

July 31
Lesson 9

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

DEVOTIONAL READING: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Romans 6

ROMANS 6:1-4, 12-14, 17-23

¹ What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. ¹³ Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

¹⁷ But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. ¹⁸ You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

¹⁹ I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. ²⁰ When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. ²¹ What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

KEY VERSE

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. —

Romans 6:4

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the dramatic change that occurs in the life of one who turns to Christ.
2. Explain the death/life and slave/free metaphors that Paul uses.
3. Identify a part of himself of herself to offer more fully as an instrument of righteousness to God and make a plan to do so.

LESSON OUTLINE

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Introduction

A. “Gotta Serve Somebody”

In 1979, the iconoclastic folk singer Bob Dylan announced his conversion to Christianity with a new album titled *Slow Train Coming*. It featured the Grammy Award-winning “Gotta Serve Somebody,” a song that expressed that new Christian’s understanding of how life really works. Dylan sang of the fact that life involves service either to Satan or to the Lord.

Dylan’s spiritual journey since then has been the subject of much speculation. But the words of his song ring true today, nearly 40 years later. Many people think they serve only themselves. Their highest good is their own pleasure and satisfaction. They reject God’s authority in their lives, often by denying his existence.

Yet as Dylan discovered, we are all servants of another. We delude ourselves if we think we are the masters of our fate and the captains of our souls. That outlook leads us to become slaves to our passions, which in turn leads to horribly messy lives and an eternity without Christ. The apostle Paul stresses that we are either servants to sin or servants to righteousness. There is no middle ground. This is the topic for today’s lesson.

B. Lesson Background

Much of [Romans 6](#) uses the metaphor of slavery. This fact brings with it a problem of certain mental associations, since slavery in the ancient world was not always equivalent to the slavery of the U.S. into the nineteenth century.

America’s sordid history of slavery involved slave traders “harvesting” people in Africa, transporting them from their homeland, then selling them as commodities. This was often justified on the racist theory that such Africans were inferior, even subhuman. This horrific legacy tends to dominate our understanding of the practice of slavery.

In Paul’s day, however, people became slaves for various reasons. Most slaves were the human spoils of war, peoples from nations conquered by the Roman legions. Roman slavery was not based on race, and there was no assumption that slaves were soulless or intellectually inferior.

Some slaves were highly educated, and their masters were known to free them after a period of service. Such people thus attained the status of loyal freedmen (compare “the Synagogue of the Freedmen” in [Acts 6:9](#)). But unless such freedom was granted, slaves were considered possessions of their owners, and we should not think that slaves were never abused in that regard. Even so, slavery in the first century AD did not have the across-the-board odious reputation we generally associate with that word now.

We also acknowledge that slavery in the first-century Roman Empire and in nineteenth-century America operated under similar assumptions. There was a master, and slaves were obligated to serve that master. Disobedience could be punished harshly. The will of the master was primary, and the slave had to obey. This is the background for much of what Paul has to say when he refers to people as “slaves to sin.”

I. Death and Life

(ROMANS 6:1-4, 12-14)

A. Faulty Logic (vv. 1, 2)

1. What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?

Paul begins this section with two rhetorical questions. These are questions for which the answers should be obvious. The second question deserves close scrutiny, and we can see in it this flow of logic: (1) Since forgiveness of sin is a sign of God’s grace to us and (2) since grace is a good thing, then (3) why not sin all the more so that we may get more grace from God?

HOW TO SAY IT

Galatians *Guh-lay-shunz*.

synagogue *sin-uh-gog*.

Thessalonians *Thess-uh-lo-nee-unz* (*th* as in *thin*).

Paul is using a technique known as “reduction to the absurd.” In this method, an argument is boiled down to a level at which supporting it seems crazy. Anyone who would argue that continuation of sin is a good thing because it results in more opportunities for God to forgive us has missed the point entirely! Do we think we are doing God a favor by increasing his grace business?

