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PAUL'S THEOLOGY OF OBLIGATION AS A PROPER
MOTIVATION FOR SANCTIFICATION

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Introduction: An Obligation Worth Embracing?

The Christian faith is rightly to be celebrated as distinct from all other religion for its magisterial heart of salvation by grace alone. Nowhere is this good news more richly expounded than in Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Herein, Paul describes justification through faith in Christ, with all of the liberation and reorientation it initiates. Nevertheless, Christian history and modernity prove that it is possible to errantly major in freedom at the expense of sanctification, particular if legalism is presented as the only alternative. We find that Paul himself allows for no such distortion. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul emphasizes obligation, even employing language related to debt and slavery, as an important motivation for the Christian's proper endeavor toward sanctification. Yet strikingly we find that at the seeming crescendo of Paul's description of this weighty commitment, he undergirds his theology of obligation with the love and certainty of adoption and sonship. It is exactly because he is a beloved son of the Father that the Christian ought to embrace obedient servanthood.

Obligation in Roman's Opening Pericope

Similarly to his other NT writings, Paul begins his epistle to the Roman church by segueing his opening identification into a gospel exposition. He understands his calling as inseparably connected to the accomplishment of Jesus, so he introduces both immediately and adjacently (Rom 1:1-6).¹ Also as in many of his other letters, Paul next describes his prayer for his Roman recipients, but here we find one of the first unique elements of the epistle. Paul is writing to a church he has yet to meet, and as such his foremost petition is to remedy that separation: "I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 51.

succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you” (vv.9-11).² Why this strong desire to go to Rome? Paul gives multiple answers of intent. He believes he has spiritual gifts to offer for the benefit of the church (v.11), and he expects that they have encouragement for him as well (v.12).³

Nevertheless, Rom 1:13-15 should be taken as Paul’s explanation for why he aspires to visit Rome. The phrase that begins verse 13 - οὐ θέλω δὲ ύμᾶς ὄγνοεῖν, ἀδελφοί – is a formula that Paul uses occasionally as an indicator for the conveyance of a particularly important point.⁴ Paul is saying, “I want you to know explicitly that I have intended to visit you, and I want you to know why.” His purpose is signaled with the conjunction ἵνα: “in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles” (v.13). Paul’s theology of harvest is multifaceted, but in this instance the word summarizes his understanding of his apostolic mission, both to proclaim the gospel to those as yet unreached, and to build up churches with fuller truth.⁵ As such, Rom 1:13 may be reworded as follows: “I want you Roman Christians to understand: that I have long intended to come to you; and that my aim is to evangelize unbelievers and disciple Christians in Rome.”

The question arises then, why has Paul’s Roman ambition remained unrealized? He himself hints at this question, both in verse 10 – “that somehow... I may now at last succeed in coming to you” – and 13 – “thus far I have been prevented.” Is Paul’s alleged intention simply lip service, like that of a man who has often meant to visit his mother-in-law but has, mysteriously, been prevented? No, and he explains why. In Rom 1:14, Paul gives the determinate

² All scripture quotations are ESV, unless otherwise stated.

³ John Brown, *Analytical Exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 5–6.

⁴ Moo, *Romans*, 60–61. The other occasions where this disclosure formula appears are: Rom 11:25; 1 Cor 10:1, 12:1; 2 Cor 1:8; and 1 Thess 4:13.

