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HOW TO WIN OVER SIN

Romans 6:19-23

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Romans Lesson 35

How to Win Over Sin Romans 6:19-23

If you're a Christian, you resolutely want to win over sin so that your life will glorify your Savior, who loved you enough to go to the cross while you were still an ungrateful rebel. Sin always dishonors the Lord. A holy life glorifies Him. Sin disrupts fellowship with the Lord. A holy life allows us to enjoy sweet communion with Him. Since the aim of all Christians is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, all Christians want to win over sin.

The big question is, *how* do we gain consistent victory over the sin that so easily trips us up? Our text provides some solid answers to this crucial question. It's not the complete answer, in that Paul does not mention the role of the Holy Spirit here. He will get to that in chapter 8. But he does give us some helpful strategies for the daily battle that we all face against temptation and sin.

The point of Romans 6 is to show that justification by grace through faith alone does *not* result in continuing sin, as Paul's critics alleged, but rather in sanctification. From 6:15-23 Paul uses the analogy of slavery to respond to the charge that his teaching that we are not under law but under grace would lead to sin. In 6:19, he commands us to present our members as slaves to righteousness. Then (6:20-23) he gives the reasons why we should obey this command. When we were slaves of sin, we were free in regard to righteousness (6:20). But where did that get us? We had no benefit from our shameful deeds, which were only heading us toward death (6:21). But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, we gain the benefits of sanctification, with eternal life as the outcome (6:22). Verse 23 sums it up by contrasting the wages of sin, which is death, with God's free gift of eternal life.

In these verses, Paul tells us...

To win over sin, give yourself as a slave to righteousness in view of your spiritual past, present, and future.

As we saw in 6:15-18, Paul gives two and only two options: Either you are enslaved to sin and free with regard to righteous-

ness, resulting in death; or, you are freed from sin and enslaved to God, resulting in sanctification and eternal life. There is no middle ground. There is no place for a person who says, "Jesus is my Savior, but He isn't my Lord." There are two and only two masters and you *must* choose: Will you continue as a slave of sin (the default mode for all of us by birth)? Or, will you submit to Jesus as Lord and give yourself as a slave of righteousness?

1. To win over sin, give yourself as a slave to righteousness (6:19).

Romans 6:19: "I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification."

Before we consider Paul's command, what does he mean when he says that he is "speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh"? In the context, he does not seem to be rebuking his readers. Rather, he is apologizing in the middle of his extended slavery analogy. He's saying in effect, "As frail human beings, we need analogies and illustrations of spiritual truth, but often these are imperfect." Paul realizes that many of his readers are slaves and that slavery is an imperfect analogy, in that there are many repugnant aspects of human slavery that do not apply to our relationship with the Lord. But in other ways, it's a useful analogy, in that God has bought us with the blood of Christ and so we belong to Him and owe Him total, unquestioning obedience.

"For" goes on to explain the valid part of the analogy, namely, that just as formerly we presented ourselves as slaves to sin, so now we should present ourselves as slaves to righteousness. "Present" repeats Paul's command in 6:13, "present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments [weapons] of righteousness to God." The verb "present" means "to give oneself as a servant or slave." Douglas Moo (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 404) explains Paul's point in 6:19: "He thus makes clear that Christians should serve righteousness with all the single-minded dedication that characterized their pre-Christian service of such 'idols' as self, money, lust, pleasure, and power." Since we repeatedly gave ourselves to those false gods, so we now

must repeatedly give ourselves to serve God and righteousness. (Moo, p. 385, argues that this is the force of the aorist tense here.)

Practically, there are two things to keep in mind as you learn to obey Paul's command here. First, as we saw last time, you "gotta serve somebody," so when you're tempted, ask yourself, "Whose slave do I want to be?" There are only two options. Do you want to serve sin, which will drag you further and further into impurity, defilement, and ultimate destruction? Or, do you want to be a slave of God and righteousness?