What Do You Think?

What techniques, tactics, etc., have you found to be helpful in overcoming persistent sin?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Before being tempted

While being tempted

2. By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

Paul answers his own question, using some of the strongest language found in his letters: *By no means!* We can sense impatience and even anger in his tone.

Paul then poses another question that highlights the absurdity of sinning in order to receive more grace: If we have died to sin, why would it still be a living force in our lives? Is sin dead or alive for us? The idea of having *died to sin* is central to what follows.

Lest we think that Paul is merely opposing first-century nuttiness, let us cast this in modern terms: Is it possible for a Christian to engage in ongoing sinful behavior and still feel good about it? Why are so many Christians comfortable doing things the Bible condemns as sin? Does the assurance of forgiveness make sin less serious?

Paul is demanding that we take a sober look at continuing sin. He begins this discussion with a surprising object lesson: our baptism (next verse).

B. Correct Thinking (v. 3)

3. Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

Paul appeals to baptism as a shared experience. He asks if his readers understand baptism to be a type of death. While this is a sort of rhetorical question, the answer may not be obvious to all. The expected response may be, “No, I did not understand baptism that way. I'm listening. Tell me more.” Remember that unlike his other letters, Romans is written to a congregation where Paul has not taught in person. Some of his teachings may be new to these readers.



Visual for Lesson 9. Point to this visual as you ask, "What is your reaction to this illustration?" Encourage free discussion.

Baptism is an act rich with symbolism, but death is not the obvious way of understanding it. Baptism is biblically depicted as a type of washing that accompanies a spiritual cleansing of sins (see [Acts 22:16](#); compare [1 Peter 3:21](#)). This is why we find baptism tied to repentance, a renouncing of sin (see [Luke 3:3](#)). For Paul, we find baptism also connected with a personal identification of the believer with Christ (see [Galatians 3:27](#)).

C. New Life (v. 4)

4. We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

Paul now explains the baptism/death analogy. The key connection is the image of burial. Only dead people are buried. Since baptism is a type of burial, it therefore must involve a death—the death is the sinful life of the believer. Baptized persons put sin to death and bury it when they believe, repent, and are baptized (see [Colossians 2:12](#)). Churches have practiced baptism in various ways from early centuries, but it is worth noting that the burial analogy works best if we understand baptism as a full immersion of a person under water.

Paul's lesson does not end under the water, however. Baptized persons come up out of the water, and Paul sees this as parallel with Christ's coming out of the grave in resurrection. Jesus died, but God brought him back to life. Paul wants his readers to understand that at the point of conversion (symbolized here by baptism), the believer's old life of sin has died and a new life begins.

This analogy has splendid teaching points, and these are worth pointing out when a person is baptized. There is a sense of death when one is completely under the water, for normal sensory perceptions are suspended. You cannot hear. You cannot smell. With eyes probably closed, you cannot see. It is like a momentary death.

What Do You Think?

In what ways do others see newness of life in you? What adjustments in that regard do you need to make?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding what fellow Christians see

Regarding what unbelievers see

D. Godly Imperatives (vv. 12, 13)

12. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.

Here in the first half of Romans, Paul personifies three spiritual realities as being tyrants; each has dominion as it reigns over us. All this is described with language derived from a king's reigning over his subjects or from a master's ruling over his slaves.

The first of these three is *death*, introduced as a reigning tyrant in [Romans 5:14](#). The second is *sin*, explicitly seen as the reigning tyrant in the verse before us. The third is *the law*, spoken of extensively in chapters 2 and 3, but introduced fully as having "authority" in [7:1](#) (but see [6:14](#), below). These three oppress us in different ways. We fear death, we suffer because of sin, and we are judged inadequate by the law (see [2:12](#)).

