

“Revolt Against Sin”
Romans 6:1-14
January 15, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

With Romans 5, Paul has wrapped up his treatment of the topic of justification and moves in Romans 6 to talk about our sanctification. This is the theological word to describe how we grow in our obedience to Christ. It answers the important and practical question of how people change. We all have had the experience of recognizing our need to change, wanting to change, but then finding our sin to have such surprising power that change is only short-lived.

The advice columnist called “Dear Prudence” received a letter from a young woman who rode a bus to work every day. Boarding the bus after her every morning was an elderly gentleman with poor eyesight. Because of his vision problems, he would always struggle to find the right bills to pay his fare. Eventually, the woman offered to help. She would pluck the right bill from his wallet, and then help herself to a twenty-dollar bill. It was so easy, and she started doing it once or twice a week and had been doing so for months by the time she wrote Prudence. The elderly man never mentioned missing any money, and she was enjoying the little boost to her own income. But then she began to feel some real guilt and begged Prudence to tell her how to stop robbing a dear old man.

Maybe you’ve never stolen from the blind, but all of us have experienced the power of sin in such a way that we really want to change but find change to be elusive. Is real change even possible? Paul assures us that it is, and in Romans 6 he makes his case for exactly how such change happens.

I. The Objection – v. 1

Paul had his critics, both outside and inside the church. One of the common critiques was that the gospel he preached resulted in a decline of personal holiness. We can hear this objection in the words of Paul’s questions in verse 1. **“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? Hadn’t Paul taught, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (5:20)?** There is an undeniable logic, then, to this objection. What is to keep people from saying, “I’m going to help make God’s grace look even more abundant by sinning to my heart’s content.” W. H. Auden once quipped about this, “I love to sin; God loves to forgive; the world is admirably arranged.”

This is no minor objection. Everyone agrees that God's children should be marked by increasing levels of personal holiness. If someone teaches the Bible in such a way that personal holiness is diminished, then that is a serious matter that calls into question their whole approach to the Bible. And some had taken Paul's declaration of the gospel in just this way. The book of Jude warns about those who had crept into the church and were guilty of perverting **"the grace of our God into sensuality"** (Jude 4).

Before we look at Paul's specific answer to this objection, let me point out two general points we learn from Paul. First, Paul clearly and strongly condemns this conclusion. Our translations say **"By no means!"** It's a phrase that reads literally, "May it never be!" and translators have offered a variety of options in trying to capture the force of this. Among them are "God forbid" (KJV), "No, no!" (NEB), "Certainly not!" (REB), and "What a ghastly thought!" (JBP). Theologically, the error Paul rejects goes by the name "antinomianism," and all who truly know God should be just as forceful in rejecting it.

Though he rejects this error as clearly and strongly as possible, it is interesting that he doesn't answer the objection by backing off of his teaching about the grace of God. He doesn't say, "O, but of course we mustn't take this grace thing too far. As we all know, God helps those who help themselves. It's like two people paddling a boat, each on his own side. If only one paddles, the boat will go in circles. God's paddling hard, but you've got to help him out." Paul says nothing of the sort. Instead of backing off of grace, he doubles down and is going to say in effect, "It's not that you've taken grace too far; your problem is that you haven't taken it far enough. He's going to answer the error of antinomianism not on the basis that it makes too much of God's grace, but that it makes too little of it.

In its approach to personal holiness, the church has always battled the two errors of legalism and antinomianism. There is a tendency to over-correct, like a four-year old driving a boat. We live on a small lake and have a little electric pontoon boat at our house that our grandchildren love to drive when they come to visit. They all have a tendency to overcorrect, with the result that a trip on the lake is a zigzagging adventure. We can do the same in the Christian life. If legalism becomes a problem, we tend to overcorrect into antinomianism, and vice versa. So Paul holds firmly to the grace of God, and he's going to teach that God's grace does more than save us from the penalty of sin. It also delivers us from the power of sin in our sanctification.

I have personally been accused of being too grace-oriented, even being referred to as a "grace boy." Our church has been accused of the same. But I think we are in good company with the apostle Paul himself, and, like Paul, we must determine not to back down from God's grace in our approach to living the Christian life.

II. The Answer – v. 2-10

How does God's grace sanctify us and lead to growth in personal holiness? Paul puts his finger on the main problem for those who would go easy on sin because of the grace of God, and it's ignorance. **"Do you not know,"** he asks, and then proceeds to speak of our union with Christ. They were ignorant of this important teaching of the Bible. Theological ignorance can have devastating effects, and that was apparently the case here.

Union with Christ is a teaching that God has joined us so closely to Jesus that we share everything. So when Jesus died, there is a death we too experience. When Jesus was raised from the dead, we too experience a new life. Verse five even uses the word "united" to speak of this. **"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"** (v. 5). Paul says it like this in verse 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."** Because we are joined to Jesus, we have a new way of doing life. The new way is the way that forsakes the self-centered approach that is always asking, "What's in it for me?" and instead dies to self and lives for God.

There are several biblical images that illustrate our union with Christ. One of the primary ones is marriage, by which two people are so closely joined that the things experienced by the one are shared by the other. When Wendy and I got married, she had a car loan. Her debt then became our debt. But she also had a car that was about ten years newer than my car, one that had a heater that actually worked and a floor that didn't allow you to see the road beneath the car, two features lacking in my car. When we got married, I not only got her debt; I got another set of car keys too. In the same way, we share everything with Christ. Our debts become his debts, and his righteousness becomes ours. Paul uses this idea in 1 Corinthians 6 to motivate the Corinthians to turn away from a practice of some in the church of sexual relations with prostitutes. Paul says, **"Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?"** (1 Cor. 6:15).

