

ACTING ON OUR UNION WITH CHRIST: ROMANS 6:12-23

ZANE C. HODGES¹

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey it with its lusts, neither turn over your body's members as instruments for unrighteousness, but turn yourselves over to God as people who are alive from the dead, and turn over your body's members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin shall not have authority over you, because you are not under the Law but under grace (Rom 6:12-14).²

In view of the spiritual reality expressed in the previous verse (v 11), believers should not only consider themselves to be “alive to God,” they should actively reorient their behavior in the light of that truth. Whereas formerly, in their unregenerate days, they had allowed **sin to reign in their mortal body so that they obeyed it with its lusts**, they are to do so no longer.

This previous obedience to sin's *lusts* had been put into effect by their turning **over their body's members as instruments for doing unrighteousness**. The *body's members* (that is, its eyes, arms, legs, etc.) had been used in the pursuit and enjoyment of sinful aims and activities. This kind of behavior should now cease.

The new lifestyle is to be marked by conscious commitment to God and to His will. Now they are to **turn themselves over to God as people who are alive from the dead**. They are not to think of themselves any longer as subjects reigned over by **sin** and death. Instead they should see themselves **as people who have been raised from the dead to walk in newness of life** (see 6:4). Their attitude of heart should be, “Here I am, Lord, **alive from the dead** and prepared to live for you.”

¹Zane Hodges was working on a commentary on Romans when he died in November of 2008. He had completed the commentary through Rom 14:15. This material is from that commentary. GES plans to publish Zane's commentary on Romans (with Rom 14:16–16:27 written by Bob Wilkin) by the end of 2010, Deo Volente.

²All translations in this article (and in the entire commentary) are the author's personal translation, based on the Majority Text (MT) readings.

The Greek verb rendered here by *turn over* (*parastēsate*), the same basic word as in the earlier part of v 13 (*paristanete*), signifies that something is made available for some purpose, that is, it is “*put at someone’s disposal*” (see BDAG, p. 778, 1.a.). Paul’s point is that, although they previously put the members of their body at sin’s disposal, they should stop doing so. Now they should put themselves *and* their bodies at God’s disposal.

The attitude expressed when they turn themselves over **to God**, should be followed by appropriate actions. They are to *turn over* their *body’s members* to Him *as instruments for righteousness*. That means, of course, that they are to employ the members of their body for the will of God. They are to use them *as instruments for* (that is, they are actually to *do*) *righteousness*. When both the attitude and the actions cohere, Christian living is experienced.

In addition, both the new attitude and the new behavior are appropriate and possible precisely because sin has lost its capacity to have authority over them. The future tense in the phrase **shall not have authority** (*ou kurieusei*) should be understood as an imperatival future (like: you shall not kill). Paul is saying, “You must not allow sin to rule you.”

Why not? **Because**, Paul insists, **you are not under the Law but under grace**. With these words Paul introduces the dominant theme of the discussion to follow (6:15–8:13). Although grace was referred to in 6:1, it has not been directly mentioned since then, and *the Law* has not been referred to in this chapter at all. The ineffectual nature of *the Law* figures prominently in the discussion that follows.

Contrary to the opinion held even by many Christians in Paul’s day (see Acts 15:5) the Mosaic Law was no more an effective instrument for Christian living than it was an instrument for justification (see 3:19-20). Those who lived under it could not truly escape the **authority** of sin in their lives. In contrast to this, freedom from sin’s *authority* can be experienced by Christian people precisely because they *are not under the Law but under grace*.

Paul now wishes to make this truth completely clear.

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the Law but under grace? Far from it! Don’t you know that to whom you turn yourselves over as slaves in

obedience, you are slaves of the one you obey, whether of sin producing death, or of obedience producing righteousness? (Rom 6:15-16).

The first question to be raised is whether the fact that **we are not under the Law but under grace** gives us a license to sin. The words **far from it** emphatically deny that it does. The underlying Greek (*mē genoito*) is idiomatic and the phrase is to be translated as best suits each context. Here the words “that’s unthinkable” might equally well be used to express Paul’s idea.

Indeed, why should such an option even be considered? The question (**Shall we sin?**) was functionally equivalent, Paul goes on to suggest, to asking whether we should be the **slaves of sin**. Thus, after dismissing the suggestion categorically (far from it), he asks rhetorically, **Don’t you know you are slaves of the one you obey?** “Don’t you realize,” he says, “that sinning entails slavery to your sinful practices?”

Paul, of course, is not implying that anyone in the Roman congregation didn’t really know this. The question is treated as hypothetical and this barbed response is rhetorical, highlighting the absurdity of any suggestion that we *should* sin. The fact was that to whomever they might **turn themselves over as slaves in obedience**, they were **slaves of the one** they obeyed. They could therefore either become **slaves to sin** or to its opposite, **righteousness** (cf. v 18).