Paul urges his readers not to allow the ominous spiritual tyrant of sin to exercise any sort of authority in their lives. He's not talking about abstract sins of the intellect, but about real-world physical acts that involve our bodies. Such sins come from yielding to *evil desires*. The underlying Greek reflects language Paul uses elsewhere when talking about sexual sins ([Romans 1:24](#); see [1 Thessalonians 4:5](#)).

Sexual passion in and of itself is not a sin, but adultery and fornication definitely are. We do not necessarily sin when we have desires ([Matthew 5:28](#) being an exception), but when we yield to them. It works this way: "after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" ([James 1:15](#)). This is letting the tyrant of sin have lordship.

13. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.

The phrase *any part of yourself* refers to the parts of the human body, such as hands or ears. Paul urges his readers to reserve each part of their bodies *as an instrument* to be used for God's right purposes.

We cannot live lives of divided loyalties, serving two masters. We must yield fully every aspect of ourselves to the service of God. We are not partly alive and partly dead. We are completely alive from the dead ([Ephesians 2:5](#)). In the new life, we serve only God in acts of righteousness.

E. Saving Grace (v. 14)

14. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

Paul returns to his tyrant language, insisting again that sin cannot be our master. The reason for this is found in the controlling rule by which we live. If we allow sin to dominate us, then we position ourselves to be subject to the law. Paul certainly has the Jewish law in mind here, but the application is broader if *under the law* is understood to mean "under the old realm." Paul has already argued that if we are under the law, then we are judged to be guilty (see [Romans 3:19, 20](#)). Anyone who attempts to be righteous by rule-keeping will fail ([3:23](#)).

Instead, we are to be ruled by *grace*. It is not about which law or set of rules we try to keep, but about which master we serve. Even when we avoid sinful behavior, we are mastered by sin if we are doing this in an attempt to earn favor with God (the way of law). If our motivation is to serve God, then righteous behavior will follow naturally.

II. Sin and Righteousness

(ROMANS 6:17-23)

A. Different Masters (vv. 17-20)

17. But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance.

Paul knows that the repatterning of a life to avoid serving sin is not a simple or easy thing. It does not happen accidentally or by chance. It comes from a solid *pattern of teaching* that is faithfully conveyed.

This is the process of discipling, the instruction of a newly baptized person in the ways of the Christian faith. Such is the core of the famous Great Commission of Jesus ([Matthew 28:19, 20](#)). The initial steps of conversion are not enough. Those must be strengthened by intentional instruction of the new believer.

18. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

Paul sums up with a simple equation: to be *set free from sin* = being *slaves to righteousness*. We are not freed from sin to serve ourselves. If we think this is the case, then we are still slaves to sin. We serve righteousness, which is the polar opposite of sin. Sin is choosing to do the wrong thing, the thing God does not want. Righteousness is doing the right thing, the thing that is pleasing to God. When we serve righteousness, we are serving God.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways you have seen people try (and fail) to be neither a servant of sin nor a servant of righteousness?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In the business world

In family life

In recreational activities

Other

19. I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness.

Paul acknowledges that by *using an example from everyday life*, he is speaking in simple, basic terms. This is because of his readers' *human limitations*, meaning the ways in which sin has corrupted them and perverted their perceptions. Paul is not being condescending, but rather is being meticulously clear. The stakes are high, and he wants no misunderstanding. Here is the bottom line: sin and righteousness are not intended to coexist in the life of a believer. *Impurity* and *wickedness* are incompatible with *righteousness* and *holiness*.

What Do You Think?

How do we evaluate the differing behavioral expectations that various churches have for their members?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding the problem of legalism ([Colossians 2:16-23](#))

Regarding the problem of license ([Jude 4](#))

Regarding local cultural practices

Other

SERVANT TO ... WHAT?

I was on the teaching staff of a small Bible college in the mid-1970s. That was when college students all across the country were demanding more freedoms on campus. In so doing, those students questioned authority, staged protests, occupied deans' offices, etc. Our small Bible college did not experience all those behaviors, but at one point students made demands to the board of trustees for more freedom from the rules and regulations.

