

Romans 6:1-2 Death to sin!

Introduction

Imagine you are about to join a major motorway in a car you are driving. You see the overhead gantry has a message which you glance at for a few seconds. It reads: 'Follow either the British (Motorway) or Germany (Autobahn) Highway Codes'. We know such a scenario could not happen, thankfully, but hypothetically it would be a most disturbing announcement. Which side of the road should I drive? What speed limit should apply? Are just the first questions that might come to mind; to continue and complete a safe journey on the public highway involves a common acceptance of the rules of the road. Without these boundaries travel on the roads would be a frightening experience.

The apostle Paul has set out a clear statement of the Gospel of grace which he enthusiastically has proclaimed for two decades around the Mediterranean countries. Yet not all those who heard what he had to say were happy with it. In fact these people were making a point of selectively using Paul's words to convey a false impression of the Gospel he was preaching. In Romans 3:1-8 the apostle refers to some of these Jewish critics who believed that he was departing from the orthodox presentation of the faith and risking giving an excuse for those people who wished to live unholy or undisciplined lives. In Romans 3:7-8 he wrote: *Someone might argue, 'If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?'* ⁸ *Why not say – as some slanderously claim that we say – 'Let us do evil that good may result'?* *Their condemnation is just!* At the time this charge is dismissed by Paul, but he has not forgotten it and now returns to answer this serious critique of the Gospel of grace. It was an issue that Jesus continually battled with some of the Pharisees of His day and the Protestant Reformers of the Sixteenth Century did the same with Roman Catholic theologians of that era. However, it goes to heart of the faith we profess in each generation. If God has done everything that is required to save us, then why does it matter how we live? If we are saved solely through Jesus' sacrifice and not by His sacrifice **and** our good works – why is it important that I lead a disciplined Christian life? The questions, which might be asked sincerely, are based on a misunderstanding of the holistic nature of the Gospel. On the day I am writing this message the Dunfermline by-election is taking place (24 October 2013). The sitting MSP Bill Walker has been forced to stand down because of alleged impropriety in his relationships with his three wives, charges upheld in recent court proceedings. The irony here is that politicians repeatedly say that your public and private lives are completely separate and that what happens in one sphere doesn't impact on the other. This ethically false statement has been used over recent years to justify the presence of a number of leading politicians in Parliament who might otherwise have been required to vacate their seats. We are whole persons and, therefore, our belief and our behaviour are intrinsically linked together if we are to retain any credibility in the public domain. Therefore, Paul takes time to address this issue in more detail here in Romans 6.

1. An objection to Paul's message (Romans 6:1)

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? ² *By no means!*

(a) **It is a logical objection** We need to be fair to Paul's opponents here and admit that the question can be asked in the light of the Gospel message he has outlined in contrast to the standard teaching of the Pharisees in the synagogues. Their concern had been very much with the holiness of God and the avoidance of the kind of sin that had led to the exile in Babylon in the time of Jeremiah more than five hundred years earlier. Their practice of the Jewish faith had developed a series of safeguards (rules) to ensure that they did not dishonour God.

What had begun in a small way had become a vast collection of rules that required legal experts (the Scribes) to inform the typical Jewish believer how to live out their faith in particular circumstances. Roman Catholic canon law functions in a very similar way. Therefore, the motivation when sincerely held was very reasonable as believers want to know not only how God wants them to live here on earth, but also how to guarantee an eternal future with the Lord beyond this life. This question was asked of the great German preacher Martin Luther at the time of the Reformation and also of George Whitfield, the most gifted Methodist preacher at the time of the Great Awakening in the Eighteenth Century in the USA and the UK.

