

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Romans 6:15-23 **“You Can Be Free”**

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(20th Sunday After Pentecost)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

ROMANS 6:15-23 "YOU CAN BE FREE"

What Is The Implication Of 6:14b, "not under law but grace"?

A. v.15a DOUBLE QUESTION ON SIN AND GRACE (Libertine Consequences).

*Binary Contrasts (*was* vs. *now*), Interlocutor, Q & A (vv.15, 16-19, 20-23)

15a Q1 "What then? //5:20 → 6:1-14 (a-b//a'-b'), (2 Questions + Neg. Answer + *Do you not know?*)
 b* Q2 Are we to **sin** because we are not under the law but under **grace (*charin*)**?" *Charis*, Objection, 2 Realms Of Power
 Jewish Believers Now Under Grace, Are We Lawless? (Antinomian/Libertine)

B. v.15c SHORT NEGATIVE ANSWER. Questions (vv.15, 16, 21) + Answers (vv.15b, 17-18, 21b-23)
 2/3 Slaves Or Freedman, Controlling Metaphor = Slavery

c A2 By no means! *Au Contraire!* Curt Rejection Of A Wrong Inference, Grace Is Not A License To Sin
 What Does It Mean To Be *Under Grace*? Obedience And Slavery Go Together

A' v.16 EXTENDED RHETORICAL QUESTION ON SIN & DEATH: 2 PATHS, 2 OUTCOMES.

No Modern Independent Agents, No Neutrality, All Have A Master, None Free

16a Q3 **Do you not know** Appeal To Common Christian Tradition // 6:3, Principle
 that if you yield (present) yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, Voluntary Slavery As Metaphor/Analogy
 you are slaves of the one whom you obey, 1/3 to 1/2 Were Slaves, Jesus In Jn. 8:34

b* a either of **Sin**, Everyone Has A Master! No Place Of Neutrality, *Sin* Personified As A Power
 b which leads to **Death**, Only 2 Alternatives, Ps. 1, Classic Jewish Two-Ways Model Of Ethics
 a' or of obedience, 1:5, Obedience Of Faith, Slavery Implies Obedience, We Have Changed Owners?
 b' which leads to righteousness? //1:5, A Right, Life-giving Relationship With God
 "Make Me A Captive, Lord, Then I Shall Be Free"

B' vv.17-23 EXTENDED 3 PART ANSWER ON THE TWO PATHS, TWO ENDS.

3:1 (1-2-1') Ring, Chiasm

A3 **1) vv.17-18 Doxology, Slaves Of Sin (Past Tense), Present Experience.** Change Owners!
 Background = Exodus Story

17a But thanks be to God, 7:25a, Energy: Apostrophe/Doxology + 3 Reasons, 1 Cor. 15:57
 Gal. 5:13, I Now Belong To Christ! Freedom Is Not Autonomous But Christonomous

b* a that you who were once **slaves of Sin** Then/Now, Drones, Righteousness, Free (vv.17-18 // vv.20-23)
 b have become obedient from the heart Ex.: 1 Thess. 4:1, 2 Thess. 3:6, Heb. 5:12-14, 1 Jn. 2:24, 27
 to the standard (form/imprint) of *teaching* to which you were handed over, p.v. 16:17, Christ Jesus?
 10:9-10, Eventual Baptismal Creeds, 2nd Century

18* b' and, having been set free from **Sin**, p.v., Loss Of Bondage, Liberation, King, "Thank God..."
 a' have become **slaves of righteousness**. New Situation, Good Master, No Absolute Freedom, Individualism
 One Lord Traded For Another, Upward Mobility, This Is Freedom!

2) v.19 Concession And Reasoned Appeal From A Master Teacher. Then/Now

Double Structure (stair step form, chiasmic vocabulary)

19a I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. //3:4-5, Limits Of Analogy
 //6:4, "just as... so now..." Formula, Phil. 2:12-13, 1 Thess. 4:3-8

b* *FOR* just as you once yielded your members to impurity (*akatharsia*) //1:24, 6:13, Immorality
 and to greater and greater iniquity (*anomia*), Lawless Process: Sin Has Deadly Momentum
 so now yield your members to righteousness (*dikaio syne*) a-b//b'-a', New Life Orientation
 for sanctification (*hagiasmos*). 1 Cor. 6:11, Lev. 19:1, Process Of Cleansing (Making God's)
Member = Facet Of The Embodied Self/Personality

