

Is God's Grace and Forgiveness Ever a License to Sin?

‘Slaves of Sin’ vs. ‘Slaves of Righteousness’

Romans 6:1-2, 12-23
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I bet you woke up this morning thinking: I sure hope the sermon today deals with the complex relationship between sin, grace, and the law. Well what a coincidence. The assigned lectionary Epistle Reading for today deals with just that.

For those of you who are more of the ‘just give me the bottom line’ kind of folks, let me start with this. **God's grace is greater than all our sin! But no, that does not mean we are given a license to sin just because God will forgive us.**

I don't know of any pastor, including myself, who hasn't been asked by someone at some point in his or her ministry whether it really matters or not if they sin, since God will forgive them anyway. It's actually an understandable question, and one that deserves a thoughtful response. For the thinking often goes something like, “**God accepts us just as we are, right?**” **That is indeed true. But God has absolutely no intention of leaving us just as we are.**

As you might guess, there's no one better to explain all this than the apostle Paul. The hard part, however, is getting into the mind and worldview of Paul's thinking as a Jewish Roman citizen, now a converted Christian, 2000 years ago in the ancient Middle East. Case in point, we can't get a handle into Paul's teaching without talking about the thorny issue of slavery. More of that in a moment.

In the sixth chapter of Romans, Paul carries on an argument against a kind of imaginary opponent. It's an interesting and effective literary technique called a diatribe. This argument springs from the great saying at the end of chapter five where Paul declares that our salvation is not a result of our efforts to earn it by following the law – we call that works-righteousness – but rather as a result of God's freely-given grace, revealed to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul puts words to what he knows his detractors must be thinking. So verse 1 starts, “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” In sheer horror Paul immediately responds to this imagined question, and the line of thinking behind it, in verse 2: By no means! God forbid! No way! **Sin, by the way, is not just an individual personal matter, but a systemic one as well.** Let us not forget the power of sin at work in governmental and political systems, in economic systems, in judicial systems, in social systems, and yes, in religious systems.

The great German theologian, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**, who was imprisoned and then executed by the Nazi's for his alleged participation in a failed plot to assassinate Hitler, **called the misunderstanding of God's love as a license to sin: “cheap grace.”** In his famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer wrote how **there are great demands upon Christians to live moral, ethical lives.** Like Paul, he believed it was a horrible thing to

turn the love, mercy, forgiveness and grace of God into an excuse for sinning – so that God's grace could abound. The whole point is that our thoughts and actions do indeed matter! For the flip side of God's forgiving grace is that **we are now called to follow God and the ways of Jesus through our active discipleship on a daily basis.** Bonhoeffer calls this “**costly grace.**”

While it is clear that Paul believes in the freedom *from* the law and the power of sin, he does not believe it is license to do whatever we want. **For Paul, freedom from something means freedom for something else. In this case, freedom from the law leads to freedom for obedience to God.** Another way we hear this, especially now as we approach the 4th of July, is in the popular statement, “**With freedom comes responsibility.**” This way of understanding freedom reveals that **an authentic Christian way of life involves an entirely new and transformed way of life.**

Paul uses a metaphor that was common in his day to explain what he means – the image of slavery. The notion of enslavement rightly falls uncomfortably and harshly on our ears. But Paul does not operate with a generalized notion of freedom, in which human beings achieve a kind of independence from all powers and authorities. **In Paul's understanding, and this is the important part, we, as humans, are always and inevitably enslaved to something or someone.** The decisive question is not whether we are enslaved, but in what form that slavery will take place. **Paul says that we are slaves of the one we obey – either of sin or obedience.**

His thinking goes like this: Once we were slaves to sin, but in Christ we become slaves of righteousness. In other words, **we exchange slavery to sin to being enslaved to God.** The twist, however, is that Paul will go on to argue that enslavement to God actually means profound liberation! It's liberation for genuine and abundant life, and liberation for service to the mission of God.

Using this metaphor of slavery allows Paul to speak of Christian ethics in terms of our fundamental loyalties. “Living under grace,” however, still recognizes “sin” and “righteousness” as competing arenas in our life. It also recognizes full well the addictive power of sin, which can “exercise dominion in our mortal bodies” and “make us obey their passion” (v. 12). By the way, when Paul mentions our mortal bodies and adds that we should “no longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness” (v. 13), he's referring to all parts of our bodies, not just to what some would consider the ‘naughty parts’. As stated by biblical commentator David Bartlett (in the Westminster Bible Commentary on Romans), “**Our members, after all, include our tongues and our brains and our stomachs as well as our procreative organs. We can serve sin by gossip and overweening pride and gluttony as much as by promiscuity.**” He goes on to rightfully remind us, “As Christians we are part of the resistance, the underground, and we serve another Lord who demands other loyalties.”

Modern psychology teaches us the same thing. **What we habitually submit ourselves to is what eventually rules us. Biblical ethics, then, is not a matter of choosing whether we will be ruled, but rather choosing what – or who – will rule us.** The ultimate choice, again using Paul's words, is whether we will become “slaves of sin” or “slaves of righteousness” (vv. 17-18). Singer-songwriter Bob Dylan summarized the matter in a song entitled, “Gotta Serve Somebody” – part of which goes,

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

Each and every one of us is profoundly aware that our struggle with temptation and sin is far from over, and that in this life we never become sinless. But as stated by New Testament biblical scholar William Barclay, Christianity has always regarded the direction in which you and I are facing as more important than the particular state to which we achieve. In other words, **is your life generally heading in the direction of sin, or in the direction of righteousness?**

Paul reminds us that we are no longer free to do as sin pleases. Instead, we are bound irrevocably to God and the ways of God, specifically as modeled by the life and ministry of Jesus. That alone, in my opinion, is what it means to declare one's trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

So then, can we really justify our intentional acts of sin simply because we are not under the law but under grace? May our response always be that of Paul's: No way! God forbid!

Your, and my, license to sin has been denied!

Amen.