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DEAD TO SIN, ALIVE TO GOD

Romans 6:5-10

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Romans Lesson 32

Dead to Sin, Alive to God
Romans 6:5-11

I read a rather unbelievable incident where a young married man forgot that he was married. After returning from their honeymoon, the husband was three hours late getting home from work one evening because he absentmindedly had gone to his mother's house instead of going home to his new bride (reported in "Our Daily Bread," June, 1982). A tip for young husbands: Do not forget that you are married!

While that sort of thing is rare in the realm of marriage, it is fairly common among those who are "married" to Christ. We are joined to Him as His bride so that we are now members of His body (Eph. 5:25-33). We are identified with Him in His death and resurrection, so that the power of sin has been broken (Rom. 6:1-4). But we forget this essential truth every time that we fall into sin.

Paul is rebutting the charge that his teaching that God justifies the ungodly by grace through faith alone, apart from any merit, will lead to licentiousness (6:1-2). He is proving that our union with Jesus Christ is completely opposed to a life of continuing sin. Rather, our identification with Christ in His death and resurrection frees us from slavery to sin and allows us to walk in newness of life. But Paul knows that we're prone to forget our new position in Christ, which is the foundation for holy living. And so he hammers it home in these verses.

Here's Paul's flow of thought: In 6:4 he says that our baptism pictured the spiritual union that we have with Christ in His death and resurrection, with the practical result that we might now walk in newness of life. Verse 5 supports and explains verse 4, as the opening word ("For") shows: "For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection."

Then in 6:6-7 Paul expounds on the first half of 6:5, showing that we have become united with Christ in His death, so that we might no longer be slaves to sin. In 6:8-10 he expounds on the sec-

ond half of 6:5, showing that we shall also live with Christ. He explains the implications of Christ's death and resurrection, so that we will understand further what our union with Him means, namely, a decisive break with sin and a new life with God. Then in 6:11 he applies these truths: "Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

I will say at the outset that this is not an easy text to grasp. The difficulty of Romans 6 & 7 was the major reason that I held off from preaching through Romans for 33 years of ministry. I wish I could say that I've had a breakthrough! I've been struggling with what Paul says here for about 45 years now, but I'm still not sure that I get it. There are all sorts of interpretive issues where commentators differ and I find much of what they say to be confusing. So I'm not so naïve as to think that this one message will make things crystal clear for you. But I hope that you will be motivated to dig deeper into these chapters on your own.

These verses are important because Paul's aim is that we would live in victory over sin. Christ's death and resurrection not only paid the *penalty* for our sin, but also provided the *power* that we need to overcome sin on a daily basis. So if this message leaves you somewhat confused, I urge you not to shrug your shoulders and walk away. Rather, chew on these verses like a dog with a bone, until you get the marrow of them into your soul. Paul's idea is:

Living in light of our union with Christ is
the key to overcoming sin.

To put it another way, don't live in sin as you used to live because you aren't the same person that you used to be. Before, you were in Adam. Now, you are in Christ. In Adam, you were dead *in* sin. In Christ, you are dead *to* sin and alive to God. So believe and act on the basis of your new identity, not your old identity.

1. To overcome sin, know that you are totally identified with Christ in the likeness of His death (6:5a, 6-7).

In the first part of verse 5, Paul states the fact that we (believers) have become united with Christ in the likeness of His death. The word "if" does not express doubt; it could be translated "since." Verses 6 & 7 explain this further: "knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might

be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin." Paul is talking about the knowledge of what God has revealed, not the knowledge that we gain by personal experience. In other words, you will never *feel* crucified with Christ; it is something that you must *believe* because God's Word says so. Let's try to follow Paul's train of thought:

- A. We are completely united with Christ in the likeness of His death (6:5a).

When we trusted in Christ as Savior, we were united to Him. The word means, literally, to be grown together with, or grafted into Christ. An older commentary (William Sanday and Arthur Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [T & T Clark], p. 157) says, "The word exactly expresses the process by which a graft becomes united with the life of a tree." In other words, it points to our organic, living union with Christ, in which we share His resurrection life. But in the first half of verse 5 the focus is not on sharing His life, but rather in His death. We saw this in verses 3 & 4: When Christ died, we died in Him. The perfect tense in verse 5 means that this union was a past action with ongoing results.

But why does Paul say that we have become united with Him "in the *likeness* of His death," not just "in His death"? While there is debate, I think that Calvin's explanation makes sense (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 223), that Paul differentiates between Christ's physical death and the spiritual implications of it. We have not yet died physically, as Christ did, but we are joined to Him in the spiritual benefits of His death. Our union with Christ is very close, as "united" implies, but it is not exact. Paul comments further on the implications of this union with the likeness of Christ's death in 6:6-7 (plus in 6:9 & 10).

- B. This union with Christ means that our unregenerate life is over so that we do not now need to obey our old nature (6:6-7).