If you go the slave of sin route, it heads toward death (6:21). Since Paul contrasts death with eternal life (6:23), he means that a life of enslavement to sin leads to eternal spiritual death, or hell (Rev. 20:14). Spiritual death is the justly earned *wage* of a life of slavery to sin. Eternal life, on the other hand, is *not* the wage earned by righteousness; it is God's free gift. But believers who have received God's free gift of eternal life are characterized by being slaves of righteousness. You can tell where they're heading (eternal life) by their growing life of holiness ("sanctification," 6:22). So when you're tempted, ask yourself, "Whose slave do I want to be?"

Second, keep in mind that Paul is describing a *process*, not a once and for all decision that catapults you into a state of total sanctification, where sin no longer tempts you. Some wrongly teach that you should seek for a dramatic spiritual experience that will transport you beyond sin and temptation. They promise that those who experience this spiritual "secret" will be free from the battles with the flesh that the rest of us unenlightened Christians struggle with. If you will just learn the secret of "letting go and letting God," your Christian life will be one of effortless, continual fellowship with Christ. So goes the pitch, but it is *not* the biblical picture. Sanctification is a lifelong process that requires a daily battle against sin and temptation.

Verse 19 shows that the process works in both directions. Either you turn down the fork in the road labeled "slaves of sin," which leads you down into more and more impurity and lawlessness. Or you turn up the road marked "slaves of righteousness," which causes you to grow more and more like Christ as you obey Him as your new Master. Frankly, neither path is a smooth, paved highway. Picture them both more like rough, four-wheel-drive

roads, where you're going over and around boulders and through rushing streams. But the road marked "slaves to impurity" doesn't get you where you want to go, even after all the trouble of driving it. It leads to death. The road marked "slaves of righteousness" ends up in heaven.

This means that if you're not moving in the direction of holiness, you need to examine whether you are truly saved. Do you love God more now than you used to? Do you hate your own sin more and more? Do you love others more, as seen in laying down your rights to serve them? Do you see the fruit of the Spirit more in your daily life? "Test yourself to see if you are in the faith" (2 Cor. 13:5a). The first step in winning over sin is to present yourself as a slave to righteousness.

2. To win over sin, remember your shameful spiritual past as a slave of sin (6:20-21).

To show why you should present yourself as a slave of righteousness, Paul reminds us of the other option, which we all were following (6:20-21): "For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death."

Even if you were raised in a Christian family, there was a point in your life at which you were a slave of sin. Since the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, the entire human race is born enslaved to sin. Maybe you want to shout, "But that's not fair! I didn't choose to be born in sin!" But even though you were born as a slave to sin, it is not an unwilling enslavement. Unbelievers sin because they want to sin. They like sinning. Even when they know that they are addicted to drugs, alcohol, pornography, homosexuality, or whatever the sin may be, and even though they know that these sins are causing huge problems, they keep doing them because they like sinning. To be delivered from sin, God has to give you a new nature through the new birth. Otherwise, you will just keep doing what you've always liked doing, namely, sinning.

There seems to be a touch of humor or irony in 6:20. Those who do not want to submit to God claim that they are now free and they don't want to give up their freedom. They protest, "I want

to be free to have sex with whomever I choose! I want to be free to get drunk or use drugs! I want to be free to lust over sexy women! I don't need religion taking away my fun and telling me how to live!" But Paul says, "Yes, such folks are free from righteousness all right! It doesn't even blip across the radar screen to tell them which way to go! But don't let it escape your attention that they are *not* free people. Rather, they are slaves of sin."

When you gave yourself to impurity and lawlessness, it did not satisfy your needs. It only made you crave more, so you committed worse and worse sins. To feed your lust with a little bit of porn is like pouring gas on a raging fire. It doesn't alleviate your lust; it only burns stronger. Slaves of sin do not manage their sin for their own enjoyment. Rather, it is a cruel tyrant that dominates and destroys them.

