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ARE YOU DEAD TO SIN?

Romans 6:1-4

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Romans Lesson 31

Are You Dead to Sin? Romans 6:1-4

I've often chuckled at a cartoon (by Mary Chambers) that I saw years ago where two couples are talking and one woman says, "Well, I haven't actually *died* to sin, but I did feel kind of faint once."

That cartoon captures how many of us feel about Romans 6:2, where Paul says that we "died to sin." We would have to admit, "I don't *feel* very dead to sin!" Maybe there have been a few times when I've felt kind of faint towards it. But, *dead*? No way!

So when we come to Romans 6, where Paul doesn't just say once (in 6:2) that we died to sin, but in some form he says it in 6:3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, and 13. So if it seems like I'm repeating myself over the next couple of weeks, it's because Paul repeats himself. But he wants us to get it because apparently it is crucial when it comes to living a godly life. And yet it's very difficult to understand because I don't feel very dead to sin! In fact, I rarely feel kind of faint!

Although commentators differ, most agree that in Romans 6:1 Paul turns from the subject of justification (or salvation) to sanctification, or how we grow in holiness. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, whom I highly respect, vigorously differs with that analysis and James Boice, whom I also highly respect, follows Lloyd-Jones. So it's difficult for me to disagree with such men, whose insight into Scripture far exceeds mine. They may be correct.

But even though this section obviously flows out of chapter 5 (as Lloyd-Jones argues from "then" in 6:1), it seems to me that Paul begins a new theme that he pursues through chapter 8: If we have been justified by faith, how do we grow in sanctification? Justification by faith dealt with the *penalty* of our sin. But how can we live a holy life in which sin's *power* is broken?

Chapter 6 falls into two main sections: In 6:1-14, Paul addresses an objection that he knows will follow from what he has been teaching about God justifying sinners by grace alone through faith alone, apart from any merit. He is especially responding to

what he has just said in 5:20, "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." The anticipated response is, "If God's response to increased sin is to pour out super-abundant grace, then maybe we should sin all the more so that God can be all the more gracious!" Paul brought up this same reaction to his teaching back in 3:8, where he acknowledged that some were accusing him of saying, "Let us do evil that good may come." His response there was, "Their condemnation is just." Here (6:2), his response is, "May it never be!" Then he launches into his extended discussion of our being united with Christ in His death and resurrection.

In the second main section (6:15-23), Paul responds to another anticipated response to his teaching (in 5:20) that the Law came in so that sin would increase, along with his comment that we are not under law but under grace (6:14). The objection is (6:15), "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" His response is the same as in 6:2, "May it never be!" Then he develops an analogy from slavery. In 6:1-4, his main idea is:

Our union with Christ in His death and resurrection
is the foundation for separation from sin
and walking in newness of life.

I'm going to work through the text verse by verse to try to get our minds around what Paul is saying under four headings:

1. There is a logical implication to reject: Since God's response to increased sin is abundant grace, then we should sin more to get more grace (6:1-2a).

Romans 6:1-2a: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be!"

Verse 1 is a test of whether you have correctly understood Paul's message up to this point. If you've been tracking with him, he knows that you will be thinking, "If God's response to increased sin is abundant grace (5:20), then why not sin more?" Since God freely justifies *not* those who try hard, but rather those who do *not* work; and since He justifies *not* those who are good people, but rather the *ungodly* (4:5); then why work at being good? Or, another form of it is, "If God is gracious towards sinners, then I'll just sin and ask for His grace." Or, as poet W. H. Auden put it (cited by Douglass Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* Eerdmans], p. 356), "I like

committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged.”

