

You are Dead! Rom. 6:1-14

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In Romans 6, the Apostle Paul wrestles with a problem that continues to vex us to this day. It's the problem of Christians and sin. What difference does being a Christian make in the way we actually live? We've all known people who profess to be Christians, yet live mean-spirited, self-centered, pleasure-seeking, greedy lives. And we've seen any number of public religious figures who profess faith in Jesus, yet are caught up in all kinds of financial or sexual scandals. How can that be? Aren't Christians supposed to be different?

In this morning's passage, Paul gives a resounding "Yes" to that question. And he phrases his answer in dramatic, radical terms. Listen as I read Romans 6:1-11.

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no

longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 6:1-11)

In a nutshell, Paul says that if you are “in Christ,” you are dead—specifically dead to sin! But what does that mean? First, let’s talk about what Paul means by “sin.” (Stay with me now because we’re going somewhere!) Paul is not referring just to the individual sins that someone may commit—lying, stealing, gossiping, murder, etc. He’s referring to a flaw in human nature that leads every one of us to sin. In fact, you’ve never met someone who is without sin! Never! (Except for Jesus) It’s in our nature.

I’ve told you before about my installation service as pastor at my former church. I had invited Rev. Dick Hutcheson, a former pastor and mentor, to deliver the sermon. As expected, Dick did a great job. But along with affirming my gifts for ministry, Dick reminded the congregation that I wasn’t perfect. His exact words were, “You need to remember that Dave is a sinner.” And he repeated that phrase multiple times, more times than I thought were necessary to make his point! In fact, it became kind of a theme of the service, as the woman who offered the installation prayer

ad-libbed a bit, praying for “Dave, who is a sinner!” But I couldn’t argue with Dick. I am a sinner! I just prefer not to be publicly reminded of it!

And, I have been a sinner since my earliest days on this earth. No one needed to teach me how! None of us has to teach our children to sin. In fact, we spend a lot of time and energy teaching them not to sin! I remember early one morning when our son was about two years old. We were still in bed, but Stephen had gotten up, climbed out of his crib, and was running around the living room. We heard a loud crash and jumped up to see what had happened. Somehow he had caused a lamp to fall over and break. When we asked him what happened, he immediately replied, “Dina did it!” referring to the little girl who lived next door! He was only two! We didn’t have to teach him to lie or throw his little friend under the bus. It came very naturally to him, and it comes naturally to each one of us. That’s what Paul is talking about when he talks about sin or the “old self” in this passage. It’s that deeply-rooted flaw in our nature that makes us incapable of living without sinning.

And because the problem of sin is so deeply rooted within us, it needs a drastic solution. It needs to be put to death, in Paul’s words. He likens it to adult baptism, where an adult is professing faith in Jesus and is being immersed. He says they are mimicking Jesus, who was buried and then raised to a new, resurrection life. He says that our old self, the sin

nature part of us, was crucified with Jesus so that it might be put to death and destroyed! That's a strong image, isn't it? But that's what sin requires, because it is so strong within us. As Thomas a Kempis put it in his book, The Imitation of Christ, "Look, it all consists in the cross, and it all lies in dying; and there is no other way to life and true peace within."

It reminds me of lawn renovation. If you've just got a couple weeds here and there, you can dig them up or spray them with weedkiller, and your lawn will be just fine. Some of us want to believe that's what sin is like in our lives. Just a sin here and there that we can easily take care of. But Paul and all the other biblical writers know that sin is a far greater problem than that. It's like a lawn that is infested with weeds. And the problem with weeds is that they are often deeply-rooted. They spread their seeds, and will eventually choke out the grass. The only way to deal with a weed-infested lawn is to kill off everything and start over. That's what Paul says needs to happen to our sin-infused nature. That old nature- all those weeds- needs to be put to death! So that we are dead to sin!

But, it doesn't seem to actually work that way in real life, does it? In a comic by Mary Chambers from Leadership Journal, we see two couples doing a Bible study together. One of the women says, "Well, I haven't actually *died* to sin, but I did feel a little faint once." If our sin nature has really been put to death along with Jesus, how come we still sin- "in

thought, word, and deed”- as one of our Prayers of Confession puts it? Come to think of it, why do we need a Prayer of Confession at all, if our sin nature is dead? (And, by the way, if you think you don't have a problem with sin, you just aren't paying attention! Ask the people who know you best to fill you in on your sins and watch what happens!)

In the concluding verses of the passage, Paul gives us at least a partial answer to the question about why we keep on sinning if our sin nature is dead. ¹²*Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.* ¹³*No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness.* ¹⁴*For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.* (Rom. 6:12-14)

There is a sense in which our sin nature has been put to death, crucified with Christ. God no longer holds our sin against us, and it no longer has total power over us. But there is another sense in which it continues to manifest itself in the present age. Its complete destruction will come in the future, when Jesus returns and gives us our new bodies and new natures. In the meantime, Paul says that because of what Jesus has done to defeat sin, that it no longer needs to have control or dominion over

us. That happens as we “*present ourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life.*” Through the work of the Spirit, we can make progress against sin in our lives, step by step.

We have a role to play here in resisting sin and presenting ourselves to God. We place ourselves under the authority of the God who raised Jesus from the dead and through the Spirit can empower us to defeat sin in our lives. Not completely, but we can grow in virtue and righteousness. We can choose to starve those impulses that lead us into sin and nourish those impulses that make us more like Jesus.

Bono, front man for the rock group U-2, put it this way, “Your nature is a hard thing to change; it takes time...I have heard of people who have life-changing, miraculous turnarounds, people set free from addiction after a single prayer, relationships saved where both parties “let go and let God.” But it was not like that for me. For all that “I was lost, I am found,” it is probably more accurate to say, “I was really lost. I’m a little less so at the moment.” And then a little less and a little less again. That to me is the spiritual life. The slow reworking and rebooting the computer at regular intervals, reading the small print of the service manual. It has slowly rebuilt me in a better image. It has taken years, though, and it is not over yet.”

And, that’s been my experience as “Dave, who is a sinner.” Living like the man that Christ intends me to be has taken years, and it is not over

yet! Maybe that's your experience, too. But don't give up. Allow God to work bit by bit to put that old nature to death and let your new nature in Christ emerge.