1') vv.20-23 Slaves Of Sin (Past Tense), Future Outcome (End). "Take Time To Be Holy"

Then/Now, Lord Sin vs. Lord Jesus, Compare The Benefits Of Masters

20 Q4 1a *FOR* when you were **slaves of Sin**, Remember Who You Used To Be!
 you were **free in regard to righteousness**; Illusory, Negative Form Of Freedom, RSV Omits "For"

21a but then what return (fruit) did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed? 1:26-28, See Results
 Lethal End! Life Does Not Flourish In The Sin Realm

b* A4 b The *end* of those things is death. Physical As Metaphor For Final Separation From God/The Good
 Freedom From Leads To Freedom For

22a a' But now that you have been set free from **Sin** 3:21, Free From Sin=Liberation, Free For God=Sanctification
 and have become **slaves of God**, Grace As A Liberating Power Into God's Purposes, p.v., 3:21

b* the return (fruit) you get is sanctification
 b' and its *end*, eternal life. 6:19, Free For God, Holy Living + Life

Metaphors (soldier's wages/ free gift), Not Symmetrical, Eternal Life Is Not Earned

23* 2a *FOR* the wages of **Sin**
 b is death, Inclusion With v.15a, 1 Es. 4:56, 1 Macc. 3:28, Lk. 3:14, 1 Cor. 9:7

a' but the **free gift (*charisma*)** of God Romans Road! Climax! Wages & Gift Are Not Symmetrical

b' is eternal life *in* Christ Jesus our Lord. 2:7, 2 Ages: Life In The New Age, Transfer Allegiance

A Brief Treatment Of Romans 6:15-23

This unit is the second panel of 6:1-23. The panels share the inclusions *Sin/Grace* (6:1//6:14, 6:15//6:23), and the outlines are parallel: “What shall we say then?”(6:1a//6:15a,b) is followed by a question concerning a false inference from grace (6:1b//6:15b) which is answered, “By no means” (6:2a//6:15c). Then comes a new question(s) using “Do you not know?” (6:3a//6:16) and a longer answer (6:4-10//6:17-23). The panels share the same step outline (a-b//a’-b’): questions (6:1-2//6:15) plus short answer (6:2b//6:15c), then question (6:2b-3//6:16) plus long answer (6:4-14//6:17-23). Each panel has a core metaphor (*baptism* [6:1-14], *slavery* [6:15-23]) that shapes the thought. The extended answer of 6:4-14 is built on the *indicative* (6:4-10, What God has done) and the *imperative* (6:11-14, How we respond), in three parts (vv.4, 6, 8) with three reasons beginning with *For* (vv.5, 7, 9-10). The extended answer of 6:17-23 is built on three examples of a *past/present* contrast (6:17-18, 19, 20-23). Each panel contains a call to surrender our *members* to God (6:13//6:19b) and ends in a promise of freedom now (6:14) and eternal life later (6:23), each beginning with *For*. *Death and resurrection* language is pervasive (6:3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9-10, 11, 16, 21, 22, 23). Paul has two questions in mind: 1) What has God done for us in Jesus Christ? 2) How do we respond to the new realities? In Jesus we are set free from the powers of Sin and Death and set in a new relationship with God which has life giving benefits now and culminates in the kingdom of God (i.e. eternal life). *God did it, so now live it with understanding and divine grace as your companions!*

“When then?” is a rhetorical bridge (v.15a). A second question, “Are we to sin because we are not under the law but under grace?” (//6:1b) names the issue, “Because we are not under the law, are we free to be lawless?” “Unthinkable.” says Paul. With the third question, “Do you not know?” we come to new material. Using the fact of slavery— perhaps a third to half the population had been or were slaves, everyone knew slavery meant obedience. The analogy is then applied to being enslaved to the power of Sin leading to Death or to God in a right relationship leading to Life (v.16b). *Sin* is a stitch word (vv.15b, 16b, 17b, 18, 20, 22). Contrasts between *then* and *now* are repeated (vv.15b, 16b, 17b, 18, 19b, 21b/22b, 23). A threefold question and answer format is used as an additional structuring device (vv.15, 16, 20-21a).

