

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## YOU GOTTA SERVE SOMEBODY

Romans 6:15-18

By

Steven J. Cole

April 17, 2011

© Steven J. Cole, 2011

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to: [www.fcfonline.org/sermons](http://www.fcfonline.org/sermons)

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture  
Quotations are from the New American  
Standard Bible, Updated Edition  
© The Lockman Foundation

April, 17, 2011  
Romans Lesson 34

You Gotta Serve Somebody  
Romans 6:15-18

Years ago Bob Dylan wrote a song, "Gotta Serve Somebody,"  
(© 1979, Special Rider Music) with the refrain,

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You're gonna have to serve somebody,  
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

I don't know if Dylan was inspired by the words of Jesus or by our text, but his song certainly reflects the truth of our text. Paul says that either you are a slave of sin or you are a slave of obedience (6:16) or righteousness (6:18, 19) or God (6:22).

Unbelievers mistakenly think that they are free when they cast off God and follow their own lusts, but they are "slaves of corruption" (2 Pet. 2:19). God has freed us from sin (Rom. 6:18), but not to live as we please. Rather, He frees us from sin to make us "slaves of righteousness." You gotta serve somebody!

C. H. Spurgeon observed (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 25:374), "Free will I have often heard of, but I have never seen it. I have met with will, and plenty of it, but it has either been led captive by sin or held in blessed bonds of grace." So the choice is not, "Should I give up my freedom so that I can submit to God?" Rather, it is, "Should I serve sin or should I serve God?" (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 399.) You gotta serve somebody! Paul is telling us:

Either you are a slave of sin, resulting in death, or you are a slave of obedience, resulting in righteousness.

Clearly, Paul's theme is "slavery." The words *slave* or *enslaved* occur eight times in 6:15-23 and in every verse except 15, 21, & 23. Also, *obedience*, *obedient*, and *obey* occur four times. And so the issue here is, whose slave are you? Do you obey sin or God? There are no other options. Let's work through the text under three headings:

1. If you think that being under grace means that you are free to sin, you do not understand God's grace (6:15).

Romans 6:15: "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!" This verse is similar in many ways, and yet different, from 6:1-2a, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be!" There Paul was responding to the possible logical conclusion to his statement (5:20), "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." The wrong conclusion would be, "So, let's sin a lot so that we get a lot of grace!"

But in 6:15, Paul is responding to a potential critic who would abuse his statement (6:14), "you are not under law but under grace." This critic would have said, "If we're not under law but under grace, then we're free to sin without any worry of condemnation!" So in this case we don't sin *so that* grace may abound, but rather *because* grace has replaced the law. But Paul responds, as he did in verse 2, with the strongest possible condemnation: "May it never be!"

As I said last week, the subject of law and grace is one of the most difficult theological issues in the Bible and I cannot resolve all the issues here. But it has often been taken to two extremes that we must avoid. Some have feared that if we emphasize God's grace too much, people will fall into sin and licentiousness. And so they virtually put people back under the law by emphasizing rules for what they consider to be holy living. Often these are not biblical commands, but rather conservative cultural norms or manmade rules propped up by Bible verses taken out of context. Invariably, legalists do not focus on sins of the heart, such as pride or a lack of love for God, but rather on outward "sins" that easily can be judged. The Pharisees and the Judaizers were the leading proponents of this false, superficial "spirituality" (Matt. 23; Gal. 6:13).

On the other end of the spectrum are those who have concluded, "If we're under grace, then sin doesn't matter." These folks view God as a loving, tolerant, nice old guy in the sky who would never judge anyone. So they mistake grace to mean that God is not concerned about our sin. This leads to licentiousness.

It's important to understand that God's true grace is *not* the balance point between legalism and licentiousness. Rather, legalism and licentiousness are two sides of the same coin whose operating principle is the flesh. The legalist, acting in the flesh, takes pride in his religious practices. He condemns those who do not match up to his standards of righteousness, while he congratulates himself on his performance. He imagines that by keeping the law, he can commend himself to God. But he is operating in the flesh. He is not examining his heart before God. And it's obvious that the licentious person is operating in the flesh, giving in to the lusts of the flesh and justifying it by equating grace with tolerance for sin. So both legalism and licentiousness stem from the sinful flesh.