A particular student whom I got to know quite well was the president of the student body. In that capacity, he requested a meeting with the board to explain the students' requests (or "demands"). But as the time to meet drew near, he came to realize what the students really desired: more freedom to do their own thing. They were not interested in serving any greater good; they just wanted to be allowed to follow their own personal (selfish) desires. Upon that realization, the student-body president dropped the petition and did not even meet with the board. He had no interest in fueling the student's immature lack of responsibility.

This is roughly what Paul is warning against. Once freed from the bondage of sin, we are not then just "independent contractors" who can do our own thing. We are called to a higher purpose, to serve righteousness. A willingness to accept this service is a mark of spiritual maturity.—C. R. B.

20. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness.

Sometimes it is worth looking back on our lives. In that regard, the equation of [verse 18](#) applies in the negative as well: to be *free from the control of righteousness* = being *slaves to sin*. When we were in the thrall of sin, we cared little about doing the right thing, about following the will of God. If we are slaves to our passions, we are not seeking to serve God.

B. Different Results ([vv. 21-23](#))

21. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!

By asking about *benefit*, Paul means "What things of lasting value did you harvest in your previous lives of sin?" The things of which we *are now ashamed* are the acts of sin that are in the past. Paul's pointed question still rings true: Was your life better when it was full of sin? We may think of the Israelites who were freed from slavery in Egypt by the mighty power of God, yet later wanted to return ([Numbers 14:1-4](#)). The lure of sin is powerful, especially when sin was at one time a deeply established lifestyle.

Thoughtful analysis of the past reveals that it was not all joyful fun and games. It was pain, disappointment, broken relationships, etc. As Paul puts it, *those things result in death!* This can be true physically and spiritually. Sin kills both body and soul (compare [Romans 7:5](#)).

22. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.

The contrast is stark. The readers' previous lives as slaves to sin became a highway to death. But freedom from that ill-chosen life results in *the benefit that leads to holiness*, a life in concert with God's will. The holy life is the absolute opposite of the life of sin. The holy life is a highway that leads to *eternal life*, not eternal death (compare [1 Peter 1:9](#)).

THE GOOD PURPOSE

Some philosophers have proposed that to understand people we need to understand what purposes drive them. To evaluate the "goodness" or

“badness” of a human purpose involves observing how peoples’ actions turn out. If the result of a certain action is beneficial, then we are able to say that the purpose that drives it is good; if the result of a certain action is harmful, then we are able to say that the purpose that drives it is bad.

But that’s more than a bit simplistic! Because the sale of Joseph into slavery ultimately turned out to be beneficial, should we conclude that the actions of his brothers in that regard reveal a good purpose on their part ([Genesis 50:20](#); etc.)? That added complexity is the result of living in a fallen world.

But God doesn’t live in a fallen world. He is the one who establishes both the purpose of everlasting life and the nature of the good actions of producing the benefits of holiness that accompany such a result. So don’t be fooled by “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ” ([Colossians 2:8](#)). When others criticize or mock your life of holiness, just remember where they get their wisdom—and where you get yours.—C. R. B.

23. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul sums up with one of the most important and oft-quoted verses in the New Testament. By *wages*, he means “earned and deserved payment.” This is not an inheritance or a gift. Our sin earns a specific end-result: *death*. The tyrant of sin becomes the tyrant of death. This is more than physical death, the fate of all men and women. This is eternal death. Those who die as slaves to sin will die forever, separated from God eternally.

Paul does not leave us hanging on this dreary note, because there is an alternative: God’s grace can be received as a *gift*. Receiving this gift is an act of faith, and more than anything else this gift is what Paul has been talking about this whole chapter. God’s gracious gift is our freedom from sin, release from the bondage of that life-long tyrant. Our future *is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*.

What Do You Think?

