

“Free to Serve”
Romans 6:1-23
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Thomas Watson: “Suck not poison out of the sweet flower of God’s mercy... To sin because mercy abounds is the devil’s logic.” (In Alan P.F. Sell, *God our Father*, 21)

What does it mean that we are saved by grace?

Among the many ways of explaining it, one way is to say that it is only possible to have a right relationship with the holy God of the universe by his grace, as a gift - not by anything we do.

We can’t earn a right relationship with God by the good things we do.

Whether I am good or bad, better or worse, doesn’t make the difference - what makes the difference is whether I trust in what Christ has done on the cross for me.

It is what he has provided for me, freely, that makes the difference - the grace of forgiveness and life are based not on what I have done but on what he did for me - by dying for my sins and offering me life. I am saved solely by God’s grace.

I can imagine someone saying to that: “WAIT a minute! Are you saying that it doesn’t matter how bad I’ve been?”

That’s right! A right relationship with God is not based on what you have done but on what Christ has done for you.

So my imaginary person goes on to ask, “Does that mean that if I sin again, even after I’m a Christian - that won’t matter?”

I won’t say it doesn’t matter (as I will show you in a minute) but I will say it won’t mean you are no longer a Christian because becoming a Christian is not based on what you have done or will do, good or bad, but on God’s grace received by faith alone.

“Let me see if I understand you. Whether I have been good or bad has nothing to do with whether God accepts me?”

That’s right - it is all a gift, not based on whether you deserve it or not. Because the truth is, none of us deserve it.

“Are you saying that even the worst of people can receive this gift just by believing, trusting in Christ?”

Yes, that’s what God says - in fact he said, “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more.”

“Well, if that’s the case, why would I break my neck to try to live a Christian life? If whether I sin or not makes no difference, I think I’ll just go ahead and do what I please in my life. I’m young, there are a lot of things I would like to try - things I’ve been told are wrong but it won’t matter - I’m saved by grace. I know that I can always come back to doing things the right way later if I want to. And in the mean time I can rest assured that my eternal destiny is secure because have said it is by grace - it was gift from God based not on what I do but on what Christ did. That’s pretty good. How do they say it? ‘I can have my cake and eat it to.’ The theology of grace gives me freedom to live as I chose - now that’s freedom!”

I can easily imagine someone listening in on this conversation having a conviction.

And they would say to me, “You can’t say that. You can’t say it’s all of grace - a gift not based on what people do. Look where that will lead - you heard it - it’ll lead to more sin. People won’t take God seriously, who knows what they’ll do. The world will descend into anarchy. There will be no controls. Do you hear what you have just said? You have given people permission to sin as much as they want without penalty. You can’t teach that! You have to teach responsibility, obedience to God, the law of God. People need to know right from wrong and do it. You’ve taken this grace thing too far. Surely you can’t mean it’s ALL of grace.

How do you think the Apostle Paul would have responded to these conversations?

I might surprise you by saying I think he would have been somewhat pleased?

Why? He would be pleased because both people got his major point.

The first person abused it and the second person disagreed with it but at least they both understood him.

It is almost every week that I hear, first-hand, of either a disagreement with the doctrine of grace or an abuse of it.

I hear it from people who refuse to accept the gift of God’s grace because they are convinced it’s too easy - it doesn’t require something from them - and they won’t accept it if they can’t earn it.

Furthermore they are convinced if you make grace this free people will abuse it.

And I hear the abuse of grace from people who excuse their sinful behavior saying it doesn’t matter because they are saved by grace.

Well, what do YOU think?

Doesn’t salvation by grace alone through faith alone leave the door wide open to sin?

If our conduct is not the basis of our relationship with God then why not sin?

In the first five chapters of Romans, God through Paul has declared that every human being is a sinner and every human being has sinned.

Furthermore no human being is even capable of being righteous, holy.

Furthermore no one can become righteous by obeying the law, by doing good.

Righteous is what we must be if we are going to have a relationship with a holy God but righteousness is what we lack.