In the things we share with Jesus due to our union with him, Paul focuses particularly on our sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Because we are united with Jesus in his death, **"We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing"** (v. 6). The old self was crucified. This takes us back to the previous chapter where Paul had spoken about the first and second Adam as representative heads over entire races of people. Paul is saying here that due to our union with Jesus, we are no longer under the headship of the first Adam. We are no longer guilty

because of Adam's sin, but innocent because of the second Adam's obedience unto death. This means, among other things, that we are no longer defined by our past. We all have skeletons in the closet, and it is easy for us to be paralyzed by our sins and shameful actions of the past. By God's grace, that old man has died. How would you feel if someone compiled a list of the top ten most shameful things you have ever done and published it in our church newsletter? Maybe we could have a section of the newsletter each month where we take turns making such a list about each church member. Of course, we will never do that. But the good news is that even if we did, that's not who you are any longer. As verse 6 goes on to say, this has happened **"so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin."** A death has happened, and it provides a fresh start not unlike a literal death releases a person from the obligation to pay taxes or to pay bills of any kind.

We are also united to Christ in his resurrection. **"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"** (v. 8-9). If our union with Christ in his death speaks of a changed attitude toward the past, our union with him in his resurrection speaks of a changed attitude toward the future. As Jesus lived to God (v. 10), even so our new life now is focused on that same purpose. Our view of the future affects our present. Let's return to the marriage image of our union with Christ. If you are engaged to be married, your future marriage will change your present behavior. New things will be done that would not otherwise be done. Perhaps there will be some premarital counseling. Attempts will be made to become acquainted with future in-laws. Two households will be combined into one. Other activities will cease, including the possibility of going on dates with anyone other than the future spouse. Because we are united to Christ, such changes in our present life are appropriate.

III. The Application – v. 11-14

Beginning in verse 11, Paul moves to personal application of this important theological doctrine of union with Christ. He makes two applications: one about the different way we are to think, and a second about a different way we are to act. Verse 11 addresses the mind. **"So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."** Paul is asking his readers to draw a conclusion that may not seem obvious at first. The word translated "consider" is the word that is translated "count" elsewhere in Romans, the Greek word *logizomai*. Abraham's faith, for example, was counted as righteousness. This is a present tense verb, meaning that such thinking should be our ongoing practice.

As we battle with sin in our lives, what exactly would Paul have us think? When I was thinking about this question this week, my first thought was that we should think of sin as a paper tiger, frightening to look at, but with no power. But then I thought, “That’s not right, either biblically or by personal experience.” The sin nature is no mere paper tiger, but a real tiger with powerful jaws and sharp claws. What we are to consider is our union with Christ, and that the tiger of my sin nature more than meets its match in the one to whom I am united by faith. G. K. Chesterton once wrote, “If a rhinoceros were to enter this restaurant now, there is no denying he would have great power here. But I should be the first to rise and assure him that he had no authority whatever.” The death and resurrection of Jesus, to whom we are joined by faith in Christ, removes all authority the sin nature has in our lives.

The last three verses of our text urge us to action. We are not to let sin reign in our mortal bodies (v. 12), remembering that it has no authority. And we are to present our members as instruments for righteousness rather than unrighteousness. The word that is translated “instruments” has a military connotation and is translated elsewhere as “weapons.” We are being told here to take up arms, using every faculty we possess as a weapon against sin and its tyranny. The tongue is not to be used to slander and gossip, but to worship God and encourage others. The feet and hands are not to be employed in selfish pursuits, but to be used to serve God and others. We are being told to launch a revolt against sin.

CONCLUSION:

I want to close with a question. Is there an area of your life in your battle with sin where you feel paralyzed? What would it look like for you to begin moving forward in that area, toward greater Christlikeness? Understanding and acting upon your union with Christ is able to remove the paralysis. May God help you to do so!

Discussion Questions
Romans 6:1-14

1. Romans 6 gives helpful instruction in our battle against sin. Where do you most experience the power of sin in your life?
2. Where have you experienced God's power to bring about needed changes in your life?
3. This passage is about our union with Christ and the resource we have in that for real change in our lives. What is meant by our union with Christ? How is marriage a good metaphor for our union with Christ?
4. We are joined into union with Jesus in his death. Paul says that our old self has been crucified with Christ (v. 6). One application of this truth is that it releases us from the bondage of our past. Can you think of some examples of how people might be held in bondage because of their past? Have you ever experienced such bondage from past sins?
5. We are also joined into union with Jesus in his resurrection. What practical difference does it make to know that our future is both secure and good because of Jesus?
6. Is there an area in your life where you have experienced a kind of paralysis in your fight against sin? That is, you know what you should do and actually want to do it, but experience some paralysis in actually moving forward with that. How does considering yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (v. 11) help in that?
7. What practical difference does it make to believe these truths about sin? As you answer, consider the G. K. Chesterton quote. "If a rhinoceros were to enter this restaurant now, there is no denying he would have great power here. But I should be the first to rise and assure him that he had no authority whatever."