

ROMANS

Part 13: “The Truth about Sin and Sanctification”

Romans 6:12–23

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Sunday, April 24, 2022 (Easter Season)

Scripture Reading

“Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. 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. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! 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? 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, 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. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. 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. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:12–23).

Introduction

Humans are inherently relational creatures. We were created to be in relationships, and relationships are a part of the goodness of God’s creation.

But one of the outcomes of living in a sin-fractured world is that many relationships can be painful. Some relationships can even be abusive. And not only are abusive relationships hard to endure, but they are also particularly difficult to escape.

In fact, even after an abusive relationship has ended, it is all too common for a victim of abuse to gravitate back into a relationship with the abuser.

As a pastor, I’ve witnessed this phenomenon firsthand. A few days ago, I called a friend of mine named Anthony Brister, who happens to be an excellent therapist.

I asked him, “What should you tell someone who has been set free from an abusive relationship? How do you help them from going backward and getting back into the same unhealthy relationship that was so destructive in the first place?”

I found what he said to be fascinating and insightful. He said what you have to first understand is that trauma conditions our brains to think that trauma is normal, acceptable, and inevitable. This is why abuse victims often return to their abusers. Victims of abuse struggle to conceptualize what life might look like outside of abuse. That unfamiliarity makes the unknown future seem scary.

Abusers, on the other hand, intuitively recognize the fear of their victims and they will often weaponize that fear against to either retain or reclaim the power they have over the abused.

To quote Anthony at length, he said, *“Abusers love their power and do what they need to do to keep it. Usually through gaslighting, manipulation, half-truths, and empty promises. They use a victim’s weaknesses against them to keep them in the relationship. Abusers will meticulously and strategically test boundaries and see how far you will let them go.”*

My counsel is to eliminate any communication with the abuser. Many people are shocked when I tell them they have to end the relationship and not look back. But it is the best course of action.”

Then, Anthony asked me, “Is there a specific relationship you are trying to address.” And the answer is yes.

This morning, I want to argue that Romans 6 is painting the picture of an abusive relationship that the word of God has called us to end once and for all—our relationship with sin.

It is a relationship in which *we* are all victims.

The power of sin is our abuser.

Christ is our liberator and Lord.

And sanctification is the process by which we walk in and embrace the freedom Christ has purchased for us.

So today, we will learn **“The Truth about Sin and Sanctification.”**

Exposition

1.) The Truth About Sin

It is tempting to have a simplistic and reductive understanding of sin. We view sin as the bad stuff we do. We use the term “sin” to describe the actions, words, and thoughts that break moral rules. And, certainly, sin is not less than the breaking of God's law. But it is something more.

The way Paul describes sin in Romans 6 shows a deeper dimension to sin. Let's look again at the text, paying close attention to how he describes sin: *“Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. 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. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace”* (Rom 6:12–14).

Here sin is not primarily an action or set of activities we do. Rather, sin is virtually personified as a spiritual power. Sin desires to “reign” over us. It wants to compel us to “obey its passions.” It wants to possess “dominion over” us.

By describing sin this way, the Apostle Paul exposes sin for what it is. Sin is a slave master that must be resisted; a gas-lighter that cannot be trusted; a terrorist that cannot be negotiated with; an abuser that cannot be indulged.

If you have ever tried to fight an addiction, if you have ever tried to say “no” to a sinful temptation, if you have ever tried to stand up for what is right when everything around you incentivizes what is wrong, you know this to be true.

Sin is not only an action—it is a cosmic tyrant.¹

And like a therapist speaking to an abuse victim, Paul pleads, “Don't go back into that mess. Don't believe sin's lies to you. Don't submit yourself again to this yoke of slavery and abuse.”

But when all you have known is slavery, it is hard to imagine freedom without fear.

Again, we might think of the ancient generation of Israelites that experienced the Exodus event. The people of Israel had been enslaved for centuries when God sent Moses to deliver them from the tyranny of the Egyptian Pharaoh.

They watched plague after plague, each of which represented the Lord displaying his sovereignty over the false gods of Egypt. Each plague represented an idol that was deposed and a chain of spiritual bondage that had been broken.

¹ See: Matthew Croasmun's *The Emergence of Sin: The Cosmic Tyrant in Romans*.