We should note that in Paul’s discussion here, the meaning expressed by the Greek verb *paristēmi* (to turn over) clearly denotes the idea of actually doing something. This might be either committing sin and thus **producing (eis) death** or it might be **obedience** (to God) and thus **producing (eis) righteousness**. Stated this way, the only reasonable choice was the *obedience* that produced *righteousness*, since who would wish to produce death?

But praise *is due* to God that you were the slaves of sin, but you have obeyed from the heart that form of teaching in which you were instructed. And having been liberated from sin, you became enslaved to righteousness (Rom 6:17-18).

Paul is grateful **to God** for the Christian experience of the Roman believers. In their unconverted days they had been **slaves of sin**, but after their conversion they had **obeyed from**

the heart (i.e., sincerely) the **form of teaching in which** they had been **instructed**. That is to say, they had responded obediently to the Christian teaching they had received.

The Greek underlying the phrase *in which you were instructed* (*eis hon paradothēte*) is at first surprising. The verb *paradidōmi* can mean “to pass on to another what one knows of oral or written tradition” (BDAG, pp. 762-63), but it is also often used as a technical term for turning someone over to the custody of the police or courts (BDAG, p. 762). Here Paul employs it as a kind of word play, though the literal sense is something like “to which you were handed over.” On the one hand, Christian teaching has been “passed on” to the Roman Christians. On the other, however, in accordance with the metaphor about slavery, they have been “turned over” to the authority of that teaching for their lives.

For the sake of clarity, my translation is a paraphrase, since the word play in question cannot really be communicated by a simple rendering. The NKJV translation (“to which you were delivered”) is not very meaningful in English. My rendering is also reflected in the Jerusalem Bible which translates: “you submitted without reservation to the creed you were taught.”

The phrase *that form of teaching* suggests that the content of what they were taught followed a particular pattern. The Greek word rendered *form* is *tupos*, which is properly assigned here by BDAG (p. 1020) to the meaning category: “a kind, class, or thing that suggests a model or pattern.” Paul is no doubt thinking of the general format in which Christian instruction was generally given to converts to Christianity. This Christian instruction and exhortation is sometimes referred to in technical literature by the term *paraenesis*.

The Roman Christians were not total strangers to Paul (see 16:1-20) and he even states that their “obedience” (*hupakoē*) has become widely known (16:19). Since they had obeyed the Christian *teaching in which they were instructed*, their personal experience had been one of being **liberated from sin** and of being **enslaved to righteousness**. In other words they had turned away from sin to do what was right in God’s sight. Their servitude was now to Him and not to sin.

(I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh.) For just as you have turned over your body’s

members as slaves to uncleanness and to wickedness producing wickedness, so now turn over your body's members as slaves to righteousness producing holiness (Rom 6:19).

Paul is not altogether comfortable with describing their Christian obedience as being “enslaved to righteousness” (v 18). He has only adopted such **human** terminology due to **the weakness of their flesh**.

His concern is for their comprehension of the truth. A more abstract description—even if accurate—would have failed due to their limitations as human beings. The following words in the verse show he is working with an analogy, moving from the familiar (slavery to sin) to the unfamiliar (slavery to righteousness).

In the past they had **turned over their body's members as slaves to uncleanness and to wickedness** (*anomia*). The result of this servitude to sinful practices was, of course, simply *wickedness*. (The phrase **producing wickedness** translates the Greek words *eis anomian*.) Your former slavery, Paul states, was negative in its effects. It was unclean and wicked and productive of nothing other than an experience of evil.

[In my translation, I have rendered the Greek word *anomia* by the more general word *wickedness*. An examination of its uses in the Greek translation of the OT (the Septuagint) shows that it had become a very general word for what is evil. The modern tendency to interpret it in terms of its derivation (“lawlessness”) is most likely an example of the so-called “root fallacy.” A word's actual meaning at any given time is determined by usage, not by the meaning of its root.]

This past experience in *wickedness* is the backdrop for understanding Paul's reference to being enslaved to *righteousness*. As believers, the Roman Christians are **now to turn over their body's members as slaves to righteousness**. What was once done in submission to sin should now be done in submission to **righteousness**. The result of this new form of active obedience will be the production of **holiness**. Thus the evil result of the former servitude can be replaced by the good result of a new servitude.

The phrase *producing holiness* translates *eis hagasmon*. BDAG (p. 10) reminds us that outside of Biblical literature the

word *hagiasmos* frequently signals “personal dedication to the interests of the deity.” In the NT it has come to mean especially “the state of being made holy.” In this context, however, an element of the basic meaning seems implicit in the context of being *slaves to righteousness*. The Greco-Roman world was familiar with the concept of someone who was permanently attached to a pagan temple as a servant of the god who was worshipped there.

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free from righteousness. So what fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the result of those things is death (Rom 6:20-21).

