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Sermon Series: *We are for...*, No. 2

New Beginnings

October 30, 2022

Romans 6:1-14 (NIV)

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – ⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

¹¹ In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. ¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. ¹³ Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

We're in the book of Romans today, the sixth chapter. Turn there with me, would you? Romans, Chapter 6.

In introducing this series last week, I mentioned how Christians, at times, have been known more for what we're *against* than anything else.

As the old saying goes, "They don't drink, they don't smoke, they don't chew, and they don't go with those who do."

Now, let me say, it is perfectly fine and good to be *against* certain things.

But it's equally important that people understand, not only *why* Christians stand against those things, but even more, what Christians actually stand *for*.

What is positive, what is good, and what is life-giving about following Jesus? The world around us needs to know that.

Along those lines, I can't help but think about the upcoming elections and what we see on some candidates' advertisements. I don't just want to know what a candidate is *against*. I want to know what a candidate is *for*.

In a similar way, the unsaved world that looks upon the Church needs to know what Christ-followers are *for*.

Now, they may not agree with us in places, but at least they'll have the whole story. They'll have the positive and not just the negative.

Toward that end, we said last Sunday that followers of Jesus are *for* both the *concept* and the *reality* of *truth*. Absolute truth, to be specific.

Christians believe that truth exists and that it can be known, which is, admittedly, unlike much thinking in the world around us today.

The world's way of thinking is that most things are relative.

That is not the Christian position. Christians are for truth, which means, of course, that some things are inherently right and others are inherently wrong.

Christ-followers are *for* the existence of truth.

And our primary, authoritative source for truth is God's revelation of Himself, which is, to us, this book (the Bible), and Jesus, of whom it speaks.

This is how we know who God is, who Jesus is, what salvation is, and what constitutes good and right.

In fact, everything we base our lives on – everything else that we say we are *for* – in one way or another rises out of this book, which we receive as God's revealed word about Himself.

That's why last week we saw the Psalmist, in Psalm 119, write so artfully and lengthily and exaltingly of God's law – of God's word. The Psalmist understood it to be, as we understand it to be, God's revelation of truth to a lost world.

The body of Christ sees this as God's "users' guide" to how life works, and we embrace it just as the Psalmist did: with happiness and with joy and, frankly, with *relief*. We see God's self-revelation as a gift: a foundational baseline graciously offered to a lost and wandering world.

So, first and foremost, Christians are *for truth*.

But what else are Christ-followers for?

Today, we are for – *new beginnings*.

Christians are for the *possibility* and the *reality* that a person can begin again and have a truly clean slate – a fresh start – which is really what the Apostle Paul is writing to the Romans about here in Romans 6.

Now, some have suggested that the main point of this passage is a definition, of sorts, of baptism.

But you know, in reality, baptism is just the *illustration* or the *vehicle*, you might say, that Paul uses to speak about the extent of the *new beginning* that Christ-followers experience. Specifically, Paul uses baptism to illustrate how *extreme and how radical is the change* that following Jesus makes in a person's life.

We see here in verse 1 that Paul begins with a question: *“Should we continue in sin in order that God might give us more and more grace?”*

Now, to us, just on its own, that sounds like a strange suggestion. But it does make sense if you understand the context.

Paul has just finished something of a comparison, you might say, between Adam and Jesus, and in that comparison he brings up how both relate with the concepts of sin, grace and law.

Now, he goes on to explain those concepts a little more, especially for his listeners in the church at Rome. They were primarily Jews who, like most first century Jewish converts, were still struggling with the idea that salvation comes through the grace of God and not by rigidly following of the Mosaic Law.

You can tell that some in Rome were having trouble with this idea, especially after Paul, in exalting the power of God and His grace, says what he does in Chapter 5, verse 20: *“As people sinned more and more, God’s wonderful grace became more and more abundant.”*

What he’s saying there is that God’s grace can overcome any measure of sin.

But, you see, the critic, or maybe even the serious questioner (using a logic-heavy approach) might suggest something like this:

“So, Paul, you’re saying that God’s grace is great enough to forgive every sin.”

And Paul would respond, “Yes, that’s right.”

“So, you’re saying God’s grace is the greatest thing in the world.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“Well then, if that’s the case, we should keep on sinning, since the more we sin, the more grace we’ll enjoy.” You see how that goes?

But why not go even further and say that sin is good or maybe even excellent, since it’s sin that gives God’s grace the opportunity to operate? If sin *produces* grace, and grace is the *greatest thing* in the world, then it must actually be *good to sin*.”

Now, to our ears, as to the Apostle Paul’s ears, that sounds awful. At least it should.