The question of v.16 is answered in vv.17-23 as a doxology, “But thanks be to God!” and presented in a 3:1 ring (1. vv.17-18, 2. v.19, 1' vv.20-23) with *slaves of sin/slaves of righteousness* (vv.17-18)//*slaves of sin/ free in regard to righteousness* (v.20) as inclusions. Each component contains a past/present contrast: *once/have become* (vv.17b-18), *For just as you once/so now* (v.19b), *For when you were/But now* (vv.20, 22). Those who once were slaves of Sin have now been set free and become slaves of righteousness (vv.17b-18) in a great transfer. The effective means of their change is Jesus Christ working through two means: 1) their faith as “obedient from the heart” (v.17b) and 2) the standard pattern of church teaching to which they’ve *been handed over*— an odd expression for their new custodian (v.17b). God uses trust from the center of the self (i.e. a relational response), and the content of the faith (a cognitive response) to move us into and then shape us within a new relationship. Everyone has a master; there is no autonomous freedom, no neutral place on which to stand. It’s a modern myth. Everyone serves authority, so the question is, “Do you know the name of your Master, and what wages does he pay?”

The central part (2. v.19) begins with a concession, “I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations.” The slavery image, painful as it was for many, was apt. Under Sin’s authority, everyone knew what it was to yield to impurity (sexual) and to increasing addictions and iniquity. But now, with a new status and power in Christ, those same capacities are yielded in a new relationship leading to a healing outcome— *sanctification* (v.19b). Grace dissolves the glue of our Sin and offers freedom.

The third part (1' vv.20-22, 23) offers two examples in step form (a-b//a’-b’) beginning with *For*. The first contrasts the way that leads to death and the way of life, “*For when you were... But now....*” The second (v.23), a rhetorical climax, states the same in the present in abbreviated form. Sin pays its adherents in deadly script, God in the currency of life, the life that was put on display in Jesus.

YOU CAN BE FREE

“... so now yield your members to righteousness for sanctification.”

Engagement with God in faith and decision make us whole again.

ROMANS 6:19b

January 28, 1945. As the war in the Pacific turns towards a close, 121 Army Rangers liberated over 500 POWs from a Japanese camp. The prisoners, many of them survivors of the Bataan death march three years earlier, were in awful condition. The primary guard unit had already left the camp because of Japan's retreat from the Philippines. Japanese troops were still around, but now kept a distance. The men didn't know what to make of the situation. Then, without warning, the Rangers swept in upon the camp in furious force.

What was bewildering was the reaction of many prisoners. So defeated were they, so diseased and wary they needed convincing they were now free. Was it a trap? Captain Bert Bank, struggling with a blindness caused by vitamin deficiency, couldn't make out his rescuers and refused to budge. A soldier tugged his arm, "What's wrong? Don't you want to be free?" Captain Bank, from Alabama, recognized the man's southern accent. A smile formed on his lips, and he willingly and thankfully began his journey to freedom.

Finally, well away from the site of an horrific assault on their humanity, the newly freed POWs began the march home. In the description of one, contrasting it with the Bataan nightmare. "It was a long, slow, steady march ...but this was a life march, a march of freedom."¹

¹ Edited from Matt Heard, *Life with a Capital L* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 2014), 80-81.

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The value of this story is that it offers insight into what it means to move from bondage to freedom and just how disorienting such a swift change can be. They were dying a day at a time under a oppressive power; then the U.S. Cavalry arrived, and in short order they were free. They could not free themselves; they had to *be freed* by a superior power. But once free, a new battle began, not just a fight to keep from dying in the camp but a fight to start living with a future again. It would take time to live into the new reality, to be deprogrammed from a living hell, but the soldier got it right, "It was a long, slow, steady march ...but this was a life march, a march of freedom."

I'll always remember the day I ruined a Thrailkill Thanksgiving, probably two decades ago now. Had I known the disturbance it would create, I'd have used more discretion, but the discovery was such a surprise it overwhelmed my judgment. It was about 3:30pm, and all- except the kitchen crew- were slouched on sofas or chairs in a calorie comma. I, however, was on my laptop, working on a sermon. My parents didn't yet have Wifi, but I found a close neighbor with an unsecured system, so I logged in with a mildly guilty conscience. Their son had once broken into my father's car and rifled his medical bag looking for drugs, so we were now even. Amazing what we justify!

Around the meal my father mentioned Mourning Van Pelt, a name his mother oft repeated as a distant grandmother with a Dutch name. Born in Holland in 1740, she'd emigrated, and in 1764 married William Lewis. In 1768 they moved to Horry County to build a family and legacy along the Little Pee Dee. Little of this was known till the day I ruined Thanksgiving.

