

“Count Yourselves Dead to Sin, But Alive to God”

Sermons on Romans # 13

Texts: Romans 6:1-14; Ezekiel 11:16-21

Paul has made the point as clearly as he can: God justifies the wicked through faith in Jesus Christ. The ground (basis) of our justification is not our own works, but the merits of Jesus Christ—including his death for our sins, his one act of obedience through which the many are made (declared) righteous—received through faith alone. Therefore, we are not in any sense justified because of God’s work in us. Rather, we are justified because of God’s work for us. But in Romans 6:1-8:39, Paul will now make the point that all those justified will also be sanctified. Indeed, the apostle cannot conceive of someone who is freely and instantaneously justified by the merits of Christ who is not also undergoing the process of sanctification.

As we have seen in previous sermons, the literary hinge between Paul’s discussion of justification and sanctification is Romans chapter 5, especially verses 12-21. In the last ten verses of Romans 5 Paul sets out the panorama of redemptive history in very broad terms while also identifying the two main figures in the administration of the covenants, Adam and Jesus. Setting these two figures in contrast to one another, Adam is both the biological and the federal head of the human race. Under the terms of the covenant of works—“do this and you shall live”—Adam is the federal representative of the entire human race. Because of Adam’s one act of disobedience, Paul says, the entire human race is rendered guilty and comes under the curse of sin, which is death. In Adam we all sin. In Adam, we all die.

But Jesus Christ, the second Adam, is the head of the covenant of grace. Through his act of obedience (which stands in marked contrast to Adam’s act of disobedience), all those whom Jesus represents are regarded as righteous. Through the disobedience of the one man (Adam) the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of Jesus Christ, the many were made righteous. As in Adam we were made sinners and subject to death, so in Christ we are reckoned as righteous, now set free from the tyranny of sin and death, so that in Christ we might live. As Paul puts it, where sin abounds, grace super-abounds.

The analogy between Adam and Christ, federal or representative heads of the covenant of works and grace respectively, becomes the basis for understanding much of Paul’s discussion of sanctification. Throughout Romans 6-8, all those in Adam, are said to be under the dominion of sin, the law and death. But all those in Christ are said to be set from the dominion of sin and the law, and now live with Christ. The analogy Paul sets out in Romans 5 between what Adam’s fall has brought about and what Christ’s obedience undoes, becomes the key to understanding what follows when Paul discusses sanctification. Doug Moo puts this in eschatological terms, speaking of a transfer of realms—from Adam to Christ.¹ This eschatological focus also fits within the structure of so-called federal theology. Under the realm (dominion) of Adam we are condemned, because Adam is our representative under the covenant of works. We are justified when we are moved (transferred) by God’s grace from the realm (dominion) of Adam to the realm (dominion) of Christ under the covenant of grace.

In light of this transfer of realms, Anders Nygren puts it, “the part of Romans with which we are now dealing discusses how he who by faith is righteous *shall live*. He who believes in Christ has, through

¹ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 350-352.

him, entered into the new age and now lives life `in Christ.’ But what exactly does that mean?”² Paul will now tell us.

We can imagine the pastoral questions which would immediately arise in the Roman church, given Paul’s stress on a gracious and free justification based upon the merits of Christ, received by faith alone. The issue is well framed by Leon Morris, “[Paul’s] teaching that salvation is a gift from God, that it is the result of Christ’s death and not our own achievement, that we obtain it by faith and not by any effort of our own, marked a revolution. And it raised all sorts of questions that could never surface while it was held that law in some form was the gateway to godliness.”³ Therefore, if we are not justified through personal obedience to the law, what role, then, does obedience to the law play now that we are justified?

Indeed, once Paul has set out the answer to the question, “How am I saved”—in the sense of being delivered from God’s eschatological wrath to come—and once he has answered that question by affirming justification by an imputed righteousness received through faith alone, the apostle must now turn to the necessarily related question. “Now that I am saved *by* the merits of Christ, how am I to live *in* Christ?” Here, the focus clearly shifts from justification [a once for all declarative act] to sanctification [both a declarative act and a life-long process], and Paul will set out the way in which these two things are necessarily related when he commands us to reckon ourselves dead to sin but alive to God.

