

Prayer

Dear Jesus, lift up our hearts to praise Your name! Take away from us any tiredness of faith that may descend upon us as we seek to serve, and invigorate us with the exciting prospects of all You have in store for us. Make us fruitful in Your work from day to day and week to week, and may we praise Your name with the true joy that comes from knowing we have given our best to You in everything; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray about an issue close to your heart, and trawl through the internet to find out more and assist your prayers

On-going prayers

- **Pray for you local hospital.** *Pray for the healthcare workers, doctors nurses, technicians, therapists and other professionals*
- *Give thanks for the answers to your prayers, and pray again those prayers that remain unanswered*
- *Pray for countries experiencing financial difficulties*

Meditation

Protect us, Lord God,

Watch over us in the paths we take;
That all our decisions may be wise.

Shield us in the company we keep;
That we may be careful to keep close to You.

Safeguard us during all our conversations;
That we may speak always in love.

Save us from harm while we do our work;
That we may build Your glorious Kingdom.

Guard us when our passions overflow;
That none may question our commitment.

Care for us, for our hopes and dreams;
That we may we accept Your plans for our future.

Bible passage – Romans 6:15-23

¹⁵ What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Again, no! ¹⁶ Surely you know that whatever you give yourselves to as obedient slaves, you are slaves of what you obey; either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to being put right with God? ¹⁷ Thanks be to God however, that you who were once slaves of sin, have now become obedient from the heart to the one who you have been given as a standard of teaching; ¹⁸ and now that you have been set free from sin, you have become slaves of what it means to be right with God! ¹⁹ I use a worldly illustration to account for your natural limitations.

For just as you once gave every part of your body as slaves to immorality and to sin which leads to further sin, so now give every part of your body as slaves to being right with God, in order to become holy. ²⁰ Now, when you were slaves of sin, you were free from any need to be in a right relationship with God, ²¹ so what benefits did you subsequently get? Only those things of which you now are ashamed and for which the end is death! ²² But now that you have

been freed from sin and become a slave of God, you receive the benefit of holiness, for which the end result is eternal life! ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Bible Study

Review

This passage completes Romans 6, and contains significant teaching about the relationship between God and people. It is characterised throughout by the description of a Christian as a 'slave of God' (6:22), and it introduces some important new themes such as 'obedience' (6:16,17), 'holiness' (6:19,22), and the freedom of the human spirit when bound to God (6:21f.). All in all, it is a message of security and hope to all who reject the immorality of the world and believe in Jesus, and it is summarised in the famous quote; '*for the wages of sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord!*' (6:23).

All of this follows on logically from previous chapters of Romans, and the more we study, the more obvious it is that Paul's explanation of the Gospel is set out logically. In recent studies, Paul has described God's work of salvation through His son, and characterised it as '*peace with God*' (5:1). He has also shown that salvation is found through faith in Christ, indeed, that He has died for all according to God's plan (5:6f.). In addition, this salvation changes people lives, as signified by baptism, which we explored in yesterday's study. So now, Paul says more about this relationship with God.

Everything we have read suggests that believers are to have a close relationship with God. However, if you did not know this passage beforehand, you might be surprised to find that it is described by Paul as a form of slavery! It is a matter of pride to Christians today that throughout the countries of the world they have forced through laws to ban slavery, even if it has not yet been entirely eradicated from our world today.

However, as with so many Biblical illustrations, we are wise to check out exactly what Paul meant by using the term 'slavery'. If we do, we will find that although the slavery of terrible enforced labour was part of Roman life, most of the 'slaves' encountered by ordinary people were those who worked as 'house-servants' in bonded service of their masters.

Here in this text, Paul introduces the idea that people are not naturally independent, rather, they become dependent on whatever they give themselves to (6:16). This is a powerful idea, and it can be debated by philosophers, but Paul simply observes that all people tend to submit to authority. Today, we might say that a scientist must submit to intellectual discipline, and an 'artist' must submit to the medium, whether paint, drama, or musical technique. The point would be the same, with the same conclusion that in relationship to God, people either turn from Him and submit to sin, or they accept His message that they may be set free from sin, and become '*slaves of what it means to be right with God*' (6:18,19).

Still, the idea of slavery is unattractive, so why would anyone accept the invitation to be a slave of God? Paul sets out the only options; we either become '*slaves of sin*' (6:20) and reap the ultimate reward of rebellion, which is death, or we accept the consequence of faith, which is to be a slave of God and receive all the benefits of His grace, given here as '*holiness*' and '*eternal life*' (6:22). This is then summarised by Paul's famous quote, '*the wages of sin is death, but the gracious gift of God in Christ is eternal life ...*' (6:23).

