

## Choose Your Master

by Ray C. Stedman

Now we look again at Chapter 6 of the book of Romans – as we are roaming through Romans.

The other day my oldest daughter, Sheila, and I were riding together in a car, and she looked over at me, and said, “Daddy, would you teach me how to drive?” She is fourteen. I said, “Yes, I’ll be glad to. Maybe this summer we can do that, but I’ll tell you how now – it is very simple. All you do is sit behind the wheel, hold it, push this peddle to go, and push this other one if you want to stop – that is all there is to it.” She looked over at me, and said, “Oh, Daddy, there’s more to it than that!” And, of course, she is right; there is more to it than that, as you know. But, in a way, she was wrong. Essentially, these are the major processes of driving, yet there is a great deal more in learning how to do it, as everyone knows.

In the same way, Romans 6:1-14 is all there is to know about life and victory in Jesus Christ. But doing it involves a learning process. In the first fourteen verses, we are told that

- We need to *know* what God declares to be a fact. All faith rests upon God’s facts, and this is a great fact; this first step is exceedingly important because it makes us realize that it is possible to be delivered from the reigning power of sin in our lives. We need the knowledge of God’s fact.
- In the second step, we are to *consider* it true in the day-by-day experience of our lives. We are to act upon the fact. We are to maintain an attitude of awareness that God looks at us this way. And we are to look at ourselves in the same way.
- Then the third step, and the wonderful one, is *yielding*, the leaning back, the resting upon the mighty indwelling, conquering life of Jesus

Christ which is designed to meet any circumstance that comes our way. As we learn this secret, we discover that it is as easy to be good in Christ as it is to be bad in Adam – just as easy. Here we discover that it is no longer the struggle to be good and trying to make the old life behave that we have been engaged in so long (and failing in so continually), but it is simply receiving, continually, the life of Jesus Christ which cannot be bad. It is wonderful, but, like driving, this must be learned by living, not be reading or hearing about it.

If you expect to learn these truths simply by reading the sixth chapter of Romans, it would be like taking a correspondence course in swimming. Have you ever tried that? No, you have to get into the water. You have to put these things into action, and that is when victory begins to come.

Now, beginning with Chapter 6, Verse 15, we find that Paul applies these truths to life itself: One by one he takes the problems that will arise as we learn to ‘walk in the Spirit.’ That is what this is – the phrase “walk in the Spirit” {Gal 5:16, 5:25 KJV} means to enjoy the fullness of the indwelling life of Christ.

The first problem that comes is what we might call the problem of **part-time victory**, Verse 15:

**What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! {Rom 6:15 RSV}**

You’ll notice that this verse is very similar to the first verse of this chapter, and the question that is asked is phrased similarly. In Verse 1 we read, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” In Verse 15 we read, “Are we to sin because we are not under law but

## Chose Your Master

under grace?” And the answer is the same, “By no means!” Certainly not!

Now, there is a difference between these questions that is hidden largely in the tense of the verb that is used. I hope you will pardon my Greek for protruding here this morning, but it is important to understand that there *is* a difference here. The first verse means “Are we to *continue* to live in sin, to abide in it, to stay in it?” Is there to be no change in our life now that we have become a Christian? And Paul’s answer is, “Of course not; we cannot continue.” This is such an important thing, because, if there is no change in your life after you receive Christ, then there is a serious doubt whether you ever received Christ at all. As Charles Spurgeon put it, “An unchanged life is the mark of an unchanged heart, and an unchanged heart is a sign of an unregenerate life.”

- If there is no change,
- If your attitudes are the same,
- If your outlook is the same, –

then there is a very serious doubt as to whether you ever became a Christian at all! That is what is involved in the question of Romans 6:1.

The other question is not, “Shall we continue to abide in sin,” but, rather, “Should we sin *even once* now that we are not under law but under grace?” That is the meaning of the question in Romans 6:15. Once we begin to realize the mighty power of Christ living in us, as opposed to the futility of trying to be good, we begin to experience some wonderful, great victories in our lives.

This is beautifully pictured for us in the book of Joshua, in the Old Testament.

I hope you have learned to read your Old Testament in the light of the New Testament, and to see how God so beautifully uses these Old Testament stories to illustrate the tremendous truths of the New Testament. One of the most effective books of the Old Testament in this respect is the book of Joshua, for it gives us the picture of Israel entering the land – and the land is always a picture of the fullness of the Spirit, the walk in Christ, that we are talking about here in Romans.

