

Dead to Sin
A Sermon for June 25, 2017
Romans 6:1a-11
Lansdowne UMC

We're continuing our series on Romans with the first chunk of chapter 6, where Paul is continuing to work out what it means to be justified by faith. Last week we talked about one way of looking at this thing called justification. Before justification, we are God's enemies. Once we are justified, we have peace with God. God gives us an assurance of that peace because the Holy Spirit pours God's love into our hearts.

But here in chapter 6 we're confronted with a new question that will mean looking at justification from a different angle. This is a question that eventually gets asked in every time and place where the gospel is proclaimed. If we're saved by God's grace through faith in Christ, then can't we just carry on sinning so that we can get more and more grace? In one form or another, this question always seems to be one of the first objections brought by someone encountering the deep reality of God's free grace. Maybe you've thought of the question this way before: Can't I just go ahead and do this thing that I know is wrong because God will forgive me? I mean, it's "Amazing Grace," right?

I think Paul's got an amazing response. I just love it. But, uh, as you may have noticed, Paul's letters can be a little difficult to understand. If you think that they're difficult to understand, you're in good company. 2 Peter actually talks about Paul's writings, saying, "There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures." Even relatively early in the history of the church, Paul's

writings were known for being both difficult to understand, and so necessary for the church that they were called “scripture.”

So Paul’s about to get confusing as he answers the question about sinning more to get more grace. But before he gets confusing, he’s incredibly clear. Question: “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” Answer: “Absolutely not!” There are really good reasons coming, but that’s the heart of the answer. No. If you think the answer is Yes, you’re confused.

Paul’s explanation comes in the next verse: “All of us died to sin. How can we still live in it?” He continues on: “Don’t you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” That’s the part where many of us probably want to say, “actually no, Paul, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

But Paul’s point here is actually pretty clear once you wrap your head around some of the ideas he’s talking about. First he’s speaking about our literal water baptism. He says that baptism unites us to Jesus. We’re no longer outside of Christ, but we’re “*in Christ*” because we’re baptized *into* Christ.

I love the way that Nicky Gumbel explains it as part of the Alpha course. He says “Let this piece of paper represent you. Imagine your name is on this piece of paper. And this Bible is Jesus. Paul explains that you are united with Christ in a mystical way. All of us who are baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. Everything that now happens to this book also happens to the piece of paper. So, when Jesus died on the cross, you died. When Jesus was buried, you were buried. Your old life is gone. When Jesus rose from the dead, you rose with him to a completely new life.”

Which brings us back to that question: should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? I’m sure most of you remember that great

parable of Jesus-- the prodigal son? The younger son convinces his father to give him his share of the inheritance, and then goes off and spends it all. He eventually comes home in disgrace, or so he thinks. Amazingly he finds his father running toward him to meet him. He throws a big party in his son's honor. His older brother who never ran away is quite unhappy.

Well, bible scholar N. T. Wright does a little thought experiment with this parable. He imagines the scene a few years later. Life for the formerly lost son has settled down. Things have gotten a little, well, normal again. His older brother tolerates having him around, more or less. Then that son who had left remembers that great day when he came up the road and his father came running to greet him. Then he thinks to himself, 'I could do that again.' "Why not help myself to enough things to survive, run away for a few weeks, and then play sad and come back again? Maybe I'll get another party!

Do you see how messed up that is? You want to throw some cold water on his face, give him a good shake and say to him, "what are you talking about? That was your old life! After everything your father has done for you, are you going to just turn your back on him again?

Oh God forgive us. How often have we set our minds on going back to our old lives? God forgive us for the times when we have presumed on your grace, desiring forgiveness without a change of heart and life.

God knows how we are. God knows how sometimes we think it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. God knows how deeply we want our own way and not God's way. So God gives us Paul to break it down for us. Here's Paul's message: that mentality is completely missing the point. It's actually the opposite of the point!

We who have given our lives to Jesus are “dead to sin.” What does that mean? In scripture, sin always brings death. God says to the man in the garden of Eden, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” Sin’s effect is to cut us off from God, the source of life. Sin’s purpose, if you will, is our death. But as Paul says in verse 7, whoever has died is freed from sin. Sin does its worst and it brings death. Always.

Our faith represented by our baptism unites us with Christ. Christ takes the penalty of our sins on himself. Our sin does its worst to Christ, and he dies. Christ dies instead of us, but by baptism, it’s as if the death is ours. And so once sin has done its worst, there is no more that it can do. We become “dead to sin.”

Paul continues in verse 8, “But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.” The message of justification by faith doesn’t end with death. Justification is a death *and* resurrection-- us taking part in *Christ’s* death and resurrection.

Stick with me here. Do you remember when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. He’d been in the tomb 4 days, but Jesus said “Lazarus, come out!” and he came out. Lazarus was brought back to life. But Lazarus being raised was really just his death suspended. He would die again. Jesus raising Lazarus is not a resurrection. It’s someone coming back to the life that they had.

But resurrection is different. Here’s what Paul says Verse 9: “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.” Jesus is alive forever. He’s not dying again. His body was transformed into a new thing. Just think about that Easter story: Mary doesn’t even recognize the risen Jesus at first. Neither do the disciples on the road to Emmaus. He’s the same, but he’s

different. He eats fish on the beach with Peter, but he also is able to pop into locked rooms, apparently not needing to use the door.

Why does this matter in the context of the question about whether or not we should sin more to get more grace? Paul understands that baptism puts us onto a one way street. Christ takes our sin on himself, bears the penalty, and dies. We die with him. Christ is raised to new life, and we, in a sense, are raised with him into a new life. In Christ, we're a different thing now. You can't tell the butterfly to crawl back into the cocoon and turn into a caterpillar. You can't undo the resurrection of Christ. In Christ, you are a new creation. The old self, as Paul says in verse 6, was crucified with Christ so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

So should we go on sinning so that grace may abound? By no means! My brothers and sisters sometimes we need God to do a new thing in us. And I'm a firm believer that in order for us to find God we have to hit the end of ourselves. But sometimes we just need to understand and claim the thing that God has already done in us. If we understood the meaning of our baptism and conversion we'd never ask the question. In Christ, you're a new creation. That old self that was stuck in sin didn't have a choice but to sin. But now that old self is dead. It got crucified. It got put in the ground. And God made something new in you. Sin has done its worst and you've come out the other side with new life in Christ.

Does this mean that we never sin? By no means! But sin is no longer the controlling force in our lives. When we sin, it's like we're living our old lives. Think of it this way: you live in a trashy apartment and you get behind on your rent payments. To make matters worse, you have a nasty landlord that has no problem barging into your apartment at the worst times to demand payment. But then something amazing

happens, someone comes along and pays your debt to the landlord. But not only that, but he *buys* you a new house, and *pays* to move you there.

That's a nice thought to think about isn't it? It's doubly good news. First, you never have to put up with that old landlord barging in again. And secondly, you've got a new house to live in that's way better than that dump you used to live in.

But imagine that after a few months of being in the new house, your old landlord barges in the door just like he used to and demands payments. What would you do? Would you say, "Sure! Come in! What's mine is yours! And please do say hi to the Mrs." By no means! The polite among us would produce the lease paperwork and say "Look, the debt has been paid. I owe you nothing! You've gotten what's yours! Now get out and never come back!"

My brothers and sisters, we don't need to pay the landlord anymore. Christ has taken care of it. This is what Paul means when he says in verse 11, "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." You've been baptized! Or if you haven't, maybe it's time to make a decision to do it. Baptism is like the moving truck from the old nasty apartment to the new house. The landlord might come to pester you from time to time, but you're out of his territory, and you don't owe him a dime.

But now you live in a beautiful new house that you didn't pay for, and that you did nothing to deserve. How are you going to treat the giver? You're going to invite that giver over every Sunday and sometimes on Wednesdays! You're going to do whatever that giver asks of you with joy in your heart. And one more thing: you'll be telling the story to everyone you meet about how someone came along and paid the debt you couldn't pay, and gave an incredible gift that you did nothing

to earn. All your friends will say with longing and curiosity, “won’t you introduce me to this giver?” And your answer? “By all means.”