

August 7, 2010 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
Romans 6 “Not Under the Law” by Andy McDonald

The wonder, and joy, and excitement on the face of a child on Christmas morning is hard to beat! They are nearly bursting with anticipation at the mystery. What will be under the tree? What is inside those wrapped up packages?

But it isn't many Christmases into life before part of the excitement transitions from excitement about what they will receive to excitement about what they are giving—even if mom and dad supplied the money for the purchase of gift their child is “giving” them. Hopefully at an early stage of life the child catches and experiences the old adage, “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” And whether they have made something with their own hands, or carefully shopped to find “just the right gift” there is excitement in the gifting, both receiving and giving.

But part of Christmas is tainted by the concept of gifts with strings attached. We might call them puppet gifts because there is a sense that in both preparing for a time of gifting and then for maybe months past the giving the giver uses the gift to try and control another person.

I knew Christmas wasn't all about Santa, but still my life was affected by the song, you know... “He's making a list, and checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty and nice.”

And from an early age we are programmed to believe that gifts are for those who have been good—so be good for goodness sake....if you want a gift.

Today God will remind us through chapter 6 of Paul's letter to the Romans that there are only two ways to get something. Just two methods, two means to get something. Do you know what they are? Any idea of what the two ways are?

The first way we get something is to earn it. Our whole capitalistic economy is built on this concept and we see it illustrated in our regular living.

Whether it is money or property or reputation or expertise we come to those things by working for them—earning them.

I was talking about this concept and was challenged that we could discover something without earning it...but the reality is whether it is a serendipitous discovery just saying I discovered implies I did something from looking, to assembling a discovery team and going on a voyage to discover, which is working to earn the discovery.

Even stealing stuff is just a corrupt way of earning it. The whole heist takes work and planning and execution.

The other way to get stuff is to receive it as a gift. At first we may even wish to receive some great gift. But while it is fun to receive a gift there is in that reception a loss of control. You don't get to pick it—oh you might put it on a wish list, but if it is really a gift you probably have very little if any say in it.

We are all familiar with the reality that some gifts, while they look like gifts at first aren't really free gifts because strings are attached.

Have you ever been suckered into some “free gift” on TV! The infomercial is almost over and if you call now you can get your free whatever. S...o in a weak moment you dial the number on the screen ready to claim your free gift only to discover shipping charges, or the fact that his one is free but it obligates you to receive something monthly.

Recently I've been noticing “free” subscription offers to magazines showing up in some of my bills. And if you use the enclosed check to get your free magazine then on some regular basis your credit card will be charged the amount to keep the magazine coming.

There was a time when our family took advantage of free weekends at a timeshare. But after that 90 minute spiel about their property it always felt like we had really earned that “free gift”.

Parents sometimes even give their children gifts with strings attached. At a young age maybe there is the promise of a gift if they will behave. Later maybe it is gifts for good grades. Maybe the underwriting of college if they will take a certain major. Buy their first home for a young couple if they will live where the parents say.

Gifts being used to control.

Sometimes I’m afraid we church people want salvation to be one of those gifts with strings attached!

We like the idea of being under the law. After all we’ve been obeying the rules and living for God and not enjoying the pleasures of sin for a season so we really want a newcomer to the faith, a new follower of Jesus to get in on salvation but then they have to pay up like we have!!

Jesus words in John 5:24 make us nervous. Jesus said, “I assure you, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.”

Really? What about the law? What about obedience? What about commitment and follow through?

Everything is either earned or received as a gift, and this would include righteousness.

We church folks throw around words like righteousness, justification, sanctification, propitiation, etc. sometimes just assuming we all could define the terms.

Righteousness simply means a right standing with God—no outstanding debts—everything in order—to the point of absolute perfection—being just like God.

And just like with everything else there are just two ways to get it, Just two ways to become righteous—we either earn it or we receive it as a gift.

Last week as Jeff preached about Romans 5 we were reminded that one man's work earned us a reward. Romans 5:18 says, "Yes, Adam's one sin brought condemnation upon everyone."

Adam earned something he made choices to step out from under submission to God and attempted to control his own life and he earned a paycheck of condemnation.

And too often we humans have bought into the idea that if we are immoral we join in Adam's sin and face condemnation but if we are moral we can get out of that condemnation.

But Paul makes it clear at the end of chapter 5 that "God's law was given so all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful kindness became more abundant. So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's wonderful kindness rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Grace is so good, so counter intuitive, so beyond our cultural norms that it hasn't been truly taught until some take it to an unwise extreme. That is what Paul comes to in chapter 6.