As Israel came out of the wilderness of self-effort across the river Jordan and into the land, the first obstacle that lay in their pathway was the tremendous city of Jericho, with its great, high walls –

tremendous walls, we are told. Archeologists, who have now laid bare the foundations of these very walls, tell us that they were very likely over 100 feet high and some 50-60 feet thick. This was an impregnable fortress. Ah, but you know the story – we have heard it sung so many times – how “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumbling down.” Actually, it wasn’t a fight at all: As they surrounded the city in the name of the Lord, and in the strength of the indwelling presence of God in their midst, the walls simply fell down flat – that is all.

We discover that here is a picture of the *life of victory* that comes in laying hold of the truths in Romans 6. As we discover and apply this truth, problems that have been insurmountable obstacles to us, problems that have baffled us and mocked us and conquered us for years, simply disappear as we lay hold of the indwelling life of Jesus Christ – and it is wonderful. We begin to experience victory.

But, you remember, that *after* the battle of Jericho, as you read on in Joshua, the next chapter tells us of the account of the greed of one man, named Achan, in the camp of Israel who coveted part of what God had set aside for himself. The result was a thorough defeat at the little village of Ai.

All this is a picture of what we are talking about here in Romans 6:1-14. We see the principle that brings about victories like the victory of Jericho, but, in Verse 15 to the end of the chapter, we see some of the problems that arise that make possible a defeat like Ai.

I hope you are following me. If not, I suggest that you read those opening chapters of Joshua in order to see exactly what I mean.

Now, when we discover that there is the possibility of living in defeat, even though we have learned the secret of victory, then we must face the question that is asked in Verse 15. Is the occasional failure permissible? Can we get by on this basis? And the answer is, “Certainly not!”

I know that many experience this. We discover the joy of deliverance. Then we also discover that the old life still has power to tempt us and draw us back into its control. We realize that, even though it is true that Jesus Christ lives within us to be all that he is (which is all that we need), nevertheless the temptation is to strike a balance and work out a compromise. We find ourselves wanting to draw on Christ for the power to meet the times of stress

## Chose Your Master

that come – the big problems – but we rather like to put on the old comfortable slippers of the flesh the rest of the time, and enjoy that.

This is the problem brought before us in the rest of this chapter, and it is essentially a problem of *incomplete acceptance of God's sentence of death* to the old life in Adam. It represents only a partial turning from the old life and a partial acceptance of God's sentence of death upon what we are in ourselves.

I hope we see this, for it is very important. It is an attempt to settle for part-time victory – but, of course, part-time victory is also part-time defeat, and this is where the problem lies.

All of us recognize that there are certain aspects of our old life that we inherited from Adam (which we call the natural life, our human nature, if you please) that are wrong and evil. We know what they are – lying, lust, hate, drunkenness, blasphemy, and some of the more outward things. When we become a Christian, we realize that these have to go, and we give them up quite readily because they hurt us. Many times they have injured us, and we are glad to see them go. But there are other aspects of that same old life that we don't quite so readily see as being wrong, and we cling to these.

I don't know what it might be in your case, but some of the common areas of life that so frequently hang on like this are:

- Ambition,
- Self confidence,
- Possessiveness (wanting to hold onto our friends, loved ones),
- Depression, and
- Anxiety (worry).

You say, "We like these things?" Yes, some of us do! We like to do them. Some folks think they are not doing their job if they don't worry. For instance, we think we are failing as parents if we don't show an anxious, furrowed brow every time some little things happens to our children. And there is also self pity, fear, hardness to each other, gossip, exaggeration – some of these areas. Now, if we hang onto these things, in effect what we are doing is saying, "Lord, isn't it all right to draw on your life for deliverance from the sins I hate, but to allow the manifestations of some of these little,

harmless thing that I love?" But, of course, they are not harmless at all. What we are really asking is what Paul asks here: "Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?" And the answer is, "By no means!" Certainly not! Not even once!

Then he goes on to give two reasons why this cannot be. The first one is **the enslaving power of sin**. In Verses 16-19, he says:

**Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of that one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? 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. I speak in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once yielded your members to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now yield your members to righteousness for sanctification. {Rom 6:16-19 RSV}**

Now, I think that you see that the underlying truth of that passage is that man is made to be mastered by something. We need a cause. Every young person is looking for a cause to live for, and to die for. When we are not aware of any cause in our life worthy of the effort, we flounder and feel depraved and deprived and hopeless. And the amazing thing is that, in all of life, there are only two possible masters: Either Christ or self; either one or the other.

