

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part thirteen

Sunday, January 13th, 2019 - 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #2101

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TRAINING OUR LIVES IN GRACE - THE LOGIC OF CONVERSION

Romans 6:12-23 - "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. [13] Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. [14] For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. [15] What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! [16] Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? [17] But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, [18] and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. [19] I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.[20] When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. [21] But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. [22] But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. [23] For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It's inevitable that Paul bump into the issue of this text. The word "**therefore**" in **verse 12** shows he's been leading up to something **based on** what he has said earlier - "**Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.**" **"Because** of all I've been saying to you, it is unthinkable that you adopt a light-hearted view of **any** continuance in sinful behavior."

Paul's concerned lest anyone misunderstand some of the great things he's been saying: **Romans 5:1** - "**....since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.**" **Romans 5:9** - "**Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.**" **Romans 6:5** - "**For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.**"

Those are powerful descriptions of something massive that God has done through Christ Jesus on our behalf. We are being called to bask in joy and hope and assurance. How shall we now **live** with these truths in our minds?

That's the issue concerning Paul in our text today. If all of this is true of us right now - if we're **united in Christ's death and life** - if we now are **justified** and **have peace with God** and are **saved from wrath** through Christ Jesus - if **all** of this is true, how much does it matter if we continue in sin? In other words, "**Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?**" (6:1), or, "**Are we to sin because we are not under the law but under grace?**" (6:15).

The here - which we'll unpack later on - is grace received gives birth to love for Christ. And love carries its own **compulsion**. Holiness is pursued with gusto but not in legalism. Love motivates. And love is the strongest compulsion ever.

Paul began working through these issues in last week's text, concluding with **verse 11** - "**So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.**" But he's not finished with this thought quite yet. **How** do I "**consider myself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus?**" How can I be sure I'm **considering** this as seriously as I should? What does a life look like when it's **considering** itself dead to sin and alive to God through Christ?

That is the subject Paul deals with in the remainder of chapter six. And here's the conclusion Paul is going to reach. It sets his blood boiling. Any experience of conversion that allows for a *willful* continuance in sin is counterfeit. God's not in it. Either conversion sets the whole life on a new course or it's spurious and empty. And now we need to look at *why* Paul can make such a striking claim. So again, the question under study in this text is *what does it mean to consider myself dead to sin (6:11)?*

1) **TO CONSIDER MYSELF DEAD TO SIN MEANS BEING AWARE EACH MOMENT IS FILLED WITH THE POWER OF PRESENTING MY BODY EITHER TO GOD OR TO FUTURE SIN**

Romans 6:12-14 - "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. [13] Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. [14] For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace."

After taking a chapter and a half describing what *God* has done for *us* in Christ Paul now rehearses what *we* must do for *ourselves*. He describes our ordinary days - the moments of our lives - in terms of being occasions where we don't merely *exist*, but where we *present ourselves* to God or to sin.

That's what you're going to be doing all this week. You will do it even when you don't think about it. You will just be doing it poorly rather than righteously.

You and I can *set ourselves up* for enslavement to our own bodies and passions: "**Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions**"(12). Or, we can present our bodies, quite literally, to the Lord in such a way that deeper patterns of holiness and righteousness become inevitable: "**...but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness**"(13b).

The *capacity* for sin is with all of us. Paul has already explained how Adam's sin has effected all of mankind (5:12-17). We are all *vulnerable* to sin. Each moment contains *risks* to holiness. This is why Paul gets so specific in these verses. Notice that he doesn't just talk about some *general, mystical* commitment to Christ. He talks about our *bodies* and our *members*: "**Let not sin reign in your mortal body**"(12), "**Do not present your members to sin**"(13), "**present your members to God as instruments for righteousness**"(13b).

Notice this language of *presenting*. This is very different from much of the evangelical church today. We speak of "**accepting Christ**," which smacks of a *one-time* action rather than on *ongoing* one. We talk of "**asking Jesus into your heart**," which designates something *interior and invisible*. No one else could see evidence of it.

To all of this Paul says, "I'm not talking about your devotions here. This isn't about your prayer group. I'm not talking about the feelings you have as you sing some worship chorus on Sunday. I'm talking about the things you do with your *body*. Don't set yourself up for bondage. Don't work *against* grace. Rather, learn to *school yourself* for the *power* of grace."

2) **REMEMBER THE POWER OF PRESENTING YOUR MEMBERS EXTENDS BEYOND THE MOMENT ITSELF**

Romans 6:15-16 - "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! [16] Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to

righteousness?”

The key phrases are **“leads to death”**(16), and **“leads to righteousness”**(16). Remember the question we’re considering. **How shall we consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God (6:11)?** Paul now gives a very profound part of his answer. We must remember that each moment of decision **leads into** another. No daily choice is an **end in itself**. Each moment only **looks** self-contained. Every moment unwraps a bit more of our eternal destiny.

I love the language of Sitting Bull: **“Two big dogs fight inside of me every day. One of them is evil and one of them is good.” “Which one wins,” he was asked. “The one I feed the most.”**

Now we’re coming to ground zero - the **core** of a sound understanding about sin and righteousness. How much does it matter if I willfully continue in sin - even **small, private** sin? Well, Paul would say, here’s how much it matters. It will lead to **death. Your death. Spiritual death (16)**.