⁵ Moo, *Romans*, 61.

that is simultaneously the reason for his intention to go to Rome and the reason for his absence thus far: “I am under obligation.” Paul’s desire to be present with the Roman Christians is real; he longs to see them (v.11) and he is eager to preach to them (v.15). But for Paul, there is an obligation that supersedes any personal preference or ambition.⁶

As to the nature of this obligation, the fullest understanding is developed as the epistle continues, but the pericope at hand gives some detail. Paul explains both the objective and the task of his obligation. He is “under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish” (v.14). And, as a result of this obligation, he is “eager to preach the gospel⁷ to you also who are in Rome” (v.15). So the purpose of Paul’s obligation, as it is described in the immediate context, is to preach the gospel to Gentiles, both evangelizing unbelievers and further edifying believers. The appearance of the word “also” (καὶ) in verse 15 is significant, because it indicates that Paul sees his impending journey to Rome as a continuation of the obligatory mission he has undertaken elsewhere. Hence it is this obligation that has prevented Paul from going to Rome thus far, but that is also his reason for aspiring to do so. Put simply, Paul has been doing what he ought to in his preceding missionary endeavors, and his persuasion is that he ought to travel to Rome in the future.⁸

More logically primary than identifying the purpose of Paul’s obligation is understanding its cause. The English word “to” presents ambiguity in this case, because to be under obligation *to* someone can mean that someone is either the object of the obligatory task or the origination of

⁶ Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (Marshallton, Del.: The National Foundation for Christian Education, 1970), 430.

⁷ The implications of εὐαγγελίσασθαι in Rom 1:15 is debated, and the consideration is tangentially related to our assessment of Paul’s obligation. While the usage is somewhat unique, here preaching the gospel is best understood as including the discipleship of those in the church as well as the evangelization of unbelievers. For more on Paul’s usage of εὐαγγελίζομαι, see Paul Bowers, “Fulfilling the Gospel: The Scope of the Pauline Mission” *JETS* 30.2 (1987), 185–98, esp. 195–98, as cited in Moo, *Romans*, 63n62.

⁸ Brown, *Romans*, 6.

the obligation itself (or both). The Greek here leaves less uncertainty. In verse 14, each of the four subgroups that Paul describes himself as being under obligation to are given in the dative ("Ελλησίν, βαρβάροις, σοφοῖς, and ἀνοήτοις). As such, these groups are best understood as the object of Paul's obligation, the aim of his mission, but not necessarily the instigation of it.⁹ This conclusion is further supported by the fact that Paul includes groups on both sides of the merit line, so to speak. He is obligated unto Greeks and barbarians, the wise and the foolish, the classy and the trashy. We might go so far as to say that Paul is highlighting that the parties unto whom he is obliged to preach actually demerit such pursuit.¹⁰ Why then does Paul describe himself as beholden to them? The word translated "under obligation" in Rom 1:14 is ὀφειλέτης, which carries connotations of indebtedness, hence the KJV's rendering, "I am debtor both to..." Thus another way of asking the question is, to whom is Paul indebted? His mission to Gentiles of all stripes, in Rome and elsewhere, is clearly an implication of his debt, but where does the debt originate?

Again, the best answer is discovered further along in Romans (as well as across the Pauline corpus), but there is one more clue to be observed before departing from chapter 1. If Paul's obligation or indebtedness is given as the overriding reason for his impending journey to Rome, then any other cause cited can at least be understood as corollary. In verse 10, such a cause is given. Paul asserts that it will ultimately be "by God's will" that he will venture to Rome. This should not be taken as token speech on Paul's part. He recognizes that God's sovereign purpose is the ultimate determinate for all of his doings.¹¹ Accordingly, while Paul's

⁹ Haldane, *Romans*, 43.

¹⁰ Moo, *Romans*, 62. Note that the description of the worldly "wise" arises just a few verses later, in Rom 1:22, with a decidedly negative connotation. Similarly, see 1 Cor 1:18-27.

¹¹ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), 18.

obligation is not explicitly presented as to do the will of God, we can say that it is God's will for Paul to be obligated to do something, namely to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.¹² It is God's will that Paul would be indebted for this mission.

To summarize our findings related to Paul's obligation in this opening pericope: (1) While Paul gives multiple motivations for his intention to travel to Rome, obligation is given in Rom 1:14 as the primary reason. (2) The Gentiles are the object of Paul's obligatory task, but they are not necessarily the cause of it; that is, Paul has not incurred some debt to the Gentiles themselves whereby he is beholden to them. (3) The specific task of Paul's obligation is to preach the gospel. And (4) it is God's will for Paul to be under this obligation.

