

Dead to Sin, Living in Christ

Romans 6:1-2

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Certain events in your life permanently change who you are. They have such a profound impact on you that you can never go back to the way you were before them. Probably some of the biggest ones would be getting married and having children. In marriage, you commit yourself to another person for the rest of your life. That changes the course of your life and your priorities drastically change as a result. Being married to another person changes you forever.

The same is true with becoming a parent. Your priorities get reoriented once more. You learn to anticipate the needs of another and put those needs above your own. You discover a capacity for love you didn't know was there. This, too, is a turning point in your life. You can see that you are a different person after kids than you were before.

In our passage this morning, Paul points us to another event that permanently changes the course of our lives. Once we have been made alive with Christ, there is no going back, and even if we could, why would we want to? Paul points this out to help combat a common misunderstanding of the gospel of grace. As we unpack this truth today, we'll also look at the practical implications it has for each of our lives.

Grace and Indulgence

Last week we looked at Paul's explanation of how people can be identified with one of two representatives. We are all born into the sin of Adam. Because of Adam's sin, we are sinful and live in rebellion against God. But Paul pointed out that there is another representative of humanity, Jesus. Adam's actions brought death to the world; Jesus' actions bring life. Adam's actions brought sin; Jesus' actions bring righteousness.

As Paul concluded that section, he pointed us to God's super-abundant grace. We talked last week about what that means. If God's grace is so overflowing, so abundant that we can never exhaust it, then it should give us confidence to keep picking ourselves back up and running back to the Lord when we fall, rather than concluding that God must give up on us if we fail too many times. Additionally, it should give us assurance of our salvation because we know that God's grace is far greater than our sin. We need not worry that we can lose our salvation by exhausting the grace of God. That is utterly impossible.

As we have seen Paul do before, he breaks off his argument because he anticipates the objections others will make. Chapter 6 addresses these objections. You may have found yourself making the same objection, or at least asking a similar question.

Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? (Romans 6:1, NLT)

This seems like a natural expansion of what Paul has said. If grace abounds more and more as sin abounds more and more, and God making His grace manifest brings glory to Him, then doesn't it stand to reason that the more we sin, the more grace God extends, and therefore the more He is glorified? The conclusion of this line of reasoning is that sin is not evil for the Christian because it leads to a greater appreciation of God's super-abundant grace! In fact, we should sin more!

Of course, this is wrong, and Paul will explain why in verse 2, but I want to point out that as patently ridiculous as it is, this is an insidious teaching that has made its way into the church in a variety of ways.

We see it in those who call themselves Christians but use the concept of God's grace justify all sorts of behaviors they simply don't want to give up. We see this in people who conclude that while God says that sex is to be reserved only for marriage, it is ok to break that command "if we really love someone." After all, we know God will forgive us.

Or we may argue that it's ok to continue to swear, speak violently, or to attack others with our words, because nobody's perfect, and God will forgive me. He knows how this is just the way I am. Besides, this is just the way the world is today. We cannot survive unless we talk like the rest of the world.

Or we justify our indulgent lifestyles, ignoring God's commands about generosity, about investing in His kingdom, and about being good stewards of what He has given us. We conclude that while we may know these things probably aren't what God commands or what He wants from us, it's really not a big deal, because we are under grace, not law.

We even see this at an institutional level in many groups that call themselves churches today. They say that God is a god of love and grace, so we should be "open and affirming" to people from all walks of life. This is code for: "We don't tell anyone that what they are doing is wrong." These so-called churches claim that because of God's grace, there is no need for people to change their lives. After all, we are not saved by being good enough. We simply need to believe in Jesus, and His grace will cover all our sins. So, we should live in ways that bring us "fulfillment" or "happiness", because that is what God desires for us.

Sadly, this is not just a modern development. It's been going on since Paul's time. It is so common that there is even a theological term for it: antinomianism. In essence, antinomianism is the belief that since we are under grace, God's law is completely put aside. It leads to a belief that we can indulge our desires, whatever they may be, without repercussions, because "Jesus covers it all."

The pernicious thing about these beliefs is that they begin with elements of truth. God's grace does cover our sin, but that doesn't give us license to sin with impunity.

This attitude has led many people to reject the gospel of grace. They argue that a salvation that is wholly of God, that is provided solely by His grace and not by our

performance leads to this kind of amoral, indulgent behavior. These people then lean in the opposite direction, insisting that one must live a good life in order to receive grace. They say that we are saved by grace, but also by our own actions. They would say that God works with us together and together we accomplish our salvation.

Both of these distortions are incorrect. But Paul anticipated that his teaching had the potential to confuse people, which is why he diverts from his argument to address this concern here. He wants us to rightly understand the gospel of grace, because rightly understood it does not lead to indulgence, but offers a wonderful freedom and assurance. It leads to worship, not rebellion.

Paul's Response

We see Paul's response to this argument in verse 2,

Of course not! Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it?
(Romans 6:2, NLT)

Paul does not mince words in his response. Though he understood the logic of the antinomians, his answer to their question was emphatic: "Of course not!" Different translations render this response in different ways, but the meaning is the same—such a conclusion is patently ridiculous.

Paul asks a rhetorical question: "Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it?" He is pointing people back to the argument he had made in preceding verses. Paul had talked about God's super-abundant grace and how it abounds even more as sin increases, but he did not say those words in a vacuum. It is important not to divorce such statements from their context.

What was the context of this statement? Paul said that every person lives in one of two families. Either we are in Adam, or we are in Christ. If we are in Christ, then we are no longer part of Adam's family. Paul goes a step further here, saying not only have we left Adam's family, but we are new people entirely. In order to become part of Jesus' family, our old self must die and we must be reborn into the family of Christ.

This is the crux of Paul's argument. If we have truly trusted Christ, if we have received His grace, then we are no longer the same person we were before. We have not just changed; we are an entirely new person!

Paul says the same thing in 2 Corinthians chapter 5,

This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! (2 Corinthians 5:17, NLT)

Our lives, like time, should be split, with a BC period (Before Christ), and a period that begins when we trust Jesus. Who we are before Christ is completely different that who we are after. Before Christ, we lived only for ourselves, but now we are to live for Him.

Here's the problem we face though—we still struggle with sin. If we have died to sin, if we are new people, why do we still struggle with it?

People have tried to think about this in different ways. Some have tried to say that this death is a process—that the old self is dying, and the new self is beginning to live. Others have tried to say that this death hasn't happened yet but will happen one day in the future. But that isn't what he said. Notice the tense of the verb Paul uses—he says we *died*. It is past tense! It isn't that we *are dying* to our old selves, it isn't that one day our old selves *will die*, our old selves *have died*. He speaks of it as a finished reality, not a future hope.

Paul is going to unpack this even more in chapter 7, but for now, it is sufficient for us to see that though our old self has died, we often don't live like that's true. We keep going back to our old ways because it's what we know best, and because going in a new direction is hard.

Stuart Briscoe, the late British preacher, told a story that illustrates the truth of this reality. As a young man, he had been drafted into the Royal Marines. As part of that experience, he found himself under the command of an imposing sergeant major. This man was a grizzled veteran of war and had little tolerance for anything other than the most rigorous adherence to military standards. This was the kind of man that sent grown men shaking in their boots. Briscoe came to fear this man and did everything he could to ensure he didn't incur his wrath.

Eventually, Briscoe's time in the Royal Marines came to an end, and he was discharged. After receiving his discharge papers, he had an extra spring in his step. He was whistling, had one hand in his pocket, and was slouching a little, all things that would have been heinous crimes as a member of the military, but he was now a civilian. Suddenly, he saw the Sergeant Major striding toward him. Instinctively, the young man pulled his hands from his pockets and began to stand up straight, until he had a realization—he was no longer part of the Royal Marines. This man no longer had any power over him. Where previously he was a slave to the Sergeant Major, now he was free to go in a different direction.

This illustrates the life we live as Christians. We have lived so long as slaves to sin that it's what we know best, it comes to us naturally. We have deeply ingrained habits that are hard to break. Sometimes those habits, those patterns of thought or action are so deeply ingrained that we don't even realize them. But, Paul reminds us, that is who we used to be, not who we are now. We are no longer slaves to sin; we must no longer answer its call. But the challenge for us is that we must work hard to break those habits. Briscoe chose to enjoy his freedom from the Sergeant Major by slouching and whistling. We should enjoy our freedom from sin by developing a new pattern of living.

Paul tells us that a person who has died to sin and is living in Christ will live differently, not because doing so will earn them salvation, but because their priorities have changed. Where before, we were only concerned about what made us happy in the

moment, or what would get us what we wanted, once we are in Christ we become concerned with what pleases the Lord, with what He says is right. We look to the law not as a burden we must carry, but as a guide for how God designed us to work best. We know that God has told us how we should live, and because of our trust in Him, we seek to establish new patterns of thinking, trusting His judgment above our own.

This is the paradox of the Christian faith. We are saved by faith alone through grace alone. We bring nothing to the table when it comes to our salvation. Christ provides it all. And yet, we would say that while we are saved by faith alone, we are not saved by a faith that is alone. The kind of grace Paul describes has to have a transformative effect on the one who receives it. When there is genuine trust in Christ, there is a change in behavior that comes with it. In the book of James, which we read earlier, James points out that if you want to know what a person really believes, don't just listen to their words, watch their actions. A person who claims to be a follower of Christ, yet refuses to do what He says shows by their actions that they aren't really followers at all! If we have real faith in God's amazing grace, it will lead to real change in how we live. It will not lead to sinful indulgence, but to humble obedience.

A person who claims to have faith in Jesus, but does not follow Him is merely paying lip service to Him. If you claim to be a Christian, but have not made any efforts to change the way you think and act, may I humbly suggest that you may not actually be a follower of Jesus? The consistent teaching of scripture is that a person is not saved by what they do, but that salvation will change what we do. I have often stated it this way: Christians are not saved because they do good things, but they do good things because they are saved. We are saved by grace, but that grace changes us forever.

Paul anticipated people misunderstanding his words, which is why he tried to correct those faulty views here. We see the results of wrongheaded notions of grace in our day as well. We see it in churches that refuse to call people to holy living because that seems like a works-based salvation, rather than a grace-based one. We hear gospel presentations that focus only on a belief of some facts, but don't talk about a change in our lives. But Paul reminds us that personal holiness is a natural result of genuine faith. We must continue to do battle with sin, working to weed it out of our lives. We do this, not to be saved, but because it is what is right. We do it because we want to honor the One who has saved us from the condemnation we deserve. We do it because we are not who we once were. We are new creations, so we live in a new and better way.

Conclusion

This morning we have only looked at two verses, but there is much to learn from them. Here are some practical applications we can draw from what we've seen this morning.

First, we should examine our faith to see if it is genuine. Paul tells us that if we are not seeking to make changes in our lives to align them with Jesus, if we are living the same way we always have, then whatever we may say we believe about Jesus, we don't have genuine faith. While there must be a point in our lives where we choose to submit to Christ, it is not a one-time thing; that submission must be a daily thing. When

we submit to Jesus and trust in Him for forgiveness, everything changes. We become new people. We live for Him instead. We do not selectively obey. If that does not describe you, do not labor under the delusion that you are ok because you are under grace. I implore you to submit your life to Jesus, following Him both today and forevermore. It is only in doing so that we find the freedom God intended for us to have.

Second, we must keep pressing toward holiness. It is tempting for Christians to become lazy or complacent, believing that now that we've "punched our ticket" we can simply sit back and relax. That simply isn't true. God has not only saved us *from* something, He also saved us *for* something. He saved us so that we would start becoming the people He created us to be. This means doing the often hard work of looking at ourselves in the light of scripture and admitting the places where we are still living for ourselves rather than Him. It means working to love everyone, especially those who are hard to love. It means swimming against the current of our culture to live the way God commands. We have died to sin, but we must choose to live like that's true. That takes work. It isn't something that happens naturally. It will take work to break old patterns of thinking and form new habits, but it's worth the effort. While we aren't saved by being good enough, and there is grace for the times when we do fail, we should also want to go in a different direction, living according to God's instructions rather than our own. Keep pushing forward. It's what God desires for you and from you.

Finally, we should do this together. God has given us the Church to help us, to encourage us, and He tells us that we are to spur one another on to become the people He has called us to be. The person we lie to the most is ourselves. The actions we spend the most time justifying are our own. We are great at making excuses as to why a given passage of scripture doesn't apply to us. Sometimes we need other people to help us see truths that we have become blind to. Other people are often able to see things in us that we can't (or won't), so we ought to take correction to heart. This truth goes both ways. We need to accept correction, and at times, be willing to give correction. One of the problems in the contemporary church is that we are so busy trying to keep everyone happy that we are unwilling to say hard (but loving and necessary) things to each other. We need to love each other enough to care. We should be open to correction from others, and we should gently and humbly correct those around us who we see drifting. There's too much at stake to let one another keep living like dead people, when we have been made alive in Christ. If we are in Christ, that makes us part of a family, and we are supposed to want (and do) what's best for each other.

These verses contain truth that is sometimes difficult for us to hear. And what Paul is saying flies in the face of what many so-called churches and Christians teach today. But Paul's gospel is consistent, and it's the consistent teaching of scripture. We are saved by grace, through faith, but this leads to a new life—a life of submission and obedience to Christ. God's grace should not lead us to greater selfish indulgence, but to a greater submission to Him. That's the true gospel—and we should embrace it fully.

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