But, you know, that very suggestion has appeared over and over again through church history.

You get the hint of it in Paul’s responses to many of the churches to which he writes: there was this definite thought that “We don’t have to concern ourselves too much with sin, since God will forgive it anyway.”

The whole letter of Jude is more or less a response to the problems caused by certain people in the church who said that God’s forgiveness allows Christ-followers to live immoral lives.

Then, there is nineteenth century Russian monk Gregory Rasputin, who preached that salvation comes through repeated experiences of sin and repentance,

and since those who sin more require more repentance, those believers who continue to sin with abandon must enjoy more of God’s grace than ordinary sinners.

Now, if you’re into pure logic, that might sound intriguing.

But don’t be fooled. It’s heresy with a capital “H,” which is obvious by Paul’s immediate reaction there in verse 2—a reaction of absolute horror.

mè génoito.

That’s the Greek for what he says, which is one of the most emphatic phrases in the New Testament. Of the 15 times it’s used, 14 are by Paul, and 10 of them in this letter.¹

A literal word-for-word translation would be, *“not may it be!”* and although that conveys the meaning, it does not convey the rhetorical power that the Greek intends—which is why our Bibles translate this as something like, “No way! Absolutely not! Heaven forbid!”

That’s Paul’s emotional response to such a ridiculous notion.

But then, once that’s out, he goes on with logic and reason to say...probably not what we’d expect.

Given what we know of Paul, we might expect him to jump into a little lecture here on the awfulness of sin, or on the danger of presuming upon God’s grace and goodness.

But he doesn’t. He actually answers the question with a question. There in verse 2, he asks, *“We who died to sin—how then shall we yet live in it?”* That’s the literal translation.

Your Bible says something close to that, but I like the even freer expression, *“Can people who are dead to sin go on sinning?”*

Of course, the inference is obvious. Paul is really asking, “Hey, don’t you *know* what happened to you when you received Christ? Don’t you *realize* what happened to you when you were baptized into Jesus’ name? *You must not*, or you would *never* suggest such an appalling thought as the ‘goodness’ of sin.”

Now, it’s important that we, who are somewhat culturally desensitized to baptism, remember that in Paul’s day, baptism was a *very radical* thing to do.

In Paul’s day, Christianity, of course, was new; it was not the prevailing belief of the culture, as it still is here today. So back then, whether you were coming from Judaism or from some Roman or Greek religion or from abject godlessness, to be *baptized* was a decision that, Barclay writes, “cut your life in two.”

Very typically it meant that one was torn from his roots—torn from her family—and now would begin life all over again.

And you see just that sort of radical change in the symbolism of baptism itself.

¹ Luke 20:16; Romans 3:4; 3:6; 3:31; 6:2; 6:15; 7:7; 7:13; 9:14; 11:1; 11:11; I Corinthians 6:15; Galatians 2:17; 3:21; 6:14.

Then, of course, baptism was typically done by immersion. So, when a person entered the water and the water closed over their head, it was like being buried in a grave. And when they emerged from the water, it was like rising from the grave. So, baptism was and still is, symbolically, like dying and rising again.

Dying to one sort of life and then rising to another sort of life.

Baptism was dying to the old life of sin and rising to the new life of grace.

The Jews, especially, understood this, which is very likely why Paul uses this illustration.

You see, when a person entered the Jewish religion it involved three things: sacrifice, circumcision and a bath, or baptism, or what's known as *Tevila*.

In doing that, the person cut their nails and hair, undressed completely and entered the water, and every part of the body had to touch the water. And there in the water, confession was made, and certain pronouncements were made upon them.

And the effect of this bath was complete regeneration. The person was understood to have become new, to the point that children born after conversion were considered Jewish first-born, even if children existed previously.

The point is that in the conversion to Judaism, the person was not just changed. The person was made completely new.

And so, how much more would this be true, you see, in Christianity!

To choose to follow Jesus, to become one of His, and to be baptized into His name, brings far more than just some partial change or alteration or improvement here or there.

To Paul, it is utter transformation: an entirely new beginning, which is actually the very meaning of repentance. *Metanoia*, the Greek word for repentance, means a change of mind, thought, or thinking so powerful that it changes one's very way of life.

Before conversion, the person was walking in this direction [turn, gesture left].

To become a Christ-follower, though, means that person, stops, turns around, and walks in a completely different direction [turn, gesture right].

That's what baptism indicates has happened in a believer, you see?

The change is total: from death to life.

From stained to clean.

From sin to purity.

To follow Jesus brings a truly new beginning.