On a whim I did a search on Mourning Van Pelt. When I hit the *Enter* key, up popped a document from the Horry Country Historical Society, the last will and testament of William Lewis, dated August 23, 1811, several days before his death. I was stunned. And as I read, I was flooded with emotion. My laptop was a time machine; I was transported back to an earlier day.

The spelling was quaint and irregular. There were twelve paragraphs, ten to living children, one to two grandchildren of a deceased son, the final to his wife Mourning. To each were given one or more slaves, and to some parcels of land and assorted household goods and farm implements, and the first paragraph

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was the shortest, “First I give bequith to my Daughter Polly Nichols one Negro girl named *Chaney* and her child *ginnney* to her and her heirs for ever.”²

As I sat listening to family snore over the noise of a Lions and Bear game, the Galivant’s Ferry farm I’d visited a boy, the place my grandmother Lida grew up, the same woman who gave me this robe, was flooded with the ghosts of a new cast of characters who’d lived and died there. It hit me. We were fully implicated in our nation’s original sin.³ Not culpable, but implicated, and such had been edited from our oral family history for well over a hundred years.

I wondered, What happened to *Chancey*, whose name was capitalized, and to her daughter *ginny* whose name was not? Was there a husband because we knew there was a father, or was it one of us? Was *ginny* a lighter shade or just a bit lighter than her mother, their West African DNA already mingled with Dutch and English additions? Was she family? Did *Chancey* and *ginny* have hope in Jesus Christ? Did they ever received holy communion when Francis Asbury came through the swamps, preaching a Methodist gospel of free grace and a life of holiness for all? And when the Exodus story was read– if it was because of its dangerous implications– did they wonder, “When us?”

The last phrase of each paragraph– modeled on the form of the first was, “to her heirs *for ever*”– was not true. It assumed current arrangements would never change, that the future was a simple extension of the present. But when the Federals came through in the early spring of 1865, the effects of the will of William Lewis fifty-four years earlier was cancelled.

One day you were property, the next day free; everything had changed, and nothing had changed. The walk of the soldiers out of a prison camp in 1945 was easy compared to the long walk to freedom since 1865, but both stories, from wars eighty years apart, contain the same insight. Status can change in a

² <http://hchsonline.org/wills/wl>.

³ For a fresh treatment of this idea, see Jim Wallis, *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016).

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moment when the U.S. Cavalry thunders in, but it takes a lifetime to work out the new arrangements, to live into the full meaning of an unexpected freedom. And so when I, full of new discoveries, said out loud, “Hey, everyone, you won’t believe what I found,” the party was over, and as I read the will, it was silent and uncomfortable in the room. Awkward history had been recovered.

At a reunion in Mullins five years ago, a cousin of my father’s generation told of a visit to the old home place and of hearing about a great bar-b-que shack in Conway. It was as good as the reputation. At the register, he wrote a check and handed it to the owner, a man of darker hue who looked at the name on the check and said. “Lewis? You look like one of the Lewis’ from up at the Ferry.”

“That’s me,” said the Colonel.

The owner smiled, “I’m a Lewis from the same bend in the river as you. Hey, Cuz!” They both laughed and shook hands.

A status change, sadly, does not always lead to a behavioral change, and when it doesn’t, an opportunity is missed, a legacy unclaimed. And so it is with us, if– with the Apostle Paul– you believe Jesus Christ is both the cavalry and the freedom, the means and the end to our full liberation from the forces of Sin and Death and Evil in which we’ve so long marinated we feel it normal, just the way things are down here at ground level. But you can be free!

TURNING TO THE TEXT

It comes as no surprise to hear I am a cartographer, a map-maker. I weekly map a grid square of Scripture. I lift off the verse and chapter divisions and do a close reading to follow the structure and texture of a biblical author’s arguments. It’s a discipline I’ve been working at since the Fall of ‘72.

My conviction is that, if I can map the text, I can follow the flow of thought; and if I can follow the flow, I can see deeply into the author’s intent; and if I can grasp the method and the message, perhaps I will have something true to say; and if I have something to preach that’s in deep continuity with the apostolic authors, then perhaps God will send down fire on the kindling I’ve gathered and God’s people be enlightened and encouraged, me first!



