

Death and New Life

Romans 6:1-14

April 10, 2011

Over the past several weeks we have been on a sort of dual journey. We have been making our way through Paul's letter to the Romans, looking at the problem of sin and how God has provided salvation. We have also been making our way through Lent, that season during which we concentrate on holiness and purification in preparation for our return to the celebration of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Next Sunday is Passion Sunday and the day that marks the beginning of our journey with Jesus through the last days before His crucifixion. This morning we look at the next part of Paul's letter. These two journey's come together in a profound way in this text. It is something we have learned recently in this congregation, though it is counterintuitive and something with which the church has struggled for thousands of years.

Paul has just made the argument that Jesus' death on the cross covers all sin for all who believe. Adam's one sin brought bondage to sin and condemnation to all of humanity. Likewise, even after many sins, Jesus' one atoning death on the cross brought righteousness and justification. The law was given so that we could be more aware of our sin, and thus we are more guilty. God's grace covers our sin and removes that guilt, even where there is law, thus the more sin, the more grace. Where sin brought death, grace brings righteousness and life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

So, Paul asks the obvious question, and one I am sure he heard all the time, "*What shall we say, then?*"

Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" (v.1) Hey, if the goal is to know God's grace, and forgiving sin makes God look good, then isn't it a good thing to give God more stuff to forgive? If we go on sinning, and God goes on forgiving, it really makes Him look like the great loving and caring Father. At least, that's how the argument goes.

Of course Paul has never said that the goal is to know God's grace or to make God look good in relative to us. The goal is not to know God's grace and forgiveness. The goal is **righteousness**. The goal is to be holy, pure, and in right relationship with God and others. Coming to know God's grace and forgiveness is just the necessary first step, not the destination.

On the other hand, for God to be continually forgiving the willful sins of people who do not repent, but sin because they want God to have something to forgive, does not show God to be loving, good, or caring. It shows Him to be weak, ineffective, and neither holy or righteous. It is a low view of God that sees Him in terms of the average human rather than as the Creator of the Universe. Speaking to this idea that a good, caring God forgives everything rather than punish sin, J.I. Packer states, "Moral indifference would be an imperfection in God, not a perfection... The final proof that God is a perfect moral Being, not indifferent to questions of right and wrong, is the fact that he has committed himself to judge the world."

Looking at the question with the goal of righteousness in mind, Paul's answer to the question should be obvious. Should we go on sinning for the purpose of giving God more to forgive? "*By no means!*"

(v.2) Paul then gives his reasoning, but it is not what we would expect. So far he has argued based on the goal of righteousness and our woeful falling short of that goal. As Paul moves ahead, however, he bases his reasoning in something entirely new.

“We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? 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.” (vv.2-4) With these sentences, Paul introduces a whole new line of argument. We are not longer talking about sin versus righteousness, or law versus grace. Paul has moved the line of reasoning to death versus new life. He has already mentioned that sin brings death and grace brings life. Now this distinction has become the focus of thought because it addresses to root of the issue of continuing in sin.

If we are in Christ, then we are **dead** to sin. It is no longer our master. It no longer has the power over us it once did. How, then, can we continue in it? Our baptisms were death to sin. They were a burial to the things of this world. Baptism is a recognition that we have been taken from the realm of sin, law, guilt and death, and appropriately buried. As Jesus died under the punishment of our sin and was buried, through our baptisms we were buried with Him.

We were buried with Jesus in death so that we might also join Him in life. In our baptism we join Him in the tomb. As we rise out of the water we join Him in His resurrection! As Jesus rose from the dead we too

rise from our watery graves. Yet that resurrection marks a new life. We are not raised to be the same **people** we were. Jesus has shared His life with us. It is a holy and righteous life that fills our bodies and souls. Our sinful lives are dead. Jesus’ life now reigns in us.

Now that he has introduced this new line of thought, Paul goes into it in a little more detail, looking first at our death with Christ, and then at our life with Him. *“If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. 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.”* (vv.5-7) If we are joined to Christ, then we are truly joined to Christ, through all that He has done, and especially His greatest work. Death to sin is just that. As Jesus hung on the cross, the old self of each person who believes in Him was hung right there with Him. We have been crucified to sin. If you are in Christ, then the person you were when you were born, the person you were when you came to Him, is dead. You have been born again into a new life—a new kind of life that is marked by life and righteousness and not death and sin.

Paul moves on to tell us a little more about this new life. *“Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 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.”* (vv.8-10) Jesus’ death on the cross took death’s power over His humanity away. If we are in

Him, we share in His death and in His life. We, too, are then dead to sin, as we have seen, but we also live to God, just as Jesus does.

There are two things here we need to point out because they get to the root of the problems we have with this passage and with sin. Paul is talking in terms of victory and life, and yet we have to admit our experience as Christians does not often live up to the expectations of this passage. We don't very often feel dead to sin and we still struggle with it—a lot.

We have been reminded several times over the last year that God has given us the victory and we just need to live in it. We learn from this passage how that happens and how we can enter into the victory Jesus has won for us. The first is that **sin** has already been defeated in the cross. If we are in Christ, we no longer deal with the power of sin as much as we deal with the power of **habit**. Before we came to Christ we sinned habitually. It was a way of life. Sin was as natural as breathing, and if we stopped doing it it would actually feel as if we were dying. We believed we needed our sins to live. We still see this in the world when we look. Now that we are in Christ, we have our source of life in Him and in His resurrection, not in the pleasure of sin or it's power over us.

Because we are dealing with habits, one of the things we need to pay attention to is our thoughts, as much, if not more than, our actions. We need to guard our minds. Our bodies, with their new life, will follow. Giving up the sinful habits we have picked up may still feel as if we are losing something we need, but allowing God to transform and renew our minds will solve that

problem, and thinking about the right things will strengthen and confirm that work. Hence we get Paul's command, "*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*" (Philippians 4:8,9) It is a thought and heart problem much more than it is an action or physical problem. Dwight L. Moody put it this way, "Many a man is praying to God to fill him when he is full already with something else."

Second, in talking in terms of death and God's action, Paul has taken the problem of the power of sin out of our hands. This is something **God** does for us, not something that we do ourselves. The problem is not that we cannot get ourselves under control. The problem is that we keep running back to the old habits and ways of doing things even as God is trying to set us on a new path. We have not yet learned to see our sin the way God does, and so we continue in it. We still have no power over it, but the One who does now also has power over us. God changes our hearts and as time goes on we become disgusted with things in our lives we used to celebrate, and it all happens because of God's work in us. A.W. Pink pointed out, "...it is not the absence of sin but the grieving over it which distinguishes the child of God from empty professors." Through Bible study, worship, and talking about God's word and our lives with other Christians we give the Holy Spirit tools with which to work on us, but it is His work, not ours.

Taking these two together, that we are dealing with habits and not the power of sin, and that bringing us into the new life is God's work, tells us why and how we can step into the victory over sin that Jesus won on the cross. We have heard the advice to accept the victory Jesus gives us and to start walking in it. We can ask God to change our mind and our hearts and our lives will follow. Sin no longer has power over us, but we will not experience that victory until we give ourselves over to the power of God in us and allow Him to start changing our habits and **minds**.

As our minds begin to change and old habits die away, we become able to obey Paul's next instruction. *"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."* (vv.11-14) The habits and sinful desires of the old life still live in us. We fool ourselves if we try to say they don't. By changing the focus of our thoughts we cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work in us and we find ourselves able to offer ourselves to God instead of sin. We can be instruments of righteousness and not wickedness. We can live holy lives in keeping with the one Who purchased us for Himself. We can do it because, and only because, of what God has already done in us and is continuing to do!

Paul makes this same argument in his letter to the Galatians as he talks about his confrontation with Peter. There he writes, *"If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"* (Galatians 2:17-21)

Sin is no longer our master, God is, through His grace. This does not mean that we no longer struggle with sin, as we will see later on. It does mean that it is not a **fair fight**. God has won! He shares that victory with us. We need to receive it, celebrate it, live in it, and cooperate with it. The goal is righteousness. The shift is from death to life. The victory is over the power of sin in our lives. The power is God's. The action is the Holy Spirit's. The recipients and beneficiaries are those who are in Christ Jesus!