

Which Fruit? Which Finality? Romans 6:20-23

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Steve DeWitt

Here we go with the final message from Romans 6. Romans 6 is the first of the three greatest consecutive chapters in the Bible. The Amen Corner of Scripture.

What's Amen Corner? Golfers know. It's the best three consecutive holes in golf at Augusta National Golf Club (see picture below).



The host of the Masters Tournament. Back nine. Holes 11, 12, and 13. If I could play any three holes in the world, it would be Augusta National 11, 12, and 13. *Augusta 11* is a challenging par 4. Hilly. Incredibly difficult green that slopes toward the pond on the left. Like chapter 6, challengingly wonderful. *Augusta 12*. Little par 3. Terrifying par 3. Majestic par 3. Like Romans 7. *Augusta 13*, a sweeping, par 5, dogleg right to left with trees, Rae's Creek, pine needles, and jaw dropping Azaleas. Romans 8. The best chapter in the Bible. 6. 7. 8. The Amen Corner of Scripture.

We are wrapping up chapter 6 with two more chapters of wonderfulness to come.

Chapter 6 begins with Paul refuting an accusation made against his teaching of salvation by justification by grace through faith in Jesus. His critics said, *If we are saved by grace, then let's get on with sinning a lot*. More sin, more grace. More grace, more glory to God. Paul is appalled. Why? Paul understood that our union with Jesus meant that when Jesus died for our sin, it forever changed our relationship to sin. To see grace as an excuse for more sinning only reveals that sin is still the stealth Darth Lord of our hearts. We are its slaves.

But Jesus' victory over sin means our emancipation from sin. Not the presence of sin or the struggle with sin, but certainly the domination of sin. Those shackles have been broken. By faith, Jesus is enthroned in our hearts and lives. Now when we sin, it is a contradiction to our essential identity in Christ.

"For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 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. 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. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:20-23, ESV)

As he has been doing through this chapter, Paul lays out two dramatically different paths of life: two different identities: slaves to sin in verse 20, slaves to God in verse 22.

Slaves to Sin – They are "Free" to Sin (Romans 6:20-21)

"For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness." (Romans 6:20)

The natural person apart from God's grace is free to sin. Understand what he means. The only nature an unbeliever has is a sin nature. They don't have the Holy Spirit; they are not born again. Sin is their "freedom." That is not to say they don't do good things, many do, and do so for many reasons. Societal expectations. Fear of negative consequences. It feels good to an image bearer to be philanthropic, help in causes, look out for the little guy, etc.

They may make moral choices, but they are "free" to not do so. They are free from the internal struggle to obey God or his moral law. While they are free from righteousness, they are not free from sin's consequences. *"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."* (Romans 6:21)

Paul points out two devastating realities for slavery to sin: its fruit and its finality. *"What fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed?"* It's a rhetorical question. The answer is, nothing good. Part of the problem with sin is that it always looks better before you sin than after you sin. The untouchable fruit in the garden of Eden looks good *before you sin*. Bathsheba looks good *before you sin*. 30 pieces of silver *sounds good before you betray the Son of God*. Sin spends a lot on makeup. But after you sin it doesn't feel like you expect.

2 Samuel 13 tells the story of Amnon who is sick with lust for his beautiful half-sister Tamar. He is literally sick that he cannot have her. One day, he violates her. And the moment after he does, the text says, *"he hated her more than he had loved her."* (2 Samuel 13:15) That is the universal experience of sin. *What have I done? Why did I do that?* Beer commercials are always rave parties with gorgeous people drinking like fish. You'll never see a beer commercial showing people puking in toilets or dying in car wrecks.

Sin has to hide its consequences, or we would never rationally choose to sin. Sin hides its fruit. Paul says, *where was sin taking you in your life?* We might say, *how was that working out for you?* Badly. Painfully.

The second fruit is *death*. *"For the end of those things is death."* (Romans 6:21) The path of sin always leads somewhere. We try to convince young people of this. That little decision to be sneaky, to shade the truth, whatever. It is the first step on a path. The path seems popular or pleasurable, but it leads to other steps, descending steps toward death. Death is

not just physical death, although it includes that. Death is a present reality in the sense that sin hollows us out. It dehumanizes us. It empties our life of just a little more meaning. It creates more unsatisfiable cravings.

