

A Sermon by
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Chinese Christian Church
of New Jersey

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The Life of Obedience: A Cause for Rejoicing

ROMANS 6:15-23

“What God has joined together, let no man separate (MARK 10:9).” Those words are often quoted at weddings. When God reveals His vision of marriage to a man and a woman and they unite themselves through a mutual promise to pursue that vision, then no human being has the right to separate such a union. It is holy, because it is something that God has put together.

But, this principle of never separating what God has put together not only applies to the truth about marriage; it also applies to the truth about salvation. When Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose from the grave and ascended into heaven, He revealed to the human race certain facts about salvation. These facts were originally united together by God. No man was ever meant to separate them.

But, since the time of Christ men have always attempted to separate the beautiful facts of salvation. Through centuries of theological debate the themes of justification and obedience have been separated in the minds of many people. Some people teach that we are first made right with God through faith in Jesus Christ. After we are made right with God, we are then called to deal with the issue of obedience, albeit with the help of God's grace. Others teach that dealing with the issue of obedience must come first. We are made right with God only after we have proven to God that we are sincere in both our desire and commitment to obey His commands.

I was personally raised on the teaching that obedience must come first. Later, I was persuaded to believe that being made right with God came first and obedience followed. But now, I no longer try to separate the themes of justification and sanctification. Some may think that my present theology is a blend between my Roman Catholic raising and my experience serving in evangelical churches over the past 30 years. I won't try to deny the influence of my past, but there is a present influence that I believe is even greater. It is the influence of the words recorded in the sixth chapter of Romans. I have found no other words in or outside of the Bible that unite these beautiful themes of salvation in such a clear and logical way. It is now my conviction that these themes were never supposed to be separated in the first place. And, the fact that many people keep trying to separate them is a great tragedy.

According to the sixth chapter of ROMANS, the theme of being made just in the eyes of God and the theme of obedience cannot be separated any more than we can separate the

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death of Christ from the resurrection of Christ. So salvation is not a matter of first being made right with God and then dealing with the issue of obedience. Nor is salvation a matter of first dealing with the issue of obedience and then entering a state of being made right with God. Salvation is both things happening at the same time.

But, for both things to happen at the same time there must be grace on the part of God and faith on the part of man. Grace describes the gift God gives to people. It is a gift to understand the truths of salvation. And, it is a gift to desire the truths of salvation. And, it is also a gift to experience the truths of salvation in a way that touches the emotions.

Faith describes the role man plays in salvation. It is the role of receiving the gift. When God gives the gift of understanding the truths of salvation, man gives mental assent to those truths. He claims them as his own. That is faith. When God gives the gift of desire, man exercises his will and makes a crisis decision to surrender himself to the truths of salvation. That act of surrendering is also faith. And, when God gives the gift of experiencing truth at the most practical level, then man rejoices with his emotions. And, yes, even such emotional rejoicing is an expression of faith.

Now let me explain the same thing in a different way. When Jesus died, He paid the penalty of my sin. When Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven He made me into a person who will (not might, but will) obey. I exercised faith when I gave mental assent to these truths. But, God not only wants my mind; He also wants my will. He wants me to desire to be free from the guilt and shame of sin. And, He wants me to desire to obey Him with all of my strength. Such desire (if it is true desire) will express itself in the form of a crisis experience where I will actually let go of the guilt and shame and I will actually offer up my body to obedience. So God wants my mind and He wants my will and He also wants my emotions. He wants me to rejoice in the triumph of truth in my life.

So what does it mean to be saved? Certainly it means going to heaven after we die. But, in the present it means experiencing both justification and sanctification, and both at the same time. And, how is a person saved? A person is saved by grace through faith. And, what is saving faith? Saving faith is using my mind and my will and my emotions to receive the grace that God is giving me.

Asking these questions and giving you these answers is my attempt to summarize the sixth chapter of ROMANS. I believe that the sixth chapter of ROMANS is the most comprehensive explanation of the power of grace as it relates to the total personality of the believer. Nothing else in the Bible or outside of the Bible can match it.

The key word used in [ROMANS 6:1-11](#) is the word "count." Verse 11 says, "Count yourselves dead to sin and alive to God..." The word makes an appeal to the mind. We must exercise faith with our minds by knowing that we have union with Christ's death and resurrection.