It is none other than John Calvin who reminds us that “throughout this chapter the apostle maintains that those who imagine that Christ bestows free justification upon us without imparting newness of life shamefully rend Christ asunder.” Calvin explicitly states, “we cannot receive righteousness in Christ without at the same time laying hold on sanctification.”⁴ And this is exactly what we see set forth in the following section of Paul’s epistle. For all of those who are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, are also said to be in the process of being sanctified by grace alone, through faith alone through the work of the Holy Spirit alone. But let us be perfectly clear—The Bible knows nothing of a justified sinner who is not also in the life-long process of being sanctified.

In this section of the epistle which runs from 6:1-8:39, Paul begins by asking several rhetorical questions, likely illustrative of the actual difficulties then found in the Roman church; “shall we sin that grace may abound?” and “shall we sin because we are under grace?” Paul’s answer to these questions is a resounding “no way!” To answer these questions, Paul will order his thinking as follows.

First, in Romans 6:1-11, Paul will deal with the abuse of grace [antinomianism] and set forth the distinction between the indicative [what we are in Christ] and the imperative [what we do in Christ]. Paul will set out his doctrine of baptism, union with Christ, and his notion that justified sinners are now dead to sin—both its guilt and its power. All of these are of great significance in understanding Paul’s doctrine of the Christian life.

Then in Romans 6:12-23 Paul moves on to list a series of imperatives to justified sinners, in effect, defining and setting out in part what the Heidelberg Catechism calls the rule of gratitude—that is, the

² Nygren, Commentary on Romans, p. 230.

³ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 243.

⁴ Calvin, The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians, p. 121.

role of the law in the life of a Christian. This is the so-called third use of the law. Justified sinners are no longer slaves to the law but are now slaves to righteousness, and they are to live like it! Christians are to live out their justification by no longer offering their bodies as instruments of sin.

Third, in Romans 7:1-6, Paul goes on to use an illustration from marriage to show how it is that we are dead to the law, no longer controlled by the sinful nature, and now free to serve in the new way of the Spirit. It is here, that Paul first introduces the Holy Spirit as the primary agent of our sanctification.

Fourth, in Romans 7:7-12, Paul must deal with the question of why it is that while the law is holy, righteous and good, nevertheless the law inevitably serves to expose our sin and incite it to greater levels! The answer is that while the commandment is holy, righteous and good, we are sinful. Therefore, the commandments of God actually bring death. Why is this? Paul will locate the problem in the sinful nature (flesh) and not in the law.

Fifth, Paul moves on to address the struggle with sin, which characterizes the normal Christian life, in Romans 7:13-25—perhaps the most disputed passage in the whole of the New Testament. Why is it that while we want to obey the law of God, we only end up sinning, and why is it that law, which is good, leads only to our death? Paul at last laments, “who will deliver us from this body of death?”

Sixth, in Romans 8, Paul turns to the anti-thesis between the flesh and the Spirit in verses 1-11. The non-Christian walks only in the flesh, while the Christian now lives life in the Spirit—indeed life in the Spirit is the characteristic of the Christian life. There are no imperatives to be found anywhere in this whole chapter—only indicatives. In verses 12-17, Paul speaks of the fact that the justified sinner is not only being sanctified, but is also adopted into the family of God, and now enjoys an intimate relationship with God. In verses 18-27, Paul reminds us that the Holy Spirit intercedes for believers when they pray, and that God himself will liberate the creation from decay, since it is human sinfulness which subjected it to decay in the first place. Then, in verses 28-30, Paul speaks of God’s sovereign purpose—those foreknown, are also predestined, those predestined are also called, those called are also justified, and those justified are also glorified. Finally, this wonderful chapter culminates in what is known as the “triumph song” (verses 31-38) in which the struggling sinner of Romans 7, will nevertheless enjoy complete victory in Christ, and has God’s promise that despite the struggle with sin, the justified sinner is more than a conqueror in Christ. Thus grace always triumphs over sin!

With the big picture before us, let us turn to our text in Romans 6:1-14.

