

Romans 6:15-23 - Saving faith wants to please God

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[0:00] Good morning, church. Let's read together. This is Romans 6, verses 15 to 23. Slaves to righteousness. What then? Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace?

By no means. Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey? Whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness.

But thanks be to God, that though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness, leading to holiness.

When you are slaves to sin, you are free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death.

[1:20] But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

That's great. Thank you, Elle. Let's pray together as we come to God's word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we want to pray and ask for your help now as we come to your word.

We come as hungry people who want to feast on the delights of your truth. So we pray, please, that you would give us attentive hearts, that you would give us open ears, for me to speak clearly and faithfully, that you might be honoured and that we all might be done good, we pray.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. We are back in the book of Romans after our Christmas break, and we are landing in the middle of chapter 6.

So what I am going to do, under the sort of suspicion that you might have forgotten all that we looked at previously, is I'm going to try and give you a little bit of a catch-up so that we know where we are in the book of Romans.

[2:42] I want you to imagine with me for a moment that you are the headteacher of a school, one of those schools that says good school on the outside, you know, or maybe even outstanding school on the outside.

If you're going to be the headteacher of one of those schools, what is it that is going to make it a good school or an outstanding school? Let me suggest that you have to insist on two things, probably more, but for the sake of this, two things.

One is that you have to, as the headteacher of a good school, insist that disobedient children are punished, held to account.

Students in a good school, if they punch the teacher, if they don't hand in their homework, if they abuse the other children, they will be disciplined. Probably not with a stick, you are not allowed to do that anymore, but maybe with a detention or maybe with removal from class.

Good schools do not tolerate bad behavior from their pupils. But as well as punishing disobedience, the other thing as a headteacher that you will need to be committed to is some sort of moral agenda for the school, some kind of way that you want the school to be, that the values that that school is going to have, you might write them on a banner and stick them around the hall, the expectations that you're going to have of the students, we're going to be generous, we're going to be kind, we're going to be tolerant of one another, we're going to be thoughtful, whatever it is.

[4:20] Now, you might not call it that, but those two things, those two things of discipline and a sort of moral agenda, theologically, those two categories are justice and holiness.

Justice, a commitment to punish wickedness, and holiness, a pattern of right living. And the Bible is really clear from the beginning to the end that God, not as the headteacher of a good school, but as the creator and lord over this world that he has made, is committed to justice, he holds the world to account.

And he's committed to holiness, because there is a way to live that pleases him. He has a culture. He has a pattern for life that he insists on. And Romans 1 and 2 presents us then with a massive problem, a problem that we all feel and all know deep down, which is that we ourselves have disobeyed this God of justice and holiness.

And more than just that, our offense against the God of justice and holiness is so bad that it is not possible for us to satisfy his justice by a commitment to future holiness.

This is really important. Listen up. Go back to school again. Let me try and imagine that you're actually a pupil in the school rather than the headteacher. And your offense is not so much that you didn't hand your homework in.

[5:44] If that was your offense, right, and you were given an after-school detention for not handing your homework in, you might be able to go to the headteacher and sit down in that detention and say, listen, this is, you know, I know I deserve this, but can I just plead for your mercy?

If I promise that I will do all future homeworks, will you let me off this detention? Imagine the headteacher might say, well, you know, that's a, it is a minor offense.

I will let you off. But imagine if your offense was greater than that. Imagine you'd lurked outside the school, mugged the headteacher, stolen his car, locked him out of his office and broken into his home.

What would you then be able to do? Surely you can see that you are not going to be able to hand in future homework to satisfy his justice. He wouldn't believe you even if you said it.

And Romans 1 and 2 tell you that this is our problem with God. It is not so much that we've just committed a few minor moral offenses that we could perhaps atone for by a pledge of future holiness.

[6:47] Rather, the issue is that we have lived in God's world with no reference to him. We have tried to overthrow God and his rule. We have taken the place that we've reserved for God and put ourselves in it.

We have become self-centered instead of God-centered. We've put our desires ahead of his desires. We've lived as if our lives were from us and for us and to us when really they're from him, for him, and to him.

And so now you understand, don't you, we cannot offer to satisfy God's justice by a commitment to future holiness. God, if I obey you from now on, will you forgive me for the things that I've done in the past?

It doesn't work because our offense is too great. You cannot pitch God's holiness against his justice like that. So we have a problem with God's justice.

