
SPECIAL MESSAGES

HOW TO QUIT SINNING BY PRACTICE

Romans 6:15-23

Let's look at God's word, Romans 6:15-23:

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.

“How To Quit Sinning By Practice.” What you do every day, the choices you make, the actions which are yours – those choices and actions lead you down one of two paths – down a path which leads to sin and greater sin and death, or down a path that leads to righteousness and life. What you actually do matters.

In Romans 6 we have a passage which I have suggested could be described as a transmission passage. You have the image of getting in your car. You have this powerful vehicle, you start the engine, the engine is idling, you are ready to go, but you're not going anywhere and you won't go anywhere until you put the car into gear, until you use the transmission to get yourself going.

You have passage of scripture which are teaching sections, doctrinal sections -- rich in truth. Then you have sections which are application passages. They apply the truth. They tell you what it looks like to live it out. These transmission passages, as I've called them, help you move from doctrine to application. They help you get started living.

Now, getting started sometimes is very difficult, isn't it? Sometimes the hardest part about vacuuming your floor is opening the closet and getting the vacuum out. The switch is so hard to turn on. I'm embarrassed to tell you that every time I vacuum, I do it so infrequently that I can't find the switch. The hardest part about cutting the grass is pulling that start cord. Sometimes it's a motivational issue. "I just don't want to do it. I just don't want to go out there. I don't want..." Right?

But sometimes it's because we feel overwhelmed. We really don't know where to start. You come to church. You are moved. You are inspired. God moves on your heart. You want to know God more. You want to experience God, but you're not sure how to do that in everyday life. These passages help us do that. It's a bigger issue than we might think. A lot of times we are just taking in truth, doctrine, truth, doctrine, teaching, and we see a disconnect between how we are living and what we know. We need help making that transition.

That's one of the reasons why we, as a local church, have worked hard to define very clear steps of discipleship, of what it means to follow Jesus. We say Gather, Connect, Serve, Grow – four commitments. Here is what that looks like in church life. Here is how you follow Jesus at Riverside. And if you want to step off into that, come to Know and Grow. That's how you launch into discipleship here. It's four weeks. We are being very deliberate about it because we believe that we need that encouragement. We need that launching pad to help us follow Jesus.

I'm sorry, Adam, but when you said it's the way we assimilate, I thought of the Star Trek movie where the Borg are assimilating and taking over everybody and they tell you: "Resistance is futile." That's like a 30-year-old movie reference. I apologize. We want to help you get into the flow of church life. So come to Know and Grow even if you missed last week.

These scriptures help, because in the same frame they hold up doctrine and they hold up practice, or application – everyday life. They kind of go back and forth and help us connect the two and help us to take that first step.

Here, Paul is talking about something very specific – how the choices you make day in and day out create a kind of momentum leading to death or life. What you do really does matter. He begins this section with this question in verse 15: “What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?”

Now, in order to get Paul’s entire discussion, I have to ask you: Do you understand what Paul means when he talks about living under the law and when he talks about living under grace? Living under the law – the Old Testament children of Israel, the Jewish people, were given the law of God. We think of the Ten Commandments as the written record, the summary of God’s moral law. This is what God requires. But the bible teaches that it wasn’t just the Jewish people that received God’s law; God’s law is actually imbedded within every person, written upon our hearts.

In Romans 2:14-15, Paul writes this:

For when Gentiles (that is non-Jewish people), who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them...

Here is what Paul tells you. Every day in life this is going on. Right now, you have within you the knowledge of right and wrong because you are made in the image of God and it’s just there. Your conscience judges you according to that law. Your conscience is constantly telling you, “Nope, nope, nope, nope – don’t eat that. You don’t need that. Another one? You’re going to eat another one?” Right? Now, you may say, “Well, I’m married to my conscience.” No, no, no, no. Your conscience is in you, alright? That’s just another gift that God has given you to help your conscience. Amen!

Your conscience is not perfect, because if you ignore it over and over and over again, Scripture says it becomes callous, like dead places on your hand, if you actually ever used them for anything physical. That skin becomes dead and your conscience becomes dead to the truth of God.