The key word used in [ROMANS 6:12-14](#) is "offer." It is the natural outcome of the "counting." Verse 13 says, "offer yourselves to God as those who have returned from death to life." The word appeals to the will. It is a crisis decision that is driven by strong desire.

The key word in ROMANS 6:15-23 is "obey." In this section of scripture obedience is presented as the natural expression of the offering, and such an outcome becomes a cause for rejoicing. In verse 17 we find words of rejoicing. "Thanks be to God." And, the reason why thanks must be given is because you wholeheartedly obeyed the truth that was entrusted to you. This is an emotional response to the triumph of truth.

It is important that you get the big picture of Romans 6 before we go on to talk about a life of obedience. The obedience (which is our cause for emotional rejoicing) is an expression of the offering. And the offering must be the result of the counting. The mind and the will and the emotions of the believer act together in harmony with each other.

The words recorded in today's scripture reading are not an appeal to the mind, nor are they an appeal to the will. They are not telling us to reckon with our minds that we have entered into a state of obedience. Nor are they making an appeal to our will by telling us to surrender. Rather, these words are dealing with obedience as an already occurring fact in the life of the believer. "Though you used to be slaves to sin, you (now) wholeheartedly obeyed..." "You have been set free from sin..." "...so [now] you offer [the parts of your body] in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness." "But now, that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God..." I think you can see clearly from these quotes that, in this section of scripture, obedience is being dealt with as a fact that already exists. The triumph of truth on the practical level has already taken place. In this section of scripture, the believer is called to seriously reflect upon his life of obedience and be thankful about it.

The main illustration Paul used to help his readers consider their life of obedience in Christ was the illustration of slavery. All of Paul's illustrations used in the sixth chapter of ROMANS were familiar to his readers, and the illustration of slavery is no exception. ROMANS understood slavery because the Roman social order at that time decreed that men either were owned or were owners of other men. The question of whether or not to obey the command of his master was not debatable. For the slave who valued his life, obedience was his only option.

The illustration is introduced by a question. The question "What then?" connects everything in this passage of scripture to the sequence of events we have already seen that began at the beginning of the chapter. That sequence of events started with the mind taking hold of the truths of justification and sanctification. It then continued with a crisis experience involving the will of believer. Then what follows? Does sin follow? By no means! Paul lies to rest once and for all the foolish notion that grace produces sin. A life of obedience is what follows. The victory of truth in the life of the believer at the most practical level is what follows.

The question that is asked in ROMANS 6:16 will make some people feel uncomfortable. It's as if it were asking, "Don't you know who you are?" If you are truly saved, then you are a slave to obedience. Those who base the assurance of salvation entirely on their mental assent to truth regardless of how they live should feel uncomfortable when this kind of question is asked. And, if you think using the standard of obedience is not a Biblical way to measure who we are in Christ, then you should be reminded that Jesus used the same kind of standard to expose the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He said, "By their fruit you will recognize them (false prophets). Do people pick grapes from thorn-bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit."

A person who has truly believed intellectually in the truths of justification and sanctification and has really offered his body in a crisis experience will respond in obedience to God just like a slave will respond in obedience to his master. On the other hand, an uncommitted body will be the playground of sin. Regardless of how respectable we look to other people on the outside, sooner or later the person we really are on the inside will show through.

I can still remember what it was like before I had my own crisis experience of offering my body to God. That crisis experience did not happen in my life until I was in my early twenties. Though I have continued to experience sin in my life, there is one thing that has forever changed. Prior to my crisis experience, I was resigned to the fact that I would sin under certain circumstances. I knew the temptations that I could not resist. And, before the temptations even came, I knew I was going to fall. Sometimes I would ask God to forgive me in advance, because I knew I was going to do something terribly wrong. I was a slave to sin. But, after I surrendered my body to Christ, I never again anticipated that I would sin. I reckoned my body dead to sin. I told God that I was willing to give up everything this world has to offer for the sake of obeying Him. And from that moment on things have been different. I now have an obedience that leads to righteousness. I am now walking a path that leads me to improve my condition of holiness step by step. What a contrast to the life I had before when I was resigned to sin under certain circumstance!

A wholehearted obedience to the truths that our minds and wills have embraced by faith does not mean we will never sin, but it does mean that we will never again be enslaved to sin. We often thank God for food and health and friends and happiness and material things. But, all this loses its meaning if we cannot thank God for the glorious freedom from the tyranny of our bodily appetites. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (GALATIANS 2:20)." That is the most basic reason for true thankfulness.

