

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, April 21, 1996, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 6:15-23

A TRIP TO THE SLAVE MARKET

We might say that Paul has rewound the tape and will now replay it. You remember that in verses 1 and 2 of this chapter he asked the question — “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” And his instant answer was, “By no means! No, no! God forbid!” And here in verse 15 he raises the question again — “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” And he gives the same uncompromising rejoinder — “No way, José!” What is being asked both in verse 1 and verse 15 is this — “Does grace sanction sin and even encourage it?”

Let’s face it — the doctrine of “free grace” has always been considered by many people to be an extremely dangerous belief. There is always the temptation to say, “If forgiveness is as easy as that; if God is always willing to forgive the sinner; and if His grace is encompassing enough to cover every guilty stain; why then worry about sin?” You remember the remark of the French cynic who said, “Of course God will forgive; that is His business!” An attitude such as that is pathetic because it is a cheap attempt to trade upon the mercy of God, and it can only bring condemnation. Sin is a terribly serious thing, and it has appallingly serious consequences.

This solemn subject was a “hot button” in the Early Church. You remember those two awesome passages in the Letter to the Hebrews:

(1) Hebrews 6:4-6: “It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because they are crucifying the Son of God all over again, and subjecting Him to public disgrace.” And

(2) Hebrews 10:26: “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left.”

Remember, of course, that these passages were written in an age of persecution, and at such times apostasy is the supreme sin. In times of persecution a person could save his own skin by denying Christ; but by so doing he was saying that Jesus Christ is not really his Lord; that his life and comfort are dearer to him than the Savior. Two hundred years after this, there came the terrible persecution under the Emperor Diocletian. When peace came after the storm, the one test that some wished to apply to every surviving member of the Church was this — “Did you deny Christ and so save your life?” And if he had denied his Lord, they would have shut the door

in his face once and for all.

However, I do not believe that this condemnation was meant to be erected into a doctrine and a theology that there is no forgiveness for the truly repentant believer who has stumbled and fallen. After all, our Lord Himself said, “Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men except the blasphemy against The Holy Spirit...” (Matthew 12:31) The blasphemy against The Holy Spirit, commonly called “the unpardonable sin,” is the sin of refusing to obey the Spirit’s call to repentance; it is the sin of believing that you do not need to be forgiven for anything. Therefore you will never repent; and if you do not repent, you can never receive God’s pardon; and therefore you have committed “the unpardonable sin.”

But this condemnation leveled against apostates in Hebrews 6 and 10 was written to point out that when, as believers, we sin, we do two terrible things:

(1) “We crucify the Son of God all over again.” This is the significance of the “Quo Vadis” legend. It tells how in the persecution under Nero, Peter was in Rome, and as martyrdom faced him, his courage failed and he fled for dear life down the Appian Way. Suddenly he saw a Figure standing in his path — it was Jesus Himself. “Dominus,” said Peter, “quo vadis?” — “Master, where are you going?” Back came the answer, “Peter, I am going back to Rome to be crucified again, this time in your stead.” And Peter, guilty and ashamed of his cowardice, turned and made his way back to Rome to be crucified upside down at his own request, because he had so shamefully denied his Lord. We must always remember that every sin we commit is another nail driven into the loving heart of God. Sin not only breaks God’s Law; it breaks God’s heart.

(2) “We subject our Lord to public disgrace.” How do we do that? I’ll tell you. When we sin, the world will say, “So that is all that your Christ can do. So that is all the Cross achieved. This Jesus you talk about obviously can’t make you a better person!” It is bad enough when a Christian falls into sin and brings shame on himself and discredit to his fellow believers; but it is far worse than even that, because it causes unbelievers to hurl their jibes and jeers at Christ. He shames his Lord and makes people laugh at the Cross.

So what the writer to the Hebrews says to Christians who sin is this — “Look at what has been done for you. Look at the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. Think of what it cost Him to purchase your salvation. Can you treat His incredible sacrifice as if it did not matter?”

So when you read Romans 6:15 — “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?”, remember these solemn truths we have just been considering.

Paul now goes on to use a vivid illustration to portray the utter foolishness of imagining that a Christian could go on sinning so that grace may increase. He uses the illustration of slavery. He takes us down to the slave market in Rome where wretched human beings are bought and sold.