God's grace is opposed to both of these, not as their balance point, but as a completely different way of relating to God. As we've seen, preaching God's grace always exposes us to the charge of licentiousness from the legalists. It happened to Jesus (Luke 5:29-32; Matt. 11:19) and to Paul (Rom. 3:8). It will happen to us. But those making the charge do not understand grace at all, as Paul's strong reaction shows: "May it never be!"

If we have responded to the good news that God freely justifies the ungodly through faith alone, apart from works (Rom. 4:5), then we will hate the sin that put our Savior on the cross. We are now identified with Him in His death to sin and resurrection to new life. That new life of Christ within us manifests itself in obedience to God (1 John 3:9). As Paul shows in 6:19, lawlessness is the mark of the slave of sin. Righteousness is the mark of the one who has received God's grace.

And so you can test yourself by this: If you think that being under grace means that you are free to sin or that you can just shrug off your sin as no big deal, you do not understand God's grace. If, motivated by God's love and grace in giving His Son, you now hate and fight your sin and strive to be more obedient, then you understand grace. God's grace instructs or trains us "to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:11, 12). Paul wants to make sure that we understand that the proper result of God's grace is to make us slaves of righteousness, not lawlessness.

2. The only options are: You give yourself to be a slave of sin, resulting in death; or, you give yourself to be a slave of obedience, resulting in righteousness (6:16).

Paul again appeals to knowledge, in this case the common knowledge of a general example (6:16): "Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?" In that culture, sometimes a man had to sell himself into slavery because of financial troubles. Once you did that, you were a slave of the one that you sold yourself to. You had to obey him as your master.

Paul's point here, though, is not so much that a slave had to obey his master, but rather that the master you obey shows whose slave you are (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Apollos/Eerdmans], p. 261). If you obey sin, it shows that you're a slave of sin, headed toward eternal death. If you obey God, it shows that you're His slave, resulting in righteousness (although Paul doesn't directly say that we are enslaved *to God* until 6:22). If there is a change of masters, you obey your new master. So the master you obey shows whose slave you now are.

Why does Paul contrast being a slave of sin with being a slave of *obedience*? We might have expected him here to say, "a slave of God." He uses *obedience* because he wants to make it clear that not being under the law does *not* in any way imply that we are free to sin. Being under grace means that we present ourselves as slaves for obedience to God. This obedience is not the means to salvation, but rather the result of it. Thus, while slavery to sin leads to death, slavery to obedience leads to righteousness (not, *life*). We are not saved by our obedience, but rather we are saved by faith that results in a life of obedience (Eph. 2:8-10).

I have a hunch that if they had to describe themselves in terms of verse 16, many professing Christians would put themselves somewhere in the middle. They would say, "I'm not really a slave of sin, but it would probably be a stretch to say that I'm a *slave* of obedience. I'm kind of in both camps."

But Paul doesn't give us that option. It's very clear: Either Christ is your master and you obey Him or sin is your master and

you obey it. There is no middle ground. You can't keep one foot on the dock and the other foot on the boat. Either you're a slave of obedience to Christ or you're a slave of sin. You can't have both Christ and sin as your master.

If that sounds extreme, keep in mind that Paul is echoing the teaching of Jesus. Jesus said (Matt. 6:24), "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus said that there are two and only two gates: the narrow gate that leads to life and the broad gate that leads to destruction. There are two types of trees: the good tree that bears good fruit and the bad tree that bears bad fruit (Matt. 7:17-19). There are two kinds of builders who build two kinds of houses: Wise builders build on the rock; foolish builders build on the sand (Matt. 7:24-27). The wise builders represent those who hear Jesus' words and obey them. The foolish builders hear Jesus' words but do not obey.