Preachers have used this famous text for centuries to highlight the consequences of sin, and people can be cynical about the claim that sin leads to death. Some will reject the claims of the Gospel. Nevertheless, this great phrase can still be used to advertise the amazing benefit of eternal life! It may not be fashionable to talk about eternal life, but deep down, each one of us longs to know that we are not an abstract piece of life that disappears for ever at death. Our Creator has made us to be with Him in glory, and our souls long to believe this and know that it is true.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Slavery and the transformation of ownership
- The consequences of transferring ownership

Going Deeper

We will now look at each part of this passage, and it is fair to say that there is hardly a verse in which there is not an important issue to be discussed about how the verse should be translated. Furthermore, each of

these issues is crucial to our understanding of the passage. You will find that my translation reads quite differently from others at a number of key points, and it is through discussing these differences that the meaning of Paul's letter becomes clearer.

As we begin, please remember the general principle I use in translation. I have avoided the use of the word 'righteousness' by using the phrase that is similar to it; which is 'in a right relationship with God'. In my opinion, this helps us explain the Gospel far more clearly to those who do not otherwise know what 'righteousness' means, and it is unfortunately true that many Christians would struggle to define it themselves! For the purposes of this passage, it is also worth remembering that 'righteousness' is closely related to the work of Christ in His death and Resurrection, and our personal experience of this through baptism. This is what the first half of Romans 6 has been all about.

Transformation; the example of slavery and the transfer of ownership

At first sight, the opening verse of our passage (6:15) seems to repeat the same question with which Paul opened the chapter. Why should a Christian suggest that we continue to sin (6:1,15)? Paul was genuinely concerned about the idea that more sin would produce more evidence of God's grace, and he raised it the first time in order to explain why it was wrong (6:1-11), but here, he dismisses it out of hand as a complete misunderstanding of the meaning of God's grace (6:14).

Paul now picks up the idea of being 'under grace', and it colours the whole of our passage as he continues to explain more about the transformation that the Gospel brings to the life of the believer. His train of thought leads him to express this in terms of the authority under which people live. The key example he uses in this passage is slavery, which in Paul's day covered everything from the worst kinds of slavery imaginable, to the example I have already given above, and the relatively humane life of service that was lived by the bonded servants who ran the households of wealthy Roman citizens across the Empire.

In verse 16, Paul explains that everyone is a slave to whoever or whatever they choose to obey. In many translations of the Bible, verse 16 begins 'whoever you give yourselves to ...' but my translation of 'whatever you give yourselves to ...' is equally correct, because slaves were owned by organisations and institutions, such as the army, as well as individuals. As far as God and the Gospel are concerned, Paul narrows down the choices available to two options, either sin, or obedience. It seems a strange choice of words, but what he means by 'sin' is the natural way of the world he has already explained (1:18-23), and 'obedience' means the path of obedience that took Jesus to the Cross and which we enter through baptism. Paul is utterly clear; everyone walks one path or the other, without exception. Although Paul does not say this, we can almost hear an echo of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, 'no-one can serve two masters ... (Matt 6:24).

Verse 17 is also confusing, given the relative simplicity of what Paul is saying, because after Paul has given thanks for the transformation of those who have rejected the slavery of sin, most translations of the Bible say; 'you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted.' (6:17). Initially, this sounds reasonable, but surely Paul has just done all in his power to argue against anything that smacks of legalism, so what is this about some 'form of teaching' to which we should be obedient? This is an important matter, because in every other part of this text, obedience is to Jesus as a person, not to a 'body of teaching'. Even though this could simply mean 'teaching about Christ', this does sound like legalism. In agreement with the 'Word' commentary by James Dunn, I believe that the Greek can be translated differently; as I have done above, saying 'you have now become obedient from the heart to the one who you have been given as a standard of teaching' (6:17). Note that here, Jesus Himself is the standard, and it is His teaching that is honoured, not any teaching 'about' Him. I am convinced that this is what Paul meant.

Transferring the ownership of our bodies, and the consequences

Paul concludes this part of his illustration in verse 18, and then apologises for using a 'worldly illustration'; but he continues to use it (see 6:20,22)! Moving on, he is determined to press his point about the meaning of transferring our obedience to Christ and taking a full part in Gospel.

He does this by strongly suggesting that Christians give all the 'parts' of their bodies to God, in the obedience of faith (6:19). Why does Paul say this? It is because he was aware that people easily 'spiritualise' matters of faith and do not connect the Gospel with what they do every day. Through his appeal for 'every part of your body' to be 'put right with God' (6:19) he reminds every one of us that sin is all too often rooted in the physical senses and passions of normal living. So the more we realise our need to submit every part of our being to God, the better.