But the point is, if salvation or justification is by faith *plus* our good works, the objection that Paul anticipates here never would have come up. Or, if we hedge in God’s grace or tone it down, no one would dare to think what Paul knows we will think if we heard him correctly. For example, the popular seminar leader, Bill Gothard, redefines “grace” to mean, “the desire and power to do God’s will” (*Men’s Manual* [Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts], p. 112). While God does give us the desire and power to do His will, that is *not* grace! God’s grace *is* His undeserved favor. If we understand and teach grace correctly, people will at least think what Paul here anticipates. And, significantly, Paul doesn’t modify his teaching that God justifies the ungodly apart from their works, or that increased sin leads to abounding grace. Neither should we!

2. There is a spiritual fact to know and believe: In Christ we died to sin, so we cannot still live in it (6:2b).

Romans 6:2b: “How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” This is a rhetorical question, which expects the answer, “There is no way that those who died to sin can still live in it!” It should be obvious: Dead men can’t live in sin.

But this raises a lot of questions. If Christians are dead to sin, then why do they sin? Can we attain sinless perfection in this life? If so, doesn’t this statement imply that we attain this state of being dead to sin at the moment of conversion? If not, do we need to work at being dead to sin? So what does Paul mean when he says that we “died to sin”?

There are a number of views (Martyn Lloyd-Jones elaborates on them, *Romans: The New Man* [Zondervan], pp. 16-20). For sake of time, I’m not going to take you through them all. But let me tell you what it does *not* mean, and then what I think it *does* mean.

Clearly, Paul does *not* mean that believers cannot sin or that they are immune to temptation. Some teach that if you go into a morgue and try to tempt a corpse to commit some sin, you will not succeed because he is dead. Likewise, it is said, Christians are dead to sin. It can’t entice them.

But, apart from the obvious fact that there are no such Christians in existence and there never have been, such a view makes all of the moral commands in the Bible to be superfluous. Why command me not to lust if I can't lust because I'm dead to it? Why command me not to steal if I'm dead to greed? Besides, there are many examples in the Bible of otherwise godly men falling into serious sin. Noah got drunk. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all lied. David committed adultery and murder after he wrote many of the Psalms. Peter denied the Lord and later acted in hypocrisy toward the Gentile believers in Antioch. And in Romans 7, Paul shares his own struggles with sin. So he does not mean that believers cannot sin or that they are immune to temptation.

What does he mean? We just saw (5:12-21) that all people are identified either with Adam under the reign of sin and death, or with Christ under the reign of grace through righteousness. There are no other categories: Either you are in Adam or in Christ. By virtue of our physical birth, we all enter this world in Adam. His sin was imputed to us. When Adam sinned, we sinned. But when we trust in Christ, we are transferred from Adam's headship to Christ's headship. Just as Adam's one sin condemned us all, so Christ's one act of obedience on the cross justified all who receive His gracious gift of eternal life.

So Paul means that if you are in Christ, when He died on the cross, you died in Him. It is *not* something that you *feel*, but rather a *fact* that is true of you because God declares it to be true. If Christ our Head died, we who are His body died with Him. This is our new status or position before God. Since Christ died to sin (6:10) and we are now in Him, we died to sin. We derive the benefits of His death because we are now in Him.

In the Bible, death is *not* primarily *cessation*, but rather *separation*. At physical death your soul is separated from your body. When we died with Christ, we were separated from the reign of death and put under Christ's reign of righteousness. Its reign over us was broken. As a result, Paul implies (by his rhetorical question) that we cannot *continue* in sin or *live in it*. He is not talking about committing acts of sin, but rather about living in sin as a way of life.

I understand 1 John 3:9 to be saying the same thing from a slightly different perspective: "No one who is born of God prac-

tices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” John is not saying that believers cannot sin at all, because in 1 John 1:8 he has said that if anyone claims that he has no sin is deceiving himself. And in 2:1 he says that if we sin, we have an Advocate with the Father. He means that those born of God cannot continue in their old way of life, which was characterized by sin. The new birth removes them from it.

So both John and Paul mean that those who are in Christ cannot continue in sin as a way of life. When we are saved by God’s grace, He places us in a new realm, under the reign of grace, where we now walk in the light as He is in the light (as John puts it). We now obey God and keep His commandments as our pattern or habit. So Paul says that we need to know this fact and believe it: In Christ we died to sin, so we cannot still live in it.