Look at verse 16 (GN) — “Surely you know that when you surrender yourselves as slaves to obey someone, you are in fact the slaves of the master you obey...” When we think of Roman slaves, we naturally think of people captured by a victorious army, or of people bought in

the slave market. But there was such a thing as voluntary slavery. People in dire poverty would sometimes go down to the slave market and offer themselves as slaves to someone simply in order to be assured of having clothes on their back and food in their stomach; and these are the people Paul is thinking about in this verse. Needless to say, those who thus offered themselves invariably had their offer accepted! But the very moment they gave themselves to a slave-master, they forfeited all their rights to personal freedom.

Self-surrender leads inevitably to slavery, whether we become slaves to sin or slaves to Christ. I saw a bumper sticker once that said, "I am Christ's slave; whose slave are you?" Our Lord had said in John 8:34 — "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin." Now, total obedience is the very essence of slavery. When you are converted by the grace of God, that is an act of self-surrender to Christ; and self-surrender leads inevitably to slavery; and slavery demands a total and radical obedience to your master. But when you offer yourself to God as the slave of righteousness, then sin has no further claim on you because you now have a new master.

Now when you think of a workman, you think of a person who gives a certain number of hours a week to his employer, and then receives his wages. But during the rest of the week he is free to do as he pleases. He may be a computer analyst in an office during the day, but he might be a Little League coach in the evening. But in Paul's time the status of a slave was quite different. The slave had no time that he could call his own. He was the exclusive possession of his master. Every single moment of his time belonged to his master. It was impossible for him to serve two masters because he was the exclusive possession of one master.

And that is the picture Paul had in mind when he said, "You used to be slaves to sin." (verse 17) — "Sin had exclusive possession of you; you were under its absolute control. It demanded and received your total obedience. But now you have a new Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. He now has exclusive possession of you. And now you can't even bear to talk about sinning: Your whole life is aimed at living to please and honor your new-found Savior."

Verse 19 (LB) is very interesting. It's as if Paul is talking with tongue in cheek! He says, "I speak this way, using the illustration of slaves and masters, because it is easy to understand..." He's really apologizing for using this picture at all, because he didn't like to compare the Christian life to any kind of slavery. I'm sure the Apostle hated slavery with a holy hatred, but he was wise enough to know that at that moment in history Christianity might have been condemned as a wildly revolutionary movement if Christians revolted against this deeply ingrained institution. The awesome power of Imperial Rome would have immediately crushed the infant Church in final disaster. And yet, the one thing this picture does is to demonstrate the fact that the Christian can have no Master but Jesus Christ. So long as a person wants to keep even one compartment of his life sealed off from Christ's complete control, that person is not really a Christian.

Going back to verse 17 Paul has something more to say. He says, "But God be thanked, that you were the slaves of sin, but you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was handed on to you." What is the Apostle saying here? He's saying, "You knew what you were doing. You made a deliberate choice, and you did it of your own free will." This is very interesting. You remember how, at the beginning of the chapter, Paul used the illustration of

Christian baptism. We discovered that in the Early Church baptism was, in the nature of things, adult baptism; and it was administered as a confession of one's new-found faith in Christ. But it is clear from this verse that no one was ever allowed into the Church on a mere wave of emotion. He received instruction in Christian doctrine. He had to know what he was doing. He was taught what Christ offered and what Christ demanded. Then, and only then, could he make the valid commitment that was required of him. He "obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was handed on to him."

They tell me that there are very few backsliders in the Christian churches of Korea; and they say that this is because every inquirer is put through a two-year period of instruction in the faith before being admitted to baptism. As one missionary said to me, "We would rather take our losses early than later."

It is said that when a young man wishes to become a member of the Benedictine order of monks in the Roman Catholic Church, he is accepted for a year on probation. During all that time, his clothes, which he wore in the world, hang in his cell. At any time he may take off his monk's robe, put on his civilian clothes, and walk out, and no one will think any the worse of him. Only at the end of the year are his street clothes finally taken away. He must know what he is doing. He must count the cost before he makes the final commitment. Jesus does not want followers who have not taken the time or the trouble to count the cost.

But Paul continues in verses 19-21 (LB). "Just as you used to be slaves to impurity and lawlessness, so now you must let yourselves be slaves to all that is right and holy. In those days when you were slaves of sin, you didn't bother much with goodness. And what was the result? Evidently not good, since you are ashamed now even to think about those things you used to do, for all of them end in eternal doom." Paul is drawing a distinction between the old life of sin and the new life of holiness. The old life was characterized by impurity and lawlessness.

