

# Dead to Sin

Romans 6:1-4

September 17, 2017

## Introduction:

One of the most notorious figures in Russian history was a monk who was known by name Rasputin. It wasn't his real name though; it was a nickname given to him by the Russian peasants meaning "debauched one" and not without reason. This charismatic and grossly immoral monk was welcomed into the service of Nicholas II, the last czar of Russia, in the early 1900s and held sway over the royal family serving as their royal adviser, and even, it was alleged, carried on an affair with Alexandra, the czar's wife.

Rasputin preached a radical understanding of sin and grace. He believed that the more you sin, the more of God's grace you would receive and so therefore one should sin with abandon, so that you would experience more grace. One quote I came across from him said this, "If you're just an ordinary sinner, you don't give God an opportunity to show His glory, so be an extraordinary sinner." <sup>1</sup> And Rasputin was. His sexual exploits and wild parties were infamous across Russia. Eventually, Russian peasants began to despise him and detested his influence over the royal family and so he was assassinated and his body thrown into a river. But by then the damage to the reputation of the czar had been done. Within a month, czar Nicholas II was overthrown, his family murdered, and the Bolshevik revolution underway, which would eventually lead to the rise of communism.

I don't know how much Rasputin knew of, or much less cared about, the Bible, but one thing for sure he was at significant odds with the opening verses of Romans 6. It's as if the apostle Paul was anticipating Rasputin's fatally flawed theology and correcting it 1900 years in advance. But while Rasputin may be infamous for his role in the tragic end of the line of Russian czars, his thinking continues to pop up in those who mistakenly treat the grace of God as a license to sin. There are modern-day Rasputins who so emphasize God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness, that they think we are free to do whatever we want because of course God will forgive our sins, no matter what we do.

So then, we need to give our attention to what Paul has to say to us about how we are to respond to sin now that we've received the justifying grace of God in Christ. Does grace indeed cancel out of need for obedience? Can we freely sin so that grace may increase? In order to answer that, I invite you to open your Bible with me to Romans 6. Paul is now moving out of establishing that salvation is by faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone, into addressing how that should affect us. We're in Romans 6, looking at v. 1-4, which can be found on pg. 942 of the pew Bibles. Please follow along as I read. **"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? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by 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."** So our first point this morning concerns the potential objection Paul has heard people raise in regard to his gospel and so our first point concerns...

## 1. The question: Should we continue in sin?

The question Paul raises in v. 1 flows out of what he said back in Romans 5. So for the sake of context, look back for a moment to v. 20-21 of chapter 5. He writes, “*Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*” The key phrase here is, “But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” Last week you might remember that I said you couldn’t out-sin God’s grace. Even though the law increased both the frequency and severity of the trespass, God’s grace given to us in Christ would always outpace it. We might be great sinners, but God is even a greater savior. God grace is more than enough to cover all our sins.

So with that in mind, we can understand the question in Romans 6:1. “**What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?**” Paul’s opponents were reasoning that since our works do not contribute in any way to our salvation, and if God’s wrath has been satisfied by the cross, and God’s grace can cover all of our sin, then it doesn’t matter whether we sin. I can distinctly remember thinking that way back in high school before I was a Christian. Growing up in a Lutheran church, I was taught about Christ and the cross and how Jesus died for all my sins. I figured since Jesus paid for all my sins, it didn’t really matter what I did because it would be forgiven. I’d imagine some of you have this sort of thinking sneak into your heads sometimes as a way of excusing some sinful deed you want to engage in. You figure, “Well, I know I shouldn’t, but Jesus died for me and paid for all my sins, so it’s not really that big of a deal if I do such and such because, after all, Jesus paid it all, right?”

In terms of where Paul is in explaining the gospel to the Romans, one can understand how they could potentially come to such a conclusion. The first five chapters have been all about our initial justification which is all by grace through faith. Paul repeatedly hammered home that works count for nothing in appeasing God’s wrath; only by faith in Christ’s death and resurrection can we be made righteous and have peace with God. If that’s all there was to it, then I suppose one could conclude that once you are saved, it wouldn’t matter if you continued to sin or not because either way, your sins are forgiven. There’s a quote I came across that reflects this idea, where a man by the name of W. H. Auden said this, “I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really, the world is admirably arranged.”<sup>2</sup> I suppose it would be if that was all there was to it.