3. There is a spiritual analogy to help you understand: Your baptism pictures your union with Christ in His death (6:3-4a).

Romans 6:3-4a: “Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, ...”

Verse 3 generates a lot of controversy. Is Paul talking about water baptism or the baptism of the Holy Spirit? If he means water baptism, is he saying that the act of baptism itself conveys these benefits? Sparing you all of the debates, I think that Paul is referring to the spiritual reality that takes place at salvation, which water baptism symbolizes.

Keep in mind that the apostles all associated saving faith with water baptism to such an extent that the concept of an unbaptized believer would have been foreign to them. When people in that day professed faith in Jesus Christ, they expressed it by being baptized in water. Paul assumes that all of the Christians in Rome had been baptized. (“All of us who have been baptized” means, “all of us believers.”) Since at that time, baptism usually followed faith in Christ rather quickly (Acts 2:41; 8:36; 9:18), the thought of distinguishing between Spirit baptism (which happens at the moment of

salvation) and water baptism would not have occurred to Paul (Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 307, note 6).

Also, not to be controversial, but there is no evidence in the New Testament that infant baptism was practiced, nor are there any verses to support such a practice. The entire argument for infant baptism rests on the assumption that it has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant. While Colossians 2:11-12 links some aspects of circumcision with baptism, those verses also specifically link faith in Christ with baptism. The clear pattern of the New Testament is that a person first believed in Christ and then expressed that faith in water baptism. In modern evangelicalism, we've wrongly replaced baptism with walking the aisle. But if you have believed in Christ as your Savior, you should be baptized in water to confess your faith.

What does baptism picture? The main thought is that of identification. The word clearly means, to immerse (as even Calvin admitted, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster Press], 4:15:14 & 4:15:19). It was used of people being drowned, or of ships being sunk (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Apollos/Eerdmans], p. 246). To be baptized into Christ's death means to be totally identified with Christ in His death. When He paid the penalty of death for sin, we paid the penalty in Him. When He died to sin, conquering its power, we who believe in Him died to sin and its power.

Why does Paul emphasize not only Christ's death, but also the fact that we were *buried* with Him through baptism? Scholars agree that burial is mentioned because it confirms that death has occurred (Schreiner, p. 308). Generally speaking, you don't bury a living person. To say that we were buried with Christ means, we really died with Him. Baptism by immersion pictures this when a person goes under the water. If we held them under for a few minutes, they really would die physically! Immersion pictures the spiritual reality: When we believed in Christ, we became fully identified with Him in His death and burial. We are united with Him in that historic action (6:5).

While Paul does not specifically say (which means that scholars argue about it) that coming out of the water pictures being raised up with Christ in His resurrection, it is implied. As I under-

stand him, he uses baptism as an illustration to help us understand our union with Christ. It pictures our death, burial, and resurrection with Christ, which took place historically when Christ died, was buried, and was raised on behalf of His people whom He redeemed. It was applied to us the instant that we believed, but we express it symbolically in water baptism. Finally,

4. There is a spiritual fact to believe and act upon: Since we are united with Christ in His glorious resurrection, we should walk in newness of life (6:4b).

Romans 6:4b: "... so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

Christ was raised bodily from the grave, not just spiritually. But spiritually, we were in Him, so that when He was raised in victory over sin and death, we were raised too (Col. 3:1). We will not receive our new resurrection bodies, which will be completely free from sin, until Jesus returns. But before then, the action on our part as a result of our spiritual resurrection with Christ is that we should walk in newness of life.

