

Romans: The Hope of Righteousness (part 4 of 9)

What it Means to be Dead to Sin

Romans 6:1-11

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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?⁴ 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. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:1–11 ESV)

When you think of beauty in creation, what comes to mind? If someone asked you, “Where is the beauty of God most on display,” where would you point them? Where is the beauty of God most evidently observed?

I am reading a great book on Jonathan Edwards by Dane Ortlund, and the first chapter is an overview of the concept of divine beauty. According to Ortlund, “To become a Christian is to become alive to beauty.”¹ A person who has become “in Christ” is able to see the world through a new lens. He or she can see the beauty of God reflected in the world, even though the world is broken. In other words, there is no real beauty apart from God’s beauty.

But where do we see God’s beauty most clearly? I found this to be an intriguing question and a compelling answer:

“The supreme instance of divine beauty being reflected in creation is not in the sun or the Grand Canyon or a nightingale’s song, but in a Christian...{And} Christian living is participation in God, in ‘the supreme loveliness of his nature.’ And if what defines God supremely is his beauty or loveliness or excellency, then to participate in the triune life of God is to be swept up into and to exude, that heavenly resplendence. A Christian is one who is being beautified.”²

¹ Dane Ortlund, *Edwards on the Christian Life: Alive to the Beauty of God*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014) 23.

² Ortlund, 30-31.

Do you see what Ortlund and Edwards are saying? The closest representation of the beauty of God, or the most beautiful thing in creation, is a Christian who reflects the beauty of God. Here is how Edwards said it in one of his sermons:

“That grace and holiness, that divine light and love, and that peace and joy that is in the hearts of the saints is a communication from God. Those are streams, or rather drops, from the infinite fountain of God’s holiness and blessedness. ‘Tis a ray from the fountain of light”³

The Beauty of Romans 6

A Christian who is “in Christ” and who lives “in Christ” in his or her daily life not only reflects the beauty of God, but there is nothing more beautiful or more attractive in all of creation than a Christ-following, God-exalting, sin-defeating, and righteousness-pursuing Christian. Sin is the pursuit of what looks beautiful but truly is not. For example, imagine that you are reflecting on your life when you are 80 years old. As you think back on your life, is it more attractive to be able to remember all the women you slept with, or it is more attractive to be faithfully married to one woman for 50 years? Is it more attractive to think back about all the people with whom you have harbored bitterness and gotten your revenge? Or is it more attractive to know that you treated unkind people with mercy and chose to love people who had “done you wrong”? Is it more attractive to circle around you the material goods that you have accumulated, or is it more attractive to see the impact of your money as it was used to further the gospel, translate the Bible in a unknown language, and support someone who was reaching people for Christ?

Romans 6 is a chapter that is designed to help us to see the beauty of what it means to be Christian. It is a chapter filled with liberating truths that could woo us toward that which is truly lovely. Often people think of Christianity as something that is entirely future-oriented. That is a tragedy. According to Romans 6, being “in Christ” is something that is supposed to work. There is a future beauty for sure. But there is something beautiful offered now. It is not completed in the immediate world in which we live. But being a Christian who lives in Romans 6 is beautiful now as well.

So let’s unpack this passage over the next few weeks and see what we can discover.

The Rhetorical Question

Paul begins his message by asking a rhetorical question. Starting chapter 6 this way is meant to get our attention. Rhetorical questions are meant to get us thinking. They are not really questions; they are statements. For instance: Kids, if your mom says, “How are you ever going to get this room clean?” she is not looking for a technical answer. If your wife says, “Are you going to watch football all day today?” there is more to that question than the question.

³ Jonathan Edwards, “It Is What May Well Make Us Willing and Desirous to God with God’s People, that God is with Them,” in *The Glory and Honor of God: Volume 2 of the Previously Unpublished Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Michael D. McMullen. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2004), 155. As cited in Dane Ortlund, *Edwards on the Christian Life: Alive to the Beauty of God*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014) 31.

Paul's question in verse 1 is: "Are we to continue to sin that grace may abound?" Why did he ask that question? First, because it was a common objection on the part of his opponents. Paul anticipates that the Christians in Rome might have heard or thought that Paul's teaching about grace could lead to excess, and he wanted to raise the objection from the very beginning. Second, he raises this question because Paul knows the scandalous nature of grace that he has talked about in Romans 1-5.

To say that we are justified by faith and not by works, that we have peace with God as well as a new standing of grace, and that we are now "in Christ" is almost unbelievable if you really understand what he is saying. To be justified means that you have not only been forgiven, but that you have been granted immunity from God's wrath. And this could lead someone to charge Paul with giving people a license to sin. Now we will see in the rest of the chapter how wrong this charge is, but I think it is worth considering for a moment that this charge was real and that it is what happens when you really understand God's grace.

