

Romans 6:1-14
(Psalm 49:5-15; John 17:20-23)
“The Necessity of Holiness”

Introduction

In every age, and particularly in an age such as ours, where the highest value is *feeling* good rather than *being* good, the church is tempted to believe and proclaim only half of the gospel. Some periods of church history have emphasized the call to biblical holiness without the comfort and assurance of knowing that we are justified by grace through faith, in other words, that we are made right with God, not through our own good works, but through the work of Christ on our behalf. Our age, however, seems to be finding new ways to celebrate the gospel exclusively in terms of what Christ has done *for* us to the practical exclusion of what Christ would do *in* and *through* us.

Why does this matter? Because, without holiness we will not see the Lord. As the author of Hebrews writes, “Strive for peace with everyone, and for holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). He is not speaking there of Christ’s righteousness credited to us through faith, but rather of practical holiness for which we are to strive, which is the subject of Hebrews 12. The great reformers, Luther and Calvin, knew this well and faithfully taught the crucial link between justification and sanctification, between what Christ has done for us, and what his Spirit is doing in and through us. Bishop Ryle put it this way in his spiritual classic entitled, *Holiness*:

I fear it is sometimes forgotten that God has married together justification and sanctification. They are distinct and different things, beyond question, but one is never found without the other. All justified people are sanctified, and all sanctified people are justified. What God has joined together let no man dare to put asunder. Tell me not of your justification, unless you also have some marks of sanctification. Boast not of Christ’s work for you, unless you can show us the Spirit’s work in you.

In earlier ages, if someone prayed to receive Christ and then asked if he was now saved, the pastor would respond, “We will see.” When pastors asked for a testimony of God’s grace, they asked two questions: “What has Christ done *for* you?” And, “What is Christ’s Spirit doing *in* and *through* you?” So also the 20th century martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote in his book *Discipleship*, “Only the believers obey and only the obedient believe.”

Why does this matter? Why begin a new year together with this theme? For three reasons: First, love for God. God is glorified in the glad obedience of his people. This has been the single great theme of John Piper’s preaching and writing ministry: God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in him and we are most deeply satisfied when God is most glorified in us. Secondly, care for our own souls. As we have just been reminded, without holiness, no one will see the Lord. Our profession of faith is a lie if it is not accompanied by the evidence of Christ’s Spirit living in and through us. And thirdly, love

of others. By this all will know that we are disciples of Jesus, by our love for one another, and love is expressed by joyfully keeping God's law, not as an external set of rules, but as the expression of new life within. In fact, this is what it means to be truly human. God made us in his image for intimate friendship with him. When we refuse his ways we become, as the psalmist said, "like the beasts that perish" (Psalm 49:12&20).

At the end of Romans five, Paul writes these words: "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (5:20). But even as he writes the words, Paul realizes that they will be misunderstood and misused, that some will interpret them to mean that our best means of bringing glory to God is by sinning, so that grace may abound even more. This is the background to chapter six. Paul now asks the question he suspects will be asked by those who misunderstand: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound" (6:1)? And he answers as strongly as possible: "By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (6:2). In other words, is there any good excuse for a Christian to continue to sin? Paul replies, absolutely not!

But the sad truth is that we do continue to sin, to feel the force, the tug and pull of sin, and to find it desirable. And so the question is whether these words have any real meaning to us in the living of our lives. We read here that we are dead to sin, and yet we do not feel particularly dead to sin. What is going on? Is the apostle mistaken? Or is there a meaning subtler than what seems to be the clear sense of the text? Is Paul merely speaking of how things ought to be, or is he speaking merely in some legal or forensic sense that is true about us, but that we do not actually experience until the life to come? Or is he, perhaps, describing the experience common to those who have advanced far down the road of holiness, but relatively unknown to typical Christians like you and me?

In other words, what are we to make of this astonishingly counter-intuitive rhetorical question, "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" There may be no text more profoundly needed by many of us here this morning, if we are to realize what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be fully human.

Body

1. What does Paul mean by saying that we have died to sin (6:2-4)?

There have been many different answers given to this question, and most of them deny the clear sense of the words. The denial springs, I think, from the reality of the experience of most Christians, and the difficulty of reconciling our experience with Paul's astonishing claim. But we must let the Bible speak, and then seek in its light to understand our lives.

So here, he cannot be asking a hypothetical question, or merely be speaking of our standing in Christ, or even merely be describing our future experience.

Why do I insist on this? Because he is addressing the very question of sin in our lives today, in our present experience, and is saying in the strongest possible way that we should not sin at this present time, in this present life, precisely because we have died to sin. He does not say that we are dying to sin, but that we have already died to sin, and therefore should not live in it any longer. So, the question is, what does he mean by this statement? Everything that he says here rests entirely upon our being united to Christ in salvation, in our being taken out of the old humanity with its inheritance of wickedness, bondage and death, and placed into the new humanity with its inheritance of righteousness, freedom and life. This is how Paul describes the change:

We have been baptized into Christ's death (6:3).

When the Holy Spirit baptizes us into Jesus Christ, of which our baptism in water is a sign and seal, he unites us to Christ, first in his death, so that "the death he died he died to sin, once for all" (6:10), for all of us who are united to him in his death. We are as surely buried with him as if we had been placed with him in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb to await the resurrection. In this sense, we have died completely and forever to the penalty we owe for our sin and rebellion against God. It is paid in full, and the record cleansed. *But more than that*, and much more to the point of this sixth chapter: the power of sin and its reign over us have been broken. We are no longer under the reign of sin, but rather under the reign of righteousness.

Illustrations abound: When a slave has been purchased from a brutal master and set free, he is no longer in bondage to that old master. He is a fool if he goes back to the place where he was beaten and enslaved and submits again to the bondage of a master who has no authority over him. When Jesus died upon the cross, he broke the power of sin and death over all who are his. When the Holy Spirit saves us by baptizing us into Christ, that freedom becomes ours and we are dead to sin, in the sense of no longer being enslaved by it, no longer living under its rule and authority.

And that is because "our old self was crucified with him" (6:6). Our old self is our old nature: the unsaved, unregenerate human nature that belongs to all the children of Adam by birth.

We have been baptized into Christ's life (6:4,5).

More than that, we have been given a new regenerate nature, like that of our Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul says elsewhere, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). We need to realize that our true self is no longer the old human nature that was put to death on the cross, but the new Christ nature

that was given to us in salvation. That is who we now are, and sin has no power over that new nature to make us obey its passions and desires. Paul says that we are united to Christ “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” (6:4).

It is past time for us, for you and me, to begin to realize who we really are, and to begin to walk out the wonder of this new life in all the power that has been given to us in Christ Jesus. But that raises an obvious and painful question:

2. How then are we to understand our ongoing struggle with sin (6:5-10)?

While our old self (the old human nature) was crucified with Christ so that we died to sin, sin did not die and in fact still is still at work in our body (thus Paul calls it “the body of sin”) (6:6).

Paul says that *we* have died to sin, not that sin has died. Sin is still present, not in the new nature given us in Christ, but in our bodies. In fact, our bodies still harbor sinful patterns of desire and response to such a degree that Paul calls the human body, even the body of a believer, “the body of sin” (6:6). At the end of chapter seven, after describing the battle that the believer faces between flesh and spirit, he cries out, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (7:24). And the answer: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (7:25), and he is on to chapter eight in which he describes how to find increasing victory over the sin that still is at work within this body of death.

In his excellent little book, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, John Murray writes “There must be a constant and increasing appreciation that though sin still remains it does not have the mastery... It is one thing for sin to live in us: it is another for us to live in sin.” Hence the challenge of the Christian life: both its glory and its struggle. The question remains, how is the struggle to be waged, the battle to be fought, and the victory realized, that is already ours in Christ Jesus?

3. What are we to do about our ongoing struggle with sin (6:11-14)?

We must fight a battle of the mind: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11).

This is crucial. We must recognize the power of truth in the battle for righteousness, peace and joy. We will never experience the fullness of God if we do not know what that is, or enjoy the new life that is ours in Christ if we do not know what we have the right to expect. Careful study of God’s Word,

under the guidance of the Spirit, in communion with God's people, is key to the pursuit of the good things of God.

Paul tells us here that we have died to sin, and thus must think of ourselves as dead to sin and alive to God in Christ. We have an enemy who is a liar and who will try to get Christians to think in this way: "I am forgiven, but will not be perfect until eternity. So rather than waste my time pursuing an impossible goal, I might as well enjoy forgiveness, realize that God is glorified by his grace being greater than all my sin, and not worry about sin. It is part of who I am in this present age, and any other view of things leads to frustration and spiritual depression." In other words, if the enemy can not get us to stop trusting God to forgive our sin, he will try to get us to presume upon God's grace, by failing to believe what the Bible says of us, particularly that we have been set free from sin.

We must first win the battle of the mind, by believing what God says about us: We have died to sin and are no longer to live in it, as though it still had dominion over us. John Calvin writes in his little book, *Instruction in Faith*, "We must meditate during all our life on the fact that, being dead unto sin and unto our former selves, we may live unto Christ and his righteousness."

We must fight a battle of the will: "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions" (6:12).

But we must also fight the battle of the will: We must stop indulging our bodies, giving the members of our bodies over to the passions and desires that they learned to serve when we were still dead in sin, under its rule and reign. The body is a wonderful servant, but a dreadful master. When your life is driven by the desires of the body, whether by hunger or thirst, by sexual desire or by fear of pain, you live at the level of an animal, a very clever animal, perhaps quite good at satisfying those desires, but an animal nonetheless.

God wants you to stop living for your stomach, or for whatever member yells the loudest. If alcohol or drugs dominate you, you are living like an animal and must get free or you cannot live as a child of God. If you are living for sexual pleasure, you are living at the level of an animal and will not know the pleasures of God. If you are living for any carnal pleasure or merely to avoid pain, you are living like an animal in the forest, not as a child of God.

Stop it! I say this to myself and to you. It is time for us to cast aside the old life and to pursue the new, to strive to enter the kingdom, to stop blundering down the wide and easy path that leads to destruction. We have it in us to enter through the gates of splendor: why would we pursue the way that leads to death, calling it the path of grace, but making grace license to sin and mocking the freedom that we have been given in Christ? Surrender your will

to the Lord of life, then take up the weapons of warfare and fight for the kingdom of God, and for your own eternal soul. “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments of 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” (6:12,13).

We must fight a battle of the heart: “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace” (6:14).

And finally, it is a matter of the heart. Do we not understand that in love God has redeemed us and poured out his grace upon us? Do we not realize that in love he has set us free from bondage to sin, and broken its grip on us? Do we not realize what it cost him to do so, in giving his Son who knew no sin, that he might become a sin offering for us, and that we might become the very righteousness of God? Do we not realize what it cost our Lord Jesus, who freely gave his life in place of ours? Do we not know what it continues to cost God’s Holy Spirit who dwells within us, and whom we daily expose to the unholiness of our thoughts and words and deeds? If we know anything of love for God, we will increasingly hate and despise sin, and love and serve righteousness. It is finally a matter of whether or not we love God, who first loved us.

Conclusion

What does this look like? I love picturesque illustration used by the great nineteenth century Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who said of these verses that – while Christians *need* never sin – sadly, we *do* fall into sin. The difference between the saved person and the unsaved is this: When a lamb falls into the mud, it strives mightily to get out, because it hates the mud and longs to be free of it. But the pig seeks out the mud, delights in it, wallows in it and enjoys it. Thus, said Spurgeon, the person who has been born of the Spirit hates falling into sin and strives mightily to escape it, while the person without God’s Spirit seeks the pleasures of this world and delights in them.

Which describes you today? If you are a Christian, born of the Spirit, baptized into Christ Jesus, I ask you: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?”