Thus everybody serves somebody or something. You can tell who a person serves by his behavior or actions. Those who live in sin are the slaves of sin. Those who live in obedience are the slaves of Jesus Christ. Those who are the slaves of sin are not under grace and are heading for eternal death. Those who are slaves of Christ have tasted His grace, are growing in righteousness, and are heading for eternal life. Are you a slave of sin or a slave of Christ?

How does a person move from being a slave of sin to being a slave of God and righteousness?

3. The only way that you can change from being a slave of sin to being a slave of righteousness is for God to free you from sin by changing your heart (6:17-18).

Romans 6:17-18: "But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness."

Paul here describes the great change that came over the Roman believers when God saved them. These changes are true of everyone whom God has saved. They are radical changes, not minor. From being slaves of sin, they became obedient from the heart

to sound teaching. From being in bondage to sin, they were freed to become slaves of righteousness. Thus there was a change of lordship, from Satan's domain of sin to God's domain of righteousness. There was a change of thinking, so that now they submit to biblical truth. There was a change of heart, so that they are now willing and glad slaves of God; they love Him and hate their former master. There was a change of will, so that now they obey God's standards of righteousness, not sin. Four quick thoughts:

- A. Salvation is neither a human project nor a joint human-divine project; rather, salvation is of the Lord (6:17-18).

Slaves of sin are not able to free themselves by their own efforts. In fact, slaves of sin often do not realize that they are slaves and they resent anyone telling them that they are. Jesus told the Jews who had [superficially] believed in Him (John 8:31-32), "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Their response was (8:33), "We are Abraham's descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, 'You will become free?'"

That's incredible! Israel had been enslaved in Egypt for 400 years. Repeatedly in their history, they had fallen under oppressive invaders (e.g., the Book of Judges). The northern tribes had fallen to Assyria. The southern tribes fell to Babylon. Later they came under the cruel reign of Antiochus Epiphanes. As they spoke, Israel was under the thumb of Rome. And yet they claimed that they had never been enslaved! But Jesus goes on to make it clear that He was talking about slavery to sin. To be freed from that cruel master, the Son would have to make them free.

In our text (6:18), Paul uses the passive verb, "freed from sin," to show that God alone can free us. It's not a joint project where He gives us a boost and we contribute our share. This is also seen in that Paul says (6:17), "Thanks be to God." He did *not* say, "Thanks be to God, but you guys deserve some credit, too, for your part." No, we were enslaved to sin and loving it. We hated the light because it exposed our evil deeds (John 3:19-20). So when God graciously freed us from sin, He gets all the thanks and glory. As Paul puts it (1 Cor. 1:26-31), we are saved because God chose us as foolish, weak, lowly, and despised sinners so that He might

shame the world's wise, mighty, and exalted, so that no one may boast before the Lord. Salvation is *totally* God's doing, not ours.

B. The way God changes us is by bringing our mind, heart, and will into submission to His Word (6:17).

Martyn Lloyd-Jones has a chapter in his Romans series on verse 17 plus another chapter in *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* ([Eerdmans], pp. 51-62). I can only skim the surface, so I refer you to his many excellent insights that I have gleaned from.

First, note that God changes us by bringing our *minds* under the teaching of His Word. Scholars debate over why Paul says "form [example, pattern] of teaching," rather than just "teaching." We can't be dogmatic, but my guess from the context is that he is contrasting his teaching of the gospel of grace with the false teaching of both the legalists and the antinomians. In other words, he is referring to the kind of teaching that he has set forth in Romans to this point, and especially to the bottom line test that sound doctrine leads to godly behavior.

But God does not just change our minds to conform to sound teaching. Also, He changes our *hearts*. Some scholars can study the Bible in the original languages and dissect it like a biologist dissects a specimen. But the truth has not affected their hearts. But as Jonathan Edwards soundly argues in his *Treatise on Religious Affections* [Banner of Truth], 1:236), "True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections." That is to say, God changes our hearts and our desires. We must understand the truth with our minds, but also our hearts must rejoice in and willingly embrace the truth.

