

REACH|14

Romans: The Hope of Righteousness (part 6 of 9)

Our Global Vision: Setting Spiritual Captives Free

Romans 6:15-23

Mark Vroegop

¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! 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? ¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. 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. ²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:15–23)

Today we are concluding the three-week spotlight on global missions that we call REACH, and our theme has come out of Mark 1:38, where Jesus talks about bringing his message “somewhere else.” We take three weeks in October in order to help us get a global view of the gospel need. In the atrium we have listed the 7,000 unreached people groups, because it is vital that we keep this need in the forefront of our minds. The need is great, and it is too easy to forget that there are 2.7 billion people who will never hear the name of Jesus unless we do something.

In December we will be taking another Christmas offering, which is one the most strategic and tangible things that we do to “move the needle” as it relates to reaching the unreached. About five years ago, I, along with one of our vision teams, visited India with Nate. The highlight of the trip was visiting a Christian school started by the seminary with whom we partner. The school was filled with children from the surrounding community, and many of the children came from Hindu and Buddhist families. Some of the leaders of the city even enrolled their children in the school, fully understanding that it was a Christian School. Desperation for education has opened a door for the gospel. After hearing the children sing Christian songs and recite Bible verses, I will never forget standing on the balcony of a Christian school, as Uncle George told us that this little school was the first gospel witness in this area of India. Even during British colonization, missionaries were not allowed to visit this area because a Hindu leader had paid tribute to the British government to guarantee that no missionary would be able to preach the gospel there. This school, funded by our Christmas offering, was the dawn of the gospel in that area of India. So, if you gave to the 2007 Christmas offering, your money made that gospel witness possible.

That is why we take a Christmas offering, that is why we have REACH, that is why we even have this facility on 96th and Towne, and that is why we build our annual budget with a focus on external ministry. “This is for that,” and we want to keep that in the forefront of your mind and heart.

Next week I’m going to share another aspect of that external mission, as we talk about what God has laid on our hearts for church multiplication, starting in the Fishers area. We have been talking, researching, and praying about this for over a year, and I want to lay before you the things that are on our hearts. I want to invite some of you to consider leaving “this” for “that,” while challenging all of us to think about the mission field that is right next door.

Our text today is part of our series in Romans, and it is admittedly not a traditional missions text. In fact, you may wonder how Romans 6:15-23 connects with foreign missions. I hope to show you. My plan is to first help you understand what these verses are saying in general and then to you personally. And then I want to show you how I think this relates to reaching people who have never heard the gospel.

The Freedom Offered in Romans 6

The sixth chapter of Romans is the personal application of the freedom that comes from having been justified by faith . . . through Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:8). Previously we learned about the connection between indicatives and imperatives, a Spirit-empowered, Word-fueled, Jesus-centered cycle of being and doing.

Two weeks ago we learned from verses 12-14 about how to not let sin reign in our bodies, and we learned about a challenger to the throne named sin who uses desires or passions to infiltrate our lives and take control of specific members of our bodies and use them for evil purposes. The call from verses 12-14 was to not allow this to happen and to reverse the destructive course by presenting our members to God as instruments of righteousness, because believers are no longer under the dominion of law; they are under grace.

Verses 15-23 conclude Paul’s argument about the practical freedom that comes through justification by faith, and I want to highlight two aspects of this freedom.

1) Free to defeat sin

Verse 15 contains another rhetorical question. The first question was in 6:1 where Paul asked, “Are we to continue to sin that grace may abound?” Now the question is “Are we to sin because we are not under the law but under grace?” These two rhetorical questions really stem from the same issue, which is a potential charge levied against Paul that this idea of immunity from God’s wrath because of the gospel could create people who just continued to sin. In other words, immunity from judgment could be abused.

In 6:14 we learned that believers in Jesus are under the dominion of grace and not law, which could mean that grace could become a justification for doing whatever you wanted. Are believers free to sin? Does the freedom of the gospel create more sin? That is the question in verse 15, and Paul's answer is an emphatic "No!"