So when was the last time that someone charged you with being dangerously gracious? When was the last time that your kids felt uncomfortable because of the implications of what you were saying about God's grace and forgiveness? Grace can be abused, for sure. But sometimes I think we are so afraid of its abuse that we downplay the scandalous miracle that it really is. In Romans 6 Paul is going to call us to be righteous, but he sets that call in the context of the soil of amazing grace. I think our default as humans is to be, at times, so concerned about "where this could go" or "let's not be extreme" that we lose the scandal. Romans 6 dares us to see grace as a scandalous immunity that motivates us to do good.

Let me try to illustrate this for you. If you have paid attention to the discussion about what is happening in Iraq, you have probably heard that part of the reason that we no longer have troops in Iraq is because our government and the Iraqi government could not agree on the issue of immunity for American troops. Our government did not want American troops subjected to potentially political gamesmanship with trumped-up charges played out in a foreign country. And the Iraqi government was concerned about what troops might do if they were granted full immunity.

With that backdrop, imagine the scenario if immunity could be used for good. What if immunity – the freedom from prosecution – served as a motivator for you to help people, to serve them freely, and to get involved in the mess of their lives because nothing bad could ever be brought against you. Imagine a soldier who uses his immunity not to get away with crimes but to serve people without fear of being taken advantage of or of being charged with a crime because of a misunderstanding.

Or imagine a convicted criminal who is granted not just a pardon, but a lifetime immunity and who uses that new freedom not to commit more crimes but to minister to people who were as trapped as he was prior to being granted full immunity.

It would be understandable to be nervous about immunity. But it also could be powerfully used for good. This is the theme of Romans 6, and it is why Paul starts with a rhetorical question.

The Proposition

In verse 2 Paul makes a strong statement (“By no means!” or “Of course not!”) followed by the main thought for verses 1-11, which is “How can we who died to sin still live in it?” Please note that Paul is not making a command. Rather, he is declaring what is already true for the believer and identifying how it should work. The believer is dead to sin. Therefore, he or she should not live in it. That’s the point.

What does it mean “to be dead to sin?” In Romans 5-6 sin is more than just the specific and individual things that human beings do which break God’s law. Sin is described in these two chapters as having power over human beings. Let me show you a few examples, both in what we have already studied and in what is coming:

- **Sin came into the world through Adam, and death spread to all mankind (Rom. 5:12)**
- **Sin reigns in death (Rom. 5:21)**
- **Human beings are naturally enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:6)**
- **Christians are told to not let sin reign (Rom. 6:12)**
- **Christians are commanded to not present their bodies to the control of sin (Rom. 6:13)**
- **The rule of sin should be resisted as a Christian (Rom. 6:14)**

Clearly, there is a sense in Romans 6 that we are talking about more than the specific sins that we commit. To be dead to sin means that the power of sin has been altered for the person who has experienced God’s grace. Paul uses a strong word, death, to communicate that something very significant has happened to a believer’s relationship to sin. After all, dead men do not sin. They are dead.

So what we are talking about here in Romans 6 is not only scandalous, but it is also very significant. “Dead to sin” is a dramatic statement. What does it mean?

The Union to Christ

In verses 3-10, Paul unpacks the believer’s death to sin as being united to Christ. A believer is dead to sin because he or she is united to Jesus. Just notice all the times, beginning in verse 3, where Paul uses language that connects believers to the work of Jesus:

- **“baptized into Christ Jesus” (v 3)**
- **“baptized into his death” (v 3)**
- **“buried with him” (v 4)**
- **“united with him . . . in death” (v 5)**
- **“united with him . . . in resurrection” (v 5)**
- **“crucified with him” (v 6)**
- **“died with Christ” (v 8)**
- **“live with him” (v 8)**

A believer's being dead to sin is completely dependent upon his being united to Christ. However, this concept is not easily understood, so the text identifies four ways that believers are united to Jesus. Before we look at each of them, let me just remind you that if you are here today, and you are not yet a follower of Jesus, what I am about to share does not apply to you. It could, but it won't, until you cross the line of putting your faith in Christ and trusting in His death on the cross for your sin. However, once you receive Christ, something supernatural and life-changing happens you. Here is how Paul describes it:

1. Baptized into His death (v 3-4a)

The theme of baptism is very obvious in verses 3-4 as Paul uses it three times ("baptized into Jesus," "baptized into his death," and "buried . . . by baptism into death"). Is Paul referring to the act of physical baptism as if participation in the ordinance of baptism creates this spiritual reality? Surely not, because that would be tantamount to a works-oriented salvation. Instead Paul is using "baptism" in sacramental or symbolic sense, both to describe those who are in Christ and to describe what happened to those who are in Christ. The main theme of the text is not baptism per se, but rather a believer's participation in the work of Christ that is shown in baptism.