I’m not talking about **sinless perfection** here. But there is the particular danger of **willing** ourselves into sin. We may all find ourselves **falling** into sin, in spite of our best efforts to **resist** it. But when we become casual about **choosing** patterns of sin - when we **“obey sin”** as Paul describes in **verse 16** - nothing but spiritual death will follow.

When you **surrender** the self to sin you entrench **slavery** into your future. You may not feel the full weight of it in the adrenaline rush of sin, but Jesus’ words are still crisply true - **“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin”(John 8:34)**.

The same is true on the side of obedience to righteousness. Paul is describing something different from the **imputed righteousness of Christ** in this text. He’s describing the seemingly small, almost mundane ways, when, in the power of grace, the body and all its members (hands, feet, eyes, ears) are **“presented,”** a **momentum of righteousness** is created. You can present yourself to **“obedience which leads to righteousness”**(16b).

It may look small now. Your steps to reach out and practically serve Christ may not **feel** full of dynamism and power. But they’re **taking your whole being** into future grace and righteousness - **2 Corinthians 3:18** - **“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”**

Be faithful with **small steps** of obedience. Don’t do any of them for **applause** or a **quick fix** to some personal problem. They carry their own, unique reward. They **protect** your soul from eternal death. And they **school future habits of holiness and life**. Each moment **takes you somewhere**. In each small choice you are establishing the issue of the **control** of your whole future.

So we see the reason for Paul’s question in **verse 15** - **“Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!”** Paul’s not just saying we **shouldn’t** do this. He’s saying it’s **logically impossible** to do this. It’s impossible because we can’t establish **two directions** for our life simultaneously. As Jesus said, we can’t serve **two** masters. Each moment of decision moves us **toward** one master and **away** from the other. We can’t **claim** one master while **obeying** another.

3) **PAUL’S EXPLANATION OF NEW TESTAMENT CONVERSION**

Romans 6:17-23 - **“But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, [18] and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your**

natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. [21] But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. [22] But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. [23] For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The opening phrase, *“but thanks be to God...”*, shows the order of events in Paul’s mind. Their *obedience* didn’t *earn* God’s grace. Rather, God’s grace set in motion everything about their Christian experience.

How did God’s grace begin to bear fruit in their lives? Paul tells us, though it’s somewhat surprising the way he does. Their lives were transformed by what Paul calls the *“standard of teaching”* (17). So Paul doesn’t just say (though this would certainly be true) that they were saved *by Jesus*. He doesn’t just say they were saved (and this would also be true) by *God’s grace*.

Paul immediately lays down the fact that spiritual life is never mediated without, what he calls, the *“standard of teaching”* (17). There is *content* to it. This is not *Oprah* spirituality. This is not people trying to *“find their true inner selves.”* This is not people trying to *“get their act together.”* This is people hearing, understanding, and, by God’s grace, reaching out to *God’s specific truth* about their sin and His salvation in Jesus Christ.

Paul describes the *depth* of their commitment to this teaching by saying something striking. It’s not that the teaching was *committed to them*. Rather, *they were committed to it* - *“...the standard of teaching to which you were committed....”* (17).

That word *“standard”* is the Greek word *“tupos”* (too-pos), from which we get our English word *“type.”* It means to *“cast an imprint by striking a blow - to impart a shape.”* So the teaching wasn’t just heard and remembered the way countless Rabbis shared their traditions. These people were *changed* by the truth the way clay is changed by the hands of the sculptor. In other words, being committed to the teaching *implies* a changed shape to the whole life.

I think the reason Paul stresses this commitment to *“the standard of teaching”* so carefully is he wants these people to get the idea that just as they *began* their Christian life with this *“standard of teaching,”* they must *continue* their death to self and their slavery to Christ with the *same* standard of teaching.

This is why Paul quickly and seamlessly links together their *past* experience in grace with their *future* obedience in grace - *“...and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. [19] I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.”*

Notice the *two parts* in this Christian experience of new life. The first is the part *done for us* - *“...having been set free....”* (18). The second, at least in part, must be *done by us* - *“...so now present your members as slaves to righteousness....”* (19).

If anyone understands the *nature* of conversion this is the only possible pattern of life. One who has *received* divine grace can’t possibly *continue* in willful sin. He can’t remain *indifferent* to sin’s presence - **Romans 6:21** - *“But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death.”* *Shame* is the only emotion the Christian can feel toward sin.

He **can't** continue to choose sin because he now **abhors** it.

God's grace transforms the **love of my heart**. And remember the rule. **Love carried it's own motivation**. That's why Paul contrasts the two driving emotions **"shame" and "love."**

This is what Paul mean in his famous words in **2 Corinthians 5:14-15** - **"For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; [15] and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."**

So, back to Paul's initial question. **"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?"(6:1)**. If I'm relying on God's grace, does it matter if I continue to choose sin? Is **post-conversion** sin a serious matter? Doesn't grace just **cover** it automatically, so I don't need to be concerned?

"O," Paul would say, "You don't get it at all. Conversion doesn't just **save** you. It **re-wires** you. It sets every second of your life under new management. **Train your members** around the power of this truth. Because by either **growing in grace** or **ignoring the transforming call of grace** you're shaping your spiritual future with every tick of the clock."