With the big picture before us, let us turn to our text in Romans 6:1-14. The first verse of Romans 6 indicates that what follows grows out of the fact that in Adam we all die, while in Christ we are made alive. Since this is the case, the question arises “*what shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?*”⁵ The question arises because of the fact that we are reckoned righteous by Christ’s one act of obedience, some were no doubt asking “what place does our own obedience play since we are justified by the righteous of another?” And there is every

⁵ The construction of the sentence implies the introduction of a false inference. See Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.297. As Cranfield goes on to point out, “that’s Paul’s concern here is to counter the danger of antinomianism in the church, to bring home to any of its members who might be unaware of it or inclined to forget the inseparability of justification and sanctification, rather than to rebut an objection to his teaching from the side of Jewish or Christian legalists (to the effect that it was likely to encourage licence), is surely clear” (p. 297, n.1).

likelihood that some in the Roman church had reached the erroneous and dangerous conclusion that since sin abounds and grace superabounds, there was no need for a justified sinner to cease sinful activity since that sinful activity results in superabounding grace!

As we read in verse 2, Paul's answer to such thinking is crystal clear: "*By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?*" The emphatic *μη γένοιτο* means something like, "no way!" Not a chance! The reason why we cannot go on sinning is made plain. We died to sin. The verb is in the aorist tense (a completed act) meaning that for Paul, when we were moved from the federal headship of Adam to that of Jesus Christ (the transfer of realms), we died to sin. When we came to faith in Jesus Christ, something definitive happened. We died to sin and then were raised to life.

Throughout this section of Romans, Paul will speak of this dying and rising with Christ in four distinct ways. The first way is when Christ died on the cross and was then raised from the dead. We died with Christ and were raised with him from the dead. In the next verse, Paul will speak of this dying and rising in connection to baptism. He will also speak of this dying and rising as an imperative (command) for all Christians. We are to die to sin and rise to newness of life on a daily basis. Finally, Paul will speak of this in an eschatological sense. Even though we die because of sin, we will be bodily raised with Christ on the last day.⁶ This means that the pattern of Christ's life, death followed by his resurrection is the pattern for our sanctification. In Christ we die to sin. In Christ we rise to newness of life!

In verse 3, Paul now introduces the subject of baptism: "*Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?*" Although the introduction of a discussion of baptism may come as a surprise, if we think about, we really should not be surprised. Since Paul can say to members of congregation he's never visited "*don't you know*" that baptism into Christ entails being baptized into his death, these words are likely part of the baptismal formula used throughout the apostolic churches.⁷ These are words the Romans have already heard in connection to their own baptisms and that of their children, and Paul now invokes them to remind the Romans of the fact that when they were baptized, these words were pronounced over them. To be baptized into Christ is to be baptized into his death. The imagery is clear—Christians are people who have already died to the old way of life, which is why we cannot continue to live in sin.⁸

But to be baptized is to be baptized "into Christ" and into his death. Baptism unites us to Christ as the sign and seal of that union we have with Christ through faith. Baptism "into Christ" is a characteristic way for Paul to speak. In Galatians 3:27, Paul says: "*for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*" In 1 Corinthians 12:13 we read: "*For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.*" The point here is that baptism unites us to Christ in his death. Having been transferred through faith from the dominion of Adam to the dominion of Christ, we died to sin. The sign and seal of that death to sin, is our baptism, "into Christ." Paul's words recall to mind the words of our Lord himself recorded in Mark 10:38 when he speaks of his own coming death as a baptism: "*Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?*"

⁶ Cranfield, *Commentary on Romans*, I.299-300.

⁷ Cranfield, *Commentary on Romans*, I.300.

⁸ Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 247.

That this is the case is made plain in verse 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.*” Paul’s point is that not only did we die with Christ we were buried with him. As Morris puts it, in baptism we are interred with Christ in the tomb. This point has made it’s way into the Creed, because it emphasizes the finality of Christ’s death. As Jesus truly died and was buried, so too are we, when we are baptized into Christ.⁹ But Christ’s death and burial was not the end! Jesus Christ rose again from the dead! As his death was followed by the glorious triumph of his resurrection, so too our union with Christ does not end with our death. As we are buried with Christ, so too, we are raised with him.