However, that is not to downplay the importance of baptism. In Paul's mind, and in that of the early church, there would have been no distinction between being a believer and being baptized because an unbaptized believer would have been an anomaly. You might think of it as the power and importance of what I mean when I say, "All of you with a ring on finger, have made a wonderful decision." Now you know what I mean. And it takes on even more significant if an estranged husband gets a text from his wife that says, "I'm putting my ring on." The ring doesn't make a person married, but it is almost inseparably linked to marriage.

So for Paul the term "baptized in Christ Jesus" is synonymous with being a Christian. Before we move on, this is a good time for me to remind you about the importance of believer's baptism. If you have yet to take that step, I would really encourage you to consider how important and meaningful that step is for you and for the church. Baptism is an affirmation and a demonstration of what happens to a person when he or she becomes "in Christ."

"To be baptized into his death" and "to be buried with him by baptism into death" is a powerful statement. It reflects that for those who receive Christ, His death becomes our death when it comes to the penalty of sin. In chapter 5 we learned that Adam served as the representative, and it was "in Adam" that we sinned. By the same means of representation, those who put their faith in Jesus are plunged into His death. From a spiritual standpoint, we fully participate in the death of Jesus. His death is our death. But that is not all.

2. United in His resurrection (4b-5)

The second way that believers are united to Christ is by virtue of our participation in His resurrection. Our union to Christ is total. Everything that He is, we are "in Him." In the same way that we participated in His death and burial, so we also participate in His resurrection.

To understand what Paul means here, let's start in verse 5. Paul argues that if we are united with Christ in His death, then we are also united with Him in His resurrection. One cannot be baptized into His death without also sharing in the resurrection. To be "in Christ" is to share in everything that Christ is.

However, verse 5 seems to have the future in view, the idea being that as Christ died and rose from the dead, so those who are "in Christ" will also be raised to life at the end of days. As we see so often in the Bible, death is not the final word. Christ will, in the end, raise all who belong to Him so that they can live with Him forever.

But the resurrection is not only about the future. There is something immediate, but not complete, in its effect, and that is what verse 4 is about: "... in order that just as Christ was raised from the death by the glory of the Father we too might walk in newness of life." The resurrection of Jesus not only brings life in the future, but it brings newness now. Throughout the Bible there are references to things being new because of being in Christ. There is a new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6), a new creation (Gal. 6:15), a new humanity (Eph. 4:24), and a newness of the Spirit (Rom. 7:6).⁴ So while Jesus has not returned, and while we long for the day when that occurs, there is a real sense in which believers are able to experience the invasion of Christ's victory in their lives and in the world.

Being united to Christ's death and His resurrection means that there is very real sense that believers are to live right now in the reality that Jesus has broken the power of canceled sin. Christ's death was only half of the story. His death paid the penalty for sin, but His resurrection validated the fact that God's wrath was satisfied. The empty tomb says that the cross worked! Resurrection means that sin has lost its power.

3. Crucified with Him (v 6-7)

The third way that Paul describes our union with Christ is by connecting the crucifixion of Jesus to the crucifixion of the "old self." He has already made the point that we died with Jesus, so how is this different?

Paul's end-game is freedom. We hear that very clearly in verse 7: "For one who has died has been set free from sin." Union with Christ is not only about union. Romans 6 is about a union with Christ that brings a new life, a free life, and a beautified life.

Notice how this is stated after the phrase "in order that" in verse 6. There are two glorious outcomes, and they are linked: 1) that the body of sin might be brought to nothing and 2) so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. Paul's hopeful vision is that sin would lose its power so that believers in Jesus could truly experience freedom from the enslaving power of sin in their lives.

But what does it mean that our "old self" was crucified with him? It is referring to the categorical characteristics of being "in Adam." The old self is the "in Adam-ness" that is in you. It is your individual connection to the curse, the guilt, and the penalty of the Fall. It is the natural inclination toward evil that ruled your life. It is the way of thinking, acting, and feeling that is part and parcel to what is broken and wrong with the world. The old realm was defeated.