The evidence of this change of mind and heart is that our *wills* gladly obey the truth. To be "obedient from the heart" is not grudging, outward obedience, but cheerful, inner obedience. It is obedience on the heart level, where God alone sees, not outward obedience to impress others with how spiritual we are.

C. The teaching is not committed to the Christians, but rather the Christians are committed to the teaching (6:17).

You would expect Paul to say that the teaching was committed to the Christians (the old King James Bible wrongly translated it that way). But the proper translation is, "to which you were committed." This lines up with the slavery analogy that Paul uses here.

The idea is that becoming a Christian means being put under the authority of God's Word (Moo, p. 401). We don't sit in judgment of the Word, but the Word sits in judgment on us. A person who has come under God's grace in Christ submits to God's Word. John Calvin, in a rare reference to his own conversion, described it as God "subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker reprint], preface to the Psalms, p. xl).

D. When God saves you, He frees you from sin and makes you a slave of righteousness (6:18).

Verse 18 is not an exhortation (that comes in 6:19), but a statement of fact: "And having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness." Paul here sums up his argument from 6:16-17, which refutes the false charge of 6:15, that if we are not under law but under grace, we can shrug off our sin. As in verse 16, Paul makes it clear that there are two and only two options. Either you are enslaved to sin or you are enslaved to righteousness. Also, this is true of all Christians (Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: The New Man* [Zondervan], p. 222). It is not just true of some Christians who have had a dramatic spiritual experience to free them from sin. It is true of all who used to be in Adam, but now are in Christ. They have been freed from sin and became slaves of righteousness.

This does not mean (as Lloyd-Jones goes on to point out) that we have become sinlessly perfect. Neither does it mean that we are free from the old sin nature or that we will never be tempted by sin. Rather, it means that the power of sin over us has been broken, so that we no longer live under sin as our master. We do not obey sin as the normal course of our daily lives. Rather, we now obey righteousness. "That means," says Lloyd-Jones (p. 225), "that we have come under the power and control and influence of righteousness." Formerly, we served sin. We obeyed its desires and urges. But now, we serve righteousness. We obey God and His Word. The irony is that true freedom is *not* freedom to sin; rather, true freedom is slavery to God and His righteousness.

### Conclusion

I intended to cover verse 19 in this message, but it will have to wait till next time. I close with a story and a question. The story is about a bazaar in a village in India. A farmer had brought in a

covey of quail. Each bird had a string tied around its foot with the other end tied to a ring on an upright stick. The quail walked around and around in a circle, held captive by that string. No one wanted to buy any quail until a devout Hindu Brahman came along. His religious respect for all life and his compassion for these birds led him to ask the price of the quail. Then he said to the merchant, "I want to buy them all." After he paid the money, he ordered the merchant, "Now, set them all free." The merchant was surprised, but the Brahman insisted: "Cut the strings and set them all free."

The farmer cut the strings, but the quail kept marching around and around in a circle. Finally, he had to shoo them off. But even then, they landed a short distance away and resumed marching in a circle, as they had done when they were tied to the stick.

God didn't free you from sin so that you would keep going in circles as if you were still bound to it. He freed you from sin so that you would become a slave of obedience to Him, resulting in righteousness. You've gotta serve somebody. The question is: Who are you serving—sin or God?

### Application Questions

1. Many Christians think that being under grace means that God is tolerant of our sin. Besides this text, what other Scriptures refute this notion?
2. By comparing 6:15 & 19 it is obvious that not being under the law does not mean being lawless. So what does it mean?
3. Some Christians claim that they are "carnal," that Jesus is their Savior, but not their Lord. How does our text relate to this? Why is this third option not possible?
4. If salvation is totally of the Lord, where do repentance and faith fit in? Are these our responsibility? Do they originate with us or come from God? Use Scripture to support your answer.

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2011, All Rights Reserved.