

LIVING BY GRACE

STUDY FOUR

Whose Slave Are You?

Romans 6:15–23

Grace frees us, but not to do as we please. We are freed to please Christ.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

PASTOR Chuck Swindoll recalls the time his mentor, Ray Stedman, had an unforgettable encounter with a man while walking the streets of downtown Los Angeles.

An eccentric man with long, tangled hair, a scraggly beard, and filthy clothes walked toward him wearing a sandwich board. Written on the front in bold letters—no doubt by the man himself—were the words “I am a slave of Jesus Christ.” The scruffy prophet held Ray’s eyes in a steady gaze until he passed by, and as he continued up the sidewalk, Ray turned to read the back side of the sandwich board. It read, “Whose slave are you?”¹

The man’s question confronted passersby with a reality most would rather not face. We all serve someone or something. People can become slaves to their career or to their possessions. Their drive to please others may enslave them to people’s opinions. Self is the master of those who think only of themselves. Sin is the master of those who can’t say no to their desires.

Christ, however, has set us free from all these masters. By choosing Him as our Master, we experience *real* freedom—which is a paradox, isn’t it? Only by serving Christ can we be truly free.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Take a quiet moment to meditate on the following declarations of your freedom in Christ.

Jesus replied . . . “If the Son sets you free, you are truly free.” (John 8:34, 36)

Because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. (Romans 8:2)

For you have been called to live in freedom. (Galatians 5:13)

Write a brief prayer asking the Lord to help you understand what it means to be free, to open your heart to the truth in His Word, and to empower you to fulfill your divine calling.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

In Romans 6, Paul addressed two types of Christians living under sin’s bondage. First, as we previously studied, some *nullified* the freeing power of grace by failing to leave their old master of sin. Paul taught them how to live in Christ’s freedom in Romans 6:1–14. Paul then wrote 6:15–23 to address a second group. These Christians *abused* grace by sinning as much as they pleased since they were no longer under the law.

The first group in their defeated state sinned because they believed they had no choice but to sin. The second group sinned *by choice*. They figured that, with no law to stop them, they could rev up their sinful desires and race through life under the green flag of grace.

Reckless liberty, however, leads to a wrecked life. In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we’ll correct this libertine extreme and learn how to live by grace as Christ intended.



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Observation: Careful Warnings to All Who Are Free

Read *Romans 6:15–23* to get an overview of the passage. As you read, make mental notes of the series of contrasts between our old way of life serving sin (“you were” 6:17, 20) and our new way of life serving Christ (“now” 6:17–19, 22).

The Question and the Central Principle

What question in *Romans 6:15* launched this section of Paul’s teaching on grace?

These libertines thought, *We can sin all we want under grace. We’re free!* Paul shook his head in response, “Of course not!” And then, with equal emphasis, he declared the big idea of the passage, writing his letters as if in all caps: “DON’T YOU REALIZE . . . ?” (6:16).

What central principle did Paul state in *6:16*?



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Why do you think Paul was so adamant? What was at stake?

Past Identity versus Present Identity

Building on his main idea, Paul contrasted our past identity as slaves to sin with our present identity in Christ in Romans 6:17–23. Fill in the contrasting points in the chart below. The first one is filled in for you.

Verses	Past Identity	Present Identity
<i>Romans 6:17</i>	“Once you were slaves of sin”	“but now you wholeheartedly obey this teaching we have given you”
<i>Romans 6:18</i>		
<i>Romans 6:19</i>		
<i>Romans 6:20–23</i>		



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Paul's central principle leads to his central command: "Now you must *give yourselves to be slaves to righteous living* so that you will become holy" (Romans 6:19, emphasis added). Step-by-step, Paul guided his readers in how to live by grace. We can summarize Paul's progression of thought like this:

1. When I was lost, I was enslaved to sin ("Once you were slaves of sin," [6:17]).
2. My slavery to sin only grew worse ("ever deeper into sin" [6:19]).
3. Christ freed me from slavery to sin ("now you are free" [6:22]).
4. I have a new Master ("have become slaves to God" [6:22]).
5. I have a new calling ("do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life" [6:22]).