The final part of our reading today concerns the consequences of being a 'slave of God' (6:22). Paul starts with a teasing suggestion in verse 20 that when people are slaves of sin, they are 'free' from any obligation to God! This is relatively obvious, but it sets us up for what Paul really wants to say. He asks a general question, 'what benefits did you get' from living a life that was in slavery to sin? (6:21) For someone who has accepted the ownership of God, the answer is straightforward; it is shame because of past sins. For

someone who persists in sin, rejection of God can only lead to one end result, which is the final separation from God; death (6:21).

In total contrast, the consequences of the transference of ownership of our bodies to obedience to Christ, through baptism and for the purpose of being right with God, are twofold. Paul identifies firstly 'holiness' (6:22) by which he means a life that is guided by the Lord through the trials of this world but which always aims to please God. Many people have attempted to define holiness; it is not one thing, but rather a journey upon which the human soul embarks, conscious of the presence of God and with His purposes constantly in view, whatever the consequences. Secondly, the end result of both the transference of ownership and the life of holiness is the gracious gift of God that is eternal life! What may not be obvious to you as you read this is that this is only one of a couple of places where Paul uses the phrase 'eternal life'. It is common in the Gospels, but not in Paul's writing; so its place here is extremely significant.

Indeed, Paul repeats the phrase in his famous ending to this passage: 'The wages of sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' (6:23). This strangely picks up the image of slavery that has dominated this passage, for the term 'wages' was commonly used for the 'pocket money' given to workers and slaves to buy food. Unfortunately it was a scrap that was often very little and not enough for a slave to avoid starvation. This is the deathly image Paul leaves us with for the consequences of sin; but Paul returns to the word 'grace' to describe the magnificent and generous gift of God that belongs to all who recognise that through slavery to Jesus Christ they are truly made free, to enjoy eternal life with their Creator!

Application

From this passage of Scripture, we see again how Paul presents sin as a tyranny that draws people further into its trap (6:19) and eventually into death, which is annihilation and separation from the presence of God. Paul's essential argument is that however many ways people think up of living life apart from the one true God, they are all alike in this respect, and the Gospel is the only alternative!

Paul had doubtless preached this message many times, and chose to write it down in this way to persuade people of the exclusive path of salvation through Jesus Christ. The need to be a slave of God, he says, is as complete and compelling as that of sin, except that it leads to life, not death! Paul sees no evidence that anyone can enjoy any freedom, unless it is through submission to the God who made all things. Anything else is a delusion. He argues that Christians must consider themselves as being wholly 'owned' by God, indeed, His slaves, but thereby enjoying all the benefits of His grace through a life of holiness and the expectation of eternal life.

This is no small conclusion. The challenge is to accept this and live life accordingly. For surely, the knowledge of our salvation is therefore true liberation, true healing and true freedom, and in slavery, we find freedom! Too often, Christians today treat such teaching as something to discuss or debate, as if Paul's writing is a description of Christianity that we can either accept or reject. But surely such an attitude places people at the centre of their own universes and offers nothing but the possibility of rejecting God if people should so want. No, the Gospel we have is the Gospel Paul describes here as offering us liberty through slavery. There is much for us to understand but we cannot dismiss this text.

By the power of God we need to rediscover what it means to be completely and wholly submitted to God, transferred to His authority in every part of our being. Then, the Lord will be seen active amongst His people and effective in His Gospel, in power.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does the imagery of slavery help or hinder Paul's description of our obedience to God in this passage?
2. In what ways do you feel that this passage reflects your experience of God, and in what ways does it seem distant from you?
3. Do you think of yourself as living a life of holiness? If not, why not? What is it about holiness that makes people afraid of the idea?

Personal comments by author

I have long been aware of the paradox of being a slave of Christ and being free in Him, and I reckon that it is essential for all of God's people to accept this basic dichotomy within the Christian life. I know, for example, that I am most free when I am bound to a task that God has for me. I also know that the greatest treasures of the Kingdom require me to work hard to find them; they are not 'free' in any sense except that they are there for me to find.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Think and pray about the consequences of our decision to submit your life to God in Christ Jesus. What has happened so far, and what do you expect to happen in the coming years?*
- *I have defined this above as 'a journey upon which the human soul embarks, conscious of the presence of God and with His purposes constantly in view' Does this reflect your life? Spend some time reflecting upon this.*

Final Prayer

Almighty Lord and Master, You were there at the beginning of our days, and You will be there at the end. Lead us, we pray, into the eternal life You have prepared for us, and for which our own lives now prepare us. Thank You, Lord; AMEN