⁴ Thomas Schriener, Romans, Vol. 6. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 310

Along with the old realm (i.e., “the old self”) there was an effect on the body. This is where Paul get very practical. To say “that the body of sin might be brought to nothing . . .” means that the location where sin expresses itself (i.e., the body) has been rendered as no longer in charge. The body is what rules those who are “in Adam.” But for those who are “in Christ,” the body, while not fully redeemed, is no longer the master. Here is how it is stated in Romans 8:

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. Romans 8:9–10 (ESV)

The body and its connection to being “in Adam” is no longer in charge. And the effect is that we are no longer “slaves to sin.” Because of being “in Christ,” we can really experience freedom. So while sin is still present in the lives of believers, it no longer has to be master.

4. United in His Victory (v 8-10)

The final union statement is a summary of what we have already heard about resurrection with one added dimension. This text is looking toward the future. Having been in Christ when it comes to death, believers will also share in His final victory. Verse 8 states that clearly: “we believe that we will also live with him.” But it is verses 9-10 that add something new.

There is assurance in these verses. Verse 9 declares that the post-resurrected Christ can never die again and that death no longer has dominion over Him. And verse 10 encourages us that in sin’s defeat, the risen Christ lives for the glory of God. Jesus defeated sin and death so that His victory could be for the magnification of God. And that leads to the conclusion of this text.

The Conclusion

We will pick up verse 11 next week, but I want you to notice where this ends and how it connects to beauty. Romans 6:11 is the application of the passage: ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:11). A right and biblical understanding of what Paul is saying here will lead those who are “in Christ” to have a different orientation in life. They will consider themselves to be dead to sin and alive to God. What does that mean? What does that mean for you?

First, it means that you need to consider whether or not you are “in Adam” or “in Christ.” We saw last week that there are only two categories of people in this world. Those who are “in Adam” are alive physically but dead spiritually. If you are in that camp, then try as hard as you might, there is no ability for you to truly change. The Bible says that even right now you are under judgment: guilty and in eternal danger. Nothing that I’ve talked about in regard to being “in Christ” applies to you. So I would ask you to take a careful look at who you really are, and maybe today would be the day when you would open your heart to receive Christ and become “in Him.”

Second, this text helps the believer to understand temptations and sin. It helps us to see that even after receiving Christ, we still battle sinful thoughts, actions, and attitudes, but it is not the same battle. Being dead to sin does not mean that our sinful inclinations have been completely eradicated. But something

has changed. And do you see what that is? According to Romans 6, we have the power to say “No!” to sin in the power of Jesus’ name. It means that Jesus bought and paid for your ability to walk away from a temptation and say, “I don’t have to do what you want!”

For some of you, that reality (and it is reality) could be the difference between bondage and freedom. The tragedy of being in bondage to something is believing deeply in your soul that you cannot and will not change. Hopelessness is birthed in the soil of this “bondage-mentality.” But this text says that you can be free because Jesus defeated the power of sin. You need to see yourself as dead to sin and alive to God.

In Pilgrim’s Progress, Christian approaches a place called the Palace Beautiful, and in front of it are two large lions. Now Christian was told by a faithful man named Porter that the lions were chained. But when he approaches the palace, he must choose to whether or not he will have faith and believe that the lions are indeed chained. He almost doesn’t pass the test as he becomes afraid at their size and their roars. After he passes by the lions and enters the palace, he has an opportunity to tell two women, Piety and Charity, about his experience. They smile and encourage him to revisit the lions in the morning, because he will see that they have neither claws nor teeth. Prudence says, “When we see through the eye of faith, we soon learn that trials and temptations be mere paper dragons – deceptions of the enemy placed in our path to frighten us back.”⁵

Think with me right now about one sin in your life that you’d like to change. You need to realize that you do not have to be in bondage. Through confession, prayer, the Word of God, and brothers and sisters around you, life change is possible.

Finally, this chapter is so important because of its vision of what real life or real humanity is all about. A life that is dead to sin and alive to God is the very best life of all. Paul wrote this section of Romans not just so that you could know what it means to be “in Christ.” He wrote it so that you could truly live. And not just in the future – right now. You see, there is nothing more beautiful and compelling and attractive and thrilling than seeing the power of the gospel lived out in a person’s life.

A Christian is one who is being beautified. By the power of Christ and by being united to Him, those who trust in Him are plunged into His death, and they are raised to walk in new lives. One of the reasons that we celebrate and practice baptism in our church is because of the powerful and celebratory power of seeing and hearing the way that union with Christ changes everything.

A Christian, by his or her union with Christ, is dead to sin and alive to God. And nothing is more beautiful than that!

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⁵ John Bunyan, *The New Amplified Pilgrim’s Progress*, (Destiny Image Publishers, 2005), 115.