

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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DEAD AND ALIVE

Romans 6:1-14

I find myself in an uncomfortable place this morning. Not that there is anything unusual about my discomfort; there is not. I feel it every time I stand before you to preach God's Word. At least I should. Sometimes, like today, I feel it more acutely. This is such a rich passage of Scripture, containing truths from God that can transform your relationship with God and the whole of your life. My discomfort comes from the fear I have that my exposition or explanation of God's Word will leave much to be desired, that I will fail to communicate adequately what God wants me to communicate to enable you to hear what God wants you to hear and apply to your lives.

I should (and do) realize that the success of God's Word – and, therefore, the success of this message – does not depend ultimately on me as the messenger. It does not depend on my eloquence or biblical scholarship or my ability to make the Bible “come alive.” The Bible *is* alive, because God has breathed life into it through the Holy Spirit. The Bible is powerful, because it is powered by God Himself.

And yet, I am aware of the sacred responsibility that is mine to faithfully and accurately proclaim and explain the message of God's Word to you. And I am acutely aware, at certain times (like today) more than others, of my inadequacy to proclaim to you “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Which is why I must consciously depend on the Holy Spirit to speak to me and through me, and to open our eyes and minds and hearts to the wonderful, life-changing, eternal truths in His Word.

As we seek to uncover and understand more of God's Word and the riches of the gospel, I invite you to turn with me to Romans 6:1-14 as we continue our “Journey on the Romans Road.” Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's Holy Word.

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In the days of the wild, wild, west, outlaws like Jesse James and Billy the Kid were often featured on “WANTED” posters as a way of alerting the public to be on the lookout for these fugitives from justice. It was not unusual for these “WANTED” posters to include the words “DEAD OR ALIVE.” In the early days of television, from 1958 to 1961, Steve McQueen even starred as a bounty hunter in the old west in a TV show entitled “WANTED: DEAD OR ALIVE.”

The theme of this passage in Romans 6, it seems to me, is not “DEAD *OR* ALIVE” but “DEAD *AND* ALIVE.” Paul is saying that as Christian believers, we are dead *and* alive at the same time. Through the power of the gospel, through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord, we are *dead to sin* and *alive to God*. Let's think about that as we walk through these verses together.

Paul begins with a question no doubt raised by someone who took exception to the gospel of grace he championed. Paul has just said, at the end of Romans 5, that “where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death (through Adam), so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (5:20-21).

If this is true, the objector asks, does it mean that sinning is actually good, because the more we sin, the more we experience God’s grace (6:1)? Should we keep on sinning so that God can keep on forgiving? In other words, does Paul’s gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone actually encourage or promote sin? Does it encourage believers to indulge in a lifestyle of sin, knowing we have been justified by grace and whatever sins we commit – past, present, and future – are all forgiven? Are we free to continue in sin so that grace may abound more and more to us?

The truth is that there is no need for us to sin so that grace may abound. We *are* sinners – redeemed and forgiven sinners in Christ – and we need only confess our sins for His grace to abound to us.

Paul responds to the objection raised in verse 1 with a definitive and pointed answer. He says: *Me genoito* (6:2), A Greek expression that is translated in a variety of ways. It essentially means the opposite of the expression I use at the close of just about every sermon I preach, which is: “Lord, let it be so.” *Me genoito* means: “May it never be so.” Other translations or paraphrases include: “God forbid!” “By no means!” “Perish the thought!” “Preposterous!” Or a simple: “No way!” Paul totally, unequivocally, and vehemently rejects the notion that God’s grace gives any of us a ticket, a free pass, or a license to sin in any way we please. Not on your life!

As a younger man, a theology professor (D. A. Carson) and a young engineer from West Africa used to meet together to help each other improve their fluency in German. The engineer’s wife was in medical school in London. He needed fluency in German to pursue doctoral studies in engineering in Germany. The professor soon discovered that his young friend disappeared into the red-light district once or twice a week. Eventually, the professor felt he knew him well enough to ask what he would do if he discovered that his wife was doing the same thing or something similar in London.

“Oh,” he said, “I’d kill her.”

“That’s a bit of a double standard, isn’t it?” the professor asked.

“You don’t understand,” said the young man. “Where I come from, the husband has the right to sleep with many women, but if a wife is unfaithful to her husband she must be killed.”

“But you told me you were raised in a mission school. You know that the God of the Bible does not have double standards like that.”

The young man smiled and said: “Ah, God is good. He is bound to forgive. That’s His job.”

He was free, he thought, to sin to his heart's content, because God in His grace was bound to forgive him, regardless of what or how many sins he committed.

That is the misunderstanding of the gospel that Paul finds it necessary to address here.

Paul answers the objector's question with a statement and a question of his own in verse 2, and then explains how baptism is an analogy or metaphor for salvation through our identification with Jesus in His death, burial, and resurrection from the dead to new life (6:3-6).

Look at the statement he makes and the question he asks in verse 2: "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" Did you know that you have died to sin? If we're honest, I doubt that any of us can say it feels like we are *dead to sin*. In some form or another, doesn't sin feel very much alive to you in your life? What in the world does Paul mean?

I remember a cartoon showing a Bible study group in which one person makes the comment: "Well, I haven't actually *died* to sin, but I did feel kind of faint once."

What is Paul getting at when he says we have "died to sin?"