Instead, his argument is to change how we would use the word "freedom." Paul would say that we are indeed free. But we are not free to sin; we are free to be sanctified. The followers of Jesus are the ones who actually have the power to defeat sin. They are free to defeat sin, and if this is not what happens in your life, then the question is whether or not you really have understood and experienced grace.

Now do not miss the significance of this statement because it is the central point of what Paul is saying here. Those who have experienced grace, and those who live under the dominion of grace and not law, are marked by a freedom to pursue righteousness rather than sin. In other words, the gospel of justification by faith, rightly understood, should lead to more sanctification, not more sin. The gospel was meant to free us from condemnation and wrath so that we could pursue righteousness, not so that we can pursue the very thing from which we have been set free. A gospel that doesn't result in practical freedom is not really the gospel.

To make this point even more evident, Paul uses the illustration or metaphor of slavery. Now you need to know that this metaphor is not perfect. After all, every illustration breaks down at some level, and that is why Paul says the following in verse 19: *"I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations."* He recognizes that the illustration of a slave has its limits, but there is an important point to be made.

Romans 6:16 identifies the connection between slavery and obedience. A slave, by definition, is one who obeys another, and the two issues are so closely tied that they are inseparable. A slave's life is consumed with the commands of another. A slave's identity is not wrapped up in his desires, but in the desires of his master. However, part of the challenge of this metaphor is that slavery is a term with so much negative history, and the slavery in the Ancient Near East was not entirely like we think of it in our unfortunate history.

You think of it through the lens of being an employee. Let's say you are a barista at the local Starbucks. When you arrive at work, your time is no longer your own because Starbucks is paying you for your time. So when you punch in, you are no longer free to do whatever you want. You are at work, and your time is directed by your supervisor. It doesn't matter what you would like to do or what you feel like doing. You are "at work," so you should work. A failure to understand this would mean that you lose your job because you cannot be paid for not working. And it is fair to assume that if you work for Starbucks, you will actually work for Starbucks. But it also means that if you visit a Starbucks on your day off, and you start to clean the store, make a Chai Tea Latte, or work the cash register, people will assume that you are an employee. Why? Because there is a connection between your actions and your job. They are very linked.

Now Paul uses this metaphor to show us that “if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one who you obey . . .” (v. 16). In other words, slaves of one master should not be serving another. McDonald’s employees should not be working at Starbucks. Or to put it in terms that are of concern to Paul here: slaves of obedience leading to righteousness should not be acting like slaves of sin leading to death. We are free to defeat sin.

For the believer to continually pursue sin is to work against who he or she really is and against what God has done through Christ. That is the point of verses 17-18:

¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. Romans 6:17–18 (ESV)

The point here is that the gracious, heart-transforming work that God did in the life of the believer means that there is a freedom from the dominion of sin and a new life that looks like being a slave of righteousness. The miracle of the gospel is not just that it changes a person’s eternal destiny, but that it changes a person’s life now. The beauty of the gospel certainly includes eternal life, but it also includes a life that is transformed by the gospel now.

So does that fit your understanding of the gospel or your life? If you are not a follower of Jesus, you need to know that the Bible not only contains answers regarding what happens when we die, but it also contains answers related to how to change from the inside out. If you are a follower of Jesus, can I just remind you that the dominion of grace is meant to change your life? Sin, for the believer, is not just an indiscretion. It is living in a contrary way to who we are and to whom we belong. We have been set free so that we can defeat sin.

2) Free to experience restoration

The second element of freedom that Paul mentions here is the way in which restoration takes place because of God’s grace. In Romans 5:20 we heard a similar theme, and it sounded like this: “*where sin increased, grace increased all the more.*” The beauty of the gospel is not just its ability to save people from hell but also its power to restore what has been affected by the brokenness of sin.

Verse 19 is a critical text. Let’s look at it closely:

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. Romans 6:19 (ESV)

We have already talked about the first sentence. Notice the argument in the second sentence. Paul is calling to mind the former life of those who had experienced God’s grace. There was a time in the past when they presented their members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness. Their whole being, and the individual parts of their bodies, were used to serve all kinds of sin and rebellion. What’s more,

notice that this was not a static issue. Sin is never satisfied. It always wants and desires more. Surely you have seen this play out in your own life, haven't you? Since the essence of temptation is the desire for more, sin always pursues the next thrill and the next risk-filled activity.