But God has made it possible for us to have his righteousness.

And that righteousness comes to us, not through our efforts but by GRACE through trusting Jesus Christ.

In the 5th chapter of Romans Paul makes it clear that it is not our actions that make us right with God but Christ's action of dying for us and rising from the dead.

Forgiveness, justification, new life, eternal life, a right relationship with God, righteousness are all given to us as an unearned gift by the grace of God.

Paul knew full well that such an announcement would lead to objections - people ready to take the precious gift of grace and turn it into either legalism or a license to sin.

Look please in your Bible at Romans 6.

When you listen to the 1st and 15th verses, think about the conversation I mentioned at the beginning of this message.

6:1 "What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning that grace might increase?"

6:15 "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?"

Both times, what response does Paul give to the questions?

"By no means", may it never be, God forbid, you can't be serious, you couldn't possibly draw such a conclusion if you had a real understanding of salvation by grace!

What we have in Chapter 6 are Paul's fuller responses to the potential abuse of the doctrine of grace.

His first response is in verses 2-14 and his second in vv 16-23.

Please notice that both times he says, (v3 and v16) "Don't you know?"

In both cases Paul is saying, I am going to remind you of truths that are basic to becoming and being a Christian.

In fact, if you remember these basics you won't ask if sin is okay, because the answer would be so obvious.

Well, if salvation is fully and only of grace, if we can't earn it or un-earn it because it is a gift why **wouldn't** that lead us to conclude that we can go on sinning and it won't make any difference?

Paul gives us two reasons why the doctrine of grace doesn't lead to more sin but to holiness instead:

1. **Vv2-14 because we are connected to Christ.**
2. **Vv16-23 because we are slaves to God.**

If you truly became a Christian, something happened that makes continuing in a lifestyle of sin totally incompatible.

The last part of V2 really summarizes Paul's first reason:

Why does the doctrine of grace not lead to sin?

Paul says, "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"

In what way is that statement true and how does it answer our question of 'why not sin since we are saved by grace'?

"How have we died to sin so that we won't live in it any longer?"

You who were here last Sunday will remember (possibly) that in chapter 5 Paul has made a major point in comparing what was formerly true of us with what is true of us now that we are Christians.

Before we were "in Adam".

By virtue of being a human being descended from Adam, we all are guilty of sin because, God said, we all, in a mysterious but definite sense were "in Adam" when he sinned. We are connected to him so that what he did, we did.

His point being that JUST AS the guilt of Adam was attributed to us because we were somehow there and we somehow sinned when Adam sinned, SO ALSO when Jesus died on the cross and rose again, we who by faith are connected to Jesus, were there so that his death was also our death.

Last week I asked, "How could the act of one man nearly 2000 years ago possibly have any significant and personal affect on me today?"

We saw that it could and does because by faith we are "in Christ".

In a sense his actions became our actions.

Here in chapter 6 Paul is going to build on that concept. How have we died to sin?

6:3 "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"

When we were converted to Christ, when we were born again, when we became Christians, when we were saved, (**as evidenced by our baptism**) we became connected to Jesus.

And if we were connected to him we were also connected to his death. (Just as we were "in Adam" when he sinned so we were "in Christ" when he died for us.)

When we trusted in Jesus as saving Lord, we were by, God's doing, placed into Christ so that what was true of him is now true of us.

"A Christian is not merely a justified believer. He is someone who has entered into a vital personal union with Jesus Christ." (Stott in Men Made New p34)

When we were placed into Him (as evidenced by our water baptism) we were also placed or baptized into his actions.

What he did we did.

What happened to him, happened to us

Since we are in Christ, WE were also there in his death.

And in these next verses (3-8) Paul says therefore there are two things that are true of us who are Christians.

Please notice he does not say these things OUGHT to be true but that they ARE true of us.

Here are the two things that ARE true of real Christians:

In Christ Jesus we died to sin and
in Christ Jesus we rose to a new life.

The logic of the passage goes like this:

CHRIST died to sin.