Obligation Developed Through Paul's Theological Discourse

The culminating verses in Paul's description of Christian obligation are Rom 8:12-15, where ὄφειλέτης next appears, but we must recognize the train of thought that arrives upon those verses. One way of summarizing the first portion of the justification section of Romans (1:18-3:20) is as the exposition of a penalty justly deserved. Paul goes to great lengths to indict all humanity under sin and the judgment it rightly incurs.¹³ Then, from the depths of this diagnosis, Paul pronounces the remedy: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (3:23-24). Paul goes on to explain the nature of the all-sufficient work of Christ to secure justification for those formerly condemned. So in total, Rom 1:18-5:21 may be summarized as: a penalty justly

¹² This distinction, while subtle, is important. If Paul understands his obligation as simply to do the will of God, interpretation is open to generality and vagueness. On the other hand, if Paul is saying that it is God's will for him to be obligated to do something specific and clear, this lends better force to the larger argument of obligation as a right motivation for Christian sanctification. If Paul's personal obligation is similar to every Christian's general obligation, we can expect that God would reveal the specific nature and tasks of that obligation, and so he has.

¹³ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1972), 76-81.

deserved, overcome by justification graciously given.¹⁴ Or alternatively, an insurmountable debt incurred by sinners, repaid by Christ on their behalf.¹⁵

In Rom 6, having defined the shift that has taken place in the Christian's forensic status before God, Paul initiates a description of the existential implications of that change. He begins by rebuking a common misconception of righteousness imputed apart from the recipient's merit: If God's grace has overcome our sin, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" (6:1). Paul's answer is an emphatic no, because the Christian "has been set free from sin" (v.7) to "walk in newness of life" (v.4). In other words, he is not only changed in relation to God, but also in relation to sin. Sin is no longer the controlling force over the Christian. He is free from its overriding influence.¹⁶

It is striking, therefore, that in the wake of expounding at length such superlative forgiveness and freedom, Paul retains premises of slavery and indebtedness as positive characterizations for sanctification. Herein we find the beginnings of Paul's understanding of obligation as a motivation for Christian sanctification. In 6:15-23, Paul explains that it is exactly because Christians have been freed from slavery to sin that they ought to "now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification" (v.19). The Christian has been freed from sin at great cost – the very life of Christ – so he is now beholden to a new master, obliged to obedience, a slave to God.¹⁷ This section of Romans is complex, the subject of much and varied theologizing, but two pertinent points should be highlighted.

¹⁴ Hodge, *Romans*, 87-97.

¹⁵ While the metaphor of forgiven debt is not used explicitly in Romans, I take Col 2:13-14 to indicate that it is an appropriate analogous understanding. See also C. F. D. Moule, "Obligation in the Ethic of Paul," in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. W. R. Farmer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 404.

¹⁶ Moo, *Romans*, 350-352, 376-377.

¹⁷ Ibid., 402-404.

The first is Paul's repeated use of the verb "present," in verse 16 and twice in 19. The word (*παρίστημι*) carries connotations of handing something over, even sacrificially,¹⁸ and so Paul describes how the Christian ought to yield himself to obedience and righteousness, even as a slave. This begs the question, is such slavery something the Christian chooses (and thus, alternatively, something that he may not choose)? Further along in the passage, Paul speaks of this slavery as something that has already happened to the Christian, as in verse 22: "You have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God." Is this new slavery to God something that is imposed upon the Christian as part of his justification, or is it something that he actively participates in as part of sanctification? The answer, according to Paul, is that it is both. In Christ, God has freed the Christian from former slavery to sin and captured him as a slave to righteousness, and as such the Christian ought to surrender himself to this new identity. This truth touches at a prevalent paradox of sanctification, that it is something that will certainly be accomplished by God in all who are justified, but that the Christian is called to participate in the process.¹⁹ As such, a proper and conscious apprehension of a newly obligated identity is a crucial instigating element of sanctification.