Let me give you an example. Our country is battling a heroin epidemic and someone's financing billboards and social media posts showing people before heroin and after. It's startling to see its effect. The addicts before looked normal, even good. After, they look terrible, and in their eyes, you see desperation. *The end of sin is death.*

I remember an overnight basketball trip I took as a teenager. I attended a Christian high school. I remember one of my teammates that I shared the overnight room with telling me that he was hoping to have sex with his girlfriend. I remember him justifying it by saying, the Bible does say, "*Stolen water is sweet.*" If I had been more mature, I could have finished the verse for him, "*...But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.*" (Proverbs 9:17-18).

There is always this dimension of sin that it is a small step toward hell. Final hell someday and hellish, death-like results today. This is the folly of sin. All the heartache, despair, depression, loss, emptiness in the world are dying steps on the downward slope to eternal death.

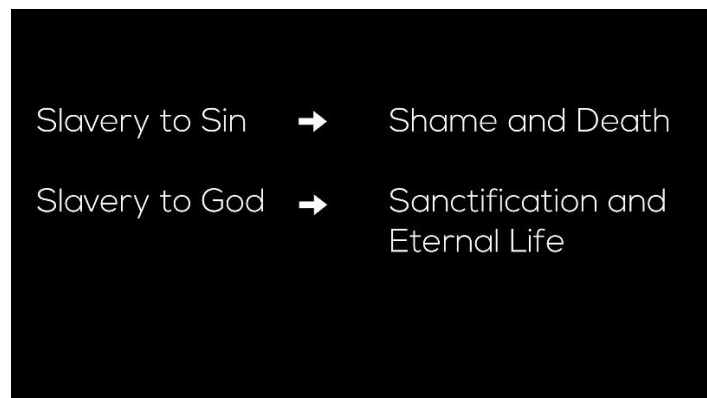
The word for death in the Greek is *Thanatos*. You may not know that, but if you are into *The Avengers*, you know that the ultimate bad guy in *The Avengers* universe is a guy named Thanos. Now I have the Comic-Con crowd with me. Do you know who Thanos is? Wherever Thanos goes, what happens? Everyone dies. The comic strip borrowed his name from the Greek. Thanos is essentially the same word here. Death. Everywhere Thanos goes, everybody dies. Wherever sin goes, death is there too.

We need to think deeply about the path we are on today. Where are these choices leading me? What will be the consequence? Sin is a destroyer. Sin is anarchy in our lives. How we need to see that in our ministries as entire families are destroyed because one member of the family chooses to bow to Thanos.

Slaves to God – We are Free NOT to Sin (Romans 6:22-23)

"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)

There is an internal logic and flow here. Slavery to sin has a fruit and a finality. Salvation through Christ has a fruit and a finality.



We will much further develop what **sanctification** is, but to give you a quick definition, it means, **becoming what we are**. Becoming in practice what I am in position before God.



Justification declares me righteous. Sanctification slowly makes me righteous. Justification is instantaneous. Sanctification is a lifelong process with the goal to conform every part of our lives to the life example of Jesus (Romans 8:29).

"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." (Romans 8:29, ESV)



All three of these are incomplete definitions but they give you the sense of it. Becoming like Jesus is really exciting if Jesus is wonderful to you. For every sports fan who wears his favorite athlete's jersey or woman who decorates her home like Joanna Gaines or teen whose look is like whoever the current "it" person is, we see the connection between valuing someone and wanting to be like them.

For a Christian, who is more wonderful than Jesus? To hear that God, by the Holy Spirit, is doing a Christological makeover of the interior and exterior of our lives is great news.

The fruit of slavery to God is sanctification and the finality of that fruit is eternal life. For Paul, eternal life is a future reference. Jesus describes it as a present reality more akin to Paul's "new life."¹ The broad point is that this is wonderful particularly when held in contrast to where sin takes us. Sin is a step toward hell and all its terrifying realities. Slaves to God walk the path of righteousness, each step toward fullness of life that goes on forever. Here is his summary:

¹ See Colin Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, p. 287.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23). Sin pays wages. God gives gifts. The wages of sin is death. The word "wages" means *paycheck; payday*. In the words of one famous sermon, sin is *payday someday*.² The holiness of God requires payment for sin. Ever since Genesis 3 we have been under the bondage of physical death and apart from the grace of God, certain eternal death. For all of sin's temporary pleasures, there is no one in hell glad they lived that way. Hell is eternal regret. Sin's payday is horrendous. God's wrath is forever. All of it earned, like a paycheck. All sinners are paid in full.

But in salvation, God gives us what we don't deserve. It is no paycheck. This is generosity. This is gift-giving. It is not earned. It is "free."

