

# The Free Gift of Eternal Life

📖 Romans 6:20-23

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**Q:** Isn't yielding to the Holy Spirit a form of "let go and let God"?

**A:** I don't want to confuse here. The expression "let go and let God" comes from the Keswick movement and they had a particular way of using that expression. It's what they mean that I am rejecting because I don't want to be understood as holding to Keswick sanctification. What they mean by "let go and let God" is that the believer needs to make a once for all decision to let go and let God. Once a believer comes to that crisis decision he becomes a surrendered Christian and is brought into the higher life. By contrast, they do not mean that the believer is in a daily struggle and needs to daily let go by making a positive presentation of his members before God. They reject the concept of a daily struggle between the old sin nature and the new nature. So I'm rejecting the expression "let go and let God" because of its association with Keswick theology. If you want to use it to refer to a daily letting go that's fine, I just think it's better to say that sanctification is a daily struggle and therefore there is a daily need to present ourselves to Him.

We've been developing principles around sanctification in Romans 6 and we'll finish the chapter today. Romans 6:23 is a famous verse. I'm sure you've heard it. It is often used in a gospel presentation. Let me state up front that Romans 6:23 is stating a general principle that can be applied to unbelievers or believers. So it can be used in principle in a gospel presentation to unbelievers. But in the context Paul is applying it to believers. And his point is that when the believer sins the wages of his sin are death, meaning he has an experience that is characterized by the negative effects of sin such as disharmony, inner turmoil, psychological frustration, chaos of the heart, et al.; but when the believer lives by faith he enjoys the free gift of eternal life, meaning he has an experience that is characterized by all the positive effects of living by faith such as joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, et. al. Not all believers are experiencing the joys of the free gift of eternal life. So what has to be understood is that eternal life is not a synonym for being a believer or going to heaven. Eternal life is not even chiefly a description of living forever. Eternal life is chiefly about a quality of life that is enjoyed and when in a sanctification context, as here, eternal life is an abundant quality of life that is enjoyed by the believer as he lives by faith. We'll get into that more later but I alert you to it up front so you can be thinking about it as we work through the text.

In Romans 6 and 7 Paul insists there are two basic results of our co-death, co-burial and co-resurrection with Christ. The first result is in Rom 6:1-13. Here Paul teaches that due to our co-death, co-burial and co-resurrection with Christ we are released from slavery to the sinful nature or disposition. This release is a once-for-all release since it is based on the once-for-all death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Consequently, the sinful nature will never be our master again. Legally we have been released and have no obligation to the sin nature, though we can present ourselves to the sin nature and experience death, a separation from the joy, peace, goodness and stability that God provides when we present ourselves to Him for obedience. The second result is in Romans 6:14 where he repeats the first result and adds the second; namely, that due to our co-death, co-burial and co-resurrection with Christ we are released from the law. He says in v 14, "...sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace." This is Paul's way of explaining why the sinful nature shall not be our master. The sin nature shall never be our master because we are not under law but under grace. If we put ourselves under the governing principle of Law then we will fail because the Law merely stirs up our sinful desires. So as long as we put ourselves under the governing principle of grace we will enjoy freedom. It's Paul's use of the word "under" that tips us off to the fact that he is referring to law and grace as governing principles of sanctification. He bluntly states that the believer's relationship to the law has been terminated. You are not "under law" as a governing principle in sanctification but "under grace." You cannot be sanctified if you put yourself under law. He does not state whether this is the external Mosaic Law or the broader principle of law but in 7:4-7 he explains his statement in 6:14 by stating it is the external Mosaic Law that he has in mind. So what Paul is saying is that the believer is not under the external Mosaic Law as a governing principle for sanctification. He has been released from the Mosaic Law. The truth will be expanded in Romans 7:1-6 by the analogy of a wife whose husband dies thus freeing her to marry another. Lopez says, "Chapter 7:1-6 returns to the issue raised in 6:14 about the Law's termination."<sup>1</sup> Showers agrees saying, "Scholars who deal with the antecedent of Romans 7 are convinced that Romans 6:14 is that antecedent." Therefore, what Paul states abruptly in 6:14 relative to our release from the law as a governing principle of sanctification he will pick up again in Romans 7. In the meantime Romans 6:15-23 is an aside in light of some confusion that may arise from the statement in 6:14 that we are not under law but under grace. What might one conclude by such a statement? That if we are free from law then that means we are free to be lawless. This is what Paul is refuting in Romans 6:15-23. It is not true that being released from law means we are free to be lawless. In all reality, when we sin it is because we have put ourselves under the sin nature as our master when we had no legal obligation to do so. When we do we are not enjoying freedom but slavery. To sin is slavery. In verse 15 Paul bluntly states that the thought that not being under law means we may be lawless is a ridiculous thought. Grace principles of sanctification do not permit lawlessness. He asks, "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!" In verse 16 Paul shows that you are a slave to the one we present ourselves to; either of the sin nature resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness." In other words, there is no freedom in living a sinful life because the presentation of your members to the sinful nature makes you a slave of the sinful nature. The end of this way of living for a Christian is death; the absence of joy, peace and goodness. On the other hand, the presentation of your