I've found John Stott's explanation of this passage (Stott, *The Message of Romans*) to be immensely helpful. He points out that it is not the literal impossibility of sin in the lives of Christians that Paul is declaring, but the total, moral incongruity of it. Living a life of sin when we have died to sin through our identification with the Lord Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection is an anomaly. It is not meant to be. It contradicts our profession of faith as followers of the Lord Jesus.

So, what does it mean to have "died to sin?" There is a popular misunderstanding of what it means, which goes something like this: When we die, our five senses will cease to operate. We will no longer be able to touch, taste, see, smell, or hear. We will lose all ability to feel or to respond to external stimuli. Just so, some believe, to die to sin means to become insensitive to it. For example, if you come across a dog or cat lying by the side of the road, you can't tell from a distance if it is alive or dead. But touch it with your foot, and you will know right away. If it is alive, there will be an immediate reaction. It will jump up and run off, unless it is injured. But if it is dead, there will be no response at all. Just so, according to this view, we are as unresponsive to temptation as a corpse is to physical stimuli. And the reason for this, we are assured from verse 6, is that our old nature was in some way crucified with Christ. For He bore not only our guilt but our "flesh," our fallen nature. It was nailed to the cross and killed, no matter how much evidence we may have to the contrary (Stott, 169).

What is wrong with this view? At least two things. First, it is incompatible with the exhortations Paul gives in verses 12 and 13 and many other places in the New Testament. If we have in fact died to our fallen, sinful nature so that we are no longer responsive to temptation, no longer tempted by temptations of any kind, it would not be necessary for Paul to urge us as he does to "not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires"

(6:12) or to “not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness” (6:13). If we were unresponsive to temptation and sin, it would be a done deal, wouldn’t it?

The second problem with this view is that it is incompatible with Christian experience. It is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer. It simply is not true. It just doesn’t match up to my experience or your experience or the experience of any Christian. We are not dead to sin in the sense of being totally unresponsive to it. It may be true that you no longer wrestle with a particular temptation that was a huge struggle for you at one time in your life. In that sense, you may be dead to a particular sin, or it may be dead to you. This does not mean that you are immune from every kind of temptation and sin known to humankind. It just isn’t so! Our fallen, sinful nature is still alive and kicking. Because it is, Paul urges us not to obey its evil desires (6:12), and we are given the Holy Spirit to enable us to subdue and overcome them (Stott, 170, 171).

So, what does it mean to say that we have “died to sin” (6:2), and to consider ourselves “dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11)? What Paul means is that by our identification with Jesus in His death and resurrection – an identification that is pictured powerfully in the act of baptism by immersion – we are emancipated, we are liberated, we are set free from the despotic, dictatorial reign of sin in our lives in order to live under the sovereign and gracious rule of Jesus Christ, who suffered, died, and rose again from the dead for us.

Paul is not saying that the act of baptism, whether by immersion, sprinkling, or pouring, saves anyone. We are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, not by the administration of baptism in any of its forms.

What Paul is saying is that baptism, especially the baptism of a professing believer in Christ, signifies the believer’s union with the Savior in His crucifixion and resurrection from the dead, including His victory over the power of sin in our lives. Understood in this way, baptism represents both a funeral (for our old, sin-dominated self) and a resurrection to new life in the power of the risen Lord. Which seems like an appropriate thought on the second Sunday after Easter, or any Sunday, for that matter. We will have to talk more about the meaning, significance, and proper administration of baptism another time.

Here is how John Stott summarizes Paul’s teaching in this passage: “For us,” he says, “it is like this. We deserved to die for our sins. And in fact we did die, though not in our own person, but in the person of Jesus Christ our substitute, who died in our place, and with whom we have been united by faith and baptism. And by union with (Him) we have (been raised) again. So the old life of sin is finished, because we died to it, and the new life of justified sinners has begun. Our death and resurrection with Christ render it inconceivable that we should go back. It is in this sense that our sinful self has been deprived of power and we have been set free” (Stott, 177).

I know that God, in His mercy and grace, enables some people to make a clean, decisive, once-for-all-time break with whatever may be their besetting sins. This, I imagine, has been the case for some of us. Praise God for it! Praise God for the freedom from sin and its enslaving power that you have experienced. All praise to Him!

But I also know that for some of us, perhaps many of us, it is a constant, daily struggle to resist some strong, relentless temptation in your life. It is an ongoing battle to say No to sin and Yes to God. And the struggle, the battle, may continue until the day you die.

What can you do, if that is the case for you? You can do what Paul counseled the Romans to do. You can live into the truth of your identification with Jesus in His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead by counting yourself dead to sin but alive to God in and through Jesus. You can resolve daily with the help of the Holy Spirit to not let sin reign in your body. You can resolve daily with the help of the Holy Spirit to not obey any evil desires. You can resolve daily with the help of the Holy Spirit to not offer the parts of your body – whether eyes or ears or mouth or mind or hands or genitals – to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather to offer the parts of your body to Him as instruments of righteousness (6:11-13). Live into the truth of who you are as a new creature in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Don't try to do it in your own power. It doesn't work. And don't give up. Trust that God is faithful and able.

When you sin, as you will, because we all do this side of heaven – as often as you sin – turn quickly to the Lord with a penitent heart. Turn to Him and receive His mercy and grace. His mercies are always new. His grace is sufficient. It is always in ample supply. No matter how many times you come.

Jesus wants you not dead or alive but dead *and* alive. *Dead to sin and alive to God in Him.* Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.