

Licensed to Kill: Strategies for Killing the Sin Within (Part 3 of 5)

"Sin in the Cross-Hairs"

Romans 6

Mark Vroegop

¹ What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. ¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for 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. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. ¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification (Romans 6:1–19 - ESV).

On January 1, 1863, the following words in an Executive Order from Abraham Lincoln became the basis for what was called the Emancipation Proclamation:

*"all persons held as slaves within the State or designated part of a State whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free . . ."*¹

It immediately freed 50,000 slaves in territories controlled by the Union, and it would eventually free 3.1 million slaves as the Confederate army fell. Two years later, and after the end of the Civil War, it would lead to the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery everywhere in United

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h1549t.html>

States.² But imagine what it must have been like to hear the news that you were finally and legally free! Booker T. Washington was only nine years old at the time, and he remembered the moment very well:

As the great day {of Emancipation} drew nearer, there was more singing in the slave quarters than usual. It was bolder, had more ring, and lasted later into the night. Most of the verses of the plantation songs had some reference to freedom.... Some man who seemed to be a stranger (a United States officer, I presume) made a little speech and then read a rather long paper—the Emancipation Proclamation, I think. After the reading we were told that we were all free, and could go when and where we pleased. My mother, who was standing by my side, leaned over and kissed her children, while tears of joy ran down her cheeks. She explained to us what it all meant, that this was the day for which she had been so long praying, but fearing that she would never live to see.³

On January 1, 1863, because of an Executive Order, the legal status of millions of enslaved people suddenly changed. They were free; they could go when and where they pleased. They were free, and now it was up to them to live like it.

Romans 6 could be considered the Christian's Emancipation Proclamation. It describes the positional freedom of the believer with a few towards a practical freedom. In other words, it is as though Romans 6 says: "You are free; live like it!" Today we are going to see how the cross puts the power of sin in the center of the target, defeats it, and then liberates the followers of Jesus to be free.

*The battle is within;
Daily I must fight;
Death comes from sin,
Killed only by Christ's might*

We are free, but we've got to live like it.

What does spiritual progress look like?

Our theme for this month is the mortification of sin, which practically speaking, means developing strategies for the atrophy of the flesh. In other words, we are discovering what the Bible says about extinguishing a passion to follow sin while simultaneously igniting a passion to follow Jesus. So far we've looked at the context for this battle, which is in between justification and glorification, in what we call sanctification, the process of making me more like Jesus and less controlled by sin. Last week we looked at where this battle resides, and we saw that it is an internal, heart-based war with indwelling sin.

Over the last two weeks, I've had a number of great questions about how this process of sanctification works. I hope this process of sanctification becomes more clear as we talk next week about the role of the Holy Spirit and then talk the following week about the role of the spiritual disciplines.

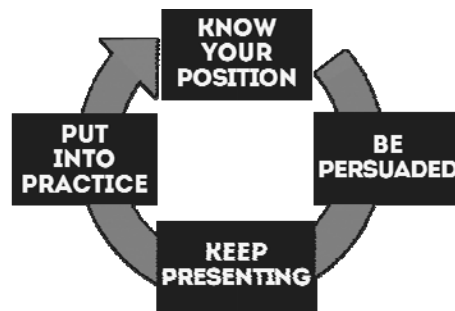
² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emancipation_Proclamation

³ Ibid.

Romans 6 helps us understand what spiritual progress actually looks like and how it relates to the issue of sanctification. It unpacks for us the relationship between our position in Christ and how that position helps us to fight the battle that is inside of us.

Let me summarize what I'm going to show you in this sixth chapter so that you understand the whole, and then we'll be able to examine each part. It is helpful for me to think about this in terms of another diagram:

The Cycle of Spiritual Progress



This text seems to highlight a spiritual progression that involves 1) knowing who you are “in Christ,” 2) believing that this really is, in fact, true, 3) presenting yourself in faith to God, 4) putting into practice who you really are “in Christ,” and this leads to 5) a greater understanding, appreciation, and affection for your position, which starts the cycle over again. Sanctification then is a progressive growth in the understanding and application of our position in Christ.

