# Lesson 61 at StudyRomans.org

**Romans 6:15, Continued**

> **Romans 6:15** — What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

The first thing we noticed last week about verse 15 is that Paul is still dealing with the objection in verse 1. Yes, he rephrases that objection here in verse 15, but it is still the same basic objection that, if what Paul is teaching is true, then we should keep sinning more and more because of God's grace.

And, as we have said, this objection was more than just an objection; it was also an accusation. Paul described it as slander back in Romans 3:8. Paul's opponents were twisting Paul's words to accuse him of teaching that we should sin more and more. And, again, based on Paul's use of the word "slander," we know that this was something that Paul's opponents were actually saying. Paul is not creating any straw man arguments here.

And, as we said at the end of the previous lesson, this objection in verse 15 hasn't gone anywhere. As Heinrich Heine famously said on his deathbed, "God will forgive me; that's his business." And how many people live the same way today?

We often hear it at their funeral when some preacher who hardly knows them shows up to try and pray the dearly departed into heaven. And most likely they had done some good things in their life, but those good things could never outweigh a life of disobedience to God. Jesus told us that very plainly.

> **Matthew 7:21-23** — Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, **but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.** On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

"I never knew you! You never belonged to me! You were a worker of lawlessness! Depart from me!" That is not something anyone ever wants to hear, and the good news of the gospel of Christ is that it is not something that anyone ever must hear. Jesus died on the cross so that we need never hear him say, "Depart from me!" Instead, we will hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

And our response to that fact should be endless gratitude. But there are some who have another response — they respond with endless presumption. Paul has already described such an attitude in Romans 2:4 — they "presume on the riches of [God's] kindness and forbearance and patience." If God gives them an inch, they try to take a yard. If God forgives one sin, they use that as an excuse to sin more and more. They are not grateful, but rather they are presumptuous.

But the reason for our gratitude and the cure for our presumption both come when we remember the price that was paid for our forgiveness.

> **1 Peter 1:18-19** — Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the pre-

> cious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

When we think about what our forgiveness cost, that price by itself should be enough to make us want to sin less and less. But not so with some — the only thing they care about when it comes to the price paid for our forgiveness is that they didn't have to pay it. They got it for free. That was the attitude of those asking this question in verse 15.

And, yes, the question in verse 15 is very similar to the question in verse 1, but there is an important difference. In verse 1, the question was "Shall we continue in sin **that grace may abound**," but here in verse 15, the question is effectively "Shall we continue in sin **because grace abounds**."

In verse 1, they wanted to sin more and more so that God could give them more and more grace. But here in verse 15, they want to sin more and more because God has already paid the price for their sin.

Paul's answer in verse 15 is a very forceful no — God forbid! Let's look next at Paul's explanation for that answer.

**Romans 6:16**

> **Romans 6:16** — 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?

Paul's explanation for his response to the objection in verse 15 begins in verse 16. But if we want a summary of Paul's explanation, we can find a perfect summary in the Sermon on the Mount:

> **Matthew 6:24** — No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

I may think I can serve two masters, but I cannot. "No one can serve two masters." Jesus is not saying it is difficult to serve two masters; Jesus is saying it is impossible to serve two masters.

And why is that? Why is it impossible? It is impossible to serve two masters because eventually those two masters will not agree with each other. One master will command me to do this, and the other master will command me to do that. And then I will have to choose which master to obey and which master to disobey. I will have to choose which master I will love and which master I will hate. I will have to choose which master I will follow and which master I will despise.

So, yes, perhaps we can serve two masters up to a point, but there can never be more than one master that we will serve to the end. At some point, we will always have to choose between two masters. Always — and that is why it is impossible to serve two masters.

Peter explains that when it comes to two of the most common potential masters — God and the state. Yes, God tells us to follow the laws of the state, but there is a limit to that command, as Peter tells us in Acts 5:29 — "We must obey God rather than men."

When the command of the state conflicts with the command of God, then we must despise the state and be devoted to God. We cannot serve two masters. And, of course, as Jesus tells us in Matthew 6, the same is true with God and money — we cannot serve two masters.