members to obedience makes you a slave of obedience. The end of this way of living for a Christian is life; the presence of joy, peace and goodness. Verse 23 is just stating the principle underlying the truth value of these prior statements. In verse 17 Paul comments positively on the Roman believer's presentation. While they had once been slaves of the sin nature, they had become obedient from the heart to the grace form of teaching to which God entrusted them and having been once for all freed from the sin nature, they had become slaves of righteousness. In verse 19 Paul clarifies why he is using the master-slave analogy from common Greco-Roman culture and encourages them to continue in the process of sanctification. "For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness," now do the opposite, "so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification." The point is to present our members as slaves to righteousness increasingly so that our sanctification will increase. In verse 20 Paul returns to their lives as unbelievers, "For when you were slaves of the sin nature, you were free with regard to the righteousness nature." As unbelievers we had no righteous disposition, no inner desire to please God. We could not be bound to such desires. Now that we are believers, however, we do have that righteous disposition and we are legally bound to fulfill such desires by daily presenting our members as slaves to righteousness. This is the only time believers enjoy true freedom, true life.

We pick up today in verse 21 where we keep the context in mind. Paul is continuing to correct the incorrect notion that a believer may have if he concludes that being free from law means he is free to be lawless. Paul's point is that you are not free to be lawless because there are deadly consequences of living a life of lawlessness, consequences within this life. In verse 21 Paul asks about their lives of lawlessness as unbelievers and how they think about that lawlessness now. The Greek is quite different from the English in the NASB so I will ask you to follow my translation. Paul asks, "What sort of fruit were you obligated to bear then?" The NASB moves the punctuation away from what it is in the Greek text and asks, "What benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed?" I prefer my translation because it honors the punctuation and sets up the contrast Paul is trying to make. So Paul simply asks, "What sort of fruit were you obligated to bear then? Concerning which now you are ashamed because the end of that is death." To justify this re-translation, note that the Greek word translated **benefit** in the NASB is *καρπος* which we would translate as "fruit" or "outcome." The verb translated **deriving** is *εχειτε* and in the lexicon says, "to be obligated to bear." It is an imperfect tense which is one of the past tenses in Greek. It means continual action in past time. What Paul is asking is, "What sort of fruit were you continually obligated to bear then?" What does he mean by "then?" He means when they were unbelievers, free from a righteous disposition. Since as unbelievers they were obligated to the sinful nature as master then obviously they were also obligated to bear the fruit of the sin nature which is personal sin. An unbeliever can bear nothing other than personal sin. This is another way of saying an unbeliever can do nothing to please God. It is also another way of saying an unbeliever has no merit with God. Unbelievers simply cannot please God. If they could then they would merit the merit of Christ. If they could the good would be coming from their sinful nature. This is impossible.

Concerning the sinful fruit that they were continually obligated to bear Paul says, "Concerning which now you are ashamed because the end of that is death." By "now" Paul means now that they are believers. Now that they are believers they "are ashamed" of the sinful fruit they bore as unbelievers. The Greek word **ashamed** is *επαισχυνεσθε* and means "to experience a painful feeling or sense of loss of status because of some particular event or activity." His point is that after we become believers we sometimes look back on our previous life and are ashamed because of how it might affect our future status. We know we are eternally secure but the time spent squandering our lives living in sin was time not well spent living for righteousness. He is using this as an apologetic to keep us from living by the sin nature now that we are believers. If we are ashamed now of what we did then we should realize that if we do the same sins now we will utterly be ashamed of them.

Why are we ashamed of them now? Because "the end of those things is death." What does Paul mean by **death**? By **death** it is obvious that Paul is not talking about eternal death, though that is the destiny of those who are unbelievers, but rather an experience of death that we faced as unbelievers from bearing sinful fruit. Whenever there is sin there is an experience of death. There is the loss of joy, peace, goodness and harmony. That is what is meant by death. Paul is talking about an experience of death as a consequence of sin. By the same token, death is something believers can experience when we sin; not eternal death, but the absence of joy, peace, goodness and stability because we have lost fellowship with God. Any time and every time we choose to live lawless lives we face an experience of death. Lopez says, "While death for non-Christians is eternal, it also includes a present experience of death that sin always brings that Paul believes Christians (though eternally secure; cf 8:28-39) can experience if they do not obey his commands (vv 12-13, 19; 8:12-13)." Clearly then, being released from the law does not mean freedom to lawlessness. If you choose to live a lawless life as a Christian then you will face the same consequences a non-Christian faces for living a lawless life. Lawlessness always results in undesirable consequences. We should, therefore, no longer sin.

