, it's either time for another hearing or time to learn their fates. In the end, they'll either face deportation to another country or receive their final papers. On average, the process can take over nine months.

For those who get to stay, the German government prepares an entirely new life for them. They'll be assigned a town that needs their expertise, a temporary home while they get back on their feet, and freedom to find a job. The goal is to functionally make them Germans – to assimilate them into the culture and give them an identity within it. Only this can give the refugees a fighting chance at succeeding and avoiding trouble.

The refugee families are obviously grateful for their new lives. While they might miss the homes they've lost, they recognize they now belong to a new world. The freedom that's now bestowed on them comes with a new set of laws. They're not free to do anything they please.

They must obey the rules of their new country and its government. The difference is that the laws of their new home are meant to *protect* their freedom, rather than limit it.

## Read the Word

As Paul enters the next phase of his argument in Romans 6, he contrasts the two concepts of slavery and freedom. He makes the simple but profound case that the law no longer enslaves us. We're free from the pressure of performing in order to receive God's favor or his salvation. Instead, we're bound by God's grace. We're free to know God more deeply, and do so under an entirely new framework.

But, just as refugees entering a new land are still obligated to adhere to the standards of their new home, so we enter this framework of grace devoting ourselves completely to Christ.

### Romans 6:15-18 (NIV)

*What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*

## Reflect

Paul opens the thought with this poignant question: "*Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?*" In other words, "are we free to live however we want now?"

To his Jewish readers, the law was seen as a restraining force in a person's life that helped them maintain a righteous lifestyle. Though it was restrictive, it was also seen somewhat as protective. To the Jewish Christians in Rome, this made the idea of no longer concerning themselves with the law difficult to accept. Like a former prisoner who struggles to adapt to the massive world outside his cell block, they felt security in returning to the law for validation and they even expected others within the church to do the same.

But Paul makes the point that freedom from the law doesn't lead to a new propensity to sin. It's not a pass to live however we choose. Instead, grace empowers us to freely live for Christ. We are no longer owned by the demands of the law. Now, we're owned by the one who completed it.

From there, he encourages them with this: “*But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance.*”

To many Jews in Paul’s day, the law had become no more than outward displays of obedience. Among his fellow Pharisees from his former life, the heart’s devotion to God was irrelevant as long as they simply acted the right way and played the part. Paul is challenging this notion in the Roman church. Notice, he writes that they’ve “come to obey *from [their] heart.*”

As we’re transformed in light of God’s grace, certain changes begin to happen in our lives. Our sins become more apparent to us and the joy we once took from them is diminished. Our priorities are reoriented around Christ’s as we follow him more. Even the way we view others changes. For some, it happens more quickly and naturally than others, but it does gradually take root. This is Paul’s point.

Freedom *from* sin doesn’t translate as freedom *to* sin. We’re now expected to obey our new master – Jesus! We have freedom to pursue righteousness through him, from the innermost parts of our being. It’s a heart-level change that results in new behaviors over time.

- When you chose to follow Jesus, did you see immediate change in your life? Why or why not?
- In which areas of your life are you still allowing sin to take hold? How can you take steps to move away from that sin?

## Pray

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your prayer time with God.

*Dear Lord, thank you for the freedom you’ve won for me. I confess I still live as if I’m still enslaved to my old sin. Please make me more aware of the areas where I am failing to obey and give me the strength to overcome them. Change my heart with the power of your grace. Amen.*

## Day 3

*Matt Morrison, Communications Pastor*

In October 2016, our team was serving refugees in Berlin when a national security alert broke across the airwaves. Police had just completed a raid on the apartment of a would-be ISIS-inspired terrorist. When they entered the apartment, they found a nearly completed suicide bomb vest and blueprints to Berlin’s commercial airports. Unfortunately, the suspect, a Syrian refugee, had fled the scene and was at-large. Given we were just days away from boarding a

New York-bound flight from one of those airports, our team was monitoring the situation closely.

The dominant news story that week surrounded the manhunt. Police were scouring the region for any sign of him. Finally, he was captured, but in an unexpected way.

Police received a call from a group of three refugees whom the suspect had befriended. When the men realized he fit the description of the man who was all over the news, they looked through his backpack to discover a weapon and a large stash of money. The suspect thought these fellow Syrians would protect him. However, upon realizing who he was, they tied him up with an extension cord and locked him in a closet. The suspect offered them the 10,000 euros in his bag if they'd let him go, but they called the police instead.

In an interview later that week, the Syrians who detained the suspect were asked why they did it. One of them replied, "The guy was a terrorist. We fled Syria because of people like him. For us, turning him into the police was the obvious thing to do."