And every time you come through this cycle, good works, righteous deeds, and the fruit of the Spirit are the result. Progressive sanctification is a daily act of faith which produces righteousness. And sin is simply unbelief, as we fail to believe the promises of God over the promises of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Let's quickly look at each of these four categories.

Know your position

The first eleven verses address the issue of a believer's position in Christ and how that affects their practice of sin. Now the reason that Paul is writing this section of Scripture is because there are some who are misunderstanding the nature of God's grace. Romans 5 highlighted the beauty and totality of God's grace with a statement like “... *since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Rom. 5:1). But some people might take this positional peace and righteousness too far and think that since they are legally declared righteous, they can simply keep on sinning. We hear this very clearly in 6:1 – “*What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?*” And Paul's answer in 6:2 is very clear: “*By no means!*” (“May it never be!” – NASB; “God forbid!” – KJV). His answer is strong because to keep on sinning because of God's grace is to totally misunderstand everything about God's grace.

So how does Paul solve this problem of people who think it is okay to keep on sinning? He appeals to their position. He tells them who they are. He calls on them to stop living in a way that doesn't fit with who they really are. He calls on them to understand their position.

What is their position? **They are dead to sin, alive in Christ.** That would be something good for us to repeat together – “We are dead to sin; alive in Christ.” Sin is no longer our master; Christ is now our king. We have been emancipated; there is a new legal standing declared. We are free. Notice how this is stated throughout verses 3-11:

- v 3 – Being baptized in Christ Jesus means that we were baptized into His death. The waters of baptism serve as a great metaphor for what happens spiritually when a person receives Christ. The effect is that when Christ died, we died. Jesus' death becomes our death.
- v 4 – Death is not the only thing we share. We also participate in Christ's resurrection. In other words, Jesus' victory over sin becomes our victory. He was raised from the death, and we will be one day too. But there is another nuance to this that is very important. The last half of verse 4 says that *“we too might walk in newness of life.”* Being “in Christ” and having died to sin means a practical effect now! The spiritual participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus is meant to help us practically. Vicarious redemption should lead to vibrant righteousness. Remember why Paul is writing Romans 6! He wants to refute those who would say that grace leads to more sin. He turns this on its head and shows us that the point of God's grace was not just to forgive us but also to free us! Positional righteousness leads to practical righteousness.
- v 5 – Paul simply restates our spiritual position: united in His death, united in His resurrection.
- v 6 – He explains our participation in the death of Jesus more specifically, stating that in the death of Jesus, our “old self” was crucified “in him.” The “old self” is everything connected to Adam's fall and the penalty that was involved. He took all of the legal consequences of the reign of sin and paid for them. And the effect of this is *“so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.”* Again, this is the practical reality of this position does.
- v 7 – Paul summarizes the practical truth of what all of this means: *“for one who has died has been set free from sin.”*
- v 8 – He repeats the connection between death and life as it relates to us and Christ: *“Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”* Again, died with Christ; live with Christ. That is the equation. That is the position.
- vv 9-10 – A concluding thought is given to us here which highlights the permanency. Notice the phrases “will never die again” and “death no longer has dominion” and “once for all” and “he lives to God.” The sense here is that the position is secured and preserved by the living person of Jesus.

Does your heart beat when you hear these truths? It should! Just think of what we've heard: Believers are dead to sin because we are alive in Christ. When He died, we died. When He rose, we rose. In His death, the old, sinful, Adam-cursed aspect of who we are was declared defeated, and

every penalty connected with that life was paid for by Jesus. And the effect of this is a positional reality that unequivocally declares: "I am free!"

