

NO LONGER SLAVES TO SIN

by Steve Zeisler

We have come to the sixth chapter of the book of Romans, where the first verse asks two very important questions. The first question is similar to that of the little drummer boy in the Christmas song who wonders what he can offer to Jesus. Paul writes:

What shall we say, then?

The opening chapters of this book have described our desperate need for help and the gracious intervention of God on our behalf. Chapter 3 verse 22 tells us about the "righteousness from God [that] comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." Chapter 5 verse 8 says, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Chapter 5 verse 16 says, "...the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification." With gratitude we find ourselves looking at God with "wonder, love and praise." We eventually get to the point of exclaiming, "What shall we say? How can we express our appreciation? How can we respond to God's love?" Chapter 6 begins the process (which extends through chapter 8) of answering these questions.

THE QUESTION OF SIN

The second question in chapter 6 verse 1 is also critical:

Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?

This question poses a possible answer to the first question, "What shall we say, then?" In chapter 5 verse 20, the immediately preceding context, Paul makes the statement, "...where sin increased, grace increased all the more." No matter how blighting the effect of sin, how far its reach, or how terrible the tragedy it accomplishes, grace is greater than sin. And wherever sin increases, grace increases all the more. Grace always overwhelms sin and breaks the power of the reign of sin and death.

But it is important to ask what attitude might be behind this second question. I see two possibilities, and to distinguish between them is important. First, a person could be asking, "May I continue unchanged in sin? Can I have favor with God and sin at the same time? If I continue in sin will God be glorified and grace increase?" Or second, a person could be asking, "Must I continue in sin? In order to experience the grace of God do I have to continue to be the person that I have been? Do I have to continue to shame myself with what now breaks my heart in order to know the grace of God?"---hoping that it's not so.

There are many who "glory in their shame" [Philippians 3:19] pursuing that which ought to bring them sorrow. You may have read about the Spur Posse in southern California, a group of teenage boys who wore San Antonio Spurs caps as their distinguishing mark. In a game they kept track of how many under-age girls they could have sexual encounters with and bragged about it to one another. They passed girls back and forth between them, taking great pride in trashing the reputation of others, often with the tacit approval of their parents. There are people everywhere who boast about how much they can drink, how many drugs they can take, racial prejudice, or love of money. If those people had they any interest at all in spiritual things, they might ask, "Can I continue in sin and have God too? What a deal that would be!"

But Paul's reaction in the verse that follows is to recoil from the thought of this possibility:

By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

He is writing from the perspective of someone who has learned to hate his sin, someone whose sinful nature and history reek of death. They have died and decayed and are awful to contemplate. He wants nothing to do with them anymore, and the longing of his heart is to be freed from all that. So he says we have died to sin,

and we should find horrible the suggestion that we would have to go back into the sewer in order to experience the grace of God.

Some prefer to think of Jesus as a kind of divine sewage treatment plant. There are all kinds of toxic pollutants and sludge and sewage that spew forth from their lives. Jesus ministry to cleanse it all and make it right, but only that---not to change the production of the filth. But he is not like a divine sewage treatment plant. If we are Christians not only has Christ died for us but we have died with him, the Scriptures say. Not only has he forgiven our sins, but we are united with him so that we become different people. We will have what this passage will call newness of life, so that instead of producing more and more sludge that is let off into the environment, we will become people who are changed from the inside out because we have the life of Christ available to us. We don't have to continue to sin in order to experience the grace of God. What a great and glorious announcement!

Chapters 6 through 8 are a complex, wonderful, and powerful description of what theologians call sanctification. Having been justified or declared right with God, we now undergo the process of being changed into the likeness of Christ. It is not easy; it is in fact complex. Any time you encounter quick fix methods for achieving Christian maturity, you know you are dealing with thinking that is either naive or deceptive, because there are not ten easy steps. In the process of growing in faith there is a great deal to learn and apply.

UNITED WITH CHRIST

The key to it all is to realize that we are united with Christ or placed into Christ. In these chapters, what we are going to be talking about are all of the implications and questions that flow from that and the growth in the life of faith as Christ increasingly takes over our experience. Baptism---dying, being submerged and raised up again---is a way of declaring our being joined with Jesus.

We not only experience Jesus' death for us, but we died with him. Verses 3-4:

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

Originally, the word baptize meant to place something into something else. A ship that was launched from dry dock into the ocean was baptized into the ocean. The baptism that Paul is describing here is a spiritual reality. We are baptized or placed into Christ. We were joined to him on his cross, in his grave, and in his resurrection. All that has happened to him has happened to us in the inner man. Thus complete change has taken place in us spiritually.