WE died in Christ because WE are connected to him.

Therefore WE died to sin. (Moo p354)

So to understand in what way we have "died to sin" we must understand in what way Christ died to sin.

Verses 9-10 explain that to us.

Notice verse 10 first of all: "the death he died, he died to sin once for all" - it is a "never-to-be-repeated" act.

Something decisive happened in Christ's death/resurrection experience.

The last part of V9 tells us what that was: “death no longer has mastery over him.”

Death once had authority over Christ because he took our sin on himself. Sin leads unalterably to death.

But once Christ died (and then rose again) he broke that linkage between sin and death.

Christ broke the rule of sin that was operating in him (because of our sin) and he was freed from its control leading to death. He broke the power of sin.

As we will see in the next section - sin is not just something we do that is wrong, sin becomes a master - it rules us.

Christ took our very real sin on himself and it ruled him (now I understand that Jesus put himself in that position willingly but having done so - having taken our sin on himself - it took him to death).

But when Jesus rose from the grave, he broke sin’s power. Jesus was no longer controlled by sin.

Again, what is Paul’s point?

When we trust in Jesus Christ as Saving-Lord we are placed “in Christ”, we are connected to him in a way that what has happened to him has happened to us.

Look at verse 6 “For we know that our old self, our old way of life, was crucified with Christ, so that the body of sin, our old sin-prone way of thinking and acting would be done away with - no longer able to control us. - “That we should no longer be slaves to sin.”

Before you became a Christian, while it was possible for you to do certain things that we would call “good” -

it was impossible for you to do anything that God would call “good” or “righteous” or deserving of God’s favor.

God said it this way “Even our so-called righteousnesses are as filthy rags”. (Isaiah 64:6)

We were controlled by sin and unable not to sin.

We could do nothing right by God’s standards because every action was corrupted in some way either by our actions themselves or by our motives.

It was impossible for us not to sin by God’s definition of sin.

But here is what happened - when we died “in Christ” that power of sin to control us was broken. Christ broke it and WE are “in Christ”.

It is now possible for us not to sin.

It is now possible for us to do real “good” by God’s definition.

As we will see from the verses that follow it is not that it is now impossible for us to sin but that it is now possible for us not to sin - sin's power to control has been broken.

So when Paul says we have died to sin,
It is not that I cannot sin but that now I can choose NOT to sin.
Before I could do nothing pleasing to God - I now can!

The Holy Spirit within us isn't mentioned until chapter 8 but that is what Paul is leading up to here -

By God's grace and his Spirit within us it is now possible for us, for the first time, to actually live in a righteous way - to please our God.

Now back to the original questions:

Shall we go on sinning that grace might increase?

Shall we sin because we are under grace?

Is sin insignificant because I am saved by grace not based on what I do?

Paul says, "by no means!" Don't let it be said! How can you even imagine going back to that old way of life of sinning against God when you have been freed from sin's control?

Paul never speaks of the impossibility of Christians sinning but only of the incongruity of Christians choosing a lifestyle of sin.

You have died with Christ to that old way of life - that is a fact.

Sin no longer is able to ultimately control your life - in Christ you have been freed.

We now have possibilities that never existed before. We can follow Christ, we can please him.

So Paul writes in verses 11-13 we must take responsibility for what is true:

You now have the ability by God's grace to obey God.

So take action - offer your body to do good instead of evil.

Since you have been freed from sin's control it makes no sense to go back to that lifestyle.

But someone might still say - "Since I'm saved by grace and secure in that grace, I have decided that I will just do some of the things I want to do for a while. I'll just live my way and later come back to God."

In the next section of the chapter, Paul says you need to understand something else that happened when you became a Christian.

Look please at verses 17 and 18 “But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. ¹⁸ You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

You used to be enslaved to sin (even though it may not have seemed like it) but at conversion you accepted the teaching of God and you trusted in Christ - and therefore “in Christ” you were set free from sin’s control.