They witnessed the Nile river turn to blood, the sky turn to darkness, and the angel of death break the will of a Pharaoh, who believed himself to be a god on earth. This was the generation that watched the Red Sea part before them as they walked into freedom. No generation had ever seen more miracles of God.

Yet, they were tempted to return to Egypt once they were freed. They were so conditioned by slavery that they could not envision a life of liberty.

They needed to be told not to go back to the Pharaoh. They needed to be reminded they would not find joy or freedom in Egypt; they would only find greater bondage and suffering.

God saved the ancient people of Israel when they could not save themselves. He delivered them from bondage as a gift of grace.

And now, Jesus Christ has accomplished a new exodus, a true exodus, and a better exodus. He has made a way for us to be redeemed from the powers of sin and death.

And Paul is clear: we cannot earn this redemption by moral performance. Our redemption is a gift of grace. But just because we have been redeemed by grace does not imply that Jesus became a man, lived, died, and rose again so that we can live a life in continued bondage to sin.

So too, we, as the people of God today, must be reminded not to present ourselves to the power of sin. Rather, we are to present ourselves to God to be used for his purposes and desires. After all, he is the One who redeemed and rescued us.

If we are going to be bound to anyone, we should pledge our lives and our service to Savior who died for our sake. As Paul goes on, *“What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! 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? 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, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations”* (Rom 6:15–19a).

Now, Paul is using an illustration that he admits has limits. But the big idea is that all of us are serving something or someone. There is no circumstance or stage of life where we escape this truth.

As Bob Dylan once sang:

*“You may be an ambassador to England or France.
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance.
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world.”*

*You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls.
But 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.”*

The question, then, which somebody will you serve?

Even after becoming a Christian, sin will try to convince you that it is a good master that will give you pleasure, satisfaction, and freedom. But don't believe your old abuser.

Sin has lied to you about the nature of freedom. Sin has convinced us that freedom is doing what we want. The problem is that sometimes what we want will harm us, enslave us, and even kill us.

Let me illustrate it this way. Two small children are playing in the front yard. One child refuses to listen to the authority of his parents. The parents command the child to stay in the yard, but the child desires—and even feels compelled—to play in the street. The other child submits to the loving limitation of her parents and plays to her heart's desire within the boundaries that were set in place for her protection and flourishing.

Which child is on a trajectory toward life, and which child is on a trajectory toward death? And which child do you believe is truly free?

What does true freedom look like for you?

Romans 6 unveils a truth that we need to embrace. Sin is an enslaver and abuser that will lead us only toward death and bondage. True freedom is found in paradox. Our truest liberty is found when we truly submit to Christ's Lordship. Our truest flourishing is found in Christ's righteousness.

That leads us to our second point.

2.) The Truth About Sanctification

Let's look back at our passage, beginning halfway through verse 19: *“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. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. 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”* (Rom 6:19b–22).

Until this point in Romans, we have been talking a lot about the theological concept of justification. Here in Romans 6, Paul introduces us to the related idea of sanctification.

Both justification and sanctification are big words. But, they are also biblical words that we should know and remember.

Justification is being declared righteous through faith in Christ. Sanctification is the grace-filled process by which Holy Spirit helps us become who God has already declared us to be in Christ.

In the section we just read Paul announces that we already “have been set free from sin.” This is a past tense declarative sentence. In other words, through faith, we have already been justified. However, we are still called to actively present ourselves as servants of righteousness. This is sanctification.

Sanctification is the reality of justification being displayed in our lives. It is a process that God empowers but in which we participate.

But in order to embrace our call to sanctification, we must keep before our minds the end of sin and the end of righteousness.

Going back to the discussion I had with Anthony, the therapist, he told me that abuse victims need to do a cost-benefit analysis. They need to remember the bad outcomes of abuse and the good outcomes of health.

And here in Romans 6, Paul makes the end of sin and the end of righteousness as clear as day. Romans 6:23 proclaims, ***“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”*** (Rom 6:23).

Sin promises a taste as sweet as honey, but its end is more bitter than wormwood. Sin promises pleasure and life, but its end is death. Christ commands us to give our lives away, but he promises us that in losing our lives, we will find them. God offers us true freedom, true joy, and eternal life in the Savior who has loved us.