The result of being placed into Christ or united with him, Paul says at the end of verse 4, is that we are to live a new life. This speaks of profound change. But all that is new does not happen instantly to people who place their faith in Christ. There are choices we must make through this sanctification process, and that is what Romans 6 begins to help us grapple with.

WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW

What is the process? To begin with, the idea of what we know becomes very important. Paul says in verse 3, "...don't you know that all us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Remember, the questions he is beginning to answer were, "What response can I make to all that God has done for me? And how do sin and grace interact with each other? How can I be free of this sinful pattern that is mine?") Twice more now he is going to use the idea of what we know. Twice also he uses a logical device called a conditional statement. A conditional statement has two parts, the antecedent and the consequent, each of which is a statement in itself. The truth of the antecedent is the basis for stating the consequent. Paul's first conditional statement is in verse 5. Let's read verses 5-7:

If we have been united with him like this in his death [antecedent], we will certainly also be

united with him in his resurrection [consequent]. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin--because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

If we have been united with him in the likeness of death, we will be united with him in newness of life, in his resurrection, in being changed. And we know that we have been united with him in his death; we can be certain of that, for that is what it means to be a Christian. So we can also be certain that resurrection life is our destiny, too. We have available to us the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead and brought about the change that he underwent from a decaying body in a grave to a glorious resurrected body that death could never touch again.

Paul makes his second conditional statement in verse 8. Let's read verses 8-9:

Now if we died with Christ [antecedent], we believe that we will also live with him [consequent]. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

There are two great verities here that we can know with absolute, unshakable certainty: We know that we are united with Christ; and we know that Christ died, was raised, and is now experiencing new life unto God. The process of complete change from sin on the cross to decay in the grave to life forever has been finished in his experience. We are united with Christ, and the process is over for Christ; therefore the process will be ended for us as well. We can be sure that we too will experience resurrection life; we too will be made new. In unity with Christ we have all that he has.

THE AUTHORITY OF SIN IS GONE

But let's carefully consider what it means for the body of sin to be done away with (verse 6). We are no longer slaves to sin because sin has been executed; the old nature has been put to death. We were on Christ's cross. Something that used to command and control us died when he died. The body of sin is not speaking of just our physical self. Our body is no more sinful than any other aspect of us; physical things are not sinful by nature. He is talking about a commanding presence--the person of sin, if you will; the authority that has owned us all our lives, demanded our obedience, crushed and hurt and confused and frightened us. That commanding presence has been executed, and we are no longer required to obey it.

One of the most famous experiments in psychology had to do with conditioned reflexes. It was performed by the Russian psychologist Ivan Pavlov on some dogs. Pavlov would let his dogs become very hungry, and then he would feed them great quantities of aromatic, entirely enticing food. They were so hungry they could do nothing but eat it. And every time he gave the dogs food he would ring a bell. This went on for a period of time. Then eventually he rang the bell without waiting for the dogs to be hungry or giving them food. And because the dogs had been conditioned to associate the sound of the bell with the food they had been so hungry for, when Pavlov rang the bell they would salivate just as they had when he gave them food.

What Paul is saying about the sin nature's having been executed on the cross is very similar to that in our experience. There was a time when sin had real authority over us, when it made us really hungry, and we had no choice but to eat the food that was placed before us. It had an aroma that was absolutely overwhelming to us. And the bell would ring every time. But now all sin has in our experience is the sound of the bell, which it uses to try to stimulate the same response in us as when it had authority over us. And when sin rings the bell, we can be made to think we have to sin--unless we see the process at work and choose that it should die. Because we have been conditioned to associate the sensation of temptation with the absolute power of sin in our life, what we must do is hear the gospel and believe it, and then choose to recognize that what once owned us owns us no more; it has died. And it is as we choose to assert the death of our sin nature and to believe that life is given to us from God that we begin to be changed; we no longer sin as much. This real change in our behavior is taking place in us because we have a new identity; we are united with Christ.

The difficulty we experience is believing that the sin nature is really dead. It is a very savvy and wily former

master of ours. There are times when sin is so familiar that we are blind to what we are doing. We are led down paths of temptation into foolish things without even realizing it, so habitual are they. There are times when the ringing of the bell is so persuasive that we feel as if we can really do nothing other than its bidding. The experience of newness of life is less familiar to us than sin is.