And the focus of Romans 3, 4, and 5 is how is a God of justice ever going to be satisfied by people like us? How can condemnation-deserving people like us ever be saved by a God of justice without him ceasing to be just?

[7:57] And Paul's point has been that God in Christ has solved this problem. He himself has satisfied justice. Andrew referenced this earlier. In Romans chapter 3, Paul writes, we are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

In other words, God in Christ has offered free satisfaction for his justice, released from guilt as a free gift, received by faith, whereby you and I can be declared not guilty.

Not because God is lying or cooking the moral books or anything, but because we've received it by faith through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. An empty hand of a new heart that receives what it could never earn.

That's Romans 3, 4, and 5. God's justice satisfied. But when we come to chapter 6, there needs to be more than just the satisfaction of God's justice because God is also holy.

He is committed to holiness. Go back to school again and just see what I mean. Imagine that you're that child that mugged the head teacher, took his office, stole his car, plundered his house, and now you're sat with him, and through some means that we don't need to explain, he has forgiven you.

[9:15] Justice has been satisfied. And you sit there, it has been offered to you freely. There's no price left to pay. But the question now is, what are you going to do now? What about holiness?

What's going to stop this forgiven kid from running back to the classroom and causing further havoc? What's to say this kid won't rob the head teacher again? What's to say he won't do something worse?

Satisfying justice is one thing, but what about a commitment to holiness? Where's that going to come from? Those are the questions of Romans 6, 7, and 8.

You might remember, if you were with us, that this question was asked at the beginning of Romans 6. Take a look at Romans 6, verse 1. Paul writes there, what should we say then? If God's justice is satisfied, and we've been released back into the world, if you like, released back to the classroom, shall we go on sinning that grace may increase?

Really, the question there is, is there just an endless loop? You know, the rebellious sinner is sent back into the world, forgiven by grace, goes back into the world, rebels some more, comes back to receive some more grace, goes back into the world, rebels some more, and just goes around this endless loop.

[10:25] Well, the answer that we saw last time, Romans 6, verse 11, the very first instruction in the book of Romans, no, it's not the answer. That's not what happens, because we should count ourselves dead to sin and alive to God.

One, I am dead. Two, I will be alive. In other words, this is the key to all this. The faith that receives forgiveness from the Lord Jesus is not an intellectual persuasion of an unchanged person, but it is the life breath of a new heart that has been made alive by God himself, and that life longs to live. We were dead. We're now being made alive. So the child returning to the classroom is not just forgiven, but in receiving forgiveness has been made new.

They're a new person, and this new person wants to live for God. The sin loop is broken. Now, that's Romans 6, verses 1 to 14, and now, at the start of our passage that El just read for us, in chapter 6, verse 15, there is a very similar, but slightly different question.

Look down at it with me. What, then? Here the concern is not so much about an endless loop of sin and grace, but rather if we are saved by grace and not by obedience, then what will teach us obedience?

[11:46] If the law, if God's rules which were over us, and they were showing us where we were going wrong, if they are no longer binding on us and over us in that sense, how will we know what to do?

Now, again, just go back to the headteacher's office for a moment. Imagine you've been forgiven for your offense of mugging the headteacher and have been returned to the classroom. You know, don't you, then, that your relationship with the headteacher is not based on your works, but on his kindness to you.

That's how you've related to him. You related to him in a way that doesn't reflect what you do because you did the worst, but a way which reflects who he is, which is kind. So that his rules and his pattern of holiness is not the basis on which he's related to you.

You were liberated from that. He related to you by his kindness and not your rule keeping. So if that's the case, the question in your mind is, if rule keeping doesn't rule my relationship with the headteacher, what am I supposed to do?

How do I live? If the spell of the law has been broken, if you put it that way, what is left to teach me? What's the incentive? What's the motivation to behave well if my behavior doesn't secure my relationship with the headteacher?

[13:04] And that's the question here. If you're justified by grace and the law, rules for obedience, had nothing to do with it, then the law is defunct. There's nothing left to teach you how to live.

So do we just sin because we don't know what to do? Are we destined just to be ignorant of God's holy ways? That's the question we're asking this morning. Now let's take a breath, right?

I realize that the danger this morning is all this is very theoretical, perhaps a little intense. Maybe you're sitting there thinking this feels like a philosophy lecture and not a sermon.

Actually, I've never been to a philosophy lecture, so I don't know, but maybe it does. But perhaps you're struggling to connect with what's been said. I know what it's like to be sat where you're sat, and I know that ultimately we are hungry, aren't we, to hear what God says from his word.