One reason God is a better master is that sin pays wages, but God gives gifts. Who would you rather have in your life? Someone who gives paybacks or someone who gives gifts? I find this parallel in marriage. It is so easy to fall into transactional payment-based marriage. *You do this for me and I will do this for you. Or to think, for me to get what I want, I have to do such and such and then she or he will do what I want.* Transactional love is a huge problem in marriage. Transactional marriage includes negatively transactional too. *You did this to me, so therefore, I am justified to do this to you. Your unkindness to me means I get to be unkind to you. You hurt me and now I will hurt you.* Wages and payback. Marriage suffocates when it turns transactional because marriage's whole basis is not the transactional relationship between Jesus and the church but rather the love relationship between Jesus and the church. Love doesn't keep score. Love keeps no record of wrongs. Love keeps no record of rights either. There's no scorekeeping with love because love is not transactional. Love is one-way giving, no matter what, all the time, till death do us part.

But if one or both of you are a scorekeeper, you always are running a deficit because the only way you can get back to even is to be wonderful more than you are average or negative. But we are sinners. Sinners always run a deficit. Every spouse runs a deficit. The only thing that balances the books in marriage is grace and love.

Would you rather have marital wages or marital gifts? By this I don't mean wrapped presents. I mean forgiveness. Love covering over an offense. The grace required to hit the restart button. One is a transactional relationship, the other is the gospel on display in marriage. This is one way the gospel resources Christian marriages.

The gospel is not that we get eternal life because this is the transactional rewards plan God has us on. No, it is a free gift. It is a gracious gift. It is an unearned gift. It flows from the kindness and mercy and love of God. Satan has no mercy. Sin has no kindness.

"Eternal life is a grace gift. Even if Christian persons managed to live an entirely sanctified life, this would not oblige God to reward them with eternal life, for they will have done more than what was required of them. Thus, Paul does not see eternal life as some sort of quid pro quo for holy living in this lifetime. Salvation is indeed a matter of grace received through faith, from start to finish." (Ben Witherington)³

See the end. All of this is "in Christ Jesus our Lord." What makes all this possible? Union with Christ. We are "in Christ Jesus our Lord." I will always remember teaching through Romans 6 as my personal discovery of the awesome doctrine of our union with Christ.

² "Payday Someday," Robert Greene Lee, *Payday Someday and Other Sermons*.

³ Ben Witherington as quoted by Colin Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, p. 286.

How Do We Apply This?

Let's draw this all together. The first application has to do with dealing with temptation. Remember Paul asks, "*what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed?*" (Romans 6:21) Where was that sin taking you? How was it going, that sinful life?

When seized by temptation, begin with the end in mind

One of the ways to battle a temptation is to ask Paul's question, what fruit am I going to get from this? How will I feel? What will be the consequences? This requires a level of mature thinking, but it's always helpful.

This has been a lesson I've learned with battling lust. How many times do you have to let your eyes go where they shouldn't and then feel shame before you learn when tempted, *I'm going to feel terrible if I look at that, fantasize about that, linger on that?* At some point we have to realize, this is going to end badly, so why do it? I have found bringing this to mind as I'm tempted, helps me say no to the temptation.

Similarly, there are so many things I naturally don't want to do that I've learned are great after I do them. It's the lesson of physical exercise. You almost never want to, but after you do, you're always glad you did. Obedience. Service to God. Giving. Forgiving. All these have residuals that are wonderful. The key is to *begin with the end in mind*. Regarding temptation to sin, think, *I'm going to feel terrible*. I'm not going to do what makes me feel terrible. Regarding aversion to doing what is right, bring to mind, *this will bless me. It will ennoble my life. It will be deeply meaningful. It will please God*. I will do it.

Our pursuit of slavery to righteousness should outpace sinners' slavery to sin

Think of all the effort sinners make worshiping their idols. For money, sinners will work their bodies to death. For fame, an athlete will pour all his energy and self-discipline. For career advance they will sacrifice their families and children. On and on. Sinners are very enthusiastic about sin. I say our enthusiasm for God should be greater than sinners' enthusiasm for sin. Why? The *fruit* is far better, and the *finality* is far greater. May we never let sinners out hustle us. Our path is much, much better.

Which Fruit? Which Finality?

Surely, this is the key point of Romans 6:23. It is why it is included in the famous evangelistic Romans Road. It clearly spells out two ways to live. Two *paths* to follow. Two *destinies* to experience. I must ask you, which path are you on? One seems more immediately gratifying, but leads to hell. The other seems less attainable, but leads to heaven. It is only attained by repentance from the life of sin and personal trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior. That's not a popular truth in our current society but I assure you, it's a very popular truth in heaven. Which fruit are you living? Toward which finality are you walking?

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