Paul says (6:6), "our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with ..." Things get confusing here in light of other texts where Paul talks about the "old man" and the "new man" (Eph. 2:14-16; 4:22-24; Col. 3:9-11) and

texts where he tells us to put to death the deeds of the flesh (Rom. 8:12-13; Col. 3:5). In the context here “the old man” represents what we were in Adam (5:12-19). We are no longer in Adam, but now we are in Christ, who is our life (Col. 3:4). So when Paul says that “our old man was crucified with Him,” he means that what we were before we were saved died with Christ. There is a complete severance between what we were under the reign of sin and death in Adam and what we have become under the reign of grace to eternal life in Christ. Our old life has ended, as “crucified” implies.

The problem is, if our old man has been crucified, then where does my strong propensity toward sin come from? Clearly, we still have an old sin nature (sometimes called “the flesh”) within us that wars against the indwelling Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:17). And Paul commands us to put off the old man and put on the new man (Eph. 4:22-24, where most commentators agree that the infinitives have imperatival force). Why do we need to put off the old man if it already has been crucified?

Reading most commentators as they try to sort this out is thoroughly confusing! I do not claim infallibility or complete understanding here! But it seems to me that Thomas Schreiner is on target when he says (*Romans* [Baker], p. 318),

What we have is the already-not-yet tension that informs all of Paul’s theology. The old person has been crucified with Christ and the new person (Col. 3:10) is a reality, and yet the old person still must be resisted and its desire (Eph. 4:22) thwarted. Believers must also choose to clothe themselves with the new person that is theirs in Christ.

Or, to put it another way, in Christ our old man was crucified *positionally*. It is a spiritual fact, just as the fact that I am raised up and seated with Christ in the heavenly places is true positionally. But in practice, I have to count it as true by believing it and resisting my indwelling old nature when it tempts me to sin. To say that the old man “was crucified” is a vivid way of saying that positionally, its power was broken. But, practically, I have to apply that truth in the daily battle against sin and temptation.

Then what does Paul mean when he says, “in order that our body of sin might be done away with”? Again, there is much con-

fusing discussion. The Lord makes it clear that sin originates in our hearts (Mark 7:21-23). Our physical bodies are not inherently sinful, as some ascetics have maintained, so that we should deny any physical pleasure. Rather, Paul probably uses the expression, "body of sin," "because the body is the means by which sin is concretely accomplished" (Schreiner, p. 316). Our bodies are the means by which the sins of our hearts eventually manifest themselves. The verb translated "done away with" means to "render powerless or inoperative."

Thus when Paul says that our old man was crucified "in order that our body of sin might be done away with," I understand him to mean that when we believe and act upon our new position in Christ, in which our old self was crucified, we will not fulfill or act out the sinful desires that tempt us. We will "no longer be slaves to sin" (6:6b). The power of sin to control us has been broken by virtue of our union with Christ.

Verse 7 adds a word of explanation, "for he who has died is freed from sin." The literal translation is, "for he who has died *has been justified* from sin," but almost all translations and commentators take it to mean "freed" in this context. Paul shifts from "we" to "he," so he may be citing a general illustration to support verse 6. The idea is that when a person dies, obviously he's done with sin. Since we died positionally in Christ, sin has no jurisdiction over us. We do not have to obey it any more.

While there are a lot of difficult details in these verses, Paul's overall point is clear: In Christ, sin's power over us has been broken. When you come to Christ, you cannot hang onto your sin with one hand while you take hold of Christ with your other hand. You must make a distinct break with the old life. As believers we have become united with Christ in His death so that we would no longer be slaves to sin, as we all were before we came to Christ. So if you claim to be a Christian and yet you are enslaved to sin, at the very least you do not understand your new position in which your old man was crucified with Christ. Paul would ask you (6:2), "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?"

Thus far we have looked at what it means to be united with Christ in the likeness of His death. But the second half of verse 5

says, "certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection." Paul expounds on this in 6:8-10.

2. To overcome sin, know that you are totally identified with Christ in the likeness of His resurrection (6:5b, 8-10).

Again, there is a lot of debate over the exact meaning of these verses. Let me try to explain my understanding under two headings:

- A. To overcome sin, know and believe that in the future you will share fully in Christ's resurrection victory over sin (6:5b, 8).

Some argue vigorously that Paul's statements about being united with Christ in His resurrection and living with Him refer to the present. Other Scriptures show that we are presently raised up with Christ (Eph. 2:6; Col. 2:12; 3:1). Also, Paul's command (6:11) to consider yourself "alive to God in Christ Jesus" lends weight to the present aspect of sharing in Christ's resurrection.

But the problem is, Paul uses the future tense both in verse 5 and in verse 8. Those who argue that Paul is talking about our present sharing in Christ's resurrection argue that it is future in reference to our death with Christ. But Paul could have used present tense verbs if that were his point. Instead he twice uses the future tense. Also, his words "*we believe that we shall live with Him*" seem to point more toward something that is not yet completely realized.

Thus while it's true that we are presently risen with Christ and share His life, Paul's emphasis here seems to be on the future resurrection of our bodies, when we will experience complete victory over sin (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], pp. 371, 377). So as Leon Morris puts it (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Apollos/Eerdmans], p. 254), "Paul is saying that the believer lives with Christ now and that this union will be even more wonderful in the life to come."