And going on in our minds are all the different troubles and struggles that we've had this week and which we're anticipating next week. You know, we've got the rent to pay. We've got the worries about work. We've got the relationship struggles.

[14:08] I don't want to hear about teachers and detentions and, you know, theories about justice and holiness. I just want to hear what God says to me, and I just want to be encouraged this morning.

Listen, if that's you, maybe that is, I mean, it's really, it's all of us, isn't it? Let me just try and say to you that these aren't abstract ideas. These are urgent truths. The truth is, I think, if you don't have good answers to the questions of Romans 6, if you don't know the connection between being saved by Jesus through his grace and his mercy and living a holy life to keep pleasing him, if you don't know the connection between those two, you will not know how to live the Christian life wherever it is that you're living it.

If you don't know how the grace of forgiveness relates to the work of holiness in which we're engaged, life will be a mystery to you, right? We won't know what difference being a Christian makes to us on Monday morning or when we cook the dinner on Tuesday night.

I don't want to overstate it. Preachers can overstate things, can't they? Vanessa accuses me of that from time to time. Are you just talking like a preacher, Steve, or is it really that bad? I don't want to overstate it.

But I think it is fair to say that many of the sort of ground level struggles that we have in our Christian life are because we don't understand this. So many churches, you know, bigger churches than ours, go wrong in answering this question.

[15:38] And it screws up the life of the people there. So listen up, because this is really, really important. I want to show you firstly the big idea. The big idea. Look down with me at the passage.

Let's see how Paul answers the question. Verse 15, let's start again. What then? Shall we sin because we are no longer under the law, but under grace? Are we just going to do whatever we want because we don't know what to do?

By no means. Don't you know that when you offer yourself to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey? Whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness.

But thanks be to God that though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

Notice the big idea then. The grace that forgives does not leave us without a concern for holiness because grace, the grace that forgives, is both about a transfer of ownership and a transformation of desire.

[16:48] This is the language, isn't it, here? It's the language of slavery. Really the idea of belonging. It wasn't strange in the first century in Rome for people to own other people and dictate what they did.

Now, Paul is not condoning that. He's just using it for an illustration. And his point is that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ experienced in salvation, received by faith, has liberated us from the master of sin, from slavery to sin.

But no longer to go our own way, but rather transferred our ownership to obedience, the ownership of God. And so now we obey not to earn forgiveness because fundamentally we now belong to God.

But there's more to it than just that. Because being transferred from the ownership of sin to the ownership of God himself also comes with a transformation of desire. Notice it, verse 17.

We now obey from the heart the pattern of teaching which has now claimed our allegiance. Here it is then, our experience of the saving work of Jesus Christ, our faith in him, which comes from these

new hearts that he's given us by the Spirit, that comes with a whole new set of desires.

[18:03] So that obedience is no longer external obedience to a set of external rules with the hope of receiving merit, but an internal desire on an internal law that's written on our hearts, driven by a love of the Lord.

Let me try and explain how this works. Imagine in the classroom, there is a set of rules on the wall, right? Hand in your homework on time.

Don't stand on the desks. Address the teacher with respect. Wear a tie. Okay? These are the school rules. They're on the wall. Imagine three different students looking at those rules.

Number one is only really interested in getting their own way. They're a rebel, right? So they read the rules and they go, I hate this school.

I hate being here. This list of rules is the way that I can ruin this school and I can show my rebellion against the school. So I read, hand your homework in time.

[19:06] What am I going to do? I am definitely never going to hand my homework in time. That's definitely not what I'm going to do. It says, don't stand on the desk. So what am I going to do? I'm going to stand on the desks. I know that will offend them.

Address the teacher with respect. So I will swear at the teacher. I will wear a hoodie instead of a tie to school. Do you see the thing? They're a rebel. They want their own way. So they read the rules and they go, this is what I rebel against to get my own way, to be my own person.

But suppose there's another child in the class and that child, they really want to be a doctor or a lawyer, something fancy, right? And they've worked out, listen, the best way for me to be who I want to be, a doctor or a lawyer or whatever it is, the best way for me to be that person and get to be who I really want to be is to keep the rules, right?

So they read, hand your homework in. And they think, well, the best way for me to become a doctor is for me to hand my homework in on time. So I'm going to hand my homework in time. I know that the best thing for me to do is not offend or upset the teacher.