As refugees, these men had found freedom in the hospitality of their German hosts, resulting in a new allegiance. It didn't matter that the suspect was a fellow Syrian, or that he had enough cash to make their lives a little bit easier in their new world. They had fled the fear and danger that accompanied men like him and they weren't going to let their new neighbors experience the nightmare they left behind.

## Read the Word

As Paul continues his argument, he reminds the Roman church that they're no longer slaves to what they left behind, but now have a new allegiance.

### Romans 6:19-20 (NIV)

*I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness.*

## Reflect

Paul begins by somewhat apologizing for the language he is using. He explains that he's using examples from everyday life so they can better understand his point. The ideas of slavery vs. freedom best amplify what he's challenging them to do.

Their old masters were “impurity and ever-increasing wickedness.” He even goes so far as to explain that his readers once offered themselves to these masters. They were devoted to these things.

Let’s face it. These are not difficult things to give devotion. They bring temporary joy, pleasure, and relief. They appeal to our most basic human urges and desires. People don’t engage in evil for the sake of evil. We do it because it feels good and it addresses the holes we feel in our lives.

The fact he calls it “ever-increasing” shows that their allegiance to their sinful desires never remained static. It only got deeper and more poignant. Sin takes us much farther than we really want to go. When we give an inch, our sin will take us the next mile.

Paul contrasts that to their new master – “righteousness leading to holiness.” They exchanged one controlling force for another. As followers of Christ, they’re now called to pursue righteousness. He wants the Romans to understand that Jesus deserves the same ever-increasing devotion that they once offered in the name of sin and impurity.

Today, these verses still beg a difficult question of you and me. Do you offer the same level of devotion to Jesus that you once offered to your sinful desires? Is your commitment to him ever-increasing, or do you allow your old life to compete with your new one?

I am personally grateful for the Syrians who captured the suspect that day. The man had blueprints to the very airport I would enter days later and once possessed the tools necessary to blow it up. It’s possible they saved my life.

I often think back on how it could have been different. What if they took his money and let him go? What if they simply saw him as a lost, fellow Syrian, rather than a terrorist? Just even the slightest sympathy toward him could have led to catastrophe. Because they chose to be ruthless, lives were ultimately saved.

Jesus deserves a devotion far greater than what we once offered to our own sinful desires. We can’t be caught between our old master and our new one. We must be ruthless against our old allegiances, as harmless as they may seem, so they don’t interfere with our allegiance to Christ.

- Is your devotion to Christ ever-increasing or has it become stagnant? Why?

## **Pray**

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your prayer time with God.

*Father, I thank you for the privilege of willingly following you. I’m grateful for the freedom you offer. Please forgive me where I allow my old allegiances to*

*remain. Give me the strength to overcome them and give me an ever-increasing devotion to you. Amen.*

## Day 4

*Matt Morrison, Communications Pastor*

In one of our final days of ministry in Berlin, my team was granted access into one of the refugee centers on the west end of the city. This was an incredible feat. Most of our ministry happened in parks and public spaces near the camps and centers, not in them. The government is wary of letting foreigners in, as it can quickly lead to trouble.

Amazingly, the volunteer coordinator at this particular center noticed us near the entrance and allowed us to come in. While I was reluctant to surrender my passport to the guards, it was worth it for the access.

Through an odd string of events, I found myself in a family's apartment. When I say apartment, I really mean a former office with two mattresses on the floor in one section and three bunk beds in the other. The kitchen was nothing more than a hot plate sitting on an end table. A family of five from Aleppo called that 250ish square feet their home.

I spent the next few hours on the floor with Ackmed, the husband, as he shared his family's incredible story. He recounted their 9-month journey from Syria to Germany. Just like we often heard on the news, his family was one of the many who paid smugglers to get them across the Aegean Sea. His wife, Ropha, nearly died along the journey. At one point, he had to perform CPR to resuscitate her. Most of the route took them by foot through eastern Europe and into Germany. They took their two small children with them, along with their 18-year-old nephew.

Ackmed and his family left behind a middle-class lifestyle. He was a safety supervisor for a conglomerate of cell phone companies in the Middle East, regulating the safety on the towers. His job took him all over the Middle East. On the side, he had a passion for men's fashion and even designed clothes. Before the war, they had a picturesque life. His parents and in-laws even lived in a nearby apartment building.

After a few hours of talking, the conversation turned especially dark when Ackmed showed me the pictures of his brother's lifeless body, taken shortly after he had been tortured and strangled. The photos explained why they had their nephew with them. A short time later, Ackmed's parents were blown apart when their apartment building was bombed. That was when they realized they had to leave. They could either stay and die or leave and survive. It was the end of the life they had always known.