I choose to obey Christ, and in a sense, I am a slave of Jesus Christ. If Jesus says it, I want to do it. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Living Out Our Freedom over Sin

Grace allows you to choose your master. "You can be a slave to sin . . . or you can choose to obey God" (Romans 6:16). It's absolutely vital to take seriously the consequences of our choice. Read [6:20–23](#) and write down what Paul wrote about *life* and *death*.

We often use [6:23](#) as an invitation to a non-Christian to receive the free gift of salvation, and that's a valid application. However, look again at the verse in its context. Paul was addressing carnal Christians who thought they could choose sin and not suffer the consequences because they were under grace.



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Read *Romans 6:20–23* again. What did he mean by “death” as wages? In contrast, what kind of “life” did Jesus freely offer? What warning and invitation was Paul giving to Christians?

Eternal life is not something out there that we reach when we die. We enter into it when we believe in the Savior. We begin an eternal kind of living the moment we believe. The wages of sin, however, is a death-like existence. Christ delivers us from the wages of sin.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Paul’s Teaching in Galatians

Paul mirrored Romans 6 in his letter to the Gentile believers in Galatia who had fallen prey to Jewish legalists. What similar principles on the subject of freedom do you find in the following verses from Galatians?

3:22: _____

5:1: _____

5:13–14: _____

6:7–8: _____



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In the space below, put in your own words Paul's instructions and warnings to the Galatian church. What vital role does the Holy Spirit play in our living by grace in freedom? (Note: we'll explore more of the Spirit's vital role in living by grace when we study Romans 8.)

We're not free to do whatever we wish, whenever we wish to do it. We certainly are free to choose. But we're not free to choose the consequences if we choose wrong. Invariably, if we do what's wrong, there will be a price to pay. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Choices and Consequences

Grace guides us to a crossroads, doesn't it? At this junction, we are free to choose whether to obey sin or God. But, as Paul made it clear, we're not free to choose the consequences of our choice. Paul knew what was at stake. With the heart of a father who dearly loves his children, he appealed to Christians . . . *use your freedom wisely.*

As we conclude, let's tie a couple of strings around our finger as reminders of Paul's teaching.

1. *It's possible to be free from sin yet choose to be enslaved.* This describes the defeated Christians. Sin dulls your spiritual taste buds to the sweetness of God. It causes you to live joyless lives instead of the abundant life God offers.
2. *It's possible to be enslaved yet think you are free.* This described the libertines. Once you realize your bondage, however, grace motivates you to choose a righteous lifestyle in the power of the Spirit. Christ gives you the grace you need to do what you can't do in your own strength.



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If you followed the wrong master in the past, what consequences did you experience?

Are you still enduring consequences? Are you struggling to change masters? Perhaps you can talk to a trusted friend about your desire to change and ask him or her to help guide you to freedom. Perhaps you can meet with your pastor or Christian counselor for guidance. What ideas do you have?

Finally, what about the loved ones you know who are racing through life at a reckless clip, running past stop signs, and not caring about the consequences? Based on our study of Romans 6:15–23, what can you share with your loved ones to encourage them to true freedom?



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Paul spoke in strongest terms to the grace-abusers who were scattering the pearls of heaven before the swine of their own sinful desires. God did not free people by sacrificing His Son so they could return to their old master and ruin their lives. That would be the saddest tragedy of all.

Conclude Romans 6 with a personal commitment to live by grace, free from sin, under the authority of our new Master.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, You sent Your Son to give me life in abundance. The kind of life I'll fully enjoy in heaven someday is the kind of life I can taste today as I live in Your kingdom, surrendered to Your authority as my Master. Forgive my lapses into sin when I lose sight of Your grace. Thank You for settling the issue of my forgiveness at the cross where Jesus died for me. Help me love others with the same grace which You love me. Help those I love to know the joy and freedom of serving You. In Jesus' name, amen.

ENDNOTE

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Romans*, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, vol. 6 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2015), 149.