So I'm going to keep those rules. Do you see that between those two students, there's no difference in their motives? Both of them want their own way. Both of them are mastered by their own desires.

[20:23] One of them is persuaded that rebelling against the rules is the best way to do that. And one of them is persuaded that keeping the rules is the best way to do that. But there is no difference. And that's what it's like in this world, right?

Like humanity says to God, I want to be in charge. I want my own way. I want to control my own destiny. I want to live as if you're not here. And it's as if the law says to people, as if God's law in the Old Testament says to people, listen, here you go then.

This is the operating system of the universe. This is how you need to live. And the rebels go, well, if that's what you say we need to do, I'm going to do the opposite, God. I'm going to do whatever I want to do.

I'm going to go my own way. And other people, often religious people, go, well, if that's the operating system of the universe, then I will keep that. And then you will have to do what I tell you to do, God.

But both of them are mastered by their own desires. Both are wicked. Both are selfish. But imagine a third child in the classroom. That child has just received forgiveness, free forgiveness for mugging the headteacher, robbing his house, taking over his office.

[21:33] And the receipt of that forgiveness has come with transforming power and transformed desires. They were owned by themselves, and they're now owned by the forgiving affection of the headteacher.

They're on his team. How do they read the rules? Well, they read them and go, do you know what? I love this teacher. The headteacher loves me.

He is full of mercy, kindness. He's forgiven me a debt I could never pay. I want to please that headteacher. And so the rules are not over me to earn anything, but they're a guide as to what pleases God himself.

So I'm going to do my best to hand my homework in. I'm going to sit in my chair. I'm going to respect the teacher and wear a tie, because that is what I want to do, because I want to please him.

Now that's it. Saving faith, the faith that receives justification, satisfaction for God's justice through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[22:37] That faith wants to please God. Not in an effort to get what it wants, but because it loves him, because it's alive to him, because it's grateful to him, to be owned by him.

So it reads the scriptures, it scours the law, it shapes its life around it, because it longs to live in a way that pleases God, that makes him smile. And here's the point.

It is only that kind of obedience that pleases God, because all other kinds of obedience are selfish. It's why the writer of the Hebrews says, without faith, it's impossible to please the Lord.

Because keeping the rules, while at the same time sort of flipping God off in your heart, is not good, it's wicked. Let me speak to you this morning, if perhaps you're not a Christian, and you assume that you can keep a certain set of rules and get God off your back, and he will do what you want him to do.

Let me tell you, that is not how this works. That is selfishness. That is flipping God off, while also trying to keep his rules. It doesn't go together.

[23:49] Actually, what we need is a new heart, a heart of faith, that receives from God his free forgiveness, and then loves to live to please him. That's the big idea here.

Faith comes with a new ownership, and new ownership comes with new desire. There is also a big instruction. So let's see this in verse 19. Look down at verse 19. Paul writes, This is the do this moment of the passage.

This is the application. If you're making notes, this is what I am to do as a result of what I've learned this morning. Here it is. Offer yourself as a slave to righteousness leading to holiness.

Notice how Paul explains it. He draws a parallel, doesn't he, between our previous commitment to impurity and wickedness, and our new commitment to holiness. You see, prior to our forgiveness received through transforming faith, we offered ourselves to wickedness.

That's how he put it. In other words, we took every opportunity for self-exaltation, every opportunity to get ahead, to get our own way. We were ambitious for our own success, for our own crown.

[25:10] We would do whatever it took to get ahead of the crowd. We were interested in ourselves, in our own plans, our own desires. We would sacrifice to them. We would go without sleep and without food if we thought it meant that we would get what we wanted for ourselves.

We would live in poor conditions. We would compromise our consciences. We would break the rules just to get on an extra rung of the ladder of the glory of me. But now we're to swap all that out. Holiness in the life of the believer sees what God has done, that God has transformed us and owned us. That faith is not just the empty hand that receives the free gift of forgiveness and justification from Jesus, but is also a life force, a driving new desire to please God.

So now I sacrifice. I take up my cross. I endure hardship and loss, but not for my glory or my fame, but for God's. I'm following Jesus.

Wherever he takes me, I will go. Whatever will drive me deeper into him, further on with him, that's what I'm going to do. If that means I'm going to go against the pattern of this world, I will go against the pattern of this world.

[26:25] If it means that my friends all go in one direction and I go in the other direction, I will do it. If it means that God leads me to a country not my own and to a people not my own, I will go. If it means that God asks me to love my wife, care for my kids, belong to church, read my Bible, love people different from me, share the Lord's Supper with people with whom I only have Christ in common, I will do it.

