

EXEGETICAL PAPER: **Romans 6:15-18** (NIV based)  
by David M. Coddington

In Romans chapter 6 is the counter response to a false interpretation of the theological idea that was established in the previous chapter. In Romans 5:20 is the statement that “where sin increased, grace increased all the more”. The grace of God is shown and applied more where the law revealed sin. This statement is quickly qualified by declaring that believers should not continue to sin because they think their sin will make God’s grace increase. The reasoning in verses 6:1-4 is that we believers are united with Christ in His death through baptism, which breaks the inability to escape bondage to sin. In this death, the “old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with” (v.6:6). The death with Christ has broken the power of sin; therefore, sin has no place in the life of a believer. Then in verses 6:5-11, the implication is drawn out that because believers are united in the death of Christ, they are also united in the resurrection and life of Christ. Believers are to be “alive to God in Christ Jesus” (v.6:11). In verses 6:12-14 is a clarifying explanation about what being 'dead to sin' and 'alive to God' practically looks like. Two commands are made: do not “let sin reign in your mortal body” (v.12) and do not “offer the parts of your body to sin” (v.13).

**VERSE 6:15: "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!"** Most likely this interjection, "What then?", looks back at the previous statement, “you are not under law, but under grace” (v.14). This idea sparks the next argument against believers who have the misconception that absence of the law is an excuse to sin. This form is exactly the same as in verse 1: interjection, rhetorical question, and negation of question (Moo 397). There is deviation in the word usage and the misconception that is being addressed.

There is a slight deviation in tenses in "Shall we sin...?" (v.15), which is in variation to “Shall we go on sinning...?” (v.1). Leon Morris states that the aorist tense verb in verse 15 points to a single act of sin, while the present tense verb in verse 1 signifies a continuing action of sin (Morris 261). While this does help to differentiate between these separate arguments, the misconception in verse 15 is not a will to sin once. Rather, Thomas Schreiner holds that there is no interpretive difference between the two verbs and that the aorist in verse 15 simply refers to sin in general (Schreiner 32). This understanding of the two phrases is preferable. The misconception in verse 15 is to continue to sin, just like in verse 1.

The subject matter of the misconception "we are not under law but under grace" is different than the misconception in verse 1. In verse 1, the misconception is sinning in order to gain more grace, while in verse 15 it is a question of sinning because of grace (Moo 398). It is a slight distinction but an important one. This misconception is rooted in the Jewish understanding of the law. It would be logical for Jews to assume that since they are not "under the law", they are free to sin. This rhetorical question addressing this idea gives it almost a comical air. This is further emphasized in the negative expression: "By no means!" The very idea of 'sinning because believers are under grace' is shown to be ridiculous.

**VERSE 6:16: "Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey -- whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?"**

The discussion moves next into addressing the misconception in verse 16. "Don't you know...?" is a common expression in the writings of Paul. It is used four times in Romans alone (cf. Romans 6:3,16; 7:1; 11:2) and another ten times in 1 Corinthians. It is used to admonish the readers and give more force to the arguments. There are two possible ways to understand this phrase. The first is that it is appealing to the reader's knowledge of the culture. Slavery was common in that time, so they will be quite familiar with the theme of slavery that is picked up in the remainder of the chapter. The second option is that it is referring to Jesus' teaching on serving two masters (Matthew 6:24), or sinners that are slaves to sin (John 8:34). The first option is more preferable. Although there are parallels and similarities between Paul's teaching and that of Jesus, this verse Romans 6:16 launches into an exposition about slavery, in a spiritual or moral sense. It does not quote Jesus or admonish the readers like it would if it was referring to Christian tradition (Jewett 416).

"Offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves" is a phrase that is rooted in the culture of that time, in which people could give themselves up to someone to become a slave so that they could pay off a debt (Morris 261). The point is not being made that people choose to be slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness before salvation. The basic assumption is that people are necessarily enslaved to sin before coming to Christ. It has already been established in verse 6:6 that believers are no longer automatically enslaved by sin. After salvation, believers do have an option to follow one of two masters: sin or righteousness. It is possible for believers to return to their former master and "offer" or 'present' themselves as a slave to sin. The presentation of oneself as a slave illustrates the point that slaves are under the control and power of their masters. That is why they are called obedient slaves. The main job description of slaves is to be obedient. It was well known in that time that slaves were at the mercy of their masters (Morris 261). They obey the will of their master. This discussion goes a little bit deeper in the next phrase.

The idea is drawn out that the condition of the slave is contingent on the kind of master he obeys, "You are slaves of the one whom you obey". In addition to the fact that slaves must obey their masters, a master of a slave gives his slave their identity. It goes a bit deeper than obedience. A good master reflects his character in a good slave; however the opposite is also true. An evil master will reflect that character onto his slave. The idea in this phrase also brings out that putting oneself into slavery brings total obedience to their master for life. In the ancient world, many times death was the only escape once a person put himself into slavery. Obeying a master will bring about total enslavement to the person (Jewett 416). In subsequent verses, this will be related to sin and righteousness.

With the phrase "slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness", the discussion in this verse 16 parallels the teaching of Jesus. In Matthew 6:24, Jesus taught that a person can only serve one master, which in that context it was God or money. Here in Romans 6:16, the comparison is made that a believer is either a slave in total servitude to sin, or to obedience to God. Sin easily enslaves believers by desensitizing them to the truth, and sometimes they willingly offer

themselves up to it, as declared earlier in the verse. It is unclear what kind of "death" is being referred to that results from sin. Douglas Moo argues that it refers to "eternal" death, the ultimate separation from God's presence (Moo 399). William Hendriksen takes the middle ground and asks why not keep all of the possible options: physical, spiritual, or everlasting death in mind. Moo's interpretation is preferable because it logically follows with the next phrase of "obedience" and "righteousness". Once again it is unclear what is meant by 'obedience'. It could be referring to the act of obedience in obeying God's laws (vv.15,17). The other option is that 'obedience' refers to 'faith'. Moo puts it correctly when he writes, this is "emphasizing the significance of obedience in the Christian life... freedom of the Christian is not freedom to do what one wants, but freedom to obey God" (Moo 399). 'Obedience' in the life of a believer leads to 'righteousness'.