So in 6:21, Paul asks us before we yield to sin to stop and think about what benefits we got out of sin when we were its slaves. What did you gain from having sin as your master? His implied answer is, nothing at all. In fact, the evil tyrant of sin was destroying you and leading toward death. So why yield to sin now? I have read about pastors who got arrested for soliciting sex over the Internet with underage girls. What were they thinking that they would gain from that? If they had only stopped long enough to think about the "benefits" of sin, including the shame, maybe they would not have yielded to the temptation.

Before we leave verse 21, let me also say that every Christian has things from the past of which you are now ashamed. What should you do when those things pop into your mind? First, let the memory of those sins humble you so that you deal graciously with fellow sinners. You were once a slave of sin, so don't be self-righteous and judgmental toward those who are still slaves of sin. Rather, point them to God's abundant grace in Christ for sinners. Second, thank God for loving you in spite of your sin and for sending Christ to die for your sins. Third, be on guard against falling back into those old sins. We are not invulnerable! Once you have yielded to a sin, it will always hold a powerful attraction, even when you're enjoying fellowship with Christ. So be on guard!

Thus to win over sin, present yourself to God as a slave to righteousness. Remember your shameful past as a slave of sin.

3. To win over sin, keep in mind your blessed spiritual present as a slave of God (6:22).

Romans 6:22: "But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life." There are four things to note about verse 22, but I'll save the fourth one for verse 23, where it's repeated.

- A. Your spiritual present is due to a great change that God has made in your life.

"But now"! Those words signal the great change that God brought about when he took you from the reign of sin and death and placed you in Christ, under the reign of grace through righteousness (5:21). You were a slave of sin, but now you have been freed from sin. Paul often draws this sharp contrast between our former life and what God has done for us in Christ. In Ephesians 2:12, he describes the sad former plight of the Gentiles: They were "excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." Verse 13 shows the great change: "But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." He does the same thing in Ephesians 5:8: "For you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light."

I read of an old black preacher who used to say, "We ain't what we want to be. We ain't what we gonna be. But, thank God, we ain't what we was!" If you have met Christ as Savior, there is a huge "but now" in your life that God has made!

- B. Your spiritual present rests on your new position in Christ.

The command of 6:19 rests on the fact of 6:18, which is repeated in 6:22: God freed you from sin and made you a slave of righteousness in Jesus Christ. This is your new position in Christ. God did it for you through His grace and power. It is true of *all* Christians, not just of some who have attained a higher level of spirituality. As Paul repeatedly states (6:2-8), in Christ we *all* have died to sin and have been raised to newness of life. Therefore, be what you now are. Live in light of your new position in Christ.

The illustration that we considered was a man who had been born a slave and lived as a slave for over 50 years. But then President Lincoln declared all slaves to be free men. This former slave's new position is that he is free from his old master, but now he had to live each day like a free man. It required a radical refocusing of his mind and the will to believe this new truth about himself. Even so, God has declared us to be in Christ, identified with Him in His death to sin and resurrection to new life. Our present victory over sin depends on counting that to be true each time we're faced with temptation.

- C. Your spiritual present includes the many wonderful benefits of sanctification.

Satan often paints the picture that a life of sin is one of freedom and pleasure, whereas a life of holiness is one of bondage and misery. What a lie! A life of sin destroys fellowship with the gracious, kind, and loving Heavenly Father. Sin destroys loving human relationships, which can be the source of much comfort and encouragement. Sin tears apart generations of family members, who need each other. Sinful parents abuse their children, depriving them of the tender love and training that they need. Rebellious children cast off the wise guidance and experience of their parents. Selfish and greedy family members fight over the inheritance, tearing apart relationships for the sake of stuff that will soon perish. Sinful people abuse their bodies with alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and venereal disease. Sin is an all-purpose, all-around destroyer!