Notice, however, the hope of what is offered in verse 19. Instead of offering your member as slaves of impurity, the gospel compels the followers of Jesus to present our members as slaves to righteousness, leading to sanctification. Take note that being a slave is a given and so is the progressive nature of humanity. You are either a slave of impurity, or you are a slave of righteousness. Your life either progresses toward more lawlessness, or it progresses toward more righteousness. The hope of the gospel is the fact that in a small and very personal way, the gospel begins to reverse the curse. The Good News begins the process of restoration.

In verse 20, Paul uses a bit of irony or a play on words when he says, "When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness." Paul uses the word "free" when the person is really not free. He or she is free in regard to righteousness, but that is really no freedom at all. In fact, that is the tragedy of sin as people are convinced that true freedom having no moral boundaries, no rules, no one telling you how to live. Satan loves to woo people down this path, which looks like freedom but is, in fact, even more bondage.

It is as though the Bible is saying, "Stop throwing your life away. Stop the process of self destruction." Grace saves us from hell, but it also saves us from ourselves. It saves us from eternal damnation, and it saves us from ruining our lives.

Yet it seems as though Paul feels that there are some who are still unconvinced. Therefore, he reminds us about the fruit of our former lives in verses 21-22. He highlights the path that we were on and where it was headed. It is as if Paul would get in our face and ask us, "Do you remember what your former life was like? How did all of that work out for you?" In verse 21, specifically, Paul brings up the things from our past of which we would be ashamed, and he asks, "What fruit did you get from those things?" He is asking about the payoff. What did your former life produce in you and around you?

All of us have things in our past that would make us embarrassed or even ashamed. Sin and shame go hand-in-hand. But the problem with the temptation to go back to our former ways is that we so quickly forget how ridiculous, destructive, and meaningless unrighteousness really is. The crazy thing about temptation and sin is that it is so irrational. Falling into temptation is spiritual insanity. Paul brings up the past in order to remind us that about the terrible payoff of sin.

And the bigger point, according to verse 23, is that if you live in grace, then why would you go back to your former life? Why would you leave the path of restoration and regress into the former ways?

²² *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.* Romans 6:22 (ESV)

The gospel offers us a better life! Notice the phrase “*the fruit you get leads to sanctification, and its end eternal life.*” Do you see the vision of what it means to be a Christian? To be justified by faith and to live in the realm of grace means that we have been granted full immunity from the wrath of God. It means that Jesus absorbed the punishment for our sins and that we have been granted the righteousness of Christ. It means that we have been saved and that we have been granted eternal life. But it also means that we are now able to live in a way that is truly beautiful. It means that while the world is still broken, imperfect, and groaning under the weight of sin, there are some people on the earth who are fulfilling Jesus’ prayer that God’s kingdom would come and His will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. It means that there are pockets of people who not only know where they are going when they die, but they know how to live right now!

The gospel creates people who are filled with the Spirit and whose lives are no longer characterized by sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, or anything else that is destructive. Rather, their lives are marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:18-23). Christianity is a partial restoration of what God-ordained Christianity was meant to be.

A few months ago, I asked one of our church members, Katie Kronberg, if she could summarize the message of Romans 6 in a poem. Somehow hearing the theme of Romans 6 in this form adds new color to the message.

Ransomed, Arise!

By Katie Kronberg

*Stand tall, O Servant of the King!
Cast aside these earthly chains.
Arise! For darkness holds no claim
On ransomed lives called from the grave*

*Hell may tempt our souls to doubt
The Power that now within us dwells-
The past Christ nailed upon that hill
So let us daily die to self!*

*Boldly we will storm the dark,
Breaking strongholds in His name.
We know our souls belong to Him.
Sin will fall where Jesus reigns!*

*Rise up, O Soul, against the dark!
Once chained, now clad in victory
Rebelling against the Enemy
Strength is found in the Risen King!*

We are free to experience restoration.

