

## *Alive to God*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on September 26, 2021.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (Romans 6:1–14).<sup>1</sup>

For those who are fans of the Rolling Stones, you may remember their irreverent but brilliantly written song, *Far Away Eyes*, which begins with these words:

I was driving home early Sunday morning through Bakersfield  
Listening to gospel music on the . . . radio station  
And the preacher said, you know you always have the Lord by your side  
And I was so pleased to be informed of this that I ran  
Twenty red lights in his honor  
Thank you Jesus, thank you Lord.<sup>2</sup>

Undoubtedly, the lyrics sound offensive, perhaps sacrilegious, but actually Mick’s mockery ironically exposes an often-believed absurdity: You can do whatever you want, even break the law, if you have “the Lord by your side.” Sometimes the world sees our theological errors better than we do.

In response to this, some in the church have sought to restrain liberty, repress assurance, and rob peace by arguing that a grace-focused life leads to “indolence and is injurious to godliness, good morals, prayers and other holy exercises,”<sup>3</sup> or so argued the disciples of Jacob Arminius. The

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> The Rolling Stones, “Far Away Eyes,” Lyrics.com, accessed September 23, 2021, <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/15248555/The+Rolling+Stones/Faraway+Eyes>.

<sup>3</sup> “The Canons of Dort, Head of Doctrine V, Rejection 6,” Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, accessed September 23, 2021, <https://prts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Canons-of-Dort-with-Intro.pdf>.

concern is a noble one: godliness, good morals, prayers, holy exercises are all behavior to be encouraged. