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# The Gospel: Freed from Sin's Enslaving Power

## Romans 6:1-23

*Pastor Russ Kennedy*

In our Bibles are a cluster of texts that define, describe and declare what reality really is. These are located all throughout the Bible, with the most significant for us as New Covenant Christians, those in Paul's writings. They would be texts like Ephesians 1, Colossians 1-2, Hebrews 2-4 and Romans 6-8.

Our study brings us to one the most important of those clusters of texts. They are significant because they build-on and assume the others while being intensely practical and life transforming. Romans 6-8 are how the gospel with its saving and transforming power causes us by faith to have hope while living in a fallen world. It tells us how, though we are in the presence of sin, we are not subject to its power.

Paul has been powerfully arguing that salvation is by grace received through faith. He has highlighted the utter sinfulness of man, the condemnation resulting from both Adamic sin and personal acts of sin and the marvelous grace in Christ. He has been insistent on faith, not works. He has elevated grace to the point that where sin increased, grace abounded. Now here is the test for whether you understand grace like Paul did and teach it like Paul did: does your teaching of grace cause people to respond with one of the following ways:

1. Since grace abounds where sin increases, let's just sin more so we will have more grace.
2. Since we are under grace and not under law, then we can do almost anything we want.

These two statements framed as questions are the basic structure of Romans 6. Verse 1 frames the first question: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" [ESV]. Verse 15 frames the second question: "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?" [ESV].

But, all of this is fine hermeneutical structuring, but our personal questions are often unsettling and near as well to Romans 6. Here are the questions that plague us and are answered here:

1. Can I continue to sin since we are under grace? More frequently this is, "Sin doesn't matter since I am under grace." So people think or say, "If I keep on thinking, wanting, doing or feeling this way, God will forgive me regardless." We are thinking of grace only as the benevolence of God and not thinking of grace as a realm or sphere in which salvation places us.
2. Must I continue to sin since we are under grace? More often this is stated as, "I can't seem to stop sinning." What is being thought or said is, "Sin is too strong and powerful for me." We are not thinking of grace as an enabling power received by faith.

What is fascinating here is that both become excuses for my sin: (1) because sin doesn't matter and (2) because I can't help myself. Paul's responses to these questions, statements or implications are emphatic. Christians *ought not to sin* and Christians do *not have to sin*. You ought not sin because of your union with Christ (v.1-14) and you do not have to sin if you yield to Christ (v.15-23).

Now, it is important to sweep away a false and very prevailing view of Romans 6 and 7. There was a notion that if we just believe the facts in Romans 6 of our co-crucifixion and co-resurrection with Christ, that we will stop sinning because we will be like a corpse to sin, dead to it. Therefore, what we must do is just believe God's word, rest in it and stop fighting sin and living as though it were a reality to us. This gave rise to the Let Go and Let God slogan. This view was popularized by the Keswick Conferences in the 60's and 70's and is the centerpiece of the writing of Watchman Nee and the teaching of Bill Gothard. Dr. John Stott effectively responded to this teaching and corrected the error in his book *Men Made New*. Interestingly enough, he actually taught the series that became that book at a Keswick Conference.

One other note. Death in this text is meant to convey the concept of judgment. That is not to say that the death here is not real: it is. There is physical death and spiritual death and sin leads to both. It does so though because God takes a holy initiative to judge sin. Though sin has natural consequences as you violate God's law, death is God's judgment.

I have come to see Romans 6-8 as absolutely essential for people who have a right standing with God – that is, they are justified – to please and glorify God in every aspect of life – that is, they are growing in grace. You must not only understand the meaning of the text, but the essential structure that frames it in and the two major doctrines taught in it. All of this informs and builds our faith – what we believe – so that we will have grace to obey.

John Piper writes, "We Americans are pragmatists to the max. We want results. And we want them yesterday. We want them simply. We want them without too much pondering and too much pain. And in the church, we have developed all kinds of Christ-coated remedies that are shallow and short-lived. We are not, by and large, the deeply grounded saints that some of our forefathers were. [Romans] does not skip from chapter 5 to 12. It leads us down deep into the roots of godliness, so that when we come up, we are not people with lists, but people with unshakable life and strength and holiness and wisdom and love."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *United with Christ in Death and in Life*, sermon 9/24/2000, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN.

## The Power of our Union with Christ

(v.1-11)

This section is full of indicatives. That is, it describes spiritual realities as truths to be known and believed.

### Its Initiation- How it Begins

(v.1-3)

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? <sup>2</sup> By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been placed [baptized] into Christ Jesus were placed [baptized] into his death?

Now don't be put off by the word baptism. Just write in your Bibles the word *immerse* or *immersion* or *to place into*. That way, we will be translating the text. Now the text tells us we were united with Christ when we were placed into Christ. We were placed into Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit at our conversion. The ordinance of baptism is meant to outwardly portray what has inwardly *already occurred*.

### Its Instruction – What it Means

(v.4-9)

I want to spend a bit of time here. I believe that there is much confusion about what is being said here. I am asking now to do some deep and difficult pondering, thinking. We have already seen some of this in Romans 2, 4 and 5.

<sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with him by being placed [baptism] into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

<sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. <sup>6</sup> We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. <sup>7</sup> For one who has died has been set free from sin. <sup>8</sup> Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup> We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

You were born *in Adam*. You were in the realm or sphere of sin and darkness, occasionally called *the flesh*. In that realm you had what is called the old self, the person you were as spiritually dead and training yourself in habits of sin. Then, when you were converted/saved, God placed you *in Christ*. You were transferred into the Christ's kingdom and spiritually united to His body through the Spirit. These are the invisible (and admittedly, difficult) spiritual reality. When you were placed into Christ and united to Him, you were joined to His death and resurrection.

Thus, the cross and resurrection are a spiritual reality to you in several ways.

1. You have physical life here on earth experienced in your body and through your five senses. It is real and authentic. It is not normal in the sense that we live in a fallen cursed earth with bodies that will decay and die with all its attendant difficulties and hardships.
2. You have spiritual life in the heavenlies and that spiritual life is hidden in Christ and will be unveiled when He comes. You are now seated in the heavenlies and have access to the throne room through Christ. However, this reality is only experienced *by faith* – not by sight (or our physical senses). When Jesus comes and we are glorified, our spir-

itual life in heaven will be reunited with our glorified physical bodies. This life in heaven is just as real and authentic as your life on earth – it is just invisible to you.

3. You have been separated through the cross from the old person that you were, the old self. You have a new identity in Christ. The old creation is gone and all is made new. But not completely. Remember that realities (1) and (2) are not yet joined in our physical bodies. So the old inner person that we were has been crucified and we have a new person.
4. You have a physical body that is living in the presence of sin. But the power of sin in your soul and body has been broken because of the death and resurrection of Christ. You have trained that body into habits of sin that you must now retrain into habits of righteousness. You do this, not by mere human willing and power, but by believing truth and God's promises and receiving enabling grace.

The point and purposes of all this are in verses 4 and 6: *so that we may walk in newness of life and not be enslaved to sin*. These great and wonderful truths are all aimed the outworking of having been sanctified, our growth in grace, our practical holiness.

The principle here is demonstrated in Christ, His death and resurrection. His death and resurrection breaks sin's dominion over Him. Since we are placed into Him and united with Him, sin does not have dominion over us.

### **Its Implementation – How it Acts**

**(v.10-11)**

<sup>10</sup> For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. <sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

These verses then call for us to consider carefully these truths about Christ (v.10) and then count them to be true for us (v.11). The call here is not to imagine something not so or to conjure something that does not exist or to put something to our account that is not ours. The clear call here is to believe these facts about the death and resurrection of Christ and then, knowing we are in Him and united to Him, believe, trust and count them to be true for us *because they are*. So, because Jesus is dead to sin through the cross and alive to God through the resurrection, so are we dead to sin and alive to God because we are *in Christ*.

So here is what you have to know and believe:

You have to know that you have been placed into Christ.

You have to know what Christ's death and resurrection mean.

You have to know how being placed into Christ and thus His death and resurrection applies to you.

Once again, let us remember that Christians are not people with simple lists of what to believe and what to do. Christians are people with a Biblical view of all things. If we do not know the truths we need to know, and we do not believe them, then we cannot have the power of grace that comes through believing those truths. So, I challenge you to think deeply about all this, believe God's Word.

Verses 1-2 show us “the incongruity, but not the impossibility of ongoing sin.” [Stott] It is not that it is not possible. The very imperatives through the rest of this chapter and through Romans show us that it is possible. But we must not think that our union with Christ and our being now in the sphere of grace frees us to live any way we choose.

## **The Precepts of our Yielding to Christ**

**(v.12-14)**

In the light of these truths, there are two important imperatives. That is, we have the commands that are essential to applying our union with Christ. The truths about our spiritual reality in Christ call for responses from us. Therefore the way of holiness is not mysticism – just believe and it becomes real – nor is it activism – just will or choose to do right – it is believing in an obeying way. I realize and I respond. The Bible clearly joins the *indicatives* and the *imperatives*.

<sup>12</sup> Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. <sup>13</sup> Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. <sup>14</sup> For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

## **Don't Allow Sin to Reign**

**(v.12)**

Though we are not in the realm of sin we can allow it to extend itself into our lives so that it rules and governs us and eventually enslaves us all over again. How does sin attempt to assert its rule and governance over us? In the part of our soul that wants. It strives to take our God-designed wants and Biblically informed desires that were made to serve our pleasure in God and to turn them into that which we serve. Sin reigns through wrong desires: wanting something so much you'll sin to get it or sin when you don't have it. The more you allow you wants and desires to control you, the more control they will have over you. And through those wrong desires, sin rules and reigns over you.

So, don't allow sin to rule you through lusts.

## **Don't Make Yourself Available to Sin**

**(v.13-14)**

Here is the second and very important precept. This is the realm where our thinking about *putting-off* and *putting-on* operates. This is where we don't give room to the devil. This is where we do not put ourselves in temptation's way. This is where we flee from evil in all its forms.

Notice that there is a *stop* and a *start* in this text. You must do both or you will succumb to sin. You must stop presenting the members of your body for sin's use and start presenting yourself for God's control. You do so as those who are dead to sin and alive to God. So the indicative is the back drop for the imperative.

Now look at the Bible's logic. We have to learn the Bible's way of thinking. In essence verses 13-14 say this: *don't let sin master you because sin will not master you*. Now that might sound odd to us, but it does because we come to the Bible with the error that if we are commanded to do something, then we alone are responsible to do it. But the Bible does not reason in this way. The Bible says here is the command from God: obey it because

God is enabling you to obey it. So I choose not to allow sin to reign in my body because God is at work not to allow sin to reign in my body.

Now this works out in all the wisdom decisions of life and Christian growth in grace. You do not want to commit sin, so you guard against those things that tempt you to sin. You do not make opportunities to sin. You observe patterns and habits of life that make you vulnerable to sin and you break those patterns and habits. If you have a hard day at work, you don't rehearse all the badness of the day on the way home so that you arrive grumpy and angry. If you struggle with sexual temptation, you don't get suggestive movies and don't read secular magazines (the ad industry may as well be called the lust industry). If you are tempted to have a beer because you stop on the way home to chat with the guys, then you stop driving home that way. If you lose your temper while playing sports, you stop playing sports until you identify and repent of the issues of the heart.

Now on the surface, most of this sounds either stunningly simple or frighteningly legalistic. Understand this. Sometimes we sin just because we are stupid. What is causing us to sin is right in front of us plain to us and easily changed *if we are not allowing our desires to master us*. These sorts of things are legalistic only if you mistake the doing of them for being spiritual and use them as measuring standards over others lives. So you don't listen to jazz because when you do you smell a bar or taste a beer. But don't tell me then that not listening to jazz makes you spiritual and makes me a sinner because I do.

### **Don't Because You are Under Grace, not Law**

**(v.14)**

I'm not going to explain or expand on this much because that is what verses 15-19 do. Basically, Paul says that we are to know doctrine, personalize it and make application because we have been transferred from the sphere of Law to the sphere of Grace. The next chapter will tell us more about the proper function of the Law as does Galatians. In fact, law keeping cannot save and in this age, it cannot transform either. Outward obedience must arise from the heart that is enabled by grace. When we try to live by Law, we go backward to being under the law, in the realm of the flesh and thus we deny the cross and that we are in Christ dependent on His grace.

## The Principle of our Obedience to Christ

(v.15-19)

By way of an extended illustration Paul clarifies for us how our union with Christ and our surrender/yielding to Him is functioning. Paul helps us by using an illustration that would be quite familiar to his hearers and listeners. For us today, this is a bit more difficult since most of you are not personally familiar with slavery.