The Connection to Global Missions

How does this text relate to reaching unreached people? Notice the conclusion of Romans 6: ²³ “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 6:23 (ESV). I found it fascinating that Paul would place this verse at the end of large section about personal righteousness and holiness, because we often use this verse in an evangelistic presentation. But it is Paul’s final thought about living under the dominion of grace.

That got me thinking. What if sanctification was more closely tied to evangelism and reaching unreached people than what we initially thought? So what does Romans 6 have to do with Global Missions?

1. Sanctification should lead us to be concerned about people living in spiritual darkness

This first point is about us. What motivates a person to have a heart for people that they have never seen and for those who have never heard the name of Jesus? What fuels a passion for global evangelism? What makes a person give away money to help spread the gospel? What compels people to leave their homes and live with people who are hard to reach?

I do not think that fairness or statistics or guilt is a sufficient motivator. It seems, however, that a natural and normal by-product of the fruit of sanctification – becoming more and more like Jesus – must include a heart for people who are living in spiritual darkness. Central to being a Christian is a concern for others. And while that needs to be applied at the individual level, surely it also means that it should be applied at a global level. In other words, can you really be righteous and not have the fruit of concern for others? Can you really follow Christ and not have a heart for the 2.7 billion people who have never heard and will never hear the name of Jesus?

A concern for the others is the essence of what the gospel and sanctification are all about. Pastor Nate just returned from a visit to a country bordering Syria that is dealing with an enormous refugee problem. There is a ministry there that provides a month’s worth of food to Muslim families who have nothing. They have fled a worn-torn country with only what they could carry. And there are Christians who are making it possible for these families to survive while also building relationships and sharing the gospel. Nate told us that one Muslim man asked the workers a very insightful and telling question: “Why are you Christians helping Muslims? We are your enemies.” What a great question, and I would argue that the answer is rooted in what it means to bear the fruit of the gospel.

Godly, righteous, fruit-bearing people will have and must have a passion to reach people with the gospel. It just fits with what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

2. The gospel, including sanctification, offers hope for the future and for the present

The tragedy of unreached people is not only that they are on a path that leads to eternal destruction, but the other aspect of the tragedy is the fact that people are in bondage, fear, and hopelessness right now. If you are a Muslim, then you live in constant fear about not doing enough to warrant Allah's favor. For your entire life, you must pray five times a day, give 2.5 percent of your income to the poor and needy, practice the fast of Ramadan, and visit Mecca if you're able to. If you are a Hindu, you must do good deeds or karma so that your next reincarnation will be better. What's more, neither Islam nor Hinduism believe in any assistance from God. It is all up to you. So there is nothing but performance, fear, and bondage.

While in the Caspian region, I had lunch with two Muslim students who watched a number of services via a CD. When I asked them what they thought, they commented on how much singing Christians do. It was odd to them because there is no singing in a Muslim mosque. And no wonder! There is no joy, only fear. The motivation for global missions is not just to save people from hell in the future; it is to set them free now and to give them a reason to live. Sanctification is more than just a goal for a believer. It is what a lost person will never experience apart from Christ.

3. True cultural transformation is possible as the gospel is known and lived

I was struck last week as I listened to a presentation by a leader in our Cambodian partnership, as she became emotional while talking about the sick reality of human trafficking in South East Asia. And it just seemed so right that a follower of Jesus would be deeply grieved over that kind of evil. But what can you do? At one level there are many things, practically, that one could and should do to deal with that kind of problem. You can educate families, set up shelters, work to change the laws in a country, and find ways to rescue people who are literally enslaved. But ultimately the change that is needed is a heart-change, where impurity is replaced with love, deception is replaced with truth, violence is replaced with gentleness, and fear is replaced with joy. The gospel of Jesus Christ, lived out in the lives of converted, righteous people, can have that happen.

How does cultural transformation take place? It happens through a tipping point, as more and more hearts are brought under the reign of Jesus and the power of the Spirit. Sanctification is not just what changes people; it has the power, if expressed in enough people's lives, to change a culture and even change a nation.

Christianity, when lived in the vision of Romans 6, is not only redemptive. It is revolutionary. So we ought to go, and give, and reach because the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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