And what Paul is telling us here is that all of that is also true when it comes to two other potential masters — God and sin. The only difference is that those two masters are never in agreement! Sin is always telling me to do something that God has told me not to do. Those two potential masters are always in conflict with each other right from the start.

But that fact does not stop us from trying to serve both of them. And a perfect example of that is the false view of God's grace to which Paul is now responding. They hear that God forgives sin, and so they decide to just sin more and more to get as much of that free gift of grace as they possibly can. After all, it didn't cost them anything! It has already been paid for! Why not just use as much of it as we can? Can't we serve both God and sin?

Paul's response here is the same as Jesus' response in the Sermon on the Mount. What they are trying to do is impossible. They cannot serve two masters. They must choose. And if they are trying to sin as much as they possibly can, then they have made their choice. They have chosen sin over God as their master.

And, as with most choices, there are consequences to this choice. If they choose to obey sin over God, the consequence is death. If they choose to obey God over sin, the consequence is righteousness.

"Oh, but that is not my plan at all! I want to keep one foot in the world and one foot in the church. You might see me one way here on Sunday, but that is not how my co-workers see me on Monday. They see a completely different person during the week. And my worldly friends see a third person on Saturday night. I serve God as master on Sunday, I

serve money as master during the week, and I serve myself as master on Saturday night."

How is that view any different from the view that Paul is addressing here? How is that view about having one foot in the world and one foot in the church any different from the view that God will forgive me because that is his business? How is that view any different from the view of those in Romans 2:4 who "presume on the riches of [God's] kindness and forbearance and patience"?

Yes, we are looking at some objections here that came from Paul's Jewish opponents — but we must never look at these objections as something unrelated to us. Yes, Paul's opponents were saying these things out loud — but am I ever guilty of saying the same thing in my heart? Am I ever guilty of presuming on the riches of God's grace? "Just one more sin right now, and I'll be sure to pray about it later tonight." How is that any different from the view that I can just continue in sin so that grace may abound? And if we are ever guilty of living that way, Paul's answer applies to us as well — God forbid!

Verse 16 uses the phrase "obedient slaves," but who is the slave-master of those obedient slaves? Verse 16 gives us two possibilities. Either we are slaves "of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness." I think we all know what it means to be a slave of sin, but what does it mean to be a slave of obedience?

We know that Paul is personifying sin in this chapter. We saw that in verse 6 with sin as a slave-master, we saw that in verse 12 with sin as a king, and we will see that again in verse 23 with sin as an employer. But Paul is not just personifying disobedience to God; Paul is also personifying obedience to God.

Here in verse 16, the two slave-masters are sin and obedience. And that makes perfect sense. After all, what is the opposite of sin? Sin is transgression of the law of God (1 John 3:4), which means that sin is disobedience to the law of God. And what is the opposite of disobedience to the law of God? The opposite of disobedience to the law of God is obedience to the law of God.

Those are the two slave-masters that we see here: disobedience and obedience. One of them leads to death, and the other leads to righteousness. Later, in verse 22, Paul will describe us as "slaves of God," but here Paul is describing us as slaves of obedience to God. And, of course, that is the same thing. No one who is disobeying God could ever be described as a slave of God. The hallmark of a slave is obedience to the slave-master, which is why verse 16 uses the phrase "obedient slaves."

**Romans 6:17-18**

> **Romans 6:17-18** — 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.

A moment ago we looked at the two possible responses that we can have when we think about what God has done for us. One of those responses is presumption, and the other response is gratitude. Paul begins verse 17 with that other response — gratitude. "Thanks be to God!"

And for what are we so thankful? We are thankful for all that Paul has been telling us about our salvation in Christ. We were once slaves to sin, but no longer. We have been set free from that slavery of sin. We are no longer under the dominion of that terrible slave-master. We have escaped the bondage of sin and death. We have been purchased by a new master — one who gives us life rather than death.