Paul continues to expand his analogy between the old servitude and the new one. As **slaves of sin** they had been **free from righteousness**. That is to say, *righteousness* was “powerless” in their lives. It had no control over what they did. It was not their “master.”

There could be no positive outcome or result from such a life. It could bear no constructive fruit, and in retrospect, it was a life that **now** made them feel **ashamed**. The rhetorical question, **So what fruit did you have then...?** assumes that there was none at all. How could there be, since **the result** [*telos*, end] **of those things** could only be **death**?

In speaking of *death* here, the Apostle no doubt had physical *death* in mind, but his concept of *death* is much broader than that. This becomes plain in his subsequent discussion, especially in 7:8-13 and in 8:6-13. For Paul, *death* is not the mere cessation of physical existence but is also an experience that is qualitatively distinct from true life.

As Paul puts it in Eph 4:18, the unregenerate are “alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them.” But as he will show clearly in the following two chapters, such “alienation” from God’s life is experienced also by the Christian when he submits to the desires of his spiritually-dead physical body.

But now, since you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you have your fruit producing holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 6:22-23).

Despite their unproductive past, however, **now** the Roman Christians are in a position to bear real **fruit** that actually produces (or, consists of) **holiness**. This is due to the transforming fact of their union with Christ that Paul had emphasized earlier in the chapter (see especially 6:1-11). This union has resulted in their being **freed from sin and enslaved to God**. As the Apostle expresses it in 6:7, “the one who has died [with Christ] is justified [*freed*] from sin.” Thus the believer is now to regard himself as “dead to sin, but alive to God *in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (6:11 emphasis added).

A new lifestyle is therefore made possible in which the believer can “walk in newness of life” (6:4). This “newness of life,” of course, is nothing less than *eternal life*. The believer’s “walk” in this new life is the outcome of possessing that life *in Christ*. Thus the end **result** [*telos*] of **producing holiness** is nothing less than an experience of **eternal life** itself. This idea is already implicit in the biblical quotation that Paul cites as part of his thematic statement for the entire book: “Now the one who is righteous by faith *shall live*” (Rom 1:17; emphasis added).

Paul can now wrap up the fundamental truths on which the entire unit (6:1-23) is based. On the one hand, **death** in all its aspects is the “pay-off” (**the wages**) of **sin**. The word rendered *wages* (*opsōnia*) is not essentially different from its counterpart in English and refers in ordinary use to “pay” or “compensation.” Obviously a statement like this is deliberately broad enough to embrace all the various aspects in which *death* is the “compensation” for sin. In other words, it states a principle, and should not be narrowed to an exclusive reference to the “second death,” or hell (Rev 20:14).³ Paul will later say to these believers that “if you live in relation to the flesh, you will die” (Rom 8:13) and that concept is one specific aspect of the principle he states here.

With **sin**, therefore, one receives what one has earned (**wages**). But **eternal life** is an *unearned* experience because, at its core, **eternal life** is **the gift of God** that is given **in Christ Jesus our Lord**. That is to say, by virtue of our being

³ Zane has written elsewhere that Rev 20:15 shows that the basis of the second death is unbelief, not sin, which Jesus already paid for at the cross (John 1:29; 1 John 2:2). Apart from the cross the second death would be one of the wages of sin. But because of Calvary no one will experience the second death *because of his sins* (cf. John 3:18).

in Christ (see 6:3,4) we possess this *gift*. When we produce holiness, therefore, we are living out *the gift* that *God* gave us when we were justified by faith.⁴

The word used here for *gift* (*charisma*) is picked up from 5:15, 16 where its occurrences are the first ones in the body of Paul's argument. (It is used in another connection in 1:11.) As is clear from 5:12-21, for Paul righteousness and **life** are part of one and the same *charisma*. As a result, "those who receive the abundance of the grace and of the gift (*dōreas*) of righteousness shall reign *in life* through one Man, Jesus Christ" (5:17). The whole gracious bestowal can be described as a "justification sourced in life." (For the Pauline link between regeneration and justification, see also Titus 3:5-7).

The closing words of v 23, **in Christ Jesus our Lord**, are identical in Greek to the words that close v 11 (*en Christō Iēsou tō Kuriō hēmōn* [MT]). Thus they form an *inclusio* with v 11 and mark the present sub-unit (vv 12-23) as complete. The repeated words also serve to emphasize the truth that the *eternal life* which is given to us as a *gift* (by virtue of which we are "alive" [v 11]) is our possession *in union with* the Savior in whom we died and in whom we have been raised to walk in God's paths.

⁴ Editor's note: Zane does not understand Rom 6:23 as an evangelistic verse. A careful reading of his comments here shows that he sees this verse as uncovering the power of eternal life that is resident within every believer. The believer is capable of living a holy life because of his union with Christ. However, the believer still has the flesh and is also able to live an unholy life and to experience the wages of his sin, which is physical death. He comments on this much more in his discussion of Romans 8, especially Rom 8:13.