Paul says that Christ’s resurrection was *through the glory of the Father*, which is mostly likely a reference to God ushering in a new age of salvation once Christ conquers death and overturns the curse brought upon us by Adam. When God in his great power raised Jesus from the dead, the new creation begins. Paul makes this very point quite explicitly in 2 Corinthians 5:17-6:2, when he tells us that the new creation constitutes the day of salvation. Therefore, when Jesus was raised from the dead by the father, the dominion of death was destroyed. And because Christ has destroyed the dominion of death when we died and were buried with him, so too, we rise to newness of life, the very point made by Paul in verse 5: “*If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.*” To be in Christ, is to be united to him in his death **and** resurrection. In Adam we are enslaved by sin and death. In Christ we are set from sin and its consequences. In Christ we have died. In Christ we live!

In verses 6-7, Paul fleshes this same point out a bit more thoroughly. “*For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.*” Because we are united to Christ, our old self (an expression used elsewhere in Paul—Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:9), was put to death with Christ when he died on the cross. The term here, crucified, is in the aorist tense, indicating a decisive end to the old man, freeing us from sin. The old self, the old man (what we were in Adam) no longer reigns. While this death of the old man does not mean the end of all struggle with sin—in fact, Paul clearly teaches throughout this section that habitual sin or indwelling sin remains and puts up a fierce struggle until we die—but whereas sin was once characteristic of us while we were under the dominion of Adam, now in Christ our sin is uncharacteristic.¹⁰ Sin was the rule for us. Now sin is the exception and we cannot live with it now that we are in Christ.

Because the old man has been nailed to the cross with Christ, the body of sin had been done away with (literally “rendered powerless”). While a number of commentators understand Paul to be speaking of the physical body in the sense that as fallen, we are inherently susceptible to bodily lusts and passions,¹¹ the word “body” (σῶμα), can also refer to the person as a whole.¹² If taken in this sense, Paul is saying that our persons have been rescued from the dominion of sin (what we were in Adam) so that we are no

⁹ Morris, Epistle to the Romans, pp. 247-248 (note 17).

¹⁰ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 251.

¹¹ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 251-252; Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 220-221.

¹² Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 375.

longer enslaved to it. By virtue of our union with Christ in his death and resurrection we have been freed from such dominion. What we were in Adam no longer enslaves us now that we are united to Christ! The old man is dead, crucified with Christ, buried with him in baptism. We have been made new.

The point that I made early on is now explicitly stated by Paul in verse 8—namely, that justification and sanctification are inextricably linked. “*Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.*” We died with Christ (an aorist again, indicating the definitive nature of the death). But for all those in Christ, death is never the end. Because of what God has done in Christ, by faith, we believe that we will also live with Christ. Although Paul uses the future tense here—in the sense of the fact that when Jesus returns at the end of the age to raise our mortal bodies—this does not mean there are not present ramifications. Because Christ has died (definitive act) we now live. One day we will be raised from the dead. Because of the certainty of our own bodily resurrection our present life is transformed. And we are to now live in the light of what Christ has done and what he will do!

Once again, in verses 9-10, Paul appeals to the common knowledge of his reader. “*For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.*” Our understanding of justification and sanctification are based upon what God has done in Jesus Christ to save us from our sin. It is very significant that Paul does not begin his discussion of sanctification by giving us a list of things to do and a list of things to avoid. That is what we might suspect and what fundamentalists and moralists would like us to think. Rather Paul speaks about the objectivity of what God has done (the repeated use of the aorist tense) as the basis for new life in Christ. Christ died (completed act) and we died with him. But Christ was raised (aorist tense) from the dead, an act which is utterly irreversible. Jesus cannot die again. Death no longer has dominion (mastery) over him. Jesus has defeated death once and for all.¹³ He has accomplished everything God intended. Having been raised from the dead, his life is a life singly devoted to God,¹⁴ as evidenced by what Paul says in Philippians 2:8-11: Jesus “*And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*”

The consequences of Christ’s death and resurrection for our own sanctification are now made plain by Paul in verse 11. Because Jesus was crucified, dead, buried and then raised from the dead, and because we are united to him both in his death and resurrection through baptism (the sign and seal of faith) certain consequences must follow. As is typical of Paul’s writings, the indicative (what we are) precedes the imperative (what we must do). It is vital to notice that Paul’s first imperative when discussing sanctification is an emphatic statement for Christians to remember (reckon) that Christ has died and was raised, that the Christian has been baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection and that the Christian should then draw the proper conclusion.¹⁵ And so Paul commands us in verse 11: “*In the same way, [that is as Christ has died and was raised] count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*”

¹³ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 254.

¹⁴ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 255.

¹⁵ Nygren, Commentary on Romans, p. 245.

Just as Christ died and was raised, so too, the Christian is to reckon themselves as dead to sin (as to its guilt and power), and alive to God (free from sin and death). In other words, Paul is saying “be what you are.”¹⁶ Now that you have been set free from sin and death, no longer live as slaves. Act like free men!¹⁷ It is from statements such as these that Protestants have spoken of sanctification as including two parts: mortification (the putting to death of the old self), and the vivification of the new man (the strengthening of the new life we have been given in Christ).¹⁸

When verse 12 begins with “therefore” (οὖν) we should be tipped off that what follows in verses 12-13 is the conclusion to what Paul has just said.¹⁹ By reckoning ourselves dead to sin and alive to God, certain things necessarily follow. The first of these is stated in verse 12: “*Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.*” Because we have died and been raised in Christ we are reminded that we are no longer in Adam, we are in Christ. Because Adam no longer reigns, neither does sin. Because this is the case, Paul is calls us to stop acting like sin is still reigning, since its reign over us is broken because we are in Christ.²⁰ The reference to our mortal bodies may indicate that our bodies are subject to sinful passions, so we should not obey the evil desires, passions and lusts which arise from our fallen existence. But there is clearly an eschatological focus here as well. The stress upon the mortality of our bodies means that we still live in this present evil age, personally subject to all of the evil associated with this present age. We must realize that we are now in Christ, and so we must live in the light of the age to come, by reckoning ourselves under the reign of Christ and clothed with his righteousness so that we do not live our lives simply to satisfy our sinful passions. We died to all this.

The second thing Paul commands of us is found in verse 13. “*Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.*” Since we are no longer under the reign (dominion) of Adam, and under the reign of Christ, instead of existing for the gratification of our sinful passions (the flesh), we are to renounce such sin and offer ourselves to God,²¹ so that we might live in righteousness, using our bodies to glorify God instead of bringing dishonor upon ourselves. As Christ gave himself for our sins, we too, we give ourselves to Christ for his glory.

And while we will return to verses 12-14 again next time (speaking of how these verses are misinterpreted), Paul now makes a very remarkable statement in verse 14: “*For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.*” Now that we have been transferred from Adam to Christ, sin is no longer our master. We have been set free from its tyranny. The law (which

¹⁶ Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 255.

¹⁷ See the article by C. E. B. Cranfield, “Sanctification as Freedom: Paul’s Teaching on Sanctification,” in On Romans (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), pp. 33-49.

¹⁸ Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, LD 16, 17.

¹⁹ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.316.

²⁰ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.316-317. Contra Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 381-382.

²¹ The present tense of the verb indicates this is to be a continual practice.

condemns us, exposes our sin, and incites our inherent sinfulness all the more) no longer has dominion over us. In Christ, grace is the ruling principle, not law and condemnation. Therefore for all those in Christ, the gospel (what God has done), not the law (what we must do) will have the final word. As we saw in our Old Testament lesson, the prophets Ezekiel (11:16-21) and Jeremiah (31:31-34) foretold of the messianic age as one in which the law is now written upon our hearts. This is because we are no longer under the reign of Adam (law), we are under the reign of Christ (grace). And because we are under the dominion of Christ, he will bring forth fruit in our lives—fruit that cannot be brought forth by law, but by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, Paul's point is clear. Sin is no longer our master. We are free men and women who will bear the fruit of the Spirit and who will put to death the fruit of the flesh. And all of this is because Christ has died for our sins and was raised for our justification. Beloved, we have all been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, so that our old man is dead—crucified with Christ, drowned in the water of baptism, interred in the tomb with Christ—so that we are raised new men and women, now truly free to obey the commandments of God with grateful hearts for all that God has done for us in Christ. And because we died in Christ and have been raised to glorious newness of life, let not sin reign in our mortal bodies. “Let us count ourselves dead to sin, but alive to God,” and bring glory to the God who has set us free from the tyranny of sin, the law and death, through the death and resurrection of his son.