It is important to recognize the emphasis that Paul therefore gives to the crucifying of the old nature in this passage. In verse 3 Paul says that in baptism into Christ we have died and have been buried in death with him. Now, not only did Christ's body die, but it was buried, and a rock was rolled over its tomb. He was really dead! That is Paul's clear emphasis here. And just as certain is the fact that our old nature was crucified, the body of sin done away with, so that we should no longer be slaves to sin. But if we are not careful we may think of sin as having been sent to its room rather than having been crucified, or of its having been tamed and having its knuckles rapped and somehow coming in line. We want to think that we can manage it a bit. But that will not do. What we have to do is see that sin has no life left. It can't command anymore, it can only ring the bell and try to make us think we need to sin. It can only dredge up all the old memories, but we don't have to do those things anymore.

PRACTICAL COMMANDS

In verse 11 for the first time in the book of Romans a command is given. For six-and-a-half-chapters we have been given information and discussion. We have seen analysis of the sin problem, grace, what God has done, and the promises he offers. We have been given extraordinary insight into the power and authority of grace. Because we are united with Jesus Christ, we are now given a command. Verses 11-14:

In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

The first response we are to make is to apply the theology to ourselves. This is true not just for pastors, for Billy Graham, for the saints of old, or for missionaries overseas. It applies to you. Consider yourself dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Every day, perhaps dozens of times throughout the day, you and I need to have theological discussions with ourselves: "I am united with Christ; I am his. That is who I am. My sin nature has been executed. It rings bells, but it has no power. I am dead to sin but alive to God, and that is what I am going to believe about myself. And I'm going to walk around and apply theology to myself as often as I need to to begin to take on that identity for myself without reservation."

The second command in verse 12 logically follows the first. "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires." We have become familiar in the last several years with the language of emotional co-dependency. That is helpful language to understand what Paul means by not letting sin reign. In the familiar pattern of someone who flees an abusive situation and goes back to it, is rescued out of it and goes into another one, and another. The first time they might have been fooled, but eventually it is clearly by choice that they are allowing hurt to themselves. They are letting something have authority over them that is destructive, and they have to stop it. It may be very difficult; there are powerful factors that contribute to this pattern. But the prayers of believing people, good counsel, and the love and the support of others are all aimed at helping them realize that they are letting something destroy them that doesn't have to. They must choose to break the pattern. In the same way we have to choose to stop letting sin in any form reign because it has no real authority left, even though it acts like it does.

The third command for us in this section is in some ways the most practical of all. We have body parts---feet, hands, ears, a mouth to talk with, and sexual capabilities. We have as well time, relationships, places to go, and assets to dispose of. These are the very practical means by which we interact with the world every day. And we are not to offer them to sin as instruments of wickedness, but rather to offer ourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and to offer the parts of our body to him as instruments of righteousness. So we must pray, "Lord, this day you may have my mouth---what I say about people, the

arguments I offer, the blessings I speak, the opportunity I have to build up rather than tear down, the opportunity to tell the truth rather than confuse. I am not going to give my mouth over to destructive behavior as I have been in the habit of doing. And you may have my hands today. The work I do is to glorify you. You may have my time...." And so on.

There is a conscious turning from the sinful opportunities. The bell ringer is dinning in our ear and telling us what we ought to spend our time on, what our minds ought to think about, where we ought to go, and what we ought to say. It is telling us whom we can hurt, anger we can express, and lies we can speak. We have all those practical opportunities, and we turn aside from them because we are united with Christ. And we start actively saying, "Feet, today we're going to go where Jesus wants us to go today for a change. Wallet, today we're going to use our money as Jesus directs." That is the practical process of taking the truth that we are united with Christ and beginning to change who we are inside and in our activity. This text does not imply that it is simple, easy, or automatic. The journey of sanctification is not completed with what we have elarned in Romans 6:1-14, but the foundation---union with Christ---is laid and practical obedience has been set before us.

Let me close by focusing on the hope that is offered in verse 14: "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace." We are going to win. In Christ, the sewage production facility is in fact going to be completely changed. It is not a question of just hoping that by the grace of God the process will turn out as it is described; it *is* going to turn out that way. Sin will not master us, because we are not under law but under grace. If our confidence was in the law, in the power of the information and the commands of God to change us, then we would be without hope. But our confidence is not in the law but in grace, and grace is greater than sin. And because we are under grace, our Lord God is going to see to it that we are sanctified, that the day will come when we stand in glory with Christ as his sons and daughters reflecting his glory back to him. It does not ultimately depend on us. This is a tremendous word of hope, and so we can joyfully enter into obedience.

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