Second, note that Paul elucidates a logical order to sanctification that prominently features this slavery. Romans 6:16 juxtaposes slavery to sin, leading to death, with slavery to obedience, which leads to righteousness. Verse 19 expands on the description: slavery to lawlessness leads to more lawlessness, but slavery to righteousness leads to sanctification. Finally, verse 22 describes the formula in full: "But now that you have been set free from sin and

¹⁸ Cleon L. Rogers Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 327.

¹⁹ Herman N Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), 253–65. As Ridderbos puts it, Paul's description of sanctification is both indicative and imperative. See Phil 2:12-13, Paul's neatest packaging of this key concept.

have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.”

Paul’s analysis of sanctification in chapter 6 may be summarized as: (1) The Christian is freed from slavery to sin; (2) He is subsequently enslaved to God unto righteousness; (3) This new slavery is both a reality passively inflicted upon the Christian and an existential ideal to be actively embraced by him; and (4) Living as a slave to obedience leads to sanctification, which ultimately leads to eternal life.²⁰

At this point, it is important – especially for the modern reader whose understanding carries much historical baggage – to generally recall what Paul would have meant by slavery. The word for slave, used repeatedly in this passage, is δοῦλος, a term that would have held specific implications for Paul’s original readers. While slavery in Paul’s day was far from universally desirable, it did not necessarily entail the “man stealing” and brutality of American antebellum slavery. Moreover, many scholars suggest that Paul has in mind a specific brand of household servant who stood to benefit substantially from a powerful master’s dealings. As such, some would even willfully commit themselves to this form of servanthood, often as an endeavor to repay a large debt. Even so, theologians should not lessen the force of Paul’s call to slavery in Rom 6; he is certainly suggesting a life-encompassing and irreversible commitment to service. A full treatment to slavery in Paul’s day and its metaphoric implications in his writing cannot be undertaken here. The main point is to see that Paul’s description of yielding oneself to slavery to, without entailing all of the violence and evil that comes to the modern mind, was still a citation of profound obligation.²¹

²⁰ Moo, *Romans*, 396–408.

²¹ Michael Joseph Brown, “Paul’s Use of Δοῦλος Ξριστοῦ Ιησοῦ in Romans 1:1,” *JBL* 120 (2001): 724–28.

Obligation's Surprising Qualification in Rom 8:12-14

As it pertains to our examination of obligation in Romans, chapter 7 may be taken as something of an aside, wherein Paul further explains how Christ has set Christians free from the law and sin, but also why Christians will continue to struggle against sin in this life. In chapter 8, Paul returns to his comparisons of the Christian's old and new existence, this time using the categories of flesh and Spirit. While the terminology has changed, the implications are the same: to live in accordance with the flesh is sin and death; to live by the Spirit is righteousness and life.²²

In Rom 8:12, the subject of obligation is again addressed. "So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh." Again, the word is ὀφειλέτης, and the verse may also be translated, "we are under obligation," as in the NASB and NIV. Once more, we see that even as he describes the Christians new life, with all of its liberation and grace, Paul nevertheless employs language related to debt and obligation to describe how we ought to understand the nature of this life. At this point, however, we have a better idea as to the origination of this indebtedness, as Paul has spent much ink expounding the great lengths to which God has gone to "pay our way" in and through Jesus. It is "the sacrificial work of Christ... which places us under debt to the life of holiness."²³

Romans 8:12-13 presents two nuances in interpretation, one relatively minor and the other more challenging. First, commentators have disagreed whether the verses should be taken as the conclusion of the preceding section, or as the beginning of a new line of thought, the start of the pericope that follows. Either answer is viable, but the best understanding will group verses

²² Ibid., 471-472.

