

Habits of Holiness
Romans 6:15-23

As many of you know, when I think about holiness I think about scissors. The term holy means “set apart”; if something is holy, it is set apart for specific purposes. Last week I brought a couple of tools that are used to make barrels. This week I’ve brought a couple of pairs of scissors. {Photo}

These are Brenda’s sewing scissors. We keep them in a box in a cabinet in the basement. These are my shop scissors. I throw them in a junk drawer or leave them lying on the bench or wherever. Brenda’s scissors are used exclusively for cutting “fabric.” My scissors can be used for cutting up old tee shirts, cutting wire, opening a can of stain, spreading peanut butter, or whatever. Brenda’s scissors are holy. My scissors are profane. Brenda’s scissors are set apart for a very specific purpose. My scissors have no scruples or morals or standards; they can be used for almost anything.

In Romans 6 Paul is urging us to view the members of our bodies like Brenda’s sewing scissors instead of my shop scissors. Last week we studied Romans 6:12-14 which emphasized what we ***shouldn’t*** do with the members of our bodies (present them to sin as instruments of unrighteousness). Today’s passage, Romans 6:15-23, emphasizes what we ***should*** do with the members of our bodies (present them to God as instruments of righteousness). Because we dead to sin and alive to God, we are no longer to use our bodies however we want; we are to use the members of our bodies exclusively for God’s purposes. We are to “glorify God with our bodies” (as in 1 Corinthians 6:20).

I hope that today’s passage gives us a fresh vision for holiness. We’ll see in this passage ***A Progression: Presenting the members of our bodies to God. . . holiness. . . eternal life.*** (Romans 6:15-23)

In Romans 6:1 Paul posed the question, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may increase?” Paul’s opponents charged that his gospel of grace would lead to “moral anarchy” (so Kruse) - that if you tell people that they’re no longer under the Law and that salvation is a free gift of God to all who believe in Jesus that people will be irresponsible and reckless in their behavior. In response to that line of thinking, Paul has been arguing that grace actually empowers people to obey God from the heart; grace makes a person dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. In verse 15 Paul asks a similar question to the one he posed in verse 1:

15 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!

Every church in every culture in every generation asks some variation of this question: If there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, does it really matter whether or not you sin? Since we’re not living under the demands and penalties of the law, does it really matter whether we obey God or disobey God? For the fifth time in Romans Paul answers his own question with the expression, “May it never be!” This is

Paul's way of screaming "No!" In the strongest of terms Paul teaches that grace and obedience go hand in hand.

Paul explains why this is so in the rest of the chapter. We need to pay careful attention to Paul's reasoning so that we're not confused about the relationship between grace and obedience. In verse 16 Paul asks the Romans a question in a way that implies that this is something they should already know/understand:

16 Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?

If you present yourself as a slave to someone, you are saying, "I will obey whatever you tell me to do; your wish is my command." In essence, Paul is saying that you can choose your master, but you cannot choose whether or not that master will have control of your life. And you cannot choose the consequences of obeying that master. Paul says that we really only have two options: being a slave of sin or a slave of obedience (to God).

If you present yourself to sin, you are allowing sin to be your master. And sin is a very harsh, demanding master. Sin promises freedom and satisfaction and life, but it results in slavery, disappointment, and death. You can choose to obey sin, but you cannot choose whether or not it will lead to death. This is what we don't understand when we yield ourselves to some sin over an extended period of time.

The other option is to present yourself to obedience, allowing God to be your master. If you submit yourself to His Lordship, you will find that the result is righteousness (in the sense of "living rightly"). Through faith in Jesus Christ you are declared righteous; through presenting yourself to God, you live a righteous life.

In verse 17 Paul gives thanks to God that this was already the experience of the Roman believers. He describes their conversion to Christianity in an interesting way:

17 But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

Paul consistently taught that all of humanity is born enslaved to sin. But when the Romans came to Christ, they "became obedient from the heart" to the gospel; it wasn't an external, superficial commitment but an internal, from-the-heart commitment. The gospel is described as "that form of teaching to which you were committed." The gospel is the good news about Jesus and the Kingdom He is establishing. Implicit in that good news is a way of living that Paul and the other apostles taught. The Romans became obedient to that way of life.

"Having been freed from sin," they became "slaves of righteousness." Colin Kruse points out that, "Slavery to God, paradoxically, is genuine freedom." This sounds

strange to our ears because we don't associate slavery - even slavery to God - as freedom. We associate freedom with being able to do **whatever** we want, **whenever** we want, with **whomever** we want. But for Paul doing whatever WE want leads to slavery because we are bent toward sin.

Paul anticipated that this teaching would sound strange to the Romans as well. It is estimated that up to 70% of the believers in Rome were currently slaves or formerly slaves (Kruse, pp. 277-278). Slavery in ancient Rome wasn't primarily racial but economic. If you couldn't pay your debts, you could be sold into slavery. This might be why Paul writes what he does in verse 19; he seems to be explaining why he is employing the imagery of slavery.

19 I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.

The NIV translates the first line of this verse with, "I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations." In other words, if he didn't use the imagery of slavery they (and we) probably wouldn't be able to understand what he was saying. He points out that before coming to Christ, "you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness." There was a time when they didn't think twice about presenting the members of their bodies to sin as instruments of impurity and lawlessness. And of course, this resulted in "further lawlessness." You've probably noticed that sin breeds more sin.

But now that they were new creations in Christ, Paul writes, "so now present your members as slaves to righteousness." This echoes what we saw in verse 13 last week. Since we were bought with a price we now belong exclusively to God; this includes the members of our bodies. Instead of being enslaved to impurity, the members of our bodies are to be slaves of righteousness (i.e., righteous living). And of course, this resulted in "sanctification" - becoming progressively more holy. The term sanctification has the same root as the term "holy," which denotes something that is set apart. In an absolute sense, God alone is holy (see Isaiah 6). Therefore, as we continually present the members of our body to God as instruments of righteousness, it only make sense that we would progressively become more like God who is holy.

In chapter 12 Paul will write something similar:

1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

At the direction of our renewed minds, we employ the members of our bodies to do God's will.

In Romans 6 Paul continues to make his case when he writes:

20 For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 21 Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death.

The basic principle behind this verse is that “No one can serve two masters.” Jesus made that statement in regard to God and money in Matthew 6. The idea is that if you are a slave of Master #1, then Master #2 has no “say” in your life. When the Romans were slaves of sin, they didn’t answer to God and to righteousness because they had another master. Paul points out that the outcome of that way of life is death. Ultimately he’s talking about eternal death in contrast to eternal life (verses 22 and 23).

When Paul writes that they were now “ashamed” of the things they did when they were enslaved to sin, he’s not saying that they lived in self-condemnation and self-loathing. He is referring to the healthy shame that acknowledges that some of our actions really do grieve the heart of God. Healthy shame is evidence of a healthy conscience. This healthy shame acknowledges that fruit of being a slave of sin is death, not life.

Paul finishes the contrast in verses 22 and 23:

22 But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The term translated “benefit” in verses 21 and 22 is normally translated “fruit.” Paul is describing the natural byproduct of being enslaved to God: sanctification - becoming progressively more holy. The outcome or end product of sanctification is eternal life. The New Testament speaks of eternal life both as something that we now possess but also as something that we fully inherit on the last day. The progression is from presenting the members of our bodies to God as instruments of righteousness to sanctification to eternal life.

Lest anybody thinks that we somehow earn or deserve eternal life because of our sanctification, Paul summarizes in verse 23, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Death is something we deserve because of our sin; it’s the paycheck we’ve earned by our sin. But eternal life is a free gift of God; it’s pure grace in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I hope that this passage gives us a fresh vision for holiness/sanctification. Sometimes we think of holiness as being rigid and serious and probably not much fun. But Paul depicts holiness as an obvious way to live our lives. Since we’ve been freed from sin and made alive to God (past tense) and since we are headed for eternal life with God (future tense), we should live for God in the present tense. Living for God involves employing the specific members of our bodies to do His will.

A Case Study: Ephesians 4:29

In our time remaining I want us to think about how we might practically live out what we've been talking about today. As a case study let's consider our speech. Quite often the Bible speaks of "the tongue" as the member of our body that represents our speech. Few people would argue with Proverbs 18:21 which says, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." Our words are incredibly powerful for good or evil. James 3 gives this analysis of the tongue:

8 But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; 10 from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.

Our tongues should be set apart exclusively for God (like Brenda's scissors). In light of this Scripture, let's consider what Paul teaches about the tongue in Ephesians 4:29.

29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, that it may give grace to those who hear.

The word translated "unwholesome" literally means "rotten." On a couple of occasions Jesus spoke of "bad/rotten" fruit coming from a "bad/rotten" tree. Paul uses the term to describe words that are defiled or unwholesome. Such "unwholesome words" could be anything from cursing people to slander to harsh or unkind ways of speaking to others. Just as you wouldn't intentionally put something rotten in your mouth, you shouldn't let anything rotten come out of your mouth. We should no longer present our tongues to sin as instruments of unrighteousness.

True to his pattern, Paul doesn't merely tell us what **not** to say; it's not enough to "not sin" with our words. Paul goes on to state positively what our words should accomplish:

29 . . . but [speak] only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, that it may give grace to those who hear.

Notice the end result: we give grace/gifts to people through our words. This is a challenging idea, isn't it? We don't often think about why we talk. We just talk. We say whatever comes to mind - good or bad, encouraging or sarcastic, shallow or profound. And then we follow up whatever comes out of our mouth with the disclaimer, "I'm just being honest" - as if honesty trumps everything else that's true about our speech.

Paul had a very different vision for what our words should be and do. His vision was for our words to give grace. After a conversation with me, instead of people feeling like I've taken something away **from** them, they should feel like I've given something **to** them.

Specifically, Paul says that we should restrict our words and speak **only** those that are “good for edification according to the need of the moment.” To edify means to “build up”; words that edify somehow help build others up into the persons that God wants them to be. Paul clarifies further when he says “according to the need of the moment.” He’s talking about using our words exclusively for God’s purposes - holiness of speech.

When you think about it, this is an incredibly intentional, deliberate use of words. We first seek to identify the need of the person to whom we’re talking, and then we seek to meet that need (partially, at least) through our words. The need may be encouragement; somebody may lack courage to do what is right. The need may be for counsel; the other person might need a wise perspective on how to proceed. The need may be for understanding; they only need to know, “Somebody understands me.” They may need correction; their thinking or their behavior may be misguided or destructive. We identify the need and then seek to meet that need through our words. In this way we build others up and give gifts to others through our words.

I’d encourage you to devote yourself this week to an exercise in holiness of speech. Seek to use your speech exclusively for meeting the need of the moment, building others up, giving gifts. Instead of saying whatever you want to say however you want say it, see your speech as set apart exclusively for God’s purposes. [I have a feeling I’m going to be thinking a lot more and speaking a lot less this week; as James said, I need to be “quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.”]

I think you’ll find that Jesus was right when He said that we speak from whatever fills our hearts: angry words come from anger in the heart, gracious words come from gracious hearts, etc. And so as we present our tongues to God as instruments of righteousness, we’ll have to renew our minds and trust God to renovate our hearts. It’s hard work, but it’s the way of holiness. As we habitually present the members of our bodies to God, we progressively become more holy (like God). Since everybody serves somebody, we are called to demonstrate in word and deed what it looks like to be bondservants of the one, true living God.