This is who you are. Central to the process of sanctification and the mortification of sin is embracing who you really are. Like a slave on January 2, 1863, your legal standing has been changed. You may still live on a plantation. You may only have slave clothes on. You may have old patterns of "slave acting," and you have a lot to figure out. But the fact still remains: You are not a slave anymore! Killing sin begins by understanding that in Christ I dead to sin and alive in Christ.

Be Persuaded

The second aspect of this cycle of spiritual progress is being persuaded that what the Bible says about you "in Christ" is in fact true. It is taking what you have just heard about your position and accepting it by faith. Imagine a slave who has just heard the Emancipation Proclamation read to him. He hears "*all persons held as slave . . . be then, thenceforward, and forever free,*" but he looks around and everything still looks the same. On the one hand, nothing has changed. But on the other hand, everything has. So what does he do? He needs to believe what he has just heard. He needs to be persuaded, convinced to believe. The slave will never act like a free man by just hearing about his freedom; he must believe it to be true.

In Romans 6:11 Paul says that in light of what you've just heard about your position in Christ and the reality of sin's defeat, "*you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*" The word "consider" (Greek: *logizomai*) is used by Paul when he is describing spiritual realities which must be believed before they have practical implications. He uses the term to describe a faith judgment regarding justification (Rom. 3:28), the value of sufferings (Rom. 8:18), Christian liberty (Rom. 14:14), and his pursuit of Christlikeness (Phil. 3:13). In each case there is something that cannot be seen, but believing in it could produce actions that would clearly be seen.

The idea is that the first step toward freedom is to believe that you are indeed free. For the slave in 1863, it means believing that despite everything else he sees and what his life has been like, there is a new freedom that he has been given. He must be persuaded.

As it relates to the mortification of sin, it means that we must believe what the Bible says about us. We must believe that we died with Christ, that sin has been defeated, that our old self was crucified, and that we no longer have to serve sin. We have to believe that we are dead to sin and alive to Christ. So sanctification is a work of faith as well. We must have faith that these things are true! We are saved by believing, but we are also sanctified by believing.

Listen to how Paul captures this in Galatians 2:20:

²⁰ 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.

Do you see the connection? This is important, because if you remember last week, I talked about the internal battle between good and evil. While that is true, there is a real battle inside. There is

another important aspect from a positional standpoint: the powers of good and evil are not equal. As a kid in church, I heard the analogy of two dogs – one evil and one good. And whichever one you fed was the one who grew stronger. But the problem is that the evil dog is dead. Now you can still act as if the evil dog is alive; you have patterns that are hard to break because you lived with the evil dog for so long. But the fact remains: the evil dog is dead.

You see, the Bible tries to show us that sin is common and it is a struggle, but it is as unnatural and unnecessary as an emancipated slave refusing to leave an abusive slave master. Far too many believers give their sin too much authority, power, and control. And one of the first steps in defeating sin is realizing, and then believing, who you are. You don't have to sin. And when you do, you embrace something from which you have been delivered. You need to be persuaded that you are dead to sin and alive to God.

Keep Presenting

In order to make spiritual progress, we have to know our position in Christ, and we have to believe that is in fact true. The third aspect of spiritual progress is found in verses 12-14, and the focus in this section is what it means to "present yourselves to God."

Verse 12 serves as a reminder, or a reinforcement, of what we have seen so far – that sin should not be allowed to control the believer because it is a defeated tyrant. To follow sin is to negate the true reality of what is at work here – *"Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions" (Rom. 6:12).*

Verse 14 also reinforces the principle that is in play here. He returns to the spiritual reality upon which all of this is based: *"For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace" (Rom. 6:14).* In other words, sin's reign should not be allowed since it has no dominion.

But what does that look like? Verse 13 shows us:

¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for 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.

"To present" means to cause something to be used for service, making something at someone's disposal, or setting something up for dedicated use. A military analogy might be helpful here. I'm sure you've seen the crisp display of a line of soldiers who twirl a rifle and snap it upright. At some point in the ceremony, someone says, "Present arms!" And when this command is declared, the soldier presents his rifle. The call to "Present Arms!" is the introduction and the dedication of an instrument of battle.