If it means leading an anonymous life, living under the radar, a life of quiet generosity, prayerful love of a small group of people, a lifetime of witness to a community that doesn't know a savior, I will do it.

Not in my strength for my glory, but for Christ and in the strength that faith in him brings. Lord, I am yours. Take me and use me. I'm reading a really helpful book at the moment called Ordinary by a guy called Michael Horton.

And in that book, he quotes someone who is describing the particular challenge that she faces in her Christian life. She spent much of her earlier years as a young person on mission in South America working with street children.

And now she finds herself at home looking after her own children. And she says that it is taking more spiritual courage and faith to love her husband, listen to her kids, tell the same stories over and over again, wash the dishes, get home ready for another day than it did to pick up sticks and go and work in South America.

[27:52] That's it here, right? The call of Romans 6 is not the call to be brilliant. The call is not to change the world. God has that covered, right? The call is to surrender and hand it all over to him.

To lay down your crown and take up your cross. You know, anyone can build some kind of Christian version of fame and self-fulfillment. People do that all the time. But that's not holiness. Instead, the faith-fueled Christian life says to the Lord, all the glory belongs to you and so do I. Take me and use me. I offer myself to you.

That's the instruction. Offer yourself to God. Finally, though, there's a big incentive. Look down at verses 20 to 23. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. But what benefit did you reap at the time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness and the result is eternal life.

[29:04] For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. I think Paul here is anticipating some kind of objection, isn't he?

Listen, this idea of being an obedient slave to God, that sounds kind of dangerous, right? That idea sounds almost sort of scary.

Why am I going to give up so much? I would understand a commitment to holiness in order to earn salvation. That equation makes sense to me. But holiness is surrendered to a God who owns me and gets all the glory.

Why would I do that? Well, Paul asks, listen, what was the benefit of living life for your own glory? You know, all that kind of immorality and that self-exaltation, that life that you lived where basically it was about getting up another rung on the ladder of the glory of you.

How was that for you? How did it work out? Where was it going? Oh yes, I remember. Death. That's where it goes. But the gift of God to belong to him, to be his obedient slave, the life of holiness, where does that lead?

[30:15] Oh, that leads to eternal life, don't you remember? Life eternal. Again, notice how this works. Notice that the implication is that Christ forgives and makes us holy.

The gospel is not just justice, it's also holiness. Because we are not just returned to the world the same people, but we are transformed by the Spirit through faith in Christ.

So it's not just forgiveness that brings us eternal life, it's holiness that brings us eternal life. Not because the holiness is ours in the sense that we are earning eternal life by our credits, but rather because holiness is the growth in us and the flourishing of what Christ has done for us.

It is us becoming more and more who we are in Christ so that we are slaves that receive life, not as wages, but as a gift.

It's an oxymoron, isn't it? You know, it's a kind of contradiction here. Notice this, right? Slaves are normally worked to death, used, abused, and dispensed with. It's why slavery is never condoned by the Bible.

[31:22] Slavery is really the peak of inhumanity, isn't it, to others. But slavery to God, ownership by Him, is not being worked to death, it's being worked to life.

In fact, it's not even worked to life as a wage, it's worked to life as a gift. This is the great incentive. Why would you not want to offer yourself to God?

Why would you not want to lay down your crown to live for His glory and not your own? Why would you not want to do that? Because that is the road to life and joy. Every other way of living is full of death and decay.

You know, live for yourself and you will die from the inside. Even if your life looks brilliant, right? Even if everyone else around you thinks, wow, look at Him. Inside you're dying and you will die. But live for God, live for Him in holiness and joy will grow and flourish and blossom even in the ordinary moments of life until one day, as Natasha was saying to us, we will be with the Lord Jesus, seated with Him, enjoying eternal life in holiness forever.

[32:45] Let me pray. Heavenly Father, thank you that in the Lord Jesus, not only have you done everything that was required for our forgiveness, you have also done everything that is required to make us holy.

Thank you that in the Lord Jesus, through faith in Him, by the power of the Spirit, we have the strength to live lives which please you, not for our glory, but for yours.

Lord, we know because we're honest that there's a way to go still for each of us. Oh Lord, so please we pray, might you continue to make us into who we already are in Jesus.

Make us more and more like Him, we pray. In His name. Amen. Amen.