The reality is that God justifies the ungodly! John writes that when Jesus came into this world "Life itself was in him and this life gives light to everyone." Again he wrote, "The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was going to come into the world."

Jesus died for the sins of the whole world. Christ's one act of righteousness makes all people right in God's sight and gives them life.

It was easy enough to jump from grace to some irrational conclusions. To misunderstand Paul's teaching so Paul poses a question in Romans 6:1 "Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more kindness?"

Should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more kindness and forgiveness?

Be identified with continuing sin

Live in an atmosphere of sin

Have our lives ruled by sin? So God's grace can increase?

Paul takes on the charge that grace could encourage sin!

He answers his own question: May it never be! Of course not. Later in the chapter he cycles back and asks the same question from a different angle—Romans 6:15 So since God's grace has set us free from the law, does this mean we can go on sinning?" And again Paul responds to this question—of course not, may it never be!

I think Paul is recognizing that there is so much more control, a sense of power in the giving of a gift and a certain powerlessness and vulnerability in receiving a gift—and we want to be in control.

We find it hard to accept, maybe especially in a denomination that includes one of the commandments of the law in our very name, Seventh-day; we find it difficult to accept that we are not under the law but under grace.

It reminds me of the study done of the effect of boundaries and fences. There was a school and the play ground was wonderfully spacious. Lots of room to play and explore and in fact the area so safe and nice that there was no fence in the school yard. Teacher observed that the students clumped around the playground equipment located in the

center of the yard. They self restricted themselves to a small space in the center. Then the school fenced the playground. Put up a boundary law. And do you know what happened. The children dispersed from their central huddle spot and began to explore and experience the whole. The rule of fence law gave them a sense of security.

Sometimes in the openness and freedom that comes with grace we may be discomforted having to determine the borders.

Paul is absolutely clear that we don't choose a life of sin so that grace may increase, and he uses two illustrations to drive his point home—death and slavery.

We don't go on practicing a life of sin because when we were baptized we died to sin.

Recently my father-in-law died. People would call Don a law abiding citizen. For more than 5 decades he honored his legally binding marriage contract with his wife MaryAnn. Each year he obeyed the law and paid his taxes. He followed the laws of Orange County when remodeling his house or building a new dock.

But today he ignores all law!! He's no longer under the law because he has died.

Paul says living a life that is marked by habitual, continual, intentional sinning is just not possible if we recognize we have died to sin.

His second illustration is that of slavery. He writes "...whatever you choose to obey becomes your master....having been freed from sin, your old master, you became slaves of righteousness your new master.

You are not under the law you are under grace and the reality is that many find it a more discomforting place –that's why we keep running back to our tutor the law.

We live with the illusion that under the law we are in control. And under grace we loose all control—Dead is pretty out of control. Being a slave was different than anything we know. The slave had no rights, no “free time” he or she was always at the disposal of the master.

There aren't three options.
Under the law, under grace or under self rule!

George Knight writes: The apostle in verse 16 extends his argument in his astute claim that people are never really free. God made them for obedience. The only question is whether they will be obedient to sin or to righteousness, to God's principles or to Satan's. Freedom in the abstract is an illusion. You are slaves to the one whom you obey! Sin or righteousness?

If we are, on our own, seeking to live a moral life, if we believe we can achieve a level of morality that will somehow recommend us to God we are lost in our moral striving.

If we believe we are independent and can do as we please living immoral lives that we can live as we please because we are not under the law and we will give grace a chance to increase by our immoral living we are abandoning in a more blatant way God.

Both of these are ways we seek to control our lives.

Control of our lives ourselves is simply not an option. We can't earn what we need.

But we can receive it as a gift.

The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

A true gift is one with no strings attached. It isn't a thank you gift for some performance. It isn't a manipulative gift to create performance it is a perfect gift of grace.

And grace transforms us. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!

We can do good stuff—random and not so random acts of kindness because we are righteous we are transformed by grace. But all our obedience, all our Sabbath keeping, all our law abiding lives contribute ZERO to making us righteous.

Righteous acts can be performed by unrighteous people on occasion but those acts don't make them righteous. There is only one way to be righteous,

Just one way to get a right standing with God, only one way to have your life be absolutely perfect before God and that is by Christ's act of righteousness that we receive as a gift.

We are totally out of control. We don't generate it. We don't produce it. We are not under the law—Thank God—we are under Grace. Sin is not our master, righteousness is our new master.

In those moments when someone presents a gift, not a thank you gift or I'm trying to get you to do something gift, but just a genuine gift, no strings attached, the only proper response is to accept it as a gift, a gift to which you contributed nothing other than acceptance—in that moment you lose control and you are not under the law but under GRACE.