Here's how this works when you face temptation. Perhaps you're tempted to use drugs or to get drunk to escape from the pressures of life. Or, you're tempted to go back to the sexual immorality of your old life. But you realize that in Christ, you have been crucified to that corrupt way of life. You now are united to Christ in both His death and resurrection. His new life is in you. And, someday soon, you will receive a new resurrection body that

cannot sin. Since that is your certain future, why would you want to sin now? As Paul rhetorically asks (6:21), "What benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death." So knowing and believing the truth of your present position of sharing in Christ's death and the certain promise of living forever with Him will break the power of sin in your daily life.

- B. To overcome sin, know that Christ's resurrection represents His complete and final victory over sin and death (6:9-10).

Verse 9 gives the reason or basis that we believe that we will share in Christ's resurrection. "Knowing" is a causal participle (Moo, p. 378). The thought is, "We believe that we will live with Christ *because* we know that He is now beyond the reach of death." His resurrection signifies that He will never die again. "Death is no longer master over Him" (6:9).

Verse 10 explains the last phrase of verse 9: "For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God." When Jesus came to this earth, He submitted Himself to the reign of sin and death in the sense that He came to bear our sins on the cross. He had no sins of His own to bear. But death was master over Him during that time because He came to die for our sins. His death on the cross was a decisive, once and for all satisfaction of God's wrath (Heb. 7:27; 9:12; 10:10). His victory over sin and death was complete. His resurrection put all of the terrors of sin and death behind Him once and for all.

Now, "the life He lives, He lives to God." This does not imply that His life prior to His resurrection was not lived for God. Rather, as Leon Morris explains (p. 255), "His life is beyond the reach of death and every evil. It is a life lived positively in and for the glory of God (cf. John 17:5), no longer with the negative aspect of putting away sin."

So the thought in verses 9 & 10 is that Christ's death and resurrection completely and finally conquered sin and death. The promise that we will one day share completely in this victory gives us the desire and power to overcome sin right now. John Piper ("Justified to Break the Power of Sin," on desiringgod.org) explains

the practical benefit of verses 9 & 10: "Sin can't enslave a person who is utterly confident and sure and hope-filled in the infinite happiness of life with Christ in the future."

By this point, perhaps you're either completely confused or you're thinking, "All right, enough of this theoretical stuff. Let's get to the practical side of things." Paul does that in verse 11:

3. To overcome sin, continually count as true the fact of your being dead to sin and alive to God in Christ (6:11).

It is significant that verse 11 is the first command in Romans to this point. Paul felt it necessary to lay the extensive doctrinal foundation of chapters 1-6 before he finally says, "Now live in this way." In other words, our Christian behavior must rest on solid doctrinal knowledge. Three times in chapter 6, Paul has mentioned knowledge: (6:3), "Or do you not know ..." (6:6), "knowing this ..." (6:9), "knowing that Christ ..." Knowing who we are in Christ is the foundation for how we are to live in Christ.

So, Paul's first command in Romans is (6:11), "Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus." "Even so" means, "Just as Christ died definitively and finally to sin, so you should count yourselves in Him to be done with sin. Just as Christ has risen from the dead and now lives in God's presence far removed from sin, so should you live in Him, since in the future you will live forever with Him." "Consider" is in the present tense and means, "keep on counting it to be true." You don't count it to be true because you *feel* dead to sin and alive to God, but rather because God says that it is true. And the truest thing about you is not what you feel, but what God declares to be true. Victory over sin begins with your mind, how you think.

This isn't just a mind game, where you tell yourself over and over that it's true until it actually becomes true. Paul isn't saying to deny reality by thinking positive thoughts. He isn't saying, "Visualize yourself as being dead to sin and then you'll act that way." Rather, he is saying, "This is the *fact* of who God has made you in Christ. You are no longer in Adam, alive to sin, but dead towards God. Rather, you are now in Christ Jesus [this is just Paul's second use of that frequent phrase in Romans], dead to sin and alive to God. Think on that truth. As you think, so you will act. So consider

it over and over as often as you face temptation." Living in light of your union with Christ is the key to overcoming sin.

Conclusion

When she was young, Victoria, the future queen of England, was shielded from that fact so that the knowledge of it would not spoil her. When her teacher finally did let her discover for herself that she would one day rule as queen, Victoria's response was, "Then I will be good!" Her life from that point was controlled by her future position. She would be the queen, so she acted as a queen should act. (Adapted from Warren Wiersbe, *Be Rich* [Victor Books], pp. 13-14.)

In the same way, the fact that we are united with Christ in His decisive death to sin and that one day we will be raised up to live with Him eternally should cause us to proclaim, "Then I will be holy." Counting our union with Christ in His death and resurrection to be true is the key to overcoming sin.

Application Questions

1. A Christian says, "I don't feel dead toward sin, so isn't reckoning it to be true just a mind game?" Your response?
2. Some Christian writers argue that believers do not have an old sin nature. Why is this teaching dangerous? Where does it lead?
3. What other Scriptures could you use to prove that our physical bodies are not sinful? Why is it important to affirm this?
4. Can a genuine believer live enslaved to sin? Is such a condition evidence that he isn't truly regenerate? Why/why not?

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