But holiness blesses those who walk in it and those around them. Holy people enjoy fellowship with the living God. Holy husbands sacrificially love their wives as Christ loved the church. They tenderly seek the blessing and benefit of their wives. Holy fathers show the grace and kindness of the Lord to their children, training them to love and follow the Lord for their own good. Holy young people walk in the ways of the Lord, avoiding the terrible scars that come from sexual immorality, drugs, alcohol, and abusive relationships. Holy church members care for one another, encouraging the fainthearted, helping the weak, being patient, kind, and loving toward one another (1 Thess. 5:14-15).

Matthew Henry, the well-known pastor and Bible commentator, was on his deathbed in 1714, at age 52. He had endured the

loss of his first wife and of three children. He was relatively young. He could have complained about his early death. But he said to a friend, "You have been used to take notice of the sayings of dying men. This is mine—that a life spent in the service of God, and communion with Him, is the most comfortable and pleasant life that one can live in the present world" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* [Revell], p. 1:xiv). That is the benefit of being enslaved to God. When you're tempted to sin, remember your spiritual present as a slave of God, including the benefits of a holy life.

4. To win over sin, look forward to your glorious spiritual future: eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (6:23).

The outcome of a present life of holiness is eternal life (6:22). Paul repeats this in 6:23, contrasting it starkly with the outcome of a life of sin: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Verse 23 begs for an entire sermon, but I'm trying to keep moving through Romans, so I'll be brief. The sermon would note three contrasts: Working for wages versus receiving a free gift; serving sin versus serving God; and, the final outcome of death versus eternal life. The fourth point would be that God's free gift comes to us "in Christ Jesus our Lord." Although this verse is often (and rightly) used in evangelism, in the context here Paul uses it to show why being under grace does not lead believers to sin: Believers know that sin pays a terrible wage: death. But receiving God's free, gracious gift results in eternal life "in Christ Jesus our Lord." We get to spend all of eternity in the presence of our loving Lord Jesus, who gave Himself to save us from hell. So why sin?

The word "wages" was used of a soldier's pay. Picture a cruel dictator, who doesn't care about his infantry. They are only pawns to preserve his luxurious lifestyle in the palace, while they're on the front lines taking bullets and shrapnel, eating horrible rations, separated from all the comforts of home. Their wage is death. That's the wage that sin pays its servants. If you continue in a life of sin, you'll experience hardship now and eternal punishment as your final paycheck.

But God offers a free gift: freedom from sin and a joyous life of knowing the only true God through Jesus Christ. You begin en-

joying the gift right now (John 17:3), and the final paycheck when you die is eternal life with this loving and gracious God. It seems like a no-brainer doesn't it? Do you want to go on being a slave of sin, with the final paycheck of eternal death? Or do you want to receive God's free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus the Lord?

Conclusion

So how do you win over sin? How do you experience consistent victory? First, receive the gift of eternal life. If you have never trusted in Christ, you are hopelessly, helplessly under the reign of sin and death. But Christ died and rose again to free you from sin. You must be born again in order to conquer sin.

Then, present yourself to God as a slave of righteousness. He is your new Master. You no longer have authority over your body. He does. Obey His Word. Remember your shameful past as a slave of sin before He redeemed you. Keep in mind your blessed present, enjoying all of the unfathomable riches of Christ. Look forward to your glorious spiritual future of eternal life free from all sin in the presence of the One who died to save you. You won't be sinlessly perfect in this life, but you can grow in holiness and consistently win over sin.

Application Questions

1. Why is the new birth essential in order to overcome sin (see John 3:19-21)? Can't unbelievers improve without it?
2. How often should we think about our past as slaves of sin? Where is the balance? (Cf. Rom. 3:20-21, Phil. 3:13-14.)
3. Some folks seem quite happy in their sin. Does this contradict the teaching that sin results in destruction, whereas holiness results in blessing and peace? Why not? See Ps. 73.
4. Will we ever be free from the tug of sin in this life? What does a life of consistent victory over sin look like? Describe it.

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