And, having read Romans 6, we know the precise point when this great deliverance occurred. It happened at the moment of our baptism, and not a moment before. Just as the Jews escaped the bondage of Egypt by crossing through water, so we too escaped the bondage of sin by crossing through water. No one who has read the Old Testament could ever be surprised by the role of baptism in the New Testament.

And, yes, that happened at our baptism, but let's be a little more specific. What exactly were we doing at our baptism? Paul tells us right here: we were being and thus becoming "obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching" to which we were committed. What does that mean?

For starters, I think the KJV translation is better than the ESV translation. In the KJV, we read: "but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you." The Greek word translated "committed" in the ESV means to place into the hands of another.

This form of teaching was delivered to us, and yes, we were then committed to it (as the ESV suggests), but I think the focus here is more on what God did in delivering the teaching to us rather than on what we did in committing ourselves to it. Paul has already told us in verse

17 what we did — we obeyed it! God delivered it, and we obeyed it. That is what Paul is saying here.

But we didn't just obey it. Instead, Paul says that we were "obedient from the heart." We did not just go through the motions. We were not delivered a checklist that we went through like a shopping list — you do this, I do that, you say that, I say this, and then you are saved. Yes, God has a plan of salvation, and yes, that plan requires specific steps, but no, God does not have a checklist of salvation where we do some list of surface actions and then just go merrily on our way to do whatever we want to do, having checked everything off the list. That is not obedience from the heart.

And, while we are here, let's take a quick side trip. Verse 17 in the context of Romans 6 is enough by itself to show that there is no such thing as infant baptism. I am reminded of a quote by H.L. Mencken. When he was once asked whether he believed in infant baptism, he famously replied: "Believe in it? I've seen it done!"

And yet, he had not seen it done. He had seen an infant bath, but he had not seen an infant baptism. And how do we know that? We know that because of verse 17 — that infant was not being obedient from the heart to any standard of teaching. And, of course, we also know that from what Paul has previously told us — that infant had never sinned, and so that infant has no sins to wash away. Babies often need a bath, but no baby has ever needed a baptism, despite what the Catholics tell us.

But verse 17 doesn't just have a message for the Catholics; verse 17 also has a message for the Calvinists — and that message is the word "obedient." The contrast in verse 17 is between being a slave to sin and

being obedient from the heart. We were once the former, but now we have become the latter. We were once slaves to sin, but now we are obedient from the heart to the teaching of God.

That is not what Calvinism teaches. Remember that acronym TULIP that represents the five points of Calvinism? The "U" stands for unconditional election, and the "I" stands for irresistible grace. In short, we were elected without our permission, and we are saved without our permission. We don't have anything to do with it. There were no conditions to being elected, and there was no way for us to resist being saved. And those words are their own words — "unconditional" and "irresistible."

And here is the question for our Calvinist friends: where is the "O" in their TULIP? Where is obedience on their list? The Bible never uses the word "unconditional" or the word "irresistible," but the Bible certainly has a lot to say about "obedience." Why did they leave that word out of their TULIP and put those other words in?

Look at the Handout for Lesson 61. That Handout shows every Greek word translated as some form of the English word "obedience" or "disobedience" in the letter to the Romans. As you can see, there are eight such Greek words.

One of the most important things to notice from that Handout is that the word "obedience" serves as a set of bookends for the entire letter to the Romans. We find the phrase "obedience of faith" both at the very beginning of the book (1:5) and at the very end of the book (16:26).

Many people try to drive a wedge between Paul and James, but there is no such wedge. Paul and James each wrote words inspired by the

same Holy Spirit, and, when we read those words, we can see that Paul and James are in complete agreement on what it means to have a living, saving faith in God. Paul tells us about the "obedience of faith," and James 2:26 tells us that "faith apart from works is dead." A faith that never leaves our head is a dead faith, and no one will ever be saved by a dead faith. A living, saving faith is always an obedient faith.

We often use the phrase "obedience to the gospel." Where does that phrase come from, and what does it mean?