²³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids Mich.: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:293. Note that here Murray's interpretation faces the ambiguity of "to" previously mentioned. The Christian is indebted to Christ – because Jesus has done the work to secure his righteousness and freedom – *unto* holy living.

12 and 13 with what precedes, even as they serve as transition to Paul's next main point. Ἐπεὶ
οὖν, at the beginning of 12, indicates that Paul considers these statements the emphatic conclusion of his preceding arguments, as in, "In light of all I've written above, we are debtors." If we take 12 and 13 as the final component of the preceding section, then in a sense all of 6:15-8:13 may be understood as Paul's explanation of one major idea: That the Christian, having been freed from his former slavery to sin, is now a slave under new obligation.²⁴ While verse 12 never says so explicitly (for reasons explained below), the implication, based on the parallels in chapter 6 and the comparison taking place in the first verses of chapter 8, the Christian is under obligation to the Spirit, or more comprehensively, to the Triune God.

The second issue is the apparent anacoluthon of verse 12. Paul begins his summary of the Christian's indebtedness with a negative – "we are debtors, not to the flesh" – but seems to exclude a corresponding positive. At first blush, we would expect Paul to follow verse 12 with something like, "... but to the Spirit, to live according to the Spirit." Some have asserted that the absence of the allegedly intended second half of the comparison is simply a mistake on Paul's part, perhaps in this eagerness to arrive at his next point. But it is also possible to recognize the form as intentional, employed by Paul to highlight an unexpected and glorious truth. If one holds to the inspiration of the text by a higher, un-mistaking Author, this intentionality is confirmed. Following verse 12, the Christian expects to hear that he is a debtor to the Spirit (as we have seen, this is a valid implication of the verse, but now a more profound truth is being revealed). Instead, in verse 14 and following, he finds that he is a son of God, with intimate access to the Father and a certain, rich inheritance.²⁵

²⁴ Moo, *Romans*, 471-473

²⁵ Andrzej Gieniusz, "'Debtors to the Spirit' in Romans 8:12? Reasons for the Silence," *NTS* 59 (2013): 61–72, esp. 69-70. Gieniusz goes so far as to argue that vv.12-14 present an intentional chiasmic structure to strongly emphasize the sonship Paul introduces.

Here is the great caveat to Paul's explanation of Christian obligation to sanctification. Any sense of indebtedness or awareness of slavery should be undergirded by a more foundational identity of sonship. Importantly, these verses do not say that obedience is meritorious to secure sonship; Just the opposite: Secured sonship is the assurance of Spirit-led obedience, or alternatively, obedience will be the proof of applied adoption.²⁶ Accordingly, Rom 8:15 – “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” – cannot be taken as a negation of all that Paul has said affirming the Christian’s slavery in chapter 6, but as a description of the his foundational awareness, his “spirit,” even as he embraces obligation.²⁷ As chapter 8 goes on to explain, the Christian is a son and an heir, inseparably loved by the Father and unstoppably destined for eternal glory. It is based upon this reality that he can joyfully embrace the way he ought to live, even in the face of struggles and suffering. This is one reason that Rom 8 is so well loved by Christians familiar with the epistle: In the wake of an extended argument about both the necessary obligation to and strenuous difficulty of sanctification, Paul gives the richest assurance that the call to this commitment is inspired by the Father’s great love, and guaranteed to succeed because of the same. The Christian is a slave to God (6:22) and indebted to the Spirit (the implied conclusion of 8:12), but these categories are not conditions of his sonship; rather, they are the loving result of it.²⁸ In fact, his identity as a child of God ought to even amplify his sense of commitment and indebtedness.²⁹

²⁶ Murray, *Romans*, 294-295; Hodge, *Romans*, 265-266.

²⁷ Moo, *Romans*, 499-501.

²⁸ Moule, *Obligation*, esp. 403-404.

²⁹ Dirk J. Venter, “The Implicit Obligations of Brothers, Debtors, and Sons (Romans 8:12-17),” *Neotestamentica* 48.2 (2014): 283-302.