This is a very powerful argument, actually, for the existence of God. In C.S. Lewis’ Mere Christianity, a wonderful classic (we normally have it at our book table), he opens with this. I’m not going to display it because it’s a little bit of a lengthy quote. But it’s so good and it helps us grab ahold of

this point: What does it mean to be under the law? That's what I'm trying to explain to us right now. He writes:

Every one has heard people quarrelling, arguing. Sometimes it sounds funny and sometimes it sounds merely unpleasant; but however it sounds, I believe we can learn something very important from listening to the kinds of things that people say (when they argue). They say things like this: "How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?"--"That's my seat. I was there first"--"Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm"-- "Why should you shove in first?"--"Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine"--"Come on, you promised." People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups.

Now, what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man's behaviour does not happen to please him. (He is not just saying, "I'm not pleased with your behavior. Listen very carefully.) He is appealing to some kind of standard of behaviour which he expects the other man to know about. And the other man very seldom replies: "To heck with your standard." (C. S. Lewis used a little more colorful word.) Nearly always he tries to make out that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard, or that if it does there is some special excuse.

Do you see that? If you listen to our everyday language, you see the assumption that there is a standard that we all agree on that is the standard of right and wrong. We judge one another, and when judgment comes at us, we don't say, "Oh, I don't believe that standard." We try to explain why we are really not breaking the standard. This is a powerful, powerful argument for the existence of God.

C. S. Lewis goes on to say, "Listen, don't say to yourself for a moment that that's just our culture -- that's just Western culture -- that's just America -- or that's just a certain brand of people." He goes through a whole study in a different book, talking about how if you go from culture to culture and look at ethics code after ethics code, you find the core repeated over and over. There is this common agreement about how people should treat people and be treated.

And when you occasionally come upon a person who is morally bankrupt, you don't say, "Ah, look -- there's no code, there is no standard." No, you view that person the same way that you view

someone or a group of people that have a physical challenge or a developmental challenge. You understand that that may be tragic, but it's not the norm.

We look at this tragedy of Stephen Paddock going to the 32nd floor in Las Vegas and in a premeditated action, unleashing death and destruction on well over 500 people -- fifty-eight people murdered and over 500 people injured. We may say to ourselves, "Wow, how can God do that? How can God allow that? How can a good God who is all-powerful allow that kind of destruction?"

But the argument that really should catch us up is: "Well, if I am just the product of natural selection, of random selection...if what governs the world is really the survival of the fittest, then I have to ask myself not, "Why did this happen and why would God allow it?" but "Why do I even care?" Why is there an outrage within me that says, "No, this is not right!" That objection, that coming before God and saying, "God, do something about this! We want a certain justice. This is not right!" appeals to a standard that is written on every heart. We know that it's wrong. We don't have to debate it. We know it. And because we know it, it points to the existence of God and our creation in his image.

So, what does it mean to be under that law? It means that one day you will stand before God and you won't be able to say, "I didn't know." There will be a judgment of our lives. In fact, the last verse that we read even tells us that the wages of sin is death. We may find comfort in saying to ourselves, "Well, it's not that bad." But Paul is wanting to be clear and say, "No, no, no, no. Though we may comfort ourselves by comparing ourselves to others, God will not treat us that way in the final judgment, any more than a judge."

A criminal at the Broward County Courthouse could come before a judge and say, "Listen, I may have committed a crime, but it's no worse than the average crime and there are many criminals much worse than I am." That judge is not likely to say "Oh, then it's okay," and neither will God say that our sin is permissible. The wages of sin is death.

We experienced that in Las Vegas in a dramatic fashion. Our brokenness with God, our rejection of God has unleashed a fury of death and destruction. And it's not just the death that we immediately inflict on others, but it's a corruption. It's a decay. It affects us in terms of our fruitfulness, our productivity, our personal relationships. It hits us on every front. The wages of sin is death.

So we are living either under law or under grace. What does it mean to be under grace? In one sense it's the same thing as being under law. The only major difference is that when I stand before God, I'll be judged by the law, but Jesus will take my place. Jesus has lived a perfect, sinless life. He left the glory of heaven and became a man – took on human flesh and lived a glorious, perfect life. And he was executed. He experienced a dramatic and horrible death. The death that I should have died for my sin he died in my place, though he didn't deserve to die. And he offers to me, he offers to you, this gift, this grace -- to be forgiven, to be declared innocent before God, righteous before God instead of guilty. So we live either under the law or under grace.

Paul is laboring to say that not only does grace impact you in terms of receiving the forgiveness of your sin and the gift of eternal life -- just receive it by trusting in Jesus Christ -- but he also wants to show you (remember our transmission passage) how that new identity of who you are in Christ radically impacts how you live everyday life.