<sup>15</sup>What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! <sup>16</sup>Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

<sup>17</sup>But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, <sup>18</sup>and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. <sup>19</sup>I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

### In its Concern

(v.15-16)

He begins by raising and answering the second major question. Since we are under grace and not law, we do not have license to sin. Now once again, notice the Bible's way of reasoning. Christians are not to sin because they have laws that tell them not to, but because they have a Master, the Lord Jesus to whom we yield and surrender. We make sin our master when we yield to it. We make Christ our master when we yield to Him. Christians then do not sin because of Law, but because of their Lord.

### In its Contrast

(v.17-18)

What graciousness here as Paul acknowledges their good beginning in these things. Though he has those in Rome who will raise the questions, he is glad to be able to express gratitude that they are not dominated by that thinking.

Verses 17-18 are at the heart of Romans 6. There is little to add to the simplicity of how they summarize what we need to learn. Listen again to those verses: "*But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.*" We were once slaves to sin. We have an obedience from the heart by faith, believing and being committed to truth. Thus, once for all, at the cross, having been set free from sin, its realm, rule and ruin, we have become mastered by righteousness.

### In its Command

(v.19)

At the heart of this is a command. Just like you used to continually present yourself to sin for its use, so now continually present yourself to God for His use. While the one resulted in slavery to sin and impurity, the other leads to slavery to righteousness resulting in transformation or growth in grace.

**The Products of our Enslavement to Christ****(v.20-23)**

This section develops the implications of our union and surrender to Christ. So while there are our responsibilities, there is also God's initiative. He unites us with Christ and places us in the realm of grace so that we do not have to sin. Being in the realm of sin leads to death. Being surrendered to God, being God's slave yields the fruit of growing in grace and holiness.

<sup>20</sup> When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. <sup>21</sup> But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. <sup>22</sup> But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. <sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**In its Contrast****(v.20-22)**

Paul wants us to see the terms of our slavery so as to motivate us to serve God. When we were in sin, we were without righteousness. That produced all kinds of fruit, evil thoughts, desires and actions of which we are ashamed now and resulted in death. But now, having died to sin, we are truly alive for righteousness. Its final outcome is life eternal.

Further, there is the great paradox here, as Stott points out. Each freedom to sin has its corresponding slavery. And our slavery to God has its corresponding freedom to live and please God.

**In its Cause****(v.23)**

Why is this so? Because sin has wages but eternal life is a gift. Once again, he points us to the importance of not banking on works but believing and receiving the gift of life.

But there is more to that here. Eternal life is not merely a future life with God in the heaven and in new heavens and new earth. We often think of eternal life as beginning at our death and going on for eternity as though it is something we enter. *The Bible never speaks of it this way.*

Eternal life is your present possession. You have it now. It is the life of God in the soul through the union of the Word and Spirit in your soul. When you were born from above, raised from spiritual deadness and given spiritual life, you received the life that is eternal at that instant. The gift of God is His life into your soul so that you spiritually live forever.

Now, this is why we do not grow in grace by Law. The Law brings death. The Law kills. The Law rules over the realm of death. To sin is to step into the place where sin rules, law reigns and death results. But we have been made alive. We live by life. Growing in grace and holiness is simply living the life, the eternal life that God has given you.



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## Reflect and Respond

### *How We Confront Ourselves and Others*

- Examine thoughts and wants behind choices and emotions.
- Teach or remind the truths that we must know and believe.
- Apply and personalize truth through dialog – questions and answers.
- Surrender and yield in practical ways so as to overcome sin.

All of us by nature are enslaved to sin – we don't rule sin, sin rules us. God is the decisive deliverer from sin – and our efforts, though real and crucial, are dependent on Him. Without this deliverance from sin and the resulting new direction of righteousness and sanctification, we have not and will not inherit eternal life.

- We have union and identification with Christ.
- We may not live as though sin does not matter.
- We may not live as though sin has control.
- We have been delivered from the old life and are empowered for the new life (v.4-11).
- We have been delivered from the condemnation of the law to the freedom and power of grace (v.14ff).
- We must not let sin master us because sin is not going to master us (v.13-14).
- We must obey truth from the heart, having been freed from sin and become God's slaves (v.17-18).

We must present ourselves to God for His use, rather than presenting ourselves to sin for its use.

We must understand that we may not live as though sin were not deadly and sanctification were not demanded.

Justification always brings transformation leading to glorification. Our transformation is decisively God's work and dependently our work. So, those who have been justified by grace will grow in grace. Sin is deadly and holiness is demanded. Isn't it glorious then that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