Everything we do relates to either one or the other – Christ or self. Paul brings out here the fact that for so long all of us knew only one master. We served self without reserve:

- We lived for ourselves,
- We loved ourselves,
- We struggled to advance ourselves.
- We fought to protect ourselves.
- We hated all rivals to ourselves.
- We loved only those who catered to ourselves.

As that little jingle says,

## Chose Your Master

I lived only for myself alone,  
For myself and none beside  
Just as if Jesus had never lived,  
And as if he had never died.

That is the way we lived, and then we found Christ, or he found us. We found a new master, yet the old love of self was still there. Now this is the problem, isn't it? Jesus said, "No man can serve two masters," {Matt 6:24 KJV}. It must be one of the other; it cannot be both – not 'it shall not' but simply 'it cannot' be both – no man can serve two masters.

After we have discovered the delivering power of the life of Christ in us, if we try to keep alive part of the old man, try to compromise, and –

- give up lust, but keep ambition, or
- give up drunkenness, but keep worry, or
- give up lying, but keep self pity, or
- deny hate, but excuse fear, or
- refuse jealousy, but permit impatience,

– what we are doing is simply selling ourselves back again into the power of that old tyrant, self. That is what Paul declares.

You see, the second group of sins which we kind of cherish and like to keep around really comes from the same source as the first group. It is *all* part of the old life – *all of it* – and obedience to *any of it* puts you under the power of *all of it* – that is what Paul is saying. It begins to grow. You let it take root in some little way in your life, and protect it, and, even though the Lord talks to you about it, you say, "Oh, Lord, it isn't very important. It is only a trivial thing. Let's not worry about it." If you do that, you discover that it begins to get a grip on you, and soon you drift back more and more into the control of self. With it comes all the misery, all the heartache, all the defeat, all the boredom, and all the frustration that you once knew.

Now, I know that we don't see all of the old life, and its control over us, at once. Bit by bit, as the Spirit of God makes us aware of these things, these areas must be faced and surrendered to the place of death where God puts them. What does he do with what we are in Adam, what we are by nature, the old man? Why, he simply calls it up before him, sentences it to death, carries it out and executes it, and puts it in the grave because that is

all that it is worth – the whole thing, all of it, completely. Then we must make this real by believing that fact – that all of it is worthless in God's sight – ambition, everything!

Do you see? When we come to that place, then we begin to realize victory. But, if we compromise a little, we will soon be back in the old cycle of defeat and barrenness that we knew for so long. However, Paul points out that it also works the other way around. You choose Christ in these struggles and you find that he grows on you, and he gets a grip on you. The power, and the glory, and the strength of his life begin to grow stronger and stronger.

You remember that old story about the Indian who became a Christian and was giving his testimony about what his Christian life was like. He said, "You know, since me become Christian, me find have two dogs inside: One big black dog, all time bad, all time fight; and one big white dog, all time good. And these dogs fight all the time." And someone said, "Which one wins?" And he said, "Whichever one I say 'sic-em' to!"

You see, there is a continual choice, and the choice makes possible further victories. Little choices make little victories grow into larger victories. What Paul is simply saying is: Now choose your master. You can have only one. You can't have both. If it is not Christ and continual victory, then it is self and increasing defeat: *Choose your master!*

These verses have given us the enslaving power of sin, and this is one reason we can never say, as Christians, "Oh well, these things are not important; there are some things that we don't need to get serious about."

The second reason is **the evil effects of sin**, Verses 20-23:

**When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But then what return did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. {Rom 6:20-23 RSV}**

## Chose Your Master

Here Paul asks another very pertinent question: When you lived for yourself, what were the results in your life?

Well, what were they?

There was some pleasure, wasn't there? Yes. You know there are pleasures in sin, plenty of them. It wouldn't be any fun if it were not so. We love to do some of these things. We like it, and it is fun at the time. We have a good time. Ah, but what then? In Hebrews it speaks of "the pleasures of sin" {Heb 11:25 KJV}, and then it adds this phrase, "for a season." Just "for a season." What then? Now, honestly, what was the result when you lived for yourself? Wasn't it emptiness and misery, strife with others, unrest and unhappiness, and shame and despair?