So he asks this question in verse 15: “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin? Shall we just go on sinning because we are not under the law, we are under grace?” Do you understand the question now? He is saying, “If you are telling me that my sin is forgiven and I'm right with God, not based on what I do, not based on my actions, but based on what Jesus has done for me, and I'm receiving that as a gift, does it really even matter what I do?”

I remember receiving a phone call from a lady who was actively participating in a cult group. She was really hung up on this one factor. She was saying, “Brian, if you're telling me I'm saved by grace, then my works and my actions don't matter, and I just can't grab ahold of that. That doesn't seem right. That seems unfair.” I tried to persuade her, but she was hung-up on this critical truth.

Here is what Paul is actually saying. He is not only saying that your actions will matter, but he is making a much more radical claim than that. It goes back to verse 14. We ended previously with that. Paul says this: “For sin will have no dominion over you since you are not under law but under grace.” Do you know what he is claiming there? He is not just saying that your actions matter if you are under grace. He is saying the only way you will be able to move away from sin and the only way that sin's hold on you will be broken is if you live under grace instead of under the law. He will unpack that more thoroughly in Romans Chapter 7, but I want you to stay with me as we consider this. Are you with me?

We are holding up the doctrine and the application so that we can see the in-between and get to the steps. Remember what we did two weeks ago? He deals with this section in Romans 6 with three objections to the whole idea of grace.

1. The first one we looked at two weeks ago. It's this absurd one. It's kind of crazy, but logically it makes sense. If you tell me that I can't get saved, I can't get right with God because of my own actions, I can't experience forgiveness of my own sin, that I have to receive it as a gift, and it's God's grace and therefore God gets the glory, well then, I might as well just go sin more. In fact, the more I sin, the more that God forgives me of, the more I experience grace, and the more glory God gets. Paul, your teaching is so crazy, so insane, you are actually telling me the more I sin the better it is for God and everybody else. That's the first objection.
2. The second objection is what we're dealing with today, a little more reasonable. If I'm not saved based on what I do, why does it matter what I do?
3. The third objection is in Romans 7. I'm giving you a whole outline of the book of Romans. I hope you're taking notes. "Well, isn't God's law good? Why is it that the law, according to you, cannot produce righteousness, but produces sin instead?"

So back to two weeks ago, because he is building on that right now. Stay with me. I want you to get this. How do you quit sinning? Why does grace not lead to greater sin? There is:

- Something to know,
- Something to consider true for yourself, and
- Something to do.

He spends 10 verses talking about the doctrine, talking about how you have a new identity in Jesus. The key to new behavior is a new identity. It's true. Jesus has died for me. The old me is dead. I now am raised to live a new life in Jesus Christ. I have a new identity.

When I hear that teaching, there is a point of decision where I say, "This is true for me. I consider this true for Brian Brookins. Jesus has died for me. I trust in him. The old Brian Brookins is dead. There is a new Brian Brookins that lives in the power of the Holy Spirit and I am headed for eternal life because of what Jesus has done."

So we can say, “You know what? I know God wants me to pray. I know that God wants me to spend time with him. That’s what Christians should do. I should walk with God. I should commune with God. I get that. That’s part of verses 1-10. That’s the identity of a person who believes and trusts in Jesus Christ. But when I get to verse 11, when I get to, “Consider it true for yourself,” I say, “But I’m just not good at that. I get distracted. I don’t pray. I don’t have any self-discipline. I don’t like to study. I just can’t do that.” Then when I get to verses 12 and 13, where I actually do it, where I present myself to God to do works of righteousness, I don’t do it. Why? Because I don’t believe it’s true for me.

Okay, now Paul is saying, “Wait. Stop thinking like that! You are never going to get started that way.” “I can’t vacuum. It’s so hard. It’s so hard. So difficult. It will take so long. I have a bad back, after all.” Right? But for us, it’s a matter of deep identity. You say, “I can’t conquer sexual sin. It’s just too strong. Brian, you don’t understand.” Paul is saying, “Listen, the only way you will conquer it is God’s grace at work in your life. And it will only be activated when you say “This is true of me! Even me!”

Yeah, the old Brian had trouble sitting down and focusing. The old Brian had trouble saying, “I want to know you, Lord.” No, the old Brian was too focused on immediate gratification. But that person is dead. You’ve given me a new identity and now I’m raised to a new life in you. And this is true of me! It’s a gift. It’s grace!