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Such careful study is a safeguard for us both. It keeps me from dishing out what you want to hear and not digging down to what we need. My job is not to be an echo chamber for the modern world; my job to bring an outside word to bear on a world so prone to amnesia it forgets the Living God or else turns God into another improvement project on the way to the American Dream. Jesus Christ did not come to improve our world but to show us a new world, and the proper name for that world is *the kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit*, and even now we get glimmers of what's ahead. And if you catch a glimpse of God's grace, it's intoxicating. Glimpses keep me going, and if they stopped, I'd soon wind down like an old toy whose spring is sprung.

Behind our nine verse paragraph from Paul is his living conviction that Jesus Christ is the mid-point, the turning and tipping point of human history. Who he was, and because of who he was, what he did matters for everyone. He is the Savior of the world, and all are offered new life through him.

God the Son has come deeply into our humanity as the man Jesus. He went down deeply into the root conflicts of our world, down to the dark emptiness of death itself, and he alone has the credentials and divine warrants to re-engineer everything from the bottom up and from the inside out. Evil as exemplified in Satan is undermined because Jesus would rather die on a cross than disobey and take the easy way; Sin and its offspring Guilt are crippled at the cross because Jesus takes the full poison of both into himself in a great act of sacrifice, and Death is served notice in his mighty resurrection that its universal rule is now broken.

So is Jesus worthy of your trust based on what the church teaches, what Paul calls the *form of teaching* in verse 17, and of your own experience of him through the Holy Spirit? That's the big question. Is he a religious decoration on the good life otherwise defined, or has he caught your attention and engaged your curiosity? Has he won your trust from the very center of who you are, from your heart, so that you are willing to obey him in the details and follow him all your life in the midst of his other followers? That's the issue, and that's the only way he can change us a little and a lot— which is what the word *salvation* mean, a decisive beginning and then a long process of change in the right direction, and he does it through the currency of trust, because— though he

has the authority and the power— he’s not a bully and perfectly willing to allow you to walk away from him forever. And new world is coming to transform this one, the kingdom of God, and of it we have a preview in Jesus Christ, the only completely true and trustworthy man who ever lived, the only innocent one. And since he’s not dead but very much alive, trust means a real relationship.

I had a trust issue, a big one, just last week. I sat in the small office of a psychiatrist with one I dearly love, and what I wanted to find out was this, “Does she know her stuff? Is she trustworthy.” She was a striking Egyptian woman, a Coptic Orthodox Christian who practices her faith at the Coptic Church in Augusta. Did you know there was such so close, a church that traces its origins back to Mark the Gospel writer and before that to the sojourn of the holy family in Egypt to escape the threats of Herod? Other than the mother church in Jerusalem, it’s as early as possible.⁴ Methodism is not yet three hundred years old as a Western church, but her unbroken tradition has continuity back to the beginning of the church of the East.

As I walked in I quickly scanned the bookshelf to the left to find all the standards texts and diagnostic manuals there. When I said I was grieved by the twenty-one of her Coptic brothers beheaded by ISIS in Libya and now declared by her pope, Tawadros II, to be saints, her eyes moistened.⁵

A glance at the wall gave me more consolation. Her psychiatric credentials as a Fellow were issued in 2013; her MD was from Emory. I thought, “That’s some pretty high priced paper on her wall.” But it was in conversation and in her fielding of questions that my trust grew. She moved easily between the technical issues of medications to discuss PTSD and to illustrate with personal stories, even confessional materials. She was clearly an advocate for her patients. My growing trust in her was evidence based, and to

⁴ For a fresh reassessment of the historical evidence, see Thomas J. Oden, *The African Memory of Mark: Reassessing Early Church Tradition* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2011).

⁵ Jaren Malsin, “Christians Mourn Their Relatives Beheaded by ISIS,” *Time*, Feb. 23, 2015, <http://time.com/3718470/isis-copts-egypt>.

her I risked the life of one I love. She's competent; she cares; I trust her.

And that's how it is with Jesus. Faith is not blind; it's not all feeling and no facts.⁶ Faith, as I love to say, is *evidence based trust*, just as with Dr. Egypt, and to seal the deal the evidence of Scripture and the testimony of others must be matched by some sort of personal encounter, of the risen Jesus pressing his case so the person feels addressed and knows a weighty decision must be made.