So, what does all this mean?

Well, theologically, in relation to what Paul is speaking of here and in answer to his initial question, it means that we cannot possibly willfully continue in sin and experience more and more grace, because to be saved, by definition, is to be saved from sinning.

And—that theological reality of being in Jesus brings, then, a moral imperative.

We must die to sin in order to be alive to Christ, so we are either dead *to* sin or dead *in* sin. We cannot possibly be both. That's why this idea of sinning more so that we receive more grace is impossible, heretical nonsense.

If we are dead to sin, if in Jesus we have been brought from death to life, then we must choose not to sin.

That's why Paul says there in verse 12, if you're in Christ, "***Do not let sin reign in your mortal body—do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness. Instead, offer every part of yourselves to God as an instrument of righteousness.***"

Theologically, we can't be in Jesus and willfully choose to keep on sinning.

But there is also a practical reality of the new beginning that comes from receiving and being in Jesus, and that is this: *we are free*.

We are no longer bound to sin.

You see, Paul goes even further in his explanation there of the magnitude of this change that being in Jesus brings.

In verse 6, he writes that this change, this new beginning, is so complete that "***the body ruled by sin is done away with—such that we should no longer be slaves to sin.***"

You see, before we came to Christ, we had no choice. We were sinners. We sinned. We lived in sin.

But now in Christ, for the first time ever, we have a choice regarding engaging in sin.

This is precisely why, by the way, there are all sorts of moral exhortations and commands in the New Testament. In Christ, we have the capacity to obey.

Which means that if we rebel, it is by our choice. If we're in Jesus, we can now hear and obey commands not to sin. And when we hear those admonitions, we should be glad because that reminds us that we have been transformed—utterly. In Christ, we are now a part of, even, what Peter calls, "a new race."²

Which actually gets back to the whole Jesus and Adam thing we see at the end of Chapter Five here.

You see, Adam *introduced* sin; but Jesus, the second or "last" Adam, as Paul says, *overcame* it.

Jesus has undone what Adam did.

So, once we're in Jesus, just as baptism symbolizes, we are dead to the enslaving power of sin. We are no longer under its control. We are now part of the race of Christ, and not the race of Adam.

In Jesus, we are of a different race. That's how big the new beginning in Jesus is.

What all this means is that, as we are in Christ, though we may have to suffer earthly consequences for past sins, we will not suffer eternal consequences. ***And we now have the capacity to make choices and live lives that please God.***

That's why Christians want other people to become Christ-followers too: we are for freedom!

² Peter 2:9

We want people to be free, not just to *know of* God and not even just to *know* God, but to actually live in ways that *please God*, that *bring God glory*, and that *bring goodness and health to themselves* and to the *world*.

We who follow Jesus: we are *for* fresh starts, clean slates, turned corners, erased sins, real choices, forgiven mistakes, freed captives, loosed chains, mercy and grace – new beginnings of the most profound kind. And, all of that is *possible*. All of that is *found in Jesus*.

That's why we're Christians, and that's why we want others to be Christians, too: Jesus offers a new beginning, a new life, a new power, a new race.

You know, in our world that is so consumed with the struggles of sin especially involving race you see, those who follow Jesus offer a completely different perspective: a new beginning in a new race.

No longer the race into which we were born.

No longer the race of Adam and sin and death, but instead the race of Jesus – the race of life.

To be born again. You can't get much more of a new beginning than that, and that's what Christ followers are for.

Listen, do you need a new beginning today?

Do you think you're trapped in this or that sin – this or that behavior?

Paul would say, "*mè génoito*."

No way!

A new beginning is possible for you – in Jesus.

If you have never received Him, you can today. Would you today?

If you have received Jesus, would you see and appreciate and maybe give thanks in a deeper way for the new beginning that you've been given? And will you take it seriously, as you consider the way you think about sin and life and death and race and freedom?

Prayer:

Holy Spirit, would You come and teach us what You would have us to know, what makes an impact on us specifically about this whole idea of what a new beginning really means. Lord, would You show us who we are in light of this, in light of what Paul says, and in light of who we are in Christ.

If there are any here today who have not received Jesus and who feel trapped and want a new start and a new beginning, would You draw them to Yourself and would You convince them of the truth of what Your word says? In Your name we pray. Amen.

Closing Song: *Lord, Thy Church on Earth is Seeking*

Benediction: May the world find, in us, in the body of Christ, the beauty of the possibility of a new start – a truly new beginning – in Jesus. And may they find their way to Him through us as we speak of Him and live for Him. Thanks for coming to worship this morning. May the Lord bless you!