Now I’m going to actually go do it. I’m going to present the members of my body to God as instruments of righteousness and not to disobedience, not as instruments of unrighteousness. Paul says this is really the only way that you will begin to experience victory over sin. The problem is so deeply imbedded within us we need a new heart. We need a new identity.

Then this last point – Something to do, verses 12 and 13 – that’s his springboard into today’s passage. We will move through it really quickly. I think the important thing is to get the big picture. Something to do.

Look at verses 12 and 13. He says, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.” Paul is not just thinking of a clever way to tell you how to live like a Christian every day. He is very deliberate in his language, and this is what he’s going to build on in verses 15-23. “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.” Present yourself to God. Present yourself to obedience. Present yourself to righteousness. Don’t present yourself to sin, disobedience, unrighteousness. This will lead to death. This will lead to life.

So then he gets into our section for today, and I’m going to give you an outline. We are just going to blaze through it in about five minutes. Here it is. Verse 15 is the question: “What should we do?” Do we sin because we are under grace and not under law? Does it matter what I do? We have tried to expound on that.

In verse 16 he gives you a principle that tells you why the answer to that is no. It’s a powerful life principle. In verses 17 and 18 he tells you what it looks like when you put it into action. In verse 19 he tells you exactly what you should do. And in verse 23, just to drive home the point, he tries to persuade you. He gives you a “Why we should do it.” Are you ready? Let’s jump in.

I. The Presentation Principle.

The principle is in verse 16, where he writes: “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?” We are going to call this “The Presentation Principle.” Whoever you present yourself to – you will become a slave of that one. You have two choices. You will present yourself to God and you will become a slave of righteousness and obedience and life, or you will present yourself to sin, to disobedience, and you will become a slave of that and it leads to death.

Think about this for a moment. Think about sexual sin or drunkenness or anger. It often starts with what seems like just an innocent choice. You have no intention of going deep down that road, but what you are doing in that moment when you are on the computer and you click that image to see it and you pursue it, you are presenting yourself and saying, “Here I am, Master, take me.” And before long, what was once a choice, you no longer feel that you have a choice. It owns you. You go to God and say, “God, help me!” But you find it’s not very easy to break free when you are enslaved.

Paul somewhat apologizes for the unpleasantness of the imagery that he uses. But he says because of our natural limitations we need to speak this way so that we get it. Let me illustrate the principle to you this way. I was wrestling with one of my sons one day. I have a very special relationship

with my kids. I could give you a quick theology on the value of wrestling. It teaches you boundaries. It helps boys be boys and men be men. It's a very good thing. The benefit of it is increased if the mom stands in the next room and tells you to stop. You know you're having some level of success, right?

So, I was wrestling with this son and he crossed a boundary. Now, in my sin in that moment, I got angry. It was a moment where I spoke harshly and all the fun ended. Then, as I was in the hallway, I heard this son in another room with self-hate speech: "Why do I do that? I always blow it. I always mess up." You see, the wages of sin is death. We don't always enter in with this premeditated: "This is what I'm going to do," because it owns us! It destroys what's precious to us!

I remember going to God, saying, "God, don't let my sin destroy that which is precious." I want to tell you that God, in his mercy, met me in the most wonderful way and said, "You know, Brian, you are my son. I love you more than you love him. And this is unfathomable to you, but I gave my Son so that you could be set free of what binds you in this moment, so that your sin against him will not define him. It does not define you. My grace is greater than your sin!" Do you see that? The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

So we learn to stop running to the law, to say, "I'm not so bad! No, you misunderstand, you're judging me." We say, "You know what? Actually, I'm worse, but Jesus is my advocate." So I went to that son and asked for forgiveness. Today, he is a star. He's awesome. He's scarred because of my parenting for sure, but I've had many occasions to apologize and say, "Listen, your hope is not in my perfection. It is in the perfection of Jesus Christ, your Savior and Lord." The principle is that you present yourself to someone.

Jesus gave us the same principle in John 8:34. "Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." I want you to see how I'm getting the title that "We Quit Sinning by Practice." It's choices of behavior that become habitual and an everyday practice.

To the next point, verse 17 and 18:

II. What does it look like?

"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." Paul is now applying the principle. This is what it looks like in life.

If you listen carefully, he is saying to you that there will be a practical result from the choices you make, a momentum you create towards death or towards life. But don't make this mistake. This is really important. Don't think you can obey your way into a new identity. It doesn't work that way. He is saying, "No, no, no – you are obeying from the heart."