This is what the Christian does, and he or she does it with their whole person. The tense is aorist active, which indicates that there is a once-for-all dedication but with continual application. In other words, the follower of Jesus has enlisted, and when called into formation, we line up for battle orders. It is what we sing in "Take My Life, and Let it Be":

*Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee,
Ever, only, all for Thee.*

Understanding your position in Christ and believing it to be true means that the follower of Jesus continually – daily – presents him or herself to God “as those who have been brought from death to life” and “as instruments of righteousness.” They realize that they are in a battle, and they approach their lives through a lens of “who am I presenting myself to?”

A failure to understand this dynamic has led to weak Christians and weak churches. Martyn Lloyd-Jones reflects on this when he writes,

The main trouble with the Christian church today is that she is too much like a clinic, too much like a hospital . . . suffering with the mumps and measles of the soul . . . feeling our own pulses and talking about ourselves. We have lost the concept of the army of God, and the King of Righteousness in this fight against the kingdom of evil.

What we all need is not a doctor but a sergeant major . . . who is there shouting out the commands of God over you – “Let not sin reign in your mortal body. Yield not your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin. Yield yourselves to God”. You have no business to be slouching about like that; stand on your feet, realize who and what you are, enlisted in the army of God. Present yourselves. This is not a clinic.⁴

We must present ourselves to God as “living sacrifices” (Rom. 12:1). As I’ve said from the beginning of this series:

*The battle is within;
Daily I must fight;*

Put into Practice

The final aspect of spiritual progress involves a very important word for the believer, a word that you need to know: **obey**. Why is this word so critical? Obedience, actual and real actions that fit with righteousness, is what all of this is about. Sanctification is not just about position; it is about practice. So any discussion or study of sanctification that doesn’t result in greater and greater obedience is not a true understanding of sanctification. God’s mission is not just to make us holy in the future. He aims to have us be holy (albeit incomplete!) now!

Verses 15-19 lay this out very clearly by linking obedience to ownership. Paul again uses slavery to make this point: You obey the one who owns you. Or to put it another way: Whomever you obey is the one whom you ultimately serve. For the Christian to obey sin is to live as a slave of a dead master.

⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Exposition of Chapter 6 – The New Man, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972), 174.

¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:15–18 – ESV).

Paul wants us to see that this is so much more than theoretical and spiritual positions. That is certainly in play here, but the other issue is the matter of obedience. It is like he gets in our face and says, “Why are you serving sin? It’s dead. You belong to someone else.”

What he wants here is for us to change our practical, daily allegiance. He wants for you and me to get serious about righteousness. He wants for us to think about all the energy and effort, time and money, thought and planning that went into our sinful actions. And he wants for us to direct the same level of energy to the practice of righteousness.

¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification (Romans 6:19)

The charge here is for us to see that the call to holiness and the call to obedience is not just something super-spiritual Christians do. It is the normal and natural effect of your position in Christ, being persuaded that it’s true, presenting yourself to God, and putting this into practice with everything you’ve got.

You are free! Jesus paid your debt! He crucified the old you! He has removed the tyrannical power of sin! Believe this! Commit every part of you to this mission! And the live every day of your life in light of this beautiful reality.

When you don’t, do you know what you are like? You are like a slave who is discovered by a Union soldier months after the Emancipation Proclamation. Imagine the pitiful scene of a slave who is still choosing to live in the terrible conditions of his slavery and working the fields in fear, even though his master has been run off and he is legally free. Imagine a soldier saying, “Look here! You are free. Stop living here and acting like a slave. The master is gone. We’re in charge and the President has declared you a free man.”

Imagine the tragedy of a freed slave whose master is gone who still chooses to live like slave when he is in fact free!

The cross has defeated the power of sin. You are dead to sin and alive to Christ. You are free! So live like it!

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