You remember Lord Byron, that brilliant English poet, who gave himself to enjoy himself completely without restraint all the early years of his life. When he was 29 years old, he wrote these words:

My days are in yellow leaf.  
The fruit of life is gone.  
The worm, the canker, and  
The grief are mine alone.

Burned out already at 29!

And Paul's question is this: Do you think that, now that you have become a Christian, if you still permit the old self to live when God says that it has no right to live, that the old life will produce any different crop than it did before? Do you think that God will somehow protect you from the results of your own folly? Of course, the answer is "No." "Be not deceived," he says in Galatians. Don't kid yourselves:

**Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. {Gal 6:7-8 RSV}**

This is written to Christians. You can be a Christian, know all the delivering truth of Romans 6, be a teacher of that truth, and yet, because you still choose to let live what God declares has no right to live, you never know – you never realize – the glory and the freshness and the joy of Jesus Christ living his perfect life through you. As Paul

says, the result of serving self is death: "The wages of sin is death."

In Southern California, on the east side of our state, we have a great valley, called Death Valley. Why is it named that? Well, some think it was named that because of the many people who died there – prospectors, and others, who tried to get through the barren wasteland. Perhaps it was, but I wonder if perhaps it was not named that really because it is such a picture of death, because its very emptiness suggests death, because it is just a barren, worthless wasteland.

Now, this is what the word "death" means here. When it says, "the wages of sin is death," it is not talking about hell because it is written to Christians. Ultimately, it is true that sin – unredeemed, not brought under the blood of Christ – brings us to hell. But this is written to people that *are* redeemed: The wages of sin *in your life* is death – emptiness, barrenness, worthlessness! That is what is taught here. The wages of sin are paid out right while you are living. And you receive the continual results of choosing to ignore the life of Christ within you, and attempting to live a Christian life by doing 'the best you can' – that is, you experience emptiness. That is the death referred to in this verse.

You can choose this if you want to. That is the dignity that God always gives human beings: We have the right to choose. He never makes us be what we ought to be; we have the right to choose to be otherwise – even as Christians.

Some of you, because you have a good personality, or a handsome face, or some special talent, are continually impressed by what you are apart from Christ in you. You can blast your way to the top of the heap by the power of your personality, or by the force of your special talent, and win the approval of many. But you will stand at last ashamed and repentant before the one whom you have robbed all your lifetime of his right to be himself in you. And you will look back on barren, wasted years filled with death, simply because you chose to be yourself in place of what he is in you.

On the other hand, you can choose to know "the gift of God" which is eternal life. Now, that is not heaven, any more than death is hell here. "Eternal life" here is not glory some day, but Christ right now. You can know the fulfillment, the glory, the satisfaction, the power of the life of Jesus Christ lived out in you through all the years ahead

## Chose Your Master

– until, at last, you stand in his presence with a life that he can approve because it not your life, it is his life all the time, lived out through you.

As Joshua said to the people as he led them into the land, “Choose you this day whom you will serve” {Josh 24:15 KJV}, so God is saying to Christians who discover the possibilities of living in victory in Jesus Christ because of his life indwelling us: “Now choose.” You can’t have both. You can’t have both the self life fulfilled

- with all its ambitions,
- with its desire for advancement,
- with its seeking for approval and plaudits of the crowd around and of men,

and also the life of Jesus Christ. You can’t have *his life for your program* – it must be *his life for his program*.

In Romans 6, God is challenging us, “Choose now! Which will you have?”

To those of you who make the choice to believe what God says, it is possible to lay hold of all the fullness, all the fragrance, all the might, all the

power, and all the glory of Jesus Christ living his wonderful life again through you.

### Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we pray that we may make this right choice. We know that we hear the call of the flesh within us, the desire to seek for self advancement, and for self glory, to be in the public eye, and to be in the center of the circle rather than let you have that place! Help us, Lord, to realize that this can never be until we are willing to believe what you said about what we are. But, oh, we thank you, Lord, that, when we do, the opposite is true. As we lay hold of you, you lay hold of us. Your life becomes sweeter, and greater, and more fragrant, more evident, more manifest, more mighty through us, to become effectual, fervent, earnest workers for your name’s sake. We ask it may be so, in Jesus’s name. Amen.

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