As for where it comes from, I think we can see it right here in verse 17 — "obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed." That standard of teaching is the gospel of Christ. That is what we have been taught, that is what God delivered to us, and that is what we are commanded to teach others. And that standard — that gospel — involves things that we must do — commands that we must obey. We see that in Acts 2:37-38, and we see that here in verse 17.

But those are not the only places where we can read about obedience to the gospel of Christ.

> **Romans 10:16** — But they have not all **obeyed the gospel**. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?"

> **2 Thessalonians 1:8** — In flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not **obey the gospel** of our Lord Jesus.

> **1 Peter 4:17** — For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not **obey the gospel** of God?

Again, a living, saving faith is an obedient faith — and the gospel of Christ is what we must obey. Those who are saved are those who have obeyed the gospel of Christ.

Now that we have looked at the word "obedient" in verse 17, let's look at the word "slaves" in verses 17-18.

We are certainly grateful to God that we are no longer the slaves of sin. But does that mean that we are no longer slaves? No, it does not, as Paul tells us right here. Our slave-master may have changed, but our status as slaves has not changed. Instead, we have "become slaves of righteousness." And so, slaves we remain.

And, in fact, I think we can say more than that. Not only do we remain as slaves, but we will always remain as slaves. Either we are in Christ or we are out of Christ. If we are in Christ, then we are slaves of God. If we are out of Christ, then we are slaves of sin. Either way, we are slaves.

But you know what? We don't much like that description of ourselves as slaves, do we? That was certainly true of the Jews. In John 8:32, Jesus told the Jews that the truth would set them free, and what was their response? They didn't much like hearing that they needed to be set free, did they?

> **John 8:33-36** — They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone.

> How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

They said, we "have never been enslaved to anyone"! Never? I think Egypt might have begged to differ! In fact, I think Rome might have begged to differ.

And speaking of Rome, any Roman citizen reading Paul's letter to the Romans would have reacted the same way those Jews reacted. We have never been enslaved to anyone! As Cicero, the famous Roman philosopher, said: "There is literally no life at all for one who is a slave. All nations can endure slavery. Our state cannot." And as Gaius, the famous Roman jurist, said: "the main division in the law of persons is this: all men are either free or slaves." That is how any Roman citizen viewed slavery.

And, yes, based on some evidence in Romans 16, we can say that the church in Rome most likely included current or past slaves. But the Jews, the Roman citizens, and the freed slaves would all have reacted with horror and shock at being called a slave by anyone. And yet Paul was now calling all of them slaves.

But are we really slaves? Or are we freed from slavery? As Jesus told us in John 8, while there is a sense in which we are slaves to God, there is also a sense in which we have been set free. "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." And Paul describes us the same way.

> **Romans 8:2** — For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

> **Romans 8:15** — For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"

> **Galatians 5:1** — For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

And, of course, we know that both of those descriptions are true. We are slaves of God, and we are also free in Christ Jesus. We understand that, and I suspect the Roman Christians understood that — but I also suspect that some of them were still offended by Paul's use of that word "slave" to describe them. And what makes me suspect that? What Paul says next is what makes me suspect that.

**Romans 6:19**

> **Romans 6:19** — 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.

The beginning of verse 19 is basically an apology from Paul for having called them all slaves. But after apologizing, Paul does not back down. Instead, Paul doubles down! He calls them slaves again!

But let's start with what I called an apology. "I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations." And having read it, I think we have to say that it is more of an explanation or an excuse than it is an apology. "Yes, I called you all slaves, but I had a good reason for doing that - your own natural limitations!"

So I guess if anyone was at fault here, it was them! And remember — Paul had never met most of these people. "Very nice to meet you! I always enjoy meeting slaves who have natural limitations!" I may be misreading the situation, but verse 19 has always seemed a bit humorous to me.

And we should note that Paul has already said something very similar to them in this letter.

> **Romans 3:5** — But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.)

And there, as here, the concern was that Paul was saying something that could easily be misunderstood — that God is unrighteous in Romans 3:5, and that the Roman Christians are all slaves here in Romans 6. In both cases, Paul pauses to stress that he is speaking in human terms.