And in that same act of becoming a Christian you turned around to serve Christ - to become a slave to righteousness.

Now catch this - becoming a Christian is not just getting a “get out of jail free” card.

Becoming a Christian means being “in Christ” becoming a Christ-follower. If you did not turn to Christ then you are not a Christian.

But, Paul says, you did turn to Christ.

Now, he has said all this in the context of a principle which he has stated in 6:16 “Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?

We like to think we are free, that we can choose to sin or not sin anytime we want to and that we are in control of our destinies.

But God says that when we offer ourselves to sin, living in a lifestyle of sin, it proves one thing - we are slaves to sin.

We thought we were free to take it or leave it but we too soon find out we are caught in it - we are slaves to it.

We don’t control it, it controls us.

And that lifestyle eventually proves we weren’t Christians at all.

Likewise, Paul says, when you give yourself to obedience you soon find out that you are a slave to it - God truly is your master.

There is a warning here - Don’t think you can just go off and sin more because you are saved by grace.

You will not prove that you are free, you will only prove that you don’t even belong to Christ - you aren’t connected to him - you haven’t died to sin.

You’ll prove you are still a slave to sin.

And Paul writes, don’t you remember that sin leads to more sin, which leads to death. It is a principle to remember: “The wages of sin is death!”

With that in mind, how could you even imagine using grace an excuse to

sin.

The very act of becoming a Christian by God's grace means you have moved from the realm of sin and death to the realm of obedience and life.

It's inconceivable to Paul that you would want to go back to death.

In the early 1860s Abraham Lincoln with the full authority of the United States government wrote the "emancipation proclamation" declaring that all slaves were henceforth free.

Robert Sadler was born in 1911 (50 years after the emancipation proclamation) and he was a United States Citizen.

He was born in Anderson, South Carolina, the next to the youngest of eleven children.

There was no school for the children because sharecroppers' children had to work on the farm.

Robert's father was a sharecropper and an abusive drunk.

Robert's mother and all the children were abused by that man.

Due to abuse and neglect Robert watched his mother and his littlest sister die.

The father moved in with another woman who did not want Robert or the other children still at home.

One night in 1916 when Robert was only 5 years of age his father took him and two of his sisters age 12 and 13 and literally sold them to a white man as slaves.

Within two years, Pearl, who was the prettiest of the girls, was tortured and disfigured by the owner and his friends - she was sent then to work the fields where she never recovered and died at age 15.

Robert was kept in the "big house" (as they called it).

Fed scraps and forced to serve the white family, Robert was beaten for the slightest mistake or just for the fun of the children or their friends.

One day in Robert's hearing, one of the owner's children asked why Robert was black and he was white.

The master answered that Robert was created to be their slave.

God was punishing black people for their sin.

He said the only niggers in heaven are there to serve the whites because niggers don't have souls.

Robert said that as he listened his heart caved within him.

If his mama and baby sister were in heaven their situation was no better than his.

Robert was never allowed to leave the “big house”.

Folks this happened within the lifetime of our grandparents.

That little boy and his sisters (and many people on that plantation) had no idea what had happened 50 years earlier - the slaves had been set free!

Every day Robert got up and did exactly what his slave-master told him to do - with no idea it could be different.

At 14 years of age, with no idea of where to go and a fear of being caught and killed, Robert ran away.

Life didn't get better for Robert for a long time but finally someone told him he was free.

Even at that it took a long time for Robert to begin to feel and act free.

Fifty years before his birth he was declared free.

At fourteen years of age he became free.

But not until age 18 did he begin to live free.

If you would ask Robert if he wanted to go back to the old way of life - you can imagine his answer.

Even when he was without a job and without food and shelter he knew that as secure as life could sometimes be on the plantation - it was still slavery and it led to death.

Paul, says you have died to sin's ultimate control over you - you died to it when Jesus died for you. You are free to not sin.

And how could you possibly want to be a slave to sin and death again when you have been set free.

Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?

By no means!

Don't you know? You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness

Written but not preached in November, 2007