This is a multi-layered issue because trust is a gift of the self that cannot be coerced. Trust can be persuaded, but it cannot be forced. Conversions at the point of sword don't last. So do you entrust yourself to Jesus the Messiah, the man of history now risen and alive and available? And if not, there must be reasons you're holding back. Is it something you'd be embarrassed to *fess up to*? I understand if you fear the relationship because of the changes it promises, but I assure you, they're not all painless, but they are all good. This is the One you were made for, and without him pieces of your puzzle will forever be missing. He wants you to know and follow him; he's been just out of sight all your life, pressing his case in more ways than you know.

So when we read Romans, we read the testimony of one who knew the apostles and met the risen Lord in an encounter that rearranged his mental furniture and set him off as a missionary till he was beheaded by Nero in the mid-sixties.⁷ Paul moved from an understanding of Jesus as a dangerous Jewish heretic to Jesus as God the Son in flesh come among us for our full restoration. Jesus wasn't the problem; he was the solution!

⁶ For a fresh defense of Gospel historicity, see Brant Pitre, *The Case For Jesus: The Biblical and Historical Evidence for Christ* (New York, NY: Image, 2016). For a full apologetic, see Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2011); for a briefer treatment, Alister McGrath, *Mere Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012).

⁷ Dr. Brian Janeway, "New Discoveries Relating to the Apostle Paul," www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2009/10/08/New-Discoveries-Relating-to-the-Apostle-Paul.aspx#Article.

And in that moment of revelation and insight Paul was invited into a new world, a world where God always makes the first gracious move and ours are always responsive, where sins are forgiven and forgotten, where we always start off by acceptance and not performance, where love is never earned but always bestowed, where trust is the means of progress, and where we are invited and empowered to grow into our full stature as sons and daughters of God.⁸

But nothing much has changed in the world around us; the deep grooves and destructive habits of the old life are still with us, but this much has changed. We are now by simple trust placed in a restored relationship with the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and so we are new people called to seek a new life. We are now permanently out-of-sync with the world around us, cross-grained, against the tide, a little weird if the truth be told, not buying its agenda or justifications. We are, quite literally, *under the influence* of another kingdom, another ruler, and in his company we find a new freedom that gives Life with a Capital L. The powers around us want to lure us back into the old world and its false loyalties, but Rabbi Paul— who by this point has been in the battle twenty-five years— gives us a way of seeing that helps keeps us on track.

It is interesting that Paul begins with a misunderstanding because he wants to close off a dead end. If God’s good law can’t heal us but only point out the symptoms of our sickness, things like idolatry, misusing God’s name, adultery and lying and stealing— the Ten Commandments, and if we are in this new way of relating to God not based on our getting it right but trusting his kindness, does it mean there are no standards and we can do just as we please? Or, as he put it in verse 15, “Are we to sin because we are not under the law but under the rule of grace?” Does God’s love, which is not dependent on our performance, free us to do as we please?” In one sense, *Yes*, if our goal is to please him, but *No* if our goal is continue as we were with a new excuse that all the old standards are now defunct. This is the path to death, not life. And Paul’s answer is blunt, “By no means,” or in French, “Au contraire,” or in cowboy, “Not by a long shot,” or in TexMex, “No way, Jose!” Do not mistake God’s

⁸ For a fresh treatment of God’s grace, see Preston Sprinkle, *Go: Returning Discipleship To The Front Lines Of Faith* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2016), 21-39.

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kindness and mercy for the likes of us as indulgence, as a version of, “Just let the young folk enjoy themselves and have a good time.”

Now the image Paul invokes next was as volatile in his day as it is in ours, and the metaphor is slavery. Only theirs was different than our ante-bellum version. It wasn't race based but war based; losers serve winners as low and high level slaves depending on education and skills. Some were physicians or government bureaucrats; most were free by age thirty and thereafter called *freedmen*. By some estimates a third to half the population in the first century either was or had once been a slave.⁹

Other than the Emperor and his legions, slavery was the dominant social institution of the day, and to claim— as some critics do— that the church approved it is simply wrong. The church emerged in a world where slavery was already a fact of life, and in its internal life ignored the distinctions that were in play outside.¹⁰ Eventually, slavery was banished in lands controlled by the church and then reemerged with a vengeance as the new world was explored and colonized through the West Indies. Scripture records and regulates much that it does not approve, and to mistake the two is more about scoring debate points than serious thought. But in both systems, ancient or more recent, this much was clear. You were owned, and obedience is required. And so the question was, “Whom do you obey?” And if, “The Emperor” was the first thing that came to mind, you were a citizen or freedman, but if “My Master” was the first thought, then you were a slave. So Paul restated he obvious in verse 16, “You are slaves of whomever you obey,” and then he shifted the register from sociology to cosmic level theology, “either of Sin that leads to death, or of obedience to God that leads to righteousness.” “Everyone,” Paul said— and this is one of his most controversial teachings in our day, “has one of two masters, either Sin with a Capital S, or the God of Jesus Christ?” No other options.

