

Think about it from a gift-giving perspective. When you buy a present for someone and they choose not to use it, what good is it? Was it money, was it time, well spent? Obviously not. So is it with the gift of Jesus that God has graciously given us. He doesn't call us to belong just to put us up on a shelf to collect dust. He makes us a part of his family so that he might use us to proclaim Jesus.

It's a sad but accurate reflection on our sinful nature that we don't like to be told what to do, even by God. We don't like to be told that God expects us to use our time, our talents, and our resources to make a difference in the world for Christ. That attitude is sin. God forgive us for our laziness and reluctance to use what he's given us to proclaim Christ! God have mercy on us for lack of response, our lack of faithfulness, our low expectations as to what he expects of us! Paul didn't call the Gentiles for sleep, but for obedience. God doesn't call us to collect dust, but to produce and to proclaim.

And never forget where this willingness to respond comes from. It comes from faith, which God miraculously creates in us by the gospel. As much as the law convicts us of our sin and damns us to hell, it only frustrates us and makes us angry. The only thing that truly motivates us to a God-pleasing obedience is faith, created by the gospel. Faith is motivated by the love of God in Christ. For Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians, "*Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again*" (5:14, 15).

When the World Trade Center in New York City was bombed on 9-11, we Americans took a stand and joined together. We put up posters and flags and took great pride in our country. Millions of people gave millions of dollars to support those who had been affected by this national tragedy. Firefighters, police officers, medical personnel, and so many others willingly gave of their time and efforts. Why? Because we were motivated to do so. Across the continent, we rose to the occasion because of our love for country and freedom.

In a similar way, Paul recognized what a blessing it was to belong to Christ and what a privilege it was to proclaim Christ. He truly reveled in the grace of God. So also do we. As Gentile Christians, we appreciate the comfort of forgiveness and the certainty of eternal life in heaven that Jesus gives us. And from this faith we are moved to do what Jesus asks us to do. We belong to Christ, and that's what Christ's people do. And when we do, God's grace wins again! Amen.

Romans 1:1-17 – *Grace Wins* – St. Paul's, Muskego, WI
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Do you know anyone who seems to be living in their own little world? They're not bad people or anything like that, but they just seem to be living and operating in a different dimension than you are. How amazing that God uses terminology like that in describing Christians! He says that we are "*foreigners and aliens*" (1 Pt 2:11) in the world. We live in the world, but we are not of the world. As a result, we may get the feeling at times that we don't belong, that we're on the outside looking in. But as the Apostle Paul addressed the Christians living in Rome, he wanted them (and us) to know that:

Grace Wins! Grace Calls Us to Belong

1. We belong to Christ.

2. We belong to proclaim Christ.

1. Paul begins this letter by describing himself as "*a servant of Christ Jesus.*" The word Paul uses for "servant" literally means "slave." In Paul's world a slave enjoyed absolutely no freedom and was completely under the domineering thumb of his master. So, it may come as a surprise to you that Paul begins this letter by calling himself a slave.

We tend to equate slavery with the way African Americans were treated in the early days of our country. Even the thought of servanthood isn't something that appeals to most today. We typically don't like people telling us what to do, and we certainly don't like people telling us what to believe. Appealing to this natural aversion to slavery and servanthood, a church recently sent out a flyer that said, "We are in a constant search for the truth. We want you to decide for yourself what to believe, instead of being told what to believe." In other words, "We don't enslave you by telling you what to believe. We let you believe what you want to believe." Sounds sort of like last week's message on agreeing to disagree, doesn't it?

Why didn't Paul mind calling himself a slave? It's because he knew what it was like to be a slave to the law, a slave to a religion that told him that the only way to get right with God was to obey the strict rules and regulations of the Pharisees. Within this system of work righteousness, Paul actually was a slave, a slave to the devil, even though he wasn't aware of it. He knew nothing different; it was his way of life. Mentally and spiritually, he was locked into this paradigm and was a slave to the law of obedience.

But then, on a trip from Jerusalem to Damascus (to persecute Christians, by the way), Paul was confronted by Jesus, called to be an apostle, and set apart for gospel work. When Jesus appeared to him, Paul learned who Jesus really was: the Messiah, descended from King David. He suffered and died on the cross, and then rose from the dead, to pay for all of Paul's sins. Paul learned that he wouldn't be saved—that he couldn't be saved—by obeying the rules of the Pharisees, but only by believing in the life and death of Jesus. It was at that moment that God broke the heavy chain of the law that hung around Paul's neck. Paul no longer belonged to the Pharisees and to their legalistic way of living, but to Christ. God's grace wins!

Our background is not at all unlike Paul's. Martin Luther captured it so well in his great justification hymn, *Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice*. This is what we he wrote and this is what we sing:

*Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay; death brooded darkly o'er me.
Sin was my torment night and day; in sin my mother bore me.
Yet deep and deeper still I fell; life had become a living hell,
So firmly sin possessed me.*

*To me [Christ] spoke, "Hold fast to me—I am your rock and castle.
Your ransom I myself will be; for you I strive and wrestle.
For I am yours, your friend divine, and evermore you shall be mine;
The foe shall not divide us" (CW 377:2, 7).*

Belonging to Jesus or aligned with Satan? Saved for heaven or damned to hell? Being declared innocent or bearing the guilt and punishment for sin in hell? This is why Paul wasn't ashamed to call himself a slave of Christ. This is why he wasn't ashamed to admit that Christ owned him. In fact, Paul was proud of it. He writes toward the end of our text, *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"*

Paul had learned that by belonging to Jesus, he had access to all the blessings that come with Jesus: righteousness, that is, Jesus' own perfection; freedom from the guilt and the punishment of sin in hell; forgiveness, salvation, eternity in heaven. And the best part? It's all free. It costs nothing. Jesus calls us by the gospel and gives us all these blessings for free. What's wrong with belonging to Christ and being his servant, his slave? Absolutely nothing. God's grace wins!

There once was a young man whose father was very wealthy. The young man wanted a new car for his birthday, but his father gave him a Bible instead. He accused his father of being greedy and unloving, threw the Bible back at him, and stormed out of the house, threatening never to talk to his father again. And he didn't. After his father died, the son was going through his things, remembering very vividly the heated argument they had had. And there it was, the Bible that he had rejected. He opened it up, and out fell a set of keys. He couldn't believe his eyes. He grabbed the keys, ran out to the garage, and found parked there the very car that he had wanted, never once having been driven. For years the young man had rejected the gift of the Bible and, as a result, had rejected his father, his father's love, and his father's gift of a new car.

Sadly, so many people today don't want Jesus' gifts. They don't understand the Christian faith. They look at Christianity as an ancient and ignorant religion, and the Bible as a book of rules and regulations. They don't want to belong to Christ, never realizing that the only other option is belonging to the devil. They reject Jesus and never get the chance to enjoy the blessings that accompany him.

2. But God's grace always wins! Paul appreciated the blessings that accompany Christ, and he realized that God didn't just call him to sit back and relax for the rest of his life. He was to use these blessings to proclaim Christ to others. He writes that he was *"called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God, the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake."*

God had a special purpose in mind for Paul long before Paul ever knew it. Quite literally, Paul was *"set apart for the gospel of God."* What is the gospel? Simply stated, it's the good news about Jesus. This was God's purpose for Paul, to proclaim Jesus. And this is God's purpose for us, who belong to Jesus, for Paul writes, *"And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ."*

And, so, Paul is teaching us that being a proclaimer of Christ is part of belonging to Christ. The two go hand in hand. You can't separate one from the other. He says we received God's grace to call people *"to the obedience that comes from faith for [Christ's] name's sake."*