Notice that his language is not that you committed to a teaching. You are actually given over to this teaching. It's very subtle. Do you see the difference? He is saying you've been swept up to Christ. You belong to him. He is your identity, so that now as you present yourself to him, you will find more and more that you just can't help it.

III. What should we do? Verse 19.

"I'm 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." Sanctification is the idea of progressing holiness, over time growing in holiness.

So here's Paul's call for a response. He is saying that if you have trusted in Jesus Christ (he's talking to the Christian right now), present yourself to God on a daily basis and the parts of your body and all that you are and say, "God, I'm yours." As you do that, no holds barred, "God, I'm all yours," you'll be swept along in a channel of life. It's not immediate. It's not easy, because it's a remake of identity. It's now sealing who you are. It's who you are, but you're not fully convinced yet. There is a sense in which I think it's correct to say you won't be fully convinced until you start to deploy those resources.

I experience this in life in the area of giving. One of the things that my dad did really well -- he did many things well -- but he taught me to give. I was a little guy and I would go out and cut yards. I'd come back and put my five dollars on the table and he would say, "Okay, son, we give the first tenth to God. What's 10% of five dollars? Fifty cents. Okay, let's give that to the Lord. It's a joy to give. When we do this we are trusting the Lord with all that we have. We are saying it all came from him." He taught me.

I think it's accurate to say that my whole life I've known the benefit of that. And throughout my life God has challenged me to give more and to know the joy of giving -- that it's an expression of faith that God is going to provide and God is going to bless.

I have experienced that so dramatically that when people say to me, "I don't think the tithe is biblical." And "I don't know about this." And "All pastors want is money," and all these things... Okay, listen, have all the debate you want -- I have a rock solid conviction this works. It all belongs to God. I am pretty sure that when I get to heaven God is not going to say, "You gave too much!" I'm fairly confident that's not going to happen. It's not hard for me to step back and look at my life, look at this church, look at these amazing people and say, "God has been pretty good to me." Right? I am never thinking, "Wow, if I had just given a little bit less, I would only owe X instead of Y."

You can experience it in life. If your issue is anger, when you step out and you are offended in that first moment, the world tells you to vent it, give expression to it. Scripture says, "Be angry and sin not." It means admit that you're angry, but don't express it in a sinful way. Deal with it. Absorb the offense, or forgive, or release, or trust the Lord.

Now, if you're on the pathway of sin and you vent it, you are going out the door and you run into the door. "Argh!" Right? Then you go out and stub your toe getting in the car. Now, what was "Argh," becomes "ARGH!" times five. You know the progression. Then the next venting. Next thing you know, you're on the highway and you are doing things where you are an absolute lunatic. It leads to death.

The first time it gets out of you, you don't say, "Oh look, I'm better. I've been real with myself. I've expressed that and now it's out. It's gone." No, it's starting to roll over you and take control.

Over here, at any point you say, "Wow, look at the way I'm acting! This is lunacy!" You have the opportunity to come back over here and say, "God, please forgive me. Help me, Lord. I need your grace. My identity is in Christ. That old person is dead." We have an opportunity to act on it. So, what should we do? We should present ourselves to God.

Last point:

IV. Why should we do it?

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? (Sin brings shame.) For the end of those things is death. (Sin brings 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.

That's a powerful statement. He is saying there's a progression of growth in your life that ends with you receiving eternal life. Then there is this fantastic verse, verse 23: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Do you see what Paul is doing? He is holding up the doctrine. He is holding up the action and he is saying, "Get started. Let me persuade you. That old path brings shame. It brings death. It's no longer who you are. Jesus has set you free." You don't have to live entrenched in those old habits, nor do you have to see yourself as a victim for what other people have done to you. The power of Christ is great enough to bring healing and restoration. You have a new life. If you are having trouble getting started, here is Paul's answer. Are you ready? "Get started." Present yourself to God.

You will be surprised. This is a cheap moment of advertisement. For some of you it's: "I should go to Know and Grow. I should take the next step. Our pastors are telling us this is how you springboard into discipleship here. I'm going to go." Anyone?

It's amazing how we take those steps. For some of you it's just getting here. There was this moment. Should we fight or go to church? Should I sleep or go to church? Should I go to the beach or should I go to church? Should I get that work done? What should I do? And here you are. You won the battle and aren't you glad? See, it's a decision that leads to life.