There are no independent agents, no neutral ground from which to choose

⁹ For a summary of first century slavery, see James R. Edwards, *Romans* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 168-169.

¹⁰ See Galatians 3:27-28.

between them, no *above it all* because we were all born in bondage, and we live under the cruel rule of Sin and all its symptoms all our days unless some stronger benevolent power breaks into the prison camp to set us free, just like the Rangers in 1945 and the Union Army in 1865 on Lewis family land.¹¹

And that superior power is Jesus, as joined by the Father who sent him and the Holy Spirit who enabled and accompanied him all his days. The fullness of the Triune God has come down to us at ground level, hidden in the babe in the manger and the boy in the carpenter shop and in the young man down at the Jordan with John and in a young spiritual warrior besting Satan in forty days of hand to hand desert combat and in Jesus the one man army of liberation back in Galilee healing the sick and casting out demons, and finally in an innocent bloodied one writhing on the cross and then on Sunday coming back to his friends in an amazing new frame ready to start the stalled kingdom movement all over again. And when, on the basis of the Jesus story, someone trusts him with their life and all its messiness, something happens. The long grip of alien powers is broken, shackles unlocked, and they are freed into a new relationship with their Liberator, and inside his world there is much to learn.

This is why Paul launches into a doxology in verse 17, “But thanks be to God,” and then tells us why. “You were once slaves of the darkest, meanest power in the universe, *Lord Sin*, but now another has broken in and set you free for himself, *Lord Jesus*. You now love him from the heart, and you— as of today— are being remolded by a new kind of truth. You are a different kind of slave now; Jesus paid the price because he thought you worth it.

When my brother Chris was an M-1 tank commander in the late 80s before the first Gulf War, he was on a select team headed to the annual NATO tank competition. The Brits with their Challenger I main battle tank, Germans with the Leopard II, the U.S. with our then-still-new M-1 Abrams.

The Abram’s engines are gas turbines, and as they rolled down the Autobahn, Chris has the pleasure of seeing what happens when a big Mercedes—

¹¹ On the contrast and conflict between biblical and modern understandings of freedom, see Appendix I at the end of this manuscript.

Romans 6:5-23. 14

impatient to pass— gets too close. The heat of the exhaust— over 1700 degrees! melts the paint which at speed peels off in great sheets leaving bare metal. I can hear Chris laughing now, calling to his buddies below, “You’ve gotta see this! I just melted a Mercedes!” They soon rigged the exhaust to point upwards.

But the delight of the trip was not melting paint, it’s what happened when they turned off the Autobahn onto roads through towns, some of which had not seen U.S. armor since April 1945. One medieval looking town heard they were coming and arranged a reception. When they turned the corner into the town the roads were lined on both sides with older citizens cheering and tossing flowers on the tanks. Forty years after liberation from the horrors of Hitler, they were still grateful enough to shout encouragement to the Yanks. And what could Sgt. Thrailkill do but what his forebears in the 2nd Armor Division had done four decades prior? He wept at the joy of it and saluted, and to this day he cannot retell the story without tears.

Jesus is our liberator, and if we are not thankful to him all our days, then we’ve missed what he’s done for us. I was a slave of Sin, driven by cosmic and psychic forces that meant me no good. There was no way out until he rolled into my life with sufficient firepower to extract me and make me his own. “You once were slaves of Sin,” said Paul in verse 17, “but now you are loyal to Jesus and his program. And you must present yourselves anew to him every day.”

So if he’s done this for us, gladly and willingly, how are we to respond? What does it mean to be his follower, his disciple, his understudy in kingdom living? Well, to put it simply, you take all the energy you used to put into rebellion and now point it in the opposite direction. Every morning of the old life— whether aware of it or not- you presented your body and all its capacities for the work of the enemy: Sin and Death and Evil. You now show up at a different formation under a different flag for a different purpose. This imagery helps me understand the second half of verse 19, “For just as you once yielded your members to impurity and to greater and greater lawlessness, so now yield your members to God’s agenda to make you both strong and solid, the fancy name for which is *sanctification*,” which is not a pinched, narrow thing but a life of love and belly laughs and service with Jesus Christ at your side, in other words what you were made for, life at full tilt under the control of one Lord.