In what ways do people still attempt to earn God’s favor? How do we convince them of their folly?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding behaviors

Regarding speech

Regarding thoughts

Conclusion

A. Lingering Sin

Why does sin linger in our lives? Can we ever truly die to sin? It is wise to acknowledge our struggles with ungodly attitudes and behaviors, as Paul himself did in [Romans 7:14-23](#). Denial of sin just makes the situation worse. But here is the lesson of Paul: we must not be dominated by sin. Our focus, our goal, our passion must be for obedience to God’s will.

To accomplish this transformation, Paul tells us to remember our baptism, remember how we pledged our lives to the Lord Jesus and chose to live for him! Don’t look back on your pre-baptismal life with any fondness. Allow the Holy Spirit to empower you for victory over sins, sins that may be large or small. Don’t just die to these sins—renew your determination to live for Christ.

B. Prayer

Holy God, may you help us in our ongoing struggle to leave sinful things behind and live for you. We pray this in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Allow Jesus to break the bondage of sin
in every area of your life!

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Arrange for someone who has been set free from an addiction (smoking, drinking, overeating, etc.) to give a five-minute testimony describing what life was like while enslaved to the addiction and how different life is after being set free. (This will be especially meaningful if a personal relationship with Christ was part of the healing process.)

After thanking your guest, say, “Sin is indeed a tyrant, isn’t it? This is humanity’s problem in every era. But Paul knows how this tyrant is defeated.”

Alternative. Place in chairs copies of the “What Does It Say?” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download, for learners to begin working on as they arrive. After completion, say, “Today we’re going to explore exactly what Paul meant when he wrote this important

message.” (Save discussion of the two visuals for Into Life.)

Into the Word

Form groups of three to five, giving each group one of the following two assignments. If you have more than two groups, assign fewer questions to the groups that have duplicate assignments. Include these instructions: “Read today’s lesson text. Then select one person to be the reporter and another person to respond to the questions for the whole-class discussion that will follow. Discuss the best ways for the respondent to answer.”

Life and Death Interview Questions. 1. You say God is merciful and forgiving. So, what’s the big deal if Christians continue to sin? Doesn’t that just give God more opportunities to be merciful and gracious? 2. Why would anyone agree to be dunked in the water at baptism? 3. Since a person is already “alive” before becoming a Christian, how can anything make him or her more alive? 4. What is one good reason why I should become a Christian?

Slave and Free Interview Questions. 1. Some people say that sinners enjoy life more because they are free to do whatever they want. Why is this either true or not true? 2. Isn’t a Christian more of a slave than an unbeliever since the Christian has to keep all those rules and laws? 3. Since some unbelievers are rich and successful, doesn’t the life of sin sometimes pay off better than being a Christian? 4. What is one good reason why I should become a Christian?

After each group presents its interview, allow time for the other group(s) to add insights.

Next, divide the class in half for a memorization exercise regarding [Romans 6:23](#). Write it on the board in three lines like this:

*For the wages of sin is death;
but the gift of God is eternal life
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Have half the class say the first line in unison, the other half respond the same way with the second line, with everyone saying the third line. After doing this three times, have the two halves of your class switch phrases as you repeat the process three more times. Finally, erase the verse and have everyone say it from memory in unison.

Next, discuss the meaning of [Romans 6:23](#) by posing these questions: 1. Why the word *wages* in the first phrase but *gift* in the second? 2. What’s the difference between what sinners receive and what followers of Jesus Christ receive?

Into Life

Say, “Let’s think about how the eyes, ears, mouth, hands, etc., are involved in the ongoing struggle against sin. What strategy could one use regarding [name a body part] to set about making that part an instrument of righteousness per [verse 13](#)?” Repeat this question for other body parts; jot responses on the board. (*Option:* Ask volunteers to share stories of victory in this regard.)

Option. If you used the reproducible page in Into the Lesson, discuss at this point the application of the two visuals at the bottom.