

Does Grace Mean We Can Keep On Sinning? 'Slaves of Sin' vs. 'Slaves of Righteousness'

Romans 6:1-2, 12-23
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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If you've ever hoped that I'd preach more on the exciting theological topic of sin, today is your day!

Our Epistle reading involves Paul's words to the church in Rome concerning **the complex relationship between sin, grace, and the law**. In the sixth chapter of Romans, Paul carries on an argument against a kind of imaginary opponent. It's an interesting and effective literary technique called a diatribe. This argument springs from the great saying at the end of chapter five that declares that our salvation is a result of God's grace, not our efforts to earn it by following the law.

A shorthand way of stating this is: "Where sin abounds, grace super-abounds." Or as a pastor friend of mine, the Rev. Jim Johnson of First Presbyterian Church in Waco, Texas, has stated for years: **"God's grace is greater than all our sin!"**

Paul phrases what he knows his detractors must be thinking begins in verse 1 of chapter 6. "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" You yourself may have asked at times: **Why does it matter if I sin or not since I can be forgiven anyway?** In sheer horror Paul immediately responds to the question he posed: By no means! God forbid! Or, as I would state it, No way should we keep on sinning!

The great German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned and then executed by the Nazi's for his participation in a failed plot to assassinate Hitler, called this misunderstanding of God's love: "cheap grace." In his famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer wrote how **there are great demands upon Christians to live moral, ethical lives**. Like Paul, he believed it was a horrible thing to turn the love, mercy and grace of God into an excuse for sinning. The whole point is that our thoughts and actions do indeed matter!

While it is clear that Paul does believe in the freedom *from* the law and the power sin, he does not believe in license to do whatever we want. **For Paul, freedom from something means freedom for something else. In this case, freedom from the law leads to freedom for obedience.** Another way we hear this is in the popular statement, "With freedom comes responsibility." This is certainly a theme we'll be hearing a lot of this coming week as we approach Independence Day on the 4th of July.

This way of understanding freedom also reveals that authentic Christianity involves an entirely new way of life. And for many people, especially those who encounter a genuine conversion experience, it becomes a clearly *different* way of life from how they have lived before.

Paul uses a metaphor that was common in his day to explain what he means – the image of slavery – being **freed from slavery of sin to being enslaved to God**. The notion of enslavement, even enslavement to God, rightly falls uncomfortably and harshly on our ears. But Paul does not operate with a generalized notion of freedom, in which human beings achieve a kind of independence from all powers and authorities.

For Paul, **humankind is always and inevitably enslaved to something or someone. The decisive question is not whether one is enslaved, but in what form that slavery will take place. Paul says that we are all slaves to the one we obey.** His thinking goes like this: Once we were slaves to sin, but in Christ we become 'slaves of righteousness.'

Paul will go on to argue, however, that enslavement to God actually means a profound liberation! Liberation for genuine and abundant life, and liberation for service. That's the kind of enslavement that I would prefer to live with.

Using this metaphor of slavery allows Paul to speak of ethics in terms of fundamental loyalties. In a broad sense, Paul thinks it possible to conceive of the religious life in one of two ways: as living "under law" or "under grace" (v. 14). For him, "under law" meant specifically the law of Moses, the Mosaic Law, but it included more than this. **Living "under the law" tends to view God as a stern judge** and the giver of law, and human beings as the keepers of law. There are countless Christians, including Presbyterians, who still view God and our relationship with God precisely in this legalistic way. This is something that I have struggled with myself.

Paul insisted, however, that this way of viewing the religious life not only misconstrues the nature of God, but also results in a distorted understanding of how we relate to God. For it has the effect of turning us into religious overachievers. Know any of those?

Living "under grace," by contrast, conceives God not so much as one who legislates but as one who loves and calls us into covenant community. Accordingly, we are seen as gracious recipients of God's love and grace. As such, we respond to God in gratitude. We live before God, then, not so much as those who keep God's laws, but rather as those who have been offered – and have accepted – God's promise of forgiveness and acceptance. Using another metaphor, Paul calls this 'eternal life'.

"Living under grace," however, still recognizes "sin" and "righteousness" as competing dominions. It also recognizes full well **the addictive power of sin**, which can "exercise dominion in our mortal bodies" and "make us obey their passion" (v. 12). Does not modern psychology teach us the same thing? **What we habitually submit ourselves to is what eventually rules us.** In other words, sin most often begets more sin, with its accompanying consequences, while love, on the other hand, most often begets more love, with its consequences.

Biblical ethics, then, is not a matter of choosing whether we will be ruled, but rather choosing what (or who) will rule us. The ultimate choice, again using Paul's words, is whether we will become "slaves of sin" or "slaves of righteousness" (vv. 17-18). This way of conceiving the ethical life may strike us as overly dualistic and, thereby, too simplistic. Yet there are elements that ring true, do they not?

In case you need any more motivation not to sin, let me remind you that there are advantages – they're stated right there in 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." What a deal!

What in the world, you may be wondering, is '**sanctification**'? It's one of those fancy ten-dollar religious words that basically mean that **the endeavor to live a Christ-like life is a life-long process and something to which we can grow closer to emulating in our own lives**, yet it is not something we ever completely achieve. Some define sanctification as, "the road to holiness" or, as growing more and more into the image of God.

Each and every one of us is profoundly aware that our struggle with temptation and sin is far from over, and that in this life we never become perfect. But Christianity, as stated by biblical scholar William Barclay, has always regarded **the direction in which we are facing as more important than the particular state to which we achieve. In other words, are we heading in the direction of sin, or in the direction of righteousness?**

So then, can we justify our intentional acts of sin simply because we are not under the law but under grace? May our response become that of Paul's: No way! Therefore, **the answer to the question of whether it matters if we sin or not, knowing God will forgive us anyway, is: of course it does!** Just ask the people, including yourself, whom your sins affect.

Sin, however, is not just a personal matter, but a systemic one as well. **Let us not forget the power of sin at work in governmental system, in economic systems, in political systems, and yes, in religious systems.**

Paul concludes in verse 23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Have we not witnessed instances of death to justice, death to freedom, death to peace, death to human dignity, death to the life that God wills for all of creation? Such is the work of sin. Paul reminds us, however, that we are no longer free to do as sin pleases. Instead, we are bound irrevocably to God.

The Rev. Gary Manning, the rector at Trinity Episcopal Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, effectively summarizes this issue of grace and sin this way:

Bound to God, we are engaged in the mission of God in the world. And the mission of God is not merely to rescue people's souls from some sort of eternal perdition! God's mission begins now! God's mission is here! God's mission is the healing of the world, the wholeness of humanity, and the renewal of creation. We all get to join that mission, because we have been conscripted by God's grace...

Fellow followers of Jesus, we have been captured by Grace and bound to God's righteousness! **What will be our response?** Will we engage the mission of God? Will we work for justice, freedom and peace? Will we be instruments of righteousness? Will we proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? Will we embody the qualities of life that are eternal?

Or... Will we turn a blind eye to the poor, the friendless and the needy in our own neighborhoods? Will we ignore the suffering of millions of children who die for the lack of clean water and fifty cents' worth of antibiotics? Will we remain silent about the futility and cruelty of war? Will we capitulate to the power of Sin that pays off in Death?

According to Paul, **since we are shackled to God's righteousness we have already answered that question – we have chosen God's mission as our mission.**

I bet you can't wait until I preach again on this exciting theological topic of sin and grace.

Amen.

Resource:

Rev. Gary Manning, TEC; Trinity Episcopal Church, Wauwatosa, WI; "Shackles That Won't Shrink!" Copyright www.day1.org