

#### Week 4 (July 2) Romans 6:12-23

Romans 6 is part of the second major way that Paul describes the human situation and the gospel's response to it in this letter. In 1:18-5:11 Paul talked about sin as acts that make humans guilty before God. He describes the work of Christ there as what allows God to offer forgiveness and remain just (3:21-26). In 5:12-7:6, Paul offers a second analysis of why we are estranged from God. Now he talks of sin as a power that captures and enslaves all people, forcing them to sin. Here the work of Christ wrests us away from the power of sin and makes us God's possessions. Rather than being "slaves of sin," we are now God's slaves. Life within this new household brings eternal life rather than the certain death we face when sin owns us.

We seldom talk of sin as a power that can force us to live as it commands. But what Paul says here has a truth that we cannot escape. We are, in fact, trapped by sin, constantly forced to violate God's will. We talk about this as systemic sin. That is, the political, economic, and cultural systems of the world do not operate according to the will of God. Occasionally we recognize this and launch a protest against it, but more often we just live within the sinful system. Think of going to the grocery store. Much, perhaps most, of what we find there was harvested by people who work under conditions and for wages that we know to be unjust. Migrant farm workers are not paid a wage that allows them to live in ways we would find acceptable for ourselves. We may be able to buy fair trade coffee, but there are no such alternatives for many things we eat. The same things are true when we buy clothes or cars, or most everything. Those goods or some parts of them were produced in dangerous conditions and often by children. But we must eat and we must clothe ourselves. So we are trapped, required to support systems that harm others. So more directly than we want to think, we harm those people—and we can't stop doing it. This is at least part of what Paul means when he says sin is a power that forces us to sin, to do things that violate God's will for all of God's people.

Paul declares, however, that believers have been freed from sin and now serve a new master, God. While he says that this is an accomplished transfer, he also knows that we must continue to live in the world that is ruled by sin. We cannot escape all of its harm. But since we are now owned by God, we are required to strive to live as God wants. We are not to allow sin to rule our lives. Paul calls the Romans to be sure that the powers of evil do not lure them into serving the purposes of evil. Instead, believers are to present their bodies as instruments of righteousness.

It is no easy task to present your body as an instrument of righteousness, as Paul's reminders make clear. This is not just a call to individuals to live lives of personal morality. It is that, but it is more. This passage in Romans is not just about personal, individual sin. Remember, it is about the way the world and its systems have been captured by sin. It is in the context of this sin-ruled world that we are to stop being used for sin's purposes and present ourselves as tools or instruments to produce righteousness. Here righteousness includes seeking to bring God's will into the places where sin reigns—which is everywhere that God's justice and love do not shape the experience of all. Acting as one of God's people includes the demand that we present ourselves as servants who work for God's righteousness in ourselves and in our world. This includes opposing sin in the form of unjust systems of all sorts. Engaging in this work is a way we live out our identity as one of God's servants; it is a way we work toward sanctification, the process of becoming holy in imitation of God's holiness. Working to make the lives of others better by opposing unjust systems is one of the ways we live out and share the eternal life God gives us in Christ.