(b) **It is a credible objection** Evangelical Christians over the years have found it difficult to accept that sometimes people sin because they actually enjoy sinning, even if there is a later moral or physical cost to the participant. A proportion of people do things that they know are wrong because they have been coerced into doing it, for example, by a bully or a gang leader, but most of the time we may know something is not right but something within us prompts us to ignore the law. Paul in Romans 7:5 states: *For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death.* There can be an issue of a wrong type of law, against which it is right to protest, like those over racially segregated schools and other public facilities in the USA in the 1960s, but on other occasions we didn't want to do something until we found out that it was illegal and then something within us inclined us to desire that course of action! Therefore, this is a sensitive area to address and it was reasonable for Paul to clarify his teaching on this matter.

(c) **It is a spiritual objection** Paul's objectors were people of faith. Outsiders who had no interest in the Gospel didn't care or didn't accept the Gospel anyway so they wouldn't have thought to raise this kind of question. For them the Gospel in itself was problematic as Paul admitted in I Corinthians 1:23: *but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.* Holiness to his Jewish critics was achieved by keeping the prescribed list of Pharisaic rules. Some churches too operate with additional lists of rules for conduct, with the best of intentions, in order to safeguard believers from dishonouring God. Paul will explain in due course why and how the issue of holy living is not evaded by promoting a Gospel of grace. But he accepts that this issue is important, because it once was a stumbling-block to him from following Jesus. In an autobiographical fragment in his letter to the Church at Philippi he drew attention to his former mindset as a Pharisee: *If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, **not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.** (Philippians 3:4b-9). These are genuine questions that were raised by people to whom it mattered; therefore, Paul takes the time to give a clear answer.*

2. **The absurdity of the objection to Paul's message** (Romans 6:2a)

² *By no means!*

This is a strong and passionate negation of such a claim. Paul has already used these words in Romans 3:4a in response to another objection to the Gospel message. Paul wants to convey to us as clearly as possible that to understand the Gospel correctly will ensure that we will react with horror at the thought of living in such a way, in the light of all that Jesus has done for us. The questions raised by his opponents are reasonable, but they are based on two main things,

either a misunderstanding of the good news of Jesus or because a person has yet to come to faith in Christ and has been mistakenly thinking that a series of religious duties alone, regularly carried out, will enable us to please God.

(a) **A misunderstanding of the gospel** The people raising this objection with Paul were Jewish. It is probably no accident that in the Gospel written in the first instance for a Jewish audience, Matthew's Gospel, that in the very first chapter this issue is addressed in the words of Gabriel to Joseph in his dream. Matthew 1:21: *She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.* In the message we proclaim the first part to emphasise is that by accepting Jesus died in our place on the cross and took the punishment we deserved for our sins **we are saved from the penalty of sin** (justification – a status before God ‘as just-as-if-I had-never sinned, because we have been credited with what Jesus did as our substitute). We need never fear as a Christian that God will reject us from His family because we have made mistakes or slipped up in some way in our Christian discipleship. We are eternally His as believers because Jesus was good enough; our confidence to come before God in prayer, for example, is in the name of Jesus, because our salvation is uniquely obtained from Him. At the time when we repent of our sins and invite Jesus to become Lord of our lives we are saved. It has been profoundly sad over the years to meet a number of incredibly conscientious Christians who live daily with the fear of blowing it and losing their salvation. Usually they have belonged to churches that teach you can be saved today but lost tomorrow. However, this is incorrect. In Romans 11:29 Paul wrote: *for God's gifts and His call are irrevocable.* In context, the apostle was particularly challenging those Christians who believed that God had finished with the Jewish people in His purposes, but it is equally applicable in this context to the Gospel message. It is also true that through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit **we are saved from the power of sin** (sanctification – the process of transformation within us to make us more like Jesus); we are continually a work-in-progress. However, possessing the moral ability as Christians to make right choices does not mean that we always do! However, we should be encouraged by promises such as I Corinthians 10:13: *No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.* Life will at times be a struggle, but we can be victorious in the battle over the temptations of the evil one; the temptations that arise from ungodly influences in the wider world and from those that arise from our sinful desires. The third thing here to remember is that one day when we leave this life **we will be saved from the presence of sin** (glorification –when we will be like Jesus- see Romans 8:30). However, there is no Christian perfection in this life. John Wesley may have believed it was possible in principle, but the one person he suggested as an example denied this was the case!