Paul's doctrine of freedom was not freedom to sin without penalty. It is a doctrine of freedom in Christ from the passions of the flesh. This definition of freedom runs contrary to the popular concept of freedom that Americans value so highly; namely, to choose to do whatever your heart desires.

There is no person on the face of God's earth who has in himself the capacity to cope with the strong desires of his body apart from grace provided by God through His Spirit. Man on his own is a moral failure. In verses 19 through 22 the Apostle Paul goes all out to make his point. He was aware of the weakness in our human nature, a weakness to forget just how awful things used to be.

And so, the Apostle used more detail to help his readers reflect upon the contrast between the life of being a slave to sin and the life of being a slave to obedience. The difference that is emphasized in these four verses is the difference between progressive wickedness and progressive holiness. It is a difference between a life leading to ever-increasing wickedness, and a life leading to ever-increasing holiness.

Can you look back on the days when your bodily appetites were unrestrained? Is it possible for you to remember the days where whenever certain temptation came your way, you submitted without protest? Can you remember when the grip of sin became more and more of a habit until what God wanted from you became less and less important, even impractical? As much as you may have hated yourself and resolved to do better, you were the slave of your body. What a wretched person you were!

If you cannot recall ever being caught up in the vicious cycle of progressive wickedness, then today's scripture lesson is going to seem quite meaningless to you. I have met many people who are slaves to sin, but they are unaware of their condition. Either their conscience has become too numb or they are too proud to admit their wretched condition. People are not born with a natural ability to be good. Human beings are born into slavery. They are slaves to sin whether they recognize it or not.

The purpose of today's scripture lesson is not to prove that point. [ROMANS 1:18-3:20](#) proves that point. But, the purpose of [ROMANS 6:15-23](#) is to help those who have already dealt with these issues to remember and to reflect on the difference between what you were in the past and what you are now in the present. "You used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness." Do you remember? Can you look back on the wasted years and the harvest of misery they produced? And can you see how things are now different? You found deliverance from this dominion of death. You are now aware of a Christ-dominated body. You can see the fruits of spiritual progress taking place in your life. If you cannot read these words with a sense of deep gratitude to God because it is true about yourself, then frankly, you need Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. This is the final test of truth about your salvation.

ROMANS 6:23 has been a favorite verse to use by people trying to convince non-believers to become believers. "You need to believe in Jesus; because, if you don't, you will reap the wages of sin which is death." As true as that may be, the words were originally written, not to help the non-believer to become a believer; rather, they were written to help the person living a life of obedience to appreciate what he has to look forward to. Instead of a taunting laugh from Satan and eternal separation from God, he can look forward to the words of God saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant (Greek, slave), enter thou into the joys of thy Lord (Greek, master)."

Justification, sanctification, glorification...God's gift of understanding and desire and

obedience...Man's response of reckoning what he understands to be real and offering his body and rejoicing over his obedience—These are the awesome truths about our salvation. We are not supposed to separate these truths.

There are many people who have attempted to separate these truths. But, to do so is nothing less than an attempt to split the human personality or to split the personality of God.

Trying to split the human personality results in people having full assurance that they are going to heaven, even though they have never offered their entire bodies to God and have never experienced the true joy that comes from a life of progressive obedience.

And, trying to split God's personality results in embracing the false doctrine that a person can be justified without being sanctified, that Jesus Christ can be Savior without being Lord.

We destroy the meaning of the gospel when we attempt to respond to God's saving grace with only part of who we are. And, we destroy the meaning of the gospel when we respond to only one part of God's saving grace. If we have not responded to all of His grace with all of our personality, then we are still in need of salvation.

The overall purpose of the Epistle to the Romans is twofold. It is to convince the reader that all people need the gospel. And, it is to explain the gospel that all people need. The logical approach to salvation is to first realize your need and then understand and embrace the solution. But, some people might be led to salvation by first coming into a clear understanding of the gospel. Their clear understanding of the gospel may then help them comprehend their need.

Some of us have grown up under the strong influence of teaching that presents only half the truth about the gospel. ROMANS 6 gives us the entire picture.

It is my hope and my prayer that God will use this entire picture to cause someone in this auditorium to experience salvation.