

Romans 6:21-23

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Paul is asking the Roman Christians: What good did it do for you to live in sin? Was it really good? It kept you from righteousness. Worse yet, the outcome of sinful living is death.

The key thing Paul focuses on here is what sort of life provides the best *benefit*. Verse 22 states clearly where the best benefit for us lies, escaping death and living life. He asks the believers *what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed (v 21)?* Paul concludes that *the outcome of those things is death (v 21)*.

Any married person can participate in adultery. It will kill their marriage. They can participate in selfishness. It will kill their partnership. Anyone can participate in extortion. It will kill their business and their freedom. The end of those things is death.

Paul has established that slavery to sin leads to death. He continues: *But now having been freed from sin (v 22)*. *But now* is in the present tense, the Roman believers are free from sin, *and enslaved to God*—again, Paul is illustrating the power every Christian has to choose. Freed from sin, becoming slaves to God. The Roman Christians were living lives of obedience to God. They had already submitted themselves to Him as slaves, which Paul commends them for (Romans 1:8, 6:17).

The choice for all Christians is “Who’s my master going to be *at this moment?*” We have a true choice because we have been empowered with the Spirit that allows us to overcome our sinful nature. Is your master going to be your sinful nature, the world, Satan? They’re all part of the same league. Or is your master going to be Christ and the Spirit that He’s placed within you (Romans 5:5)? You’ve been set free from sin. Why would you want to go back to something that kills you? You can, but you have the power not to. Why wouldn’t you exercise it?

Paul is arguing against accusations claiming he taught that sinning was fine since Christians are under grace (Romans 3:8). There are competing Jewish “authorities” in Rome whom Paul is answering, to defend the truth of his ministry, and to make clear to the Roman believers that he does not endorse sinning. He explains to the readers of his letter why sinning is profoundly harmful and self-destructive, even though Christians are under God’s grace rather than the law. He illustrates that sin keeps us from harmonious living and leads us to experience death.

Paul has already thanked God (v 17) that the Roman Christians are currently living obediently to God and have enslaved themselves to Him, rejecting sinful living. Further on in verse 22, Paul communicates the wonderful result of their obedience by what happens when a believer becomes a slave to God, having been *enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life*.

Eternal life (in the Greek, “*aiōnios zōē*”) is a phrase that’s used to represent a gift: everlasting life implanted in us when we believe on Jesus. The same phrase is also used as a result, a benefit, that we have in our lives as we walk by faith, which is what Paul is talking about here. It is also

used in Romans 2:7 as a reward *to* those “who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life.”

In this passage, eternal life is a reward. It means life as God intended it, as contrasted by the death of living for yourself (Romans 1:28–32).

Paul is talking about the benefit, the result of what we do in this world, when we live the life that God has given us. When we live this resurrected newness of life (v 4), we actually have life as it was intended.

Verse 23 is typically used as a verse describing when a person first believes in Jesus and is first justified in the presence of God; this is a legitimate application of the verse, but in context of this letter to the Roman believers, Paul is addressing how we can live righteously or justly in daily life:

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The *wages of sin is death*—all the time. This is true whether it is eternal separation from God for the unbeliever or it is a disconnection from our relationship with a spouse or friend for the believer. For any person who makes sin their master, it will always lead to some form of death.

Throughout Chapter 6, Paul illustrates the current reality of the Christians to whom he is writing: we’ve got to choose to serve something.

We can choose the world:

- Do we want to serve and become a slave to our own appetites of sin, or the world’s system, what the world says we must do?
- Or what Satan says that we must do?

If we choose the ways of the world, we get the consequence of the world, which is death (v 23). We are separated from God’s (good) design. Therefore, we are subjected to futility, exploitation, and loss.

The alternative to the ways of the world is to follow the ways of God. If we do this we choose to become a slave of Jesus Christ.

- It is He who made the world.
- It is He who has our best interests at heart.
- And it is He who has given us the power to overcome the harsh taskmaster of sin.

For the Roman believers, as verse 17 shows, Paul is thankful that they are already acting obediently (from the heart) to what they have been taught, becoming slaves of righteousness. But Paul desires that they continue in this way, and not get thrown off course by the competing Jewish “authorities” who desire the Roman believers fall under their sway and add religious observance as a necessity to achieve righteousness.

This is Paul's argument: Can we sin? Of course we can, and we do. Will grace abound? Of course it will. No one can out-sin God's love (Colossians 2:14).

So then should we lean into that reality of God's infinite grace in order to choose to live in sin? No, that's crazy! Sin leads to death, loss, and slavery. The only reason we would choose it is because we have been deceived by Satan's false framing. Just as he did to Eve, Satan frames death as life. But it is not. Death is death.

Paul desires that we have a renewed mind, that sees sin for what it is (Romans 12:1-2). When we see this reality, we will not desire it; sin is death. We have the resurrection life of Jesus that we are able to live. It leads us away from death and into life. Not only can we have fulfillment through living in God's (good) design, we can have amazing rewards for walking in faithfulness (1 Corinthians 2:9; Revelation 3:21). Paul's argument is that when we see reality as it is, the only reasonable choice is to choose life, which comes by walking in faith (that God's ways are for our best).

Biblical Text

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. 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.