## Read the Word

As followers of Jesus, we can easily slip back into the sinful patterns of our old lives. We often forget what we've been saved from and the brokenness those patterns brought. As Paul closes his argument in Romans 6, he confronts his readers with a powerful question and a poignant reminder:

### Romans 6:21-23

*What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

## Reflect

Paul's question is pretty on-the-nose. *"What benefit did you reap from that time from the things you are now ashamed of?"*

In other words, *"How did that life work out for you?"*

He reminds them that those old ways led to death. That is sin's reward. That's its end result. But, we've been set free from that life. We're no longer enslaved to sin, nor its result. As he has mentioned before, we're owned by God now. He is our master and we should pursue righteousness in him with all the strength he gives us.

He ends the passage with that famous statement, *"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

While our sin earns death, we freely inherit God's beautiful gift of eternal life. It's not something we have to earn. It's not *eventually* available to us. It's openly offered to us *now*.

When we're tempted to fall back into our old patterns, it's helpful to remember where that life would have eventually led us. It's important to remind ourselves of what was really at stake before we chose to follow Jesus. Paul is making sure his readers don't forget it and it's important that we don't forget it either.

Just as Ackmed and his family were faced with a clear choice to either stay in Aleppo and die or leave and experience a new life somewhere else, we all eventually face a similar decision. We can continue moving deeper into sin, a path that will inevitably lead to death, or leave it all behind and embrace the eternal life that Jesus offers. This is one of the central themes of the gospel message.

It's important to remember that our lives before Jesus were nothing less than slavery, and all the horrors that slavery entails. It was captivity, even if it felt like freedom in its time. The freedom we have now have through him is worth leaving everything else behind to experience. It's worth any risk or loss along the way, even if that means letting go of old joys that are really rooted in the slavery we've left behind.

## Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Dear Lord, thank you for saving me from my sin, even if that sin felt like home to me before. Please give me the strength and wisdom to root out any semblance of the life I've left behind in you. Amen.*

## Day 5

*Matt Morrison, Communications Pastor*

It's Friday! How has this week's reading impacted you? Today, spend some extended time in prayer and consider your next steps in following Christ.

## Reflect & Pray

Start by reviewing this week's passage.

### **Romans 6:15-23 (NIV)**

*What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*

*I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

How does this week's study hit you? When we touch on the subject of sin, all of us have the tendency to respond in one of three ways:

### **Avoidance**

Let's face it. This is the easiest possible response. We don't avoid these messages because we don't care. Usually, it comes from a feeling of helplessness. If you're struggling with certain pet sins or even addiction, passages like this may feel like too much to handle. The idea of letting go of those sins may seem like too large of a burden. You may feel too far gone or that it's too engrained in your life to release them.

If this is you, I encourage you to spend some extra time rereading the passage today. You're right that you can't overcome sin on your own. But, that doesn't mean you have to feel hopeless. The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead lives inside you. He can empower you to overcome those hurdles.

Before you go on to the next thing in your day, take some time right now to pray and ask for his strength. Confess those sins to him and ask for his forgiveness. Ask him to reveal steps you can take right now to move away from those sins. You may even consider reaching out to a fellow Christian you trust and confess your struggles to him or her as well. Ask that person for loving accountability.

### **Shame**

As you read these verses this week, God may have revealed some areas of your life where you're still serving your former master. You want to overcome them. In fact, you're eager to take those first steps. Yet, you feel stuck. This message greets you with a profound sense of shame. It reminds you of the things you do alone, when no one is looking. It brings to mind painful memories of past failures. You're stuck, not in inaction, but in a place of helpless shame.

If that's your natural response, it's great that you see those sins. However, it's important to remember that when the Holy Spirit confronts us, it's never from a place of guilt and shame. He convicts us. He reveals the areas of our lives that must change. But, he never condemns us. Any voice in your life that makes you feel less loved by the Father isn't from him.

Take some time and ask God to remind you of his love for you. Thank him for the freedom he has given you from your sin, and the guilt that once followed you. Ask for his restoration in your heart and look for those reminders around you today.

### **Conviction**

My prayer is that you respond with conviction today, rather than avoidance or shame. I encourage you to soberly come face-to-face with your sin. But, don't try to tackle it on your own and don't let your guilt overwhelm you. Confess your sins to God, and trust in the weight of his love for you. Take the necessary steps to move away from those sins. If you fail again tomorrow, confess all over again and keep on going. His grace is more than enough to forgive and strengthen you. Feel overwhelmed by the God who rescued you, instead of the sin that

was enslaved you or the shame that may still grip you.

### **What's Your Next Step?**

- Which of the responses above feels most natural to you? Why?
- What steps can you take today to move away from the habitual sins in your life?
- To whom can you confess today? Who do you trust to encourage you and hold you accountable?