Paul says that Christ was raised from the dead "through the glory of the Father." It's an unusual expression. I would have expected him to say, "by the power of God." While most commentators say that "glory" is used here as a synonym for "power," Paul does say "glory," not "power." C. H. Spurgeon (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 27:626) points out that glory is a grander word, because it includes the display of all of the Father's attributes in raising Christ from the dead. The word "Father" (rather than "God") implies His great *love* for His Son and for us in giving up His Son to death. The *wisdom* of God was displayed by allowing Christ to suffer in our place before raising Him from the dead. The Father's *justice* is displayed at the cross and resurrection (4:25). His *faithfulness* to His promise not to allow His Holy One to undergo decay (Ps. 16:10) was seen in the resurrection. And, of course, His great *power* was displayed there, too (Eph. 1:19-20).

As a result of our union with Christ in His resurrection, we are to walk in newness of life. This means that our new walk in Christ should be totally distinct from our life before Christ. We

should develop transformed minds through God's Word, so that our whole worldview lines up with Scripture. Our motives for why we do what we do should no longer be selfish, but rather for God's glory. Our attitudes, especially in trials, should not be complaining, but rather thankful to God. Our emotions should be marked by joy and hope in the Lord. Our character should be developing the fruit of the Spirit. Our use of time and money should be managed in light of eternal values. And we should be walking in consistent obedience to God's commandments, which are for our good.

The description of this newness of life as "a walk" implies a long, steady, gradual process. Paul is not talking about sinless perfection, but rather a direction of life in which we sin less and less. Over time, we should make progress in holy, obedient living as those who have been raised up with Christ.

Conclusion

I realize that the concept of being dead to sin and alive to God in Christ is difficult to comprehend and apply. We'll look at it further in weeks ahead, since Paul does. But let me conclude by giving three applications based on this text:

(1) *Do not presume on God's grace as permission to sin.* Many Christians stupidly (I chose that word deliberately!) think, "I can go ahead and sin and just get forgiven. After all, I'm under grace." That is stupid because it ignores what we saw last time, that sin does not move in to help you achieve your objectives. It moves in to reign and its reign is one of death. God's grace does not mean that He is tolerant of your sin. Grace does not excuse sloppy living. God is committed to your holiness, and if you play loose with sin, He will discipline you, perhaps severely!

(2) *If you have trusted Christ, make a distinct break with your past life and declare it publicly in baptism.* Becoming a Christian means burning all your bridges to your past life of sin. If you have drugs in your possession, destroy them. If you have alcohol and you are tempted to get drunk, pour it down the drain. If going to bars tempts you to drunkenness or picking up loose women, stop going there. If you have pornographic magazines, get rid of them. If Internet porn is a problem, get some system of accountability or stop using the Internet. Follow the example of the new believers in Ephesus, who

burned 50,000 days' wages worth of magic books (Acts 19:19). And then confess your new faith in water baptism.

(3) *Meditate often on your union with Christ and what it means.* You are now in Christ. Think about it and act accordingly. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (pp. 25 ff.) uses the example of the slaves who were freed by President Lincoln during the Civil War. His Emancipation Proclamation declared them to be free. Many of the older slaves had not known any other life. They were born slaves and had lived all their lives under a cruel master. But now they "died" to slavery. They were declared free. But they didn't *feel* free. When they saw their old master coming, they may have shook in fear and even obeyed him if he gave them a command. But they didn't have to obey him. His power over them was broken. They did not have to live under his tyranny. They could walk in newness of life.

Even so, in Christ you died to sin. You no longer have to live under its power. You don't have to obey it. You have been raised up in Christ so that you now can walk in newness of life. Think often about your new position in Him. Our union with Christ in His death and resurrection is the foundation for separation from sin and walking in newness of life.

Application Questions

1. Why is the thought of licentiousness the litmus test of whether we correctly understand and present God's grace?
2. is it just a "mind game" to think, "I'm dead to sin" when you feel very much alive to it? What real difference does this make?
3. Why is water baptism important? Why should it be practiced only on believers? What are the dangers of infant baptism?
4. What specific aspect of the old life do you need to cast off so that you can now walk in newness of life?

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