

Romans 6:15-23

Service in the New Life of the Justified Sinner

The new life of the justified sinner has its basis in Christ, and that new life is service to the Lord.

A. Notes on the Text

Verse 15

After the last words of v. 14 ("you are not under law, but under grace") Paul allows himself to be interrupted once again by an opponent. This one concludes: "If the law is no longer valid for us, the believers, we can revel in sin. The law can no longer condemn us anyway. All has been forgiven already!"

In v. 1 Paul spoke about continuing in sin; the question is whether, after having received forgiveness, we should throw ourselves into the pool of iniquity again, since in Christ everything is forgiven anyway (see Main Thoughts).

Verse 16

Paul rejects this conclusion with all his might. Using the example of the slave (a well-known figure at the time!) he states sharply: you cannot serve two masters, Christ and sin (Satan; cf. Matthew 6:24). Either you belong wholly to sin, or you belong wholly to the Lord. There is no neutrality in human life regarding either. And now God (Christ) and sin (Satan) are opposing powers. The end of the verse also shows that the fruits of the one and the other as opposites. A double life in sin is impossible.

Verse 17

Paul maintains that believers have been freed from sin in Christ (6:4ff.), and he also holds the Roman Christians to their public profession of faith: they have accepted the preaching of the gospel regarding that redemption by Christ in faith. At that time this was the "standard of teaching," or teaching method: not the Judaistic kind (achieving righteousness by one's own works of the law), nor the antinomian kind (grace gives license to sin), but the evangelical kind: the doctrine of Christ's grace, which delivers from sin to live in good works. This teaching came upon them with power: the Spirit of God uses the preaching to move men to faith (Romans 10:14,15; see also Heidelberg Catechism, A. 65).

Verse 18

Being "slaves" to sin and to righteousness. These two kinds of slavery (Greek: *douleia*), slavery to sin and slavery to righteousness are not the same; the first is real slavery (even if man imagines himself free!), while the latter is true freedom (even if many, unfortunately, still experience it as an oppressive relationship!). Other translations have: "slavery to sin and service to righteousness."

"Righteousness," in vv. 16 and 18, means: Christ's revelation of salvation, which takes us into its service, so that we will do God's will and no longer Satan's and, in consequence, God will receive his due. In short, living a holy life, hating sin, fleeing from sin, and devoting ourselves to God (sanctification).

Verse 19

"I put this in human terms": humanly speaking, that is, "I express myself in terms derived from human relationships (slavery)."

"Because you are weak in your natural selves": because of your limited human capacity to understand correctly spiritual matters of sin and grace.

Verse 20

"Free from the control of righteousness": you used to delude yourself into thinking that you were free, (and so you were! [ironic]), but free from God's righteousness and so in reality a slave to Satan. Thus, Paul sharply contrasts being bound to sin in slavery and serving God in freedom.

Verses 21 -22

"Things you are now ashamed of": see Romans 1:24ff.

Verse 23

Paul speaks in military terms, first of two kinds of service, and then in return for those, two kinds of wages: the wages of sin is (eternal) death, as soldier's pay; the gracious gift of God is (eternal) life, as a bonus.

Note the difference: we deserve eternal death because of our sin; we do not deserve eternal life – we cannot earn it, either by works of the law (Judaism), or by living a pious life. Christ has fulfilled all obedience of God's law (see the end of Article 22, Belgic Confession), and has received eternal life as a reward (wages) (cf. Leviticus 18:5; Galatians 3:12), to hand to us as a gift of grace!

B. Main Thoughts

1. The new life of the justified sinner flourishes in the living union with Christ, SO that the *root* of the new life is in the union of faith with Christ (Romans 6:1-14). That new life is *service*. It is obedience to Christ, to his word and law, free from slavish service to sin. This service of obedience is "rewarded" (see Heidelberg Catechism, A. 63) with the gracious gift of eternal life, while the slavery of sin ends in eternal death.
2. In Romans 6 we find two thoughts permeating the chapter:
 - a) the believer is not only free from the *guilt* of sin (justification, Romans 5), but also from the *power* of sin (see Romans 6:2,7,18, 22); and

b) as a result, he may, can and will, fight against sin (Romans 6:2,4,6,12,13,19).

The new life is there to be placed completely at God's service. The new life in righteousness means doing God's will.

3. In this part of the Bible we come across the concept antinomianism for the first time (*anti* means against; *nomos* means law). The antinomians teach that for a Christian the law of God is no longer valid. The grace of redemption has completely freed the believer from this law, so that he is no longer required to do good works according to the law. They often differentiate between the "old" and the "new" nature in man. The "old" nature in the believer is still sinful, sometimes very sinful, but he does not need to fight those sins, because they will be credited to the account of the "old" nature. And the "new" nature cannot sin; in principle it is perfect, without sin.

This dualism in the life of the believer leads to treating sin as a trifle: sinning is "only the old Adam!" This view often occurs in mystical circles, where the antithesis of nature and grace is taught. A variant on the concept is that the believer is totally released from the law; he can live as he pleases. Then sin is no longer sin.

This leads to a life of excesses, such as in case of the "turbulent" Anabaptists in Munster (1535). These Anabaptists taught, pursuant to the antinomian idea, that the flesh (sin) and the Spirit (grace) were one and the same. Thus, one could indulge the passions of the flesh in the enthusiasm of the Spirit! You can't imagine anything worse! Antinomianism is totally contrary to the Scriptures. The believer is delivered from the power of sin to do the will of Satan (sin) no longer, but rather the will of God (righteousness). Christ is looking for good fruits in us (John 15:2ff.; cf. Matthew 3:8ff.; 7:17-19; 12:33; Titus 3:14). That is why, in salvation, the law of God once again starts to function as a rule of thankfulness (Romans 8:4; Heidelberg Catechism, A. 90, 115, Belgic Confession, Article 24 [about the necessity of good works]. See Glossary #18 and #19).

The gospel of Christ is not legalism (a new law, requiring the believer to earn something), nor is it lawlessness (without any binding to God's will).

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