But what does that phrase "human terms" mean? And what are these "natural limitations" that caused Paul to speak this way?

I think we can paraphrase the first sentence of verse 19 this way: "I am using this distasteful example from everyday life because you need some help in understanding important spiritual truths."

And, if that is what Paul meant, then those "natural limitations" in verse 19 were not peculiar to the Roman Christians. We today also have those same "natural limitations." Why? Because we also need help in understanding spiritual truths. And we can also benefit from this same analogy of human slavery.

And that makes sense historically. Even though some commentators and some translators act as if Paul is specifically criticizing the Roman Christians, we need to remember that Paul had never met most of them. The better view is that what Paul is saying here about the Roman Christians is true of all Christians. We all need help in understanding spiritual truths.

And so, Paul starts out in verse 19 by explaining why he was using this distasteful analogy. And what does Paul do next? He keeps using the same distasteful analogy!

> "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."

So I guess the end of verse 19 gives us another reason why Paul is calling them slaves — they really are slaves! They are slaves to righteousness.

Verse 19 doubles back all the way to verse 1. Are we to sin and sin and sin so that grace may abound? No! That is what you did when you were slaves to impurity. You were slaves to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness. You were sinning and sinning and sinning **prior** to being saved — how can you still be sinning and sinning and sinning **after** being saved? You once were impure, but now you are sanctified. You once were lawless, but now you are righteous. Everything about you has changed — how can you continue in sin? How can you present your bodily members to your old owner now that you have been bought by your new master?

**Romans 6:20**

> **Romans 6:20** — For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

"Fine! You want to talk about freedom instead of slavery? Then let's talk about freedom. Do you want to know when you were free? You were free back when you belonged to sin!" That is what Paul says here: "When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness." But what does he mean?

Paul is using a distasteful analogy — so let me do the same thing. I think that a good way to explain the meaning of this freedom in verse 20 is to let Sin City explain it to us.

What are the advertising slogans that Las Vegas has used in recent years to lure in its visitors? I think we are all familiar with the current slogan, "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas," but what was the slogan that Las Vegas was using before they used that one? It was this slogan: "Freedom from Dullsville." Yes, freedom. Vegas was promising people precisely what Paul describes here in verse 20 — freedom in regard to righteousness (which they call Dullsville!).

That is what Vegas' *first* slogan promised — **freedom**. And what about Vegas' *second* slogan? What does that slogan promise? It promises **shame**. "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas." In other words, those who follow that slogan when they come to Vegas won't want anyone to know what they did in Vegas. They will be ashamed of what they did in Vegas.

We see the freedom here in verse 20. Do we also see that shame? Yes, we do. Look ahead to the next verse — what follows the **freedom** in

verse 20? The **shame** in verse 21. Freedom in verse 20, and then shame in verse 21. These two verses in Romans 6 are the mirror image of Las Vegas' entire advertising campaign! Freedom from righteousness followed by shame.

That is what Paul is telling us here. When they were slaves to sin, they were free in regard to righteousness. That is just another way of saying that when they belonged to the slave-master of sin, no other master had any claim on them. They belonged to sin; they did not belong to anyone else.

That they were free in regard to righteousness does not mean that they had no obligation to obey God. If it meant that, then they would not have been guilty of sin. Instead, this freedom in verse 20 just means that, while bound to one master, they were free from another master. Paul is still using the analogy of slavery. Slaves have only one master at a time.

In recent lessons, we have spent some time looking at what Peter tells us in 2 Peter 2:20-22 about those who escape the defilements of the world but then are later entangled and overcome. But what does Peter tell us in the immediately preceding verse? What Peter tells us is the same thing that Paul is telling us here.

> **2 Peter 2:19** — They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.

Peter says: "They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption." And Paul says: "For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness."

And so, yes, they promise freedom, but there is a hook in that promise. The only freedom that they will get is freedom from the only thing they need — righteousness. It is the same freedom from water that a fish experiences when it gets hauled into the boat. Yes, the fish is free from that water, but the fish needs that water to live.