Summary and Implications

We may summarize Paul's theology of Christian obligation in Romans as follows:

(1) Upon justification, the Christian has been set free from his former slavery to sin.

Nevertheless, even as he is freed, he has been recaptured into slavery to righteousness and to God.

(2) This new slavery is both something inflicted upon the Christian and something that he should actively give himself over to. Per the line of reasoning in Rom 6:15-8:13, the Christian should reckon himself as indebted to God because of Christ's work to "pay his way," and pursue sanctification accordingly.

(3) The Christian need not be fearful, begrudging, or legalistic about this obligation, because his slavery is undergirded by his sonship, so he can joyfully embrace how he ought to live, even in midst of difficulties.

With this framework in mind, we can fully understand Paul's obligation as expressed in Rom 1:14. Paul is not under obligation to the Gentiles in the sense that he owes them something in their own right, but he is indebted to God, unto obedience, and the specific apostolic task that God has given to him is to preach the gospel to them. Accordingly Paul has embraced his obligation and made it his mission to do the will of God. Yet even in the face of opposition and suffering, he can pursue this obligation with longing and eagerness because it is undergirded by the love of the Father.

These tenets of obligation are not exclusive to those of apostolic office, but also carry over into the hortatory conclusions of the epistle for all Christians as well. Paul's practical imperatives to his Roman readers are introduced in Rom 12:1: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable

to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Note how Paul’s exhortation encapsulates his theology from chapters 6 and 8. It is reasonable (a better translation of *λογικὴν*, which the ESV renders “spiritual”) that the Christian should give himself over (again, *παρίστημι*) to God, unto holy living. Why? “In view of God’s mercy.”³⁰ In other words, it is the logical response of the ones so saved to yield themselves to the life God deems acceptable. Nevertheless, any sense of obligation is undergirded by grace. They are striving toward acceptable living in light of the acceptance they have already received in Christ.

In many ways, the hortatory portions of Romans may be understood as Paul’s specific explanation of the implications of justification-founded indebtedness.³¹ He uses language related to obligation in 15:1 and 27 (*όφειλω* morphemes in both cases), where he draws out how the strong ought to interact with the weak, and how Gentiles ought to materially support Jewish Christians, respectively. Indeed, Paul’s theology of obligation is found to be a unifying thread that runs through Romans from beginning to end.³² This is to say nothing of the obligation themes that pervade many of his other epistles.³³ In short, it is impossible to properly understand many of Paul’s practical exhortations without some foundational apprehension of his theology of obligation, and Romans presents the fullest exposition.

Conclusion

A healthy understanding of Christian obligation is as crucial to the modern disciple as it was to Paul’s original readers. On one hand, bare obligation, without an awareness of the Fatherly love

³⁰ This is how the NIV renders the prepositional clause, which I believe better encapsulates the potential nuances of *διὰ* here. God’s mercy is both the inspiration and empowerment for our obedience. See Moo, *Romans*, 749.

³¹ Walter F. Taylor Jr., “Obligation: Paul’s Foundation for Ethics,” *Trinity Seminary Review* 19.2 (1997): 91–112.

³² Romans 13:8 presents another interesting use of *όφειλω*, this time in the form of a negative imperative. Interesting potential future paper topics abound!

³³ Two prominent examples are 1 Cor 9 and Gal 5.

that underpins and empowers it, leaves Christian sanctification indistinct from the legalism of every other religion. On the other end of the spectrum, nebulous attestations to the Father's unconditional love, without any emphasis on the proper, biblical response, lends itself to antinomianism. The theology of embraced indebtedness presented in Romans affirms the logical third use of the law. There are few forces as pleasing to God, as powerful in the world, and as fearsome to the enemy, as a Christian deeply persuaded of his Father's love and rigorously committed to serving his Master. How much more a church with many members bound by the same!

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