There are two options for what 'righteousness' is referring to. The first is earthly righteousness, being holy in action and deed. Douglas Moo argues for this view because the word "righteousness" is not used to refer to the final judgment or state of believers (Moo 399). However, Leon Morris points out that 'righteousness' is not gained by 'obedience' but rather by 'faith'. This leads him to conclude that this verse is not distinguishing between earthly righteousness and the final position of believers in heaven. It is preferable to go with Morris' interpretation because it fits better with the use of "death". "Death" refers to the ultimate final death and likewise "righteousness" refers to the final state of believers with God.

**VERSE 6:17: "But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted."** In verse 17, the tone changes. From the previous verses, it would seem that believers are standing on a fence leaning to one side or the other. But in this verse, a positive tone is taken and thanks given to God that they were once slaves of sin but have now become obedient. This praise is rooted in the work of God, and that is why it is "thanks be to God". It is due to the work of God that the believers in Rome have become obedient (Schreiner 333). Schreiner explains, "Believers are called to yield to God as their master, to be those who have already been claimed and delivered by that master" (Schreiner 334).

It is important that the obedience of the Roman believers came "wholeheartedly", 'from the heart'. The obedience of believers has to come from a deeply felt and motivated action. In addition, it also implies a contrast between a conviction that is superficial, shallowly rooted, or coerced as sin's slave (Dunn 343). This is somewhat contrasted with the idea of slavery in verse 16. A person gives himself to slavery but it may not be because of desire or will. In contrast, the obedience that the Roman believers are exhibiting is heartfelt. They are not doing what is right out of a sense of duty or servitude. One of the key differences between correct and incorrect obedience is the manner in which it is pursued. Obedience from the heart is absolutely praiseworthy in the eyes of God. It is all the more incredible because the Roman believers "used to be slaves to sin". They were dead in their trespasses and cared only for their sin (Romans chapter 1). God is shown to be even more glorious by the transformation of His people.

The last part of the verse is highly ambiguous in the Greek. There are two main schools of thought on the translation and interpretation of the phrase: "form of teaching

to which you were entrusted". The first understanding is proposed by Douglas Moo that translates the phrase to mean "form" of Christian teaching that the Roman believers had been handed over to (Moo 400). Another understanding, explained by James Dunn, is that the phrase refers to a catechism or document that was given to the Roman believers for them to learn from (Dunn 343). Moo's understanding of the phrase is preferable because there is no direct or apparent evidence that the Roman believers were given a catechism or some other document. Most likely this is referring to the doctrines and theology as a whole that the Roman believers dedicated themselves to learning. This also goes along with the idea of "obedience" from verse 16. The opposite of being enslaved to sin is obedience to God. Obeying the teaching that the Roman believers received is equated to obedience to God.

**VERSE 6:18: "You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."** In the first part of this verse is a reiteration of the point made in verses 6:1-11 - believers have been "set free from sin". This does not mean that believers will not sin, rather, this is referring to the power that sin had over believers before their regeneration in Christ. They have been set free permanently from its condemning power and their inability or powerlessness to escape bondage to it. Freedom is an important idea in the writings of Paul. He uses it more than any other writer in the New Testament. Christ brought real freedom that brought people out of spiritual darkness and decay. This freedom is not the gift to do whatever one wants, rather, it is the deliverance from the evil influence of sin (Morris 263).

It is ironic then that believers have become "slaves to righteousness" after being freed from the enslavement of sin. The distinction is made between "liberty and license" (Morris 264). Believers do not have a license to do whatever they want because they are free. The freedom in Christ that believers have is not pointless or purposeless. They have been freed so that they might give themselves over to another cause - a cause that is far greater than the filth and decay of sin. The goal of the slave of righteousness is to live life as God intends and wills them to live - a life that is righteous and does what is right in all situations. Being a slave of righteousness reflects an attitude toward God that is obedient. A slave's purpose is to obey every will of their master. God is the master of all who believe in Jesus Christ. This righteousness is not out of duty, service, or bondage, but rather based on a "new and powerful relationship with God that has already been established" (Moo 403).

The discussion goes on in verses 19-23 to flush out what being a slave of righteousness looks like. Believers are commanded to 'present' or "offer [the parts of your body] in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness" (v.19). A key part of being a slave of righteousness is getting every body part and every aspect of mental processing to being under the will of God. Next, in verse 22, believers are reminded of the nourishment that living a life of righteousness produces. A life of sin and enslavement brings about depravity, but a life of righteousness brings new life to a believer. In the next chapter, the discussion moves on to how the law is applicable in the life of believers.

**CONCLUSION:** Application from this text must be drawn from the whole. This passage is written to believers to remind them that they are no longer under the law but

under grace. This fact should not drive them to want to sin more, but rather to live a life of righteousness. There is no acceptable reason to go back under the old bondage of sin when they have freedom in Christ. The same is still true for us today. Sin is just as tempting now as it was back then. There may be a prevalence of different sins, but that has not changed its enslaving power. We need to realize, first, that the world is spiritually enslaved. People in the world are unable to escape, and they need the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Second, we believers are freed from the condemnation of sin and given access to God's power to escape from the bondage to sin, large and small. We do not have to be held captive by lying, pride, lust, or any other sin. Our master is Jesus Christ - His righteousness should be the focus and the pursuit of our lives.

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