CONCLUSION

I know some for whom only the bottom line matters. They ignore the journey and aim at the destination. And it is to them that Paul addresses the final two thoughts of the paragraph. Only two masters, only two outcomes. So do the accounting. “What, after all,” he asks, “is the return on investment from those things of which you are now ashamed?” And they agree when he answers for them, “The end of those things is death,” and the fact is that some folk already have the look and smell of death about them, and when I sit with them I tremble. Then there’s the other ledger, the life column, “I’ve been set free by Jesus; I now belong to him. Along the way he’s putting me back together to make me whole, and you know what? It feels like life, and he promises it’s only going to get better forever.”

Sin pays with death because you are its slave; Jesus gives life because you are his friend. Doing life with Him and his followers is not the only way to live, but we believe it’s the best, and when life is over, you’ll know one way or the other, so where do you place the wager that is your life? If there’s no God and only black nothingness at death, if it’s only evolution and a cosmic accident with no meaning, you’ve still lived the best, most noble life imaginable, but if it’s as Jesus said, oh what a life!¹²

Columbia University researcher Dr. Sheena Iyengar found the average person makes about 70 decisions a day; that’s 25,500 a year and 1,788,500 over 70 years. The French Existentialist Philosopher Albert Camus said, "Life is a sum of all your choices." Put those 1,788,500 together, and that's who you are.¹³ There is one choice that can change it all forever. Chose the one who’s chosen you. I’m betting it all, and I mean all, on Jesus Christ. I have no Plan B.

¹² On Pascal’s wager, see Michael Rota, *Taking Pascal’s Wager: Faith, Evidence, and the Abundant Life* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2016).

¹³ John Ortberg, *All the Places to Go* (Colorado Spring, CO: Tyndale House, 2015), 8; also www.ted.com/talks/sheena_iyengar_on_the_art_of_choosing?language=en.

Ancient And Modern Concepts Of Freedom

(Adapted from Luke Johnson, *Romans* [Macon, Ga: Smyth & Helwys, 2001], 107-109)

Issue	Ancient Christian	Modern (18 th Century Enlightenment)
Slavery	Slavery as a sociological fact of the ancient world, the spoils of war, sometimes voluntarily entered to improve ones lot, not race based, often freed (<i>freedmen</i>).	Absolute value of freedom, slavery as an abomination, deprived of the <i>rights of freedom</i> , entirely a sign of oppression.
Freedom	Everyone is constrained; everyone has a master and roles in an overarching hierarchy of authority. Freedom is for the sake of obedience. Freedom of spirit matters; choices are limited. We are made to serve a higher power.	Absence of constraint, do as I please, highly individualistic, “the right of self-determination” is paramount. Freedom is to choose what I want. We are the higher power, and any service is purely voluntary.
Place In The World	A thick world of interlaced powers is over the human. In polytheism many gods and goddesses. For Jews one involved, holy God. Everyone serves some power or hierarchy. A richly furnished universe. Life is a constant response to forces greater than the self. We are under; the powers are sovereign.	No powers over us except perhaps a distant, deistic God. No angelic realm. World operates on rational natural law which humans may understand and direct. We are defined by our free choices. We are over; we are sovereign.
Social Organization	Life is a hierarchy, top to bottom. Key question is “Whom do you serve? Who is your Lord?” All have an answer, Gives me freedom in regard to lesser authorities.	Life is a social contract by the consent of the governed. Key question is, “What are my rights?” Equality and freedom are assumed. Obedience is functional. Service is to the sovereign self.
Cosmic Power	For Paul the personified cosmic powers of Sin, Death, Evil, Law, Grace are the background of life, forces on the field on which we live.	Only forces are natural law and the consequences of our free decisions. No others forces but a weak sense of fate and perhaps karma, even luck.
Agenda	Living in a new community of fellow travelers, of disciples who learn to love God and one another as they follow the Savior to freedom.	“Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as an individual agent
Convictions/Beliefs	For Paul a <i>standard of teaching</i> to which believers are <i>handed over</i> . Objective and fixed. What’s true and good?	Create your own world view, a customized choice from the marketplace of ideas. Fluid and flexible. What works?