In verse 22 we have an exact contrast to verses 20-21. Here again, the liberties taken by the translation team of the NASB mask the dramatic contrast in the original Greek. Therefore, I'll be working from my translation and only refer to theirs to make corrections. "But now, having been freed from the sin nature and enslaved to God, you are obligated to bear fruit continually to sanctification, and the end, eternal life." By the word **now** Paul is referring to our lives as regenerate. As regenerate we have been freed from the sin nature and enslaved to God. We have a new master. God is our master and as such we are continually obligated to bear fruit to sanctification. This is phase two sanctification, which is experiential sanctification. Again, as far as a chart is concerned, Paul is saying that if we have the x axis and it refers to our growth and the y axis refers to time, then we are obligated to have a continual upward climb in sanctification. We don't always have a continual upward climb but that is what we are obligated to do. When we present ourselves to God there is continual good fruit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc...and tacked on to that he says "and the end," or "goal" eternal life, by which Paul means what? A rich enjoyment of the eternal life we possess or put in John's terms, the abundant life. It's an experience

now is the point I'm trying to make, just as the death in verse 21 was an experience so the eternal life here is an experience.

In verses 20-21 Paul was referring to our life then as slaves of the sin nature. In verse 22 he is referring to our life now as freed from the sin nature and enslaved to God. In verses 20-21 then we were obligated to bear sinful fruit. In verse 22 now we are obligated to bear sanctification fruit. And finally, in verses 20-21 then the end was an experience of death. In verse 22 now the end is an experience of eternal life.

Verse 23 merely states the general principle to prove that these things are true. **For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** Again, while the principle can be applied to unbelievers, Paul is making application in context to believers. His point is that we have a choice as believers of which way to live. This is not a once for all choice but a daily choice. Each day we choose to present our members to the sinful nature there is an act of personal sin that issues forth and the wages of that sin is death. This death is an experience lacking joy, peace, goodness and harmony with God because we are out of fellowship with Him. By sinning we are merely being paid the wage for sin. On the other hand, if we choose to present our members to God then there is an act of personal obedience that issues forth by the grace of God and the free gift of God is eternal life. The eternal life is an experience of joy, peace, patience, kindness, inner contentedness, etc...all the good things of life because we are in fellowship with Christ Jesus our Lord. It is really quite simple. Sin deals out the wages of death but faith results in an enjoyment of the gift of eternal life that is held in Jesus Christ our Lord.

In summary, in 6:15-23 Paul is taking an aside to address the possible wrong conclusion one might draw from his statement in verse 20 that the regenerate man's relationship to the Law has been terminated. Does this mean that the regenerate man is free to live lawlessly? The answer is an emphatic no. He is explaining that we now have a choice in who we will serve; either the old sin nature or the new righteous nature. In verse 20, while we were unregenerate we were slaves of the old sin nature. It was our master and we complied with its desires. At that time we had no obligation to do righteousness. In verse 21 Paul asks what fruit were we obligated to bear as unregenerate? There was only one kind of fruit, sinful fruit. Now as regenerate people we are ashamed of that fruit and have concern about how all that squandering of time might affect our status in the resurrection. Of course we are eternally secure but the amount of time we have to serve Him is limited. The end of that lifestyle we once lived was one of death. The mention of death in this context refers to an experience of death, one of inner frustration, turmoil and psychological problems as well the external chaos and suffering that our sin introduces into our lives and the lives of those associated with us. In verse 22 we are shown that there is another alternative for the regenerate man. Now we have been freed from the mastery of the sin nature and enslaved to God. We are now obligated to continually bear fruit in accordance with our new righteous nature, fruit that results in our experiential sanctification. As we do, the end is an enjoyment of the eternal life that we possess. Eternal life is more about the quality of life that we experience as one characterized by joy, inner contentment

and the relaxed mental attitude that comes about naturally as a result of righteousness. In verse 23 Paul explains that these two possible outcomes for the regenerate man are based in an eternal principle. The wages of serving the sin nature is death, always and everywhere, not just one lump sum at the end but periodically, each time we serve the sin nature we earn the wage of death. Sin always has negative consequences. It is never a good idea. On the other hand, the free gift of God is eternal life, always and everywhere, not just one lump sum at the end but periodically, each time we serve God by faith there is a fresh enjoyment of the gift of eternal life that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In conclusion, what can we learn? First, as regenerate people we now have a choice every day to serve the sin nature or to serve God. We did not have this choice as unregenerate. Then we could only choose to obey our sin nature. So now we have been freed, not to lawlessness but to serving God. Second, the things we did as unregenerate we are now ashamed of. Therefore we should no longer submit to the sin nature and do those things. If we do, of course, we will feel a sense of shame and will experience some loss at the judgment seat of Christ. Third, the end of all personal sin is an experience of death. Sin can never result in good. It only gives a negative return. It gives loss of joy, absence of inner contentment, the presence of a frustrated mental attitude. Fourth, as regenerate people we are now obligated to bear fruit to God. This fruit results in sanctification, the positive growth of the believer in his being set apart for the purposes of God. Fifth, the end of all sanctification fruit is an experience of eternal life. This experience is one of joy, inner contentment and a relaxed mental attitude. Sixth, the general principle Paul is applying is verse 23, that the wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life. The sin nature always deals forth death, but the grace of God always deals forth eternal life. This principle applies to unbelievers in an eternal way and to believers in a temporal way. Therefore we should make the choice every day to present our members to God as slaves to Him to bear fruit continually for Him and to our sanctification. This is the way to live a content life full of the most inner joy and a relaxed mental attitude.

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<sup>1</sup> Rene Lopez, *Roman's Unlocked*, p 143.