This is a truth that is easy to say, but it is also easy to forget. Like abuse victims, we often succumb to an amnesia about what is true. How do we keep the truth about sin and sanctification in front of us?

It’s actually not that complicated. Sanctification is a process, and we need to plan the process. And much of that plan involves an unflinching determination to prioritize the means by which God imparts his grace to us.

First and foremost, this means that we must value the word of God in our lives. When we read Scripture, we remind our hearts of what is true. We remind our hearts that our identity is in Christ. We remind our hearts of the power of God. We remind our hearts of the deception of sin and the end it brings. We remind our hearts of the love and glory and power of God.

Another crucial means of sanctification is prayer. The Lord's prayer includes a petition that says, “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” This is a prayer of and

for sanctification. In prayer, we acknowledge our utter dependence on God and our need for his grace. Yet, prayer is also a way that we participate in his work within our lives by focusing our hearts on what is true and inviting his power into our lives.

And finally, we must remember to prioritize gathered corporate worship. As the book of Hebrews tells us, *“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near”* (Heb 10:24–25).

Especially now, on this side of the pandemic, I am more convinced than ever that there is something genuinely irreplaceable about gathered worship. Corporate worship is not only informative but is of itself formative. In worship through song, sermon, sacrament, and service, we remind one another over and over again of the gospel. We are reminded of who Christ is and what he has done for us. We are reminded of the extravagant love of God so that, in response to his love, we might live for him.

Sanctification is a work of grace in our lives. But to experience that grace, we must not neglect the means by which God imparts that grace to us.

Conclusion

The good news of Romans 6 is that, at the Cross, Christ has defeated the powers of sin and death. Christ has already won this war, and, for those in Christ, our future hope is sealed. Sin has been delegitimized of the spiritual authority it once held over us.

But until Christ returns, sin still exists. It can still lie to us and deceive us, and attempts to sway our beliefs and behaviors.

Sin is an abuser. But Jesus is no stranger to abuse. He has known humiliation. He has known pain. He is a man of sorrow who is well acquainted with grief. Yet, he endured suffering for our sake and for our redemption. That is why he is worthy of our trust. That is why we can embrace, and even celebrate, the goodness of his rule and reign in our lives.

The only way we can live free of sin’s deception is to cling to the one who set us free of sin’s dominion and who is infinitely better than anything sin can claim to give us. It is grace that saved us. And it is grace that will sanctify us.

Grace is the power of obedience because it is the power of resurrection. And when we allow ourselves to be saturated in the truth of God’s grace, the Holy Spirit empowers us to a righteousness that flows not from duty but delight.

There was an eighteenth-century English poet named William Cowper captured this powerful idea in a poem he titled “Love Constraining to Obedience.” I’ll read that poem in full now.

No strength of nature can suffice

*To serve the Lord aright:
And what she has she misapplies,
For want of clearer light.*

*How long beneath the Law I lay
In bondage and distress;
I toiled the precept to obey,
But toiled without success.*

*Then, to abstain from outward sin
Was more than I could do;
Now, if I feel its power within,
I feel I hate it too.*

*Then all my servile works were done
A righteousness to raise;
Now, freely chosen in the Son,
I freely choose His ways.*

*'What shall I do,' was then the word,
'That I may worthier grow?'
'What shall I render to the Lord?'
Is my inquiry now.*

*To see the law by Christ fulfilled
And hear His pardoning voice,
Changes a slave into a child,
And duty into choice.*

People of God, you are no longer prisoners and slaves to sin. The love of Christ has set you free!

So Redeemer Christian Church, don't fall for sin's lies. May we see sin for what it is. May we see Christ for who he is. May we embrace the gift of sanctifying grace.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1.) *Read Romans 6:12–23. How does Paul seem to personify sin in this passage? Why is it helpful to understand sin as a slave master?*
- 2.) *This passage addresses the concept of sanctification. What is sanctification? What is the relationship between sanctification and justification? (You may want to consult a systematic theology book for this answer).*
- 3.) *What is the end of sin, and how does knowing the end of sin empower the process of sanctification in our lives?*
- 4.) *What is the end goal of righteousness? How can we remind our hearts of this end in practical ways?*