(b) **A challenge concerning the Gospel** There are lovely sincere people who think that being a Christian is just about being a ‘good person’ or carrying out a small number of religious duties in association with being a decent neighbour and citizen. In this case these individuals have missed the most important part of the step of turning to the Lord Jesus for salvation. However, we are all painfully aware at times of individuals who have professed faith at some time in the past whose lives today fall far short of the biblical standards for conduct. This is why the Bible contains some searching words to challenge individuals who say the right words but don't live in a manner consistent with a Christian profession. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus uttered these searching words: ¹⁶ *By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thorn-bushes, or figs from thistles?* ¹⁷ *Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.* ¹⁸ *A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.* ¹⁹ *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* ²⁰ *Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them.* ²¹ *Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven* (Matthew 7:16-21). In

II Corinthians 13:5 Paul wrote: *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?* Likewise Peter wrote these words in II Peter 1:10-11: *Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble,¹¹ and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.* ‘Talking the talk’ and ‘walking the walk’ go hand in hand in the New Testament. This is critically important because it is possibly the most significant reason why some people choose not to become followers of Jesus. The vast majority of people who come to faith do so because they saw something of Jesus in a Christian’s life, but the converse can also be true. Jesus’ warning in Luke 17:1-3 is very clear. *Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come.² It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied round their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble.³ So watch yourselves.* There is no excuse for ungodly living. The Bible is clear that a genuine Christian will want to associate with fellow believers for worship on a Sunday on a regular basis; a person who loves the Lord will want to get to know Him better by reading the Bible and praying in their own time; will desire to find avenues for service using the gifts God has given them. This is as natural in spiritual terms as physical growth is in a young child. Its absence is a concern and not what we would naturally expect. Paul passionately resists any notion that the Gospel of grace would lead us to be less committed to desiring Christ-likeness within and a willingness to lead a holy life of committed service. On the contrary our motivation is love for God in response to His amazing love for us, as he puts it in II Corinthians 5:14a *For Christ’s love compels us...*

3. A radical truth for a Christian to grasp (Romans 6:2b)

We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? (Romans 6:2b)

(a)**What it does mean?** Paul will address this subject by answering four questions that he poses in Romans 6 and 7: The first addressed in Romans 6:1-14: ‘Shall we continue to sin that grace may abound? The second in Romans 6:15-7:6 ‘Shall we sin because we are under grace rather than law?’ The third question is covered in Romans 7:7-12: ‘Is the law sin?’; then the fourth question in Romans 7:13-25 ‘Did the good law cause death?’; Paul unpacks the words: *We are those who have died to sin* in the verses that follow. Notice the different ways he emphasises this point in the next few verses, Romans 6:3-8. Death to sin means...; to grasp what Jesus has done for us on the cross is essentially transformative – the fruit of the spirit will be evident to different degrees in the life of a follower of Jesus. We will notice in our way of looking at things; in our motivation for the vocabulary we use in speech and sometimes the range of activities we enjoy might be different to before, depending on our upbringing and previous personal choices. Notice here ***We are those...*** these are words addressed to believers, those who have put their faith and trust in the Lord. Have you taken that step of faith? The big hint here –that those who think they can live as they like while using a bit of religious or even biblical vocabulary are not genuine followers of Jesus. A Christian will be horrified at such a pattern of thinking. If the Lord Jesus loves me this much to die in my place on the cross then the least I can do for Him is to live the best life I can for Him. In Paul’s words: *For to me, to live is Christ...*(Philippians 1:21). Nothing else is even on the radar of his motivation for living. What is your biggest motivation for the way you live? Paul expressed it so well in II Corinthians 5:9-10: ***So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*** In addition, Paul uses the Greek aorist tense here ***who have died to sin***, which refers in this context to something that happens at a moment in time (our conversion)

and ensures that we can never be the same again. What Jesus did changed our status before and relationship with God the Father; how we live is the experience of the journey of faith till that day when we stand before the Lord the moment we leave this life. But we can never be in the position again that we were before conversion. The challenge for us as Christians is how can I make the most of the few years God has entrusted to me on earth before I leave it for eternity?

Paul is assuming the Christian is in ‘union’ with Christ that is that as we sinned in and through Adam, in Christ, the perfect man who bore our sins in Himself as our representative, we are put in a place of right standing with God through Jesus’ sacrifice for us. Or as Paul puts it in II Corinthians 5:14-15: ¹⁴ *For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.* ¹⁵ *And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.* Therefore, what Paul is saying here is that we are dead to the guilt of sin, ie justification. In Christ as a Christian we have a fresh start to live a Spirit-empowered life set free from any guilt or condemnation from our past failures. This may not be a big issue for some people, but other people can be emotionally crippled or feel worthless and condemned by their past failings. If that is your position today, then Paul’s words here are definitely for you – You died to that sin –it has gone forever, the record erased. God has a new beginning for you –no need to live in (self?) condemnation, instead in the confidence and joy of quality life God has planned for you.

(b) **What it doesn’t mean** (i) A Christian has no struggles with sin When we die physically our five senses cease to operate. That is, we are no longer able to taste, touch, hear, see or smell. We are unable to response to any outside stimuli. Some Christians have thought that this is what the apostle Paul is saying of us as Christians –with respect to temptation to sin. It is possible in theory that Paul might have meant this view, after all Romans 6:6a states: *For we know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with...* However, this language is used by Paul both of believers (Romans 6:2, 11) and also of Jesus (Romans 6:10). Jesus was and is perfect. He was never under the power of sin or unable to resist its influence. Therefore, it appears likely another interpretation is required. Another challenge to this view will come in Romans 6:12 where Paul writes: *Do not let sin reign in your mortal body...* if a committed Christian by definition had no battles with sin and temptation then these words of command to us would be pointless. The critique of this interpretation is complemented by our human experience. We can face at times very real temptations to say or do wrong things and sometimes we make the wrong choices for which apologies or something more major has to happen to put things right. God has given to us the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower us to overcome temptation to sin, so the idea popular in some Christian circles that either as an intellectual fact to be accepted or as a result of a special experience from God we have no problem or struggles with sin is wrong. To look in our hearts and minds we know this idealistic view is incorrect. (ii) A Christian should be in this position in this life In some churches that teach particular forms of ‘holiness’ doctrines there is an emphasis on the ‘higher life’ or a level of spirituality which implies that there are Christians of the ‘Class A’ variety and others like the fruit in the supermarket marked as ‘Class B’ based on their spiritual attainments in overcoming their struggles with sin. Paul’s words in Romans 6:2 actually relate to what God has done in Christ for us in His sacrificial death in order that we might lead a God-honouring life. The apostle will speak about his own struggles to think, speak and act in a godly manner in the second half of chapter seven, so he cannot be assuming that his hearers or readers are all more advanced in their faith than the great apostle to the Gentiles! We are called to live holy lives and to become more like Jesus, but the more we grow in our faith the more conscious we become of our imperfections. This insight alone grounds our faith with a recognition of a call to humility so that we don’t look down on other people, seeing ourselves as better than them. But for the grace of God we

don't know how we might have lived our lives and what mistakes we might have made in life choices.

Paul, having outlined the wonderful good news of the benefits of what Jesus has done for us on the cross in Romans 5 has now moved on to address concerns about the impact of this glorious Gospel on the daily life of the Christian. He does not apologise for proclaiming a Gospel of grace, but because some Jewish (and Gentile?) believers want to live under some form of rules and regulations instead of the way of Jesus he has to correct their misunderstandings of what it means to lead a God-honouring life. In Romans chapters six to seven he will unpack this subject to encourage us in our faith journey for our good and for the glory of God, Amen.