The pagan world was an impure, unclean world. It did not know the meaning of chastity. For example, Justin Martyr, the famous second century Christian writer, tells about the exposure of babies. In Rome, unwanted children, especially girls, were literally discarded. Every night numbers of them were left lying in the Forum, where they were collected by despicable entrepreneurs who owned houses of ill repute. These poor little girls were then trained up to be prostitutes, with whom the brothels were stocked. And Justin turns on his heathen opponents and tells them that, in their immorality, they had every chance of going into a city brothel, and all unknown to them, having sexual intimacy with their own daughter. That is what pagan life was like.

And the pagan world was lawless. People's lusts were their only laws. But the new life in Christ is different. It is a life in which you are a slave to righteousness (verse 19). The Greeks defined "righteousness" as "giving to God and to man their due." The Christian is the person who gives God this proper place and who respects the rights of all other human beings. The Christian will never willingly disobey God, nor will he ever use another human being in such a way as to exploit that person in any shape or form.

And that leads to holiness in this present life, and, at the last, never-ending fellowship

with God in heaven (verse 22).

Verse 23 is a glorious finale to the chapter — “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord,” or to put it another way — “Sin’s pay is death, but God’s free gift is eternal life.”

“Pay” and “free gift.” Those are two military words. The word for “wages” or “pay” is “opsonia?” in Greek. And that was the soldier’s pay that he had earned at the risk of his life. It was something that was owed to him, and could not be taken from him. The word for “free gift” is “charisma” in Greek or “donativum” in Latin, and that was a totally free and unearned gift which soldiers in the army sometimes received. On special occasions, for example on the Emperor’s accession to the throne, or on the anniversary of his birthday, the Emperor would hand out a free gift of money to each man in military service. It had not been earned; it was a present, pure and simple; a gift of the Emperor’s kindness and grace.

So Paul says, “Satan pays wages that you have earned by your sin — they are terrible wages — eternal death.” If we got the pay we have earned, it would be death. It is death that is due to us as our right. And then he goes on — “But what we have in fact received is a free gift; we did not earn it; we did not deserve it; we have earned death; but out of His boundless grace, God has given us life, through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Let me close with a beautiful story from the Gospels. In Matt. 8:5-13 we are told of our Lord’s encounter with a Roman centurion who had a servant who was paralyzed and in terrible pain; and he knew that Jesus could heal him. Jesus immediately said that he would come to the home and heal the servant. But the centurion said, “Lord, I don’t deserve to have You come under my roof. But just say the word and my servant will be healed.” And then he made this amazing statement — “For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes...” Do you realize what he was really saying? He was saying, “I’m a man under authority myself...therefore I can say to a soldier under my command — ‘Come,’ and I know he will do it.” Now there is enshrined within these words one of the greatest truths you and I can ever learn, and it is this —

You can only be in authority if you are under authority. That centurion, years before, had sworn allegiance to the Emperor; he had voluntarily placed himself under Caesar’s authority; therefore he had the authority to be obeyed by those under his command.

Now let me tell you this — If, by an act of genuine commitment, you have come under the authority of Christ; have become His slave; then, and only then, will you have the authority and the power to conquer sin in your life every day you live.

I pass a large public school as I drive into the office; and at the street crossing there is a lovely lady, appointed by Fairfax County and under the authority of the county, who directs the children across the street. And when she steps out into the middle of the road, you had better stop your car! And then, smiling at all the children, she sees that each child crosses safely to the other side. Do you get the picture? Those little children have the authority, the power to stop a whole stream of traffic! Why? Because they have placed themselves under the authority of that crossing

guard who herself is under the authority of the county!

This is surely a parable of life. The people who are really living, mastering their temptations and grappling successfully with their problems, are the people who know Christ personally, and who have placed themselves unreservedly under His authority. In a word, they have become His slaves; and therefore, they have power; they are in authority; the world, the flesh and the devil have lost their power over them, because they now have a new Master.

George Matheson's magnificent hymn begins with a paradox, but that paradox contains within itself the secret of power which we may experience, as the slaves of Christ:

“Make me a captive, Lord,
And then I shall be free;
Force me to render up my sword,
And I shall conqueror be...”

That is it. To be in authority, you must be under authority. Remember the bumper sticker? — “I am Christ's slave; whose slave are you?”

Can you say what Paul said to the Roman believers? — “You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.” You can only be set free from sin, you can only be in authority over sin and have the power to live victoriously if you have become the slave of Christ. There's no other way. And as the medieval saint once said, “In Christ's service is perfect freedom.”

AMEN.