But the problem is our initial justification isn’t the end of the story. God not only saves us from the penalty of our sin in justification but he also goes on to free us from the power of sin in our sanctification. The term *sanctification* refers to the growth in practical righteousness in our lives that comes out of our justification. God’s doesn’t just save us from his wrath; he saves us so that we might live for him. So in chapters 6-8 of Romans, Paul gets into the issue of sanctification: how does the truth of our justification manifest itself in our lives after we trust in Christ.

So then, while the logical behind the question might be valid if God was only interested in saving us from divine punishment there is far more to being a Christian than simply

gaining a, “Get Out of Jail Free” to keep you from hell. So then, now that we’ve considered the question being raised, let get to our second point which gives us...

## 2. The answer: No! We died to sin

Let’s start at v. 1 once again and read through v. 2. **“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?”** We’ll stop there.

Paul uses forceful language to answer the question of whether we’re to keep sinning so that grace might increase. We could just as easily translate his reply as, “Absolutely not!” Paul could not disagree with that conclusion more. The reason that such an inference is totally out of line is because Paul says that sin is something we **“died”** to. He asks as rhetorical question, **“How can we who died to sin still live in it?”**

What does Paul mean by saying that we’ve **“died to sin”**? Perhaps first, we need to say what it doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean that as Christians we no longer sin, such that we’ll live sinless lives. The rest of Paul’s letters makes it clear that sin can still be an issue for believers, not to mention that the rest of the NT, both by examples in the book of Acts and in what Paul, Peter, and others say about our need to resist sin and confess to God the sin that we still do, make it clear that becoming a Christian is not to become sinless. Not to mention that you and I both know experientially that as much as we’d hate to admit it, we still sin. So, **“dying to sin”** is not the complete absence of sin such that we never ever sin again once we become a believer.

So what then does Paul mean? Well, the rest of the chapter spells this out for us but in a nutshell it means this: as Christians, we are no longer under the reign of sin such that it has a controlling power over us. Right before this in 5:21 Paul stated that sin once **“reigned”** over us: past tense. It used to be the controlling power in our lives. Because we were full of nothing but sinful desires, we could only do that which was sinful. As I’ve often said, we can only do that which we desire the most, and if our desires are all bent towards rebelling and rejecting God - as indeed they are before we become believers - then all we can do is sin. We were essentially slaves to sin, under it’s power, free to sin in diverse ways, but not free to obey or please God because we didn’t want to. Our desires were thoroughly sinful. Our sinful desires reigned over us.

But as Christians, we’ve **“died to sin”** in that the monopoly those sinful desires once had upon us were broken when we came to faith in Christ. By being born again, we’ve been given a new heart with new desires, desires that can lead to righteousness instead of unrighteousness. The power of sin that once controlled us has been shattered. We are dead to sin in that we no longer are forced to obey our sinful desires as we once did. As Christians, we can choose to say no to sin and yes to righteousness because there are competing desires in our hearts that allow us to resist the old desires that once led us to sin. We don’t have to keep sinning like we once did: we can act upon the new desires in our hearts that allow is to obey God rather than rebel against him. The old sinful desires aren’t eliminated, but they aren’t in complete control as they once were.

There's an illustration that Tim Keller used that might help us envision this. "If a wicked military force had complete control of a country, and a good army invaded, the good army could throw the wicked force out of power and give the capital and the seat of government back to the people. But the out-of-power soldiers could still live out in the bush. This guerilla force could create havoc for the new, rightful government. It could even impose it's will on part of the country, even though it could never get back into power." <sup>3</sup> So then, "dying to sin" doesn't mean sin is non-existent or has no power whatsoever. It still is around and can still cause problems. But whereas before you *had to* obey it, now you can choose not to. You *may* or *may not* obey it. You are free to stop sinning and obey God now that you have been justified by Christ.

So what this means then is if you're dealing with some sort of sin issue in your life, you don't need to think your doomed to forever be in bondage to it. Maybe pornography has been a problem for you, or alcoholism, or gossiping, or having a quick temper - it can be whatever besetting sin that haunts you - and you think you will never conquer it and you might just as well accept the fact that you will never change. The gospel tells us that such thinking is a lie. If you are a Christian, then you have died to sin. While it might have once held you firmly in its grip, sin's power has been broken. You don't have to throw up your hands in despair. God has given you a new heart in Christ that gives you new desires that can overcome the power of sin should you chose to walk by the Spirit and not in the flesh. You have been liberated; live within that freedom to say no to sin and yes to righteousness.

Well, Paul goes on in v. 3-4 to begin to explain for us how it is that we've become dead to sin, so moving on to our third, and longest, point this morning, we have...

### 3. The explanation: We were baptized into Christ

Paul goes on in v. 3-4 to ask yet another rhetorical question so look back in your Bibles once again at v. 3-4. **"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by 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."**

Paul makes a surprising mention of baptism here saying that through baptism we were connected to Christ's death and burial. So what does Paul mean by this? Is he saying that the ritual act of being baptized brings about a connection with Christ's death such that baptism is necessary to be saved? Of course, some churches do indeed think along these lines. In a Roman Catholic setting, water baptism is viewed as necessary for the washing away of original sin. In their view baptism effects spiritual rebirth, such that it is a sacrament that brings about God's initial saving grace in a person's life. So they would point to these verses here as evidence of the efficacy of the sacrament of baptism to bring about spiritual life.

There are also Protestant churches that can view baptism as necessary to salvation. Churches such as the Disciples of Christ will incessantly insist that one must be water baptized in order to be saved. I remember when I was pastoring down in the St. Louis

area and there was a church like that just a half mile down the road from me that thought this way. I had introduced myself to the pastor there just to be neighborly shortly after I had accepted the position at the church I was at and it didn't take long for him to press the point with me that water baptism was necessary to be saved, and this was one of the favorite passages he liked to quote.

But is that what Paul is teaching here? Is he claiming that water baptism is what connects us to Christ and that without it we cannot be saved? To answer that, let me remind you of a couple of things first. Number one is the fact that Paul has spent the first five chapters of Romans talking about how faith alone is what saves us. Paul has totally disavowed any role works have in making us acceptable in God's sight, including the rite of circumcision. So then, why would Paul undermine his entire argument here by adding baptism as a second element to faith as a requirement for salvation? He only mentions baptism in these two verses and never comes back to it, whereas the emphasis on faith is constantly repeated throughout Romans as well as the rest of his letters. Plus, in 1 Corinthians Paul says God did not send him to baptize but to preach the gospel. Clearly, if baptism was necessary to salvation, Paul - the great missionary and church planter - never would have said such a thing.

Number two, let's remember the case of the thief on the cross next to Christ to whom Jesus promised, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." While he excused faith, that thief certainly had no opportunity to be baptized. Yet if baptism was necessary for salvation, Jesus couldn't have made that promise to him. So then, baptism is not a prerequisite for salvation. Such a notion would flatly stand in opposition to everything Paul has said about the centrality of faith and in opposition to rest of the NT.

So what is going on here? Why does Paul mention baptism? The early church viewed a person's conversion as a series of events - repentance, faith, regeneration, baptism, justification were all part of one's coming to faith. As a result, one part could be referred to as representing the whole. Thus, sometimes in the book of Acts for example the call to salvation will be, "Believe in Christ," or "Believe and be baptized," or "Repent and believe." So then, baptism here in Romans 6 is being used by Paul to refer to the whole conversion experience, of which the rite of water baptism was a customary part. Paul didn't have any concept of a Christian who wasn't baptized. In our day we rarely insist that those who profess faith in Christ be immediately baptized, but that's not how it was in the early church. Think for a moment of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 who's immediately baptized after coming to faith. So then, Paul is referring to the entire conversion experience here, when the Roman believers first heard the gospel, believed it, repented of their sins, were given the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and were thereupon baptized in water.

So then, what Paul is saying here is essentially calling the Romans to recall that when they first came to faith, something fundamentally changed about them. They died with Christ and were buried with Christ in that what happened to Jesus is counted as if it happened to them. Water baptism is a symbolic picture of that, but the reality is that when you put your faith in Christ, God reckons Christ's life to be your life and your sin to be Christ's sin. When Christ defeated sin's power we share in that power by our new

relationship to him. Christ's victory becomes our victory and his power becomes our power so that we can resist sin. All the benefits gained by Christ are ours because by faith we are in Christ, identified with him.

So let me say by way of application that while we should not look at baptism as a sacramental rite that mystically grants us some spiritual benefit that wasn't there before (such that it causes you to be born again or that it washes away the guilt of original sin by virtue of having been baptized), Paul would have the Roman believers think back to their baptism as something that helps cement in their minds the reality of Christ has done for them. While their baptism didn't save them, it was to point them back to Christ and all the benefits he gained for them.

For me, the anniversary of my baptism is an important one for me to remember, While I had become a Christian many months earlier, it was on Sunday, May 22, 1991 that I was baptized and publicly proclaimed my allegiance to Christ. It was a declaration that I had died with Christ and rose with him by faith. I would hope that you would view your baptism with the same respect, at least as far as you can remember it. Furthermore, use those times when you are watching other people be baptized to remind yourself of the reality that it points to: that we are baptized into his death and we rise with him into new life by the glory of God the Father. Baptism, while not salvific, is nevertheless a concrete way of helping us remember what has happened to us in the spiritual realm when we first believed.

But moving on now from the issue of baptism, we need to focus our final moments on where this passage is ultimately leading to. The whole point of Paul bringing up the issue of baptism is not to give us a theological lecture on the meaning of baptism but rather to encourage his readers to live in the freedom they now have in Christ. Look at the very last phrase in v. 4. He says that we were united with Christ in baptism in order that **“we too might walk in newness of life.”**

Jesus died more than just to save us from the penalty of sin. Being a Christian is about far more than merely not having to fear the fires of hell after you die. Our salvation is not only about the future but about the here and now. Jesus saved you so that you **“might walk in newness of life”** today. Remember what Jesus himself said: “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” How can we continue to live in ongoing sin when so much more is offered to us? We can now live so as to please God! We are free from the bondage to sin that once enslaved us: we can live differently. God has empowered us with new hearts and renewed minds so that what we once were is not what we must continue to be. If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation: the old has gone and the new has come!

My friends, stop wallowing in sin. Don't give into sin because you believe the lie that you have no choice, that your old habits and addictions can never be broken. They have and they can. You are dead to sin. You have been liberated. You can walk in newness of life because the Holy Spirit of God lives within you, empowering you and convicting you, and leading you to say “no” to your sinful flesh and “yes” to Christ. Paul says in Ephesians 2:10 that we were created in Christ Jesus to do good works. Same

idea that he is communicating here. If you're looking at Christianity only as eternal fire insurance then I can assure you that you've fundamentally misunderstood what Christ came to do. A transformed life is what Christ gives us right now, so live that kind of life. Don't continue in sin: live righteously because you now can. Walk in newness of life given to you in Christ, not because it can earn you salvation but because you already possess by faith in Christ.

## **Conclusion**

So as we draw to a close, let this wonderful truth sink down deep into your hearts: you have died with Christ and have been raised with him. Sin no longer needs to be your master. Christ has emancipated you through his shed blood, he has empowered you by the Holy Spirit, and your heavenly Father has called you to the joy of walking in the newness of life. We don't need to keep on sinning so that grace may increase: we have all the grace we'll ever need in Christ who set us free. Let us then put off the sin that once so easily entangled us and live righteously in the glorious power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of our God. Let's pray.

## **Endnotes**

1. <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/45-45/dying-to-live-part-1>
2. Moo, Douglas. TICNT: The Epistle to the Romans. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, 1996. (Pg. 356)
3. Keller, Timothy. Romans 1-7 For You. The Good Book Company: USA, 2014.