

From Slaves of Sin to Slaves of Righteousness

"Thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness." Romans 6:17-18

In this verse, Paul thanked God that the believers who wholeheartedly obeyed his form of teaching (or doctrine) were transformed from slaves of sin into slaves of righteousness. This result is so remarkable that we must ask, "What was Paul's teaching that miraculously changed the lives of those who believed and acted on it?" According to the Bible, Paul taught the purpose and power of Christ's crucifixion (1 Corinthians 2:2; Galatians 3:1). This teaching, which Paul called the gospel of "Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:23)," is the foundational doctrine that Paul, as an apostle and master builder, laid brick by brick (precept by precept) so Christ's church might be established and built up by this truth (1 Corinthians 3:10-11).

Let us take a closer look at this truth of the cross. Before we were saved, we were slaves of sin. Our sinful nature was like a "sin factory" within us that continuously produced sinful attitudes and actions. How did God miraculously free us from this "wretched man" who was enslaved to sin? In order to redeem us from sin, God had to free us not only from the penalty of sin, He had to free us from the power of sin. Therefore, to make us a new creation in Christ, God had to first deal with the old creation (our sinful Adam nature). By Christ's death on the cross, God not only dealt with the fruit of the old creation (our sinful actions), He also destroyed its root (our sinful nature/the sin factory). "For we know that our old man of sin was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin (*our sinful nature*) would be destroyed, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin (Romans 6:6-7)." By the divine operation of the cross, God not only crucified our sinful nature with Christ; He removed it and replaced it with Christ's nature

when we received His risen Son as Lord into our hearts (Colossians 1:27; 2:11-12). This is the doctrine of the cross that Paul laid down as the only true foundation for the church. This fundamental Christian doctrine is summarized as: Christ died for us and included us in His death so that He might live in us. This is the truth that Paul practiced and preached: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me; and the life that I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God (Galatians 2:20)."

Mere mental assent to this doctrine (of our co-crucifixion with Christ) is not enough for us to experience the reality and power of Christ living in us. We must wholeheartedly obey (believe and act on) this foundational truth in order to experience freedom from the power of sin. Of course, this is only possible if God has given us divine revelation to know this doctrinal truth in our heart (and not just our mind). For example, just as we needed God's divine revelation to know that *Christ died for us* (Romans 5:8) so that we might believe and act on this truth with a conviction that resulted in our salvation, we also need God's divine revelation to know that *we died with Christ* (Romans 6:8) so that we might believe and act on this truth with an inward conviction that results in our sanctification. God knew that there was no way we could possibly overcome sin if we still had a sinful nature after we were saved. This is why He removed our sinful nature through Christ's death on the cross and exchanged it with His Son's nature. However, if we have never heard this truth or if we do not believe and act on this truth, then God cannot set us free from the power of sin so that we can be slaves of righteousness (John 8:32-36). The Bible says, "For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith (Hebrews 4:2)."

Becoming a slave of righteousness does not mean that we are perfectly sinless (see 1 John 1:8). However, it does mean that we practice righteousness instead of practicing sin. Jesus said that whoever practices sin is still a slave of sin

(John 8:34). And John taught, "No one who abides in Him keeps on sinning. No one who practices sin has seen Him or known Him. Dear children, the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil... by this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God (1 John 3:6-10)." What does it mean to practice righteousness? It means we develop a habit of living *by faith* in the truth of the cross. Jesus said, "My brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice (Luke 8:21)." Although we no longer have a sinful nature after we are born of the Spirit, our mind still needs to be renewed and converted by the truth of God's word. It all starts with our believing what Christ has accomplished for us on the cross. Our sinful nature, which was central to who we were and at the core of our rebellion toward God, was removed when we received Christ. If we believe and act on this truth, we will be able to walk in ever-increasing freedom from entangling sins. Our belief in this divine truth empowers us to carry our own cross and lose our unconverted soul-life for Christ's sake (Mark 9:34-35). Each day, we can by faith "put to death" our old soulish way of thinking and acting and put on Christ's way of thinking and acting (Ephesians 4:22-24). This daily practice of renewing our mind and losing our soul-life for Christ's sake results in our sanctification and transformation. Paul wrote, "Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is (Romans 12:2)."

In the natural, we practice something new until we learn it by heart. In the same way, if we practice righteousness (our new way of life) by believing and acting on this truth that we no longer have a sinful nature, the reality of the cross of Christ will be indelibly imprinted in our hearts. We will then wholeheartedly serve God as slaves of righteousness and the outcome is eternal life.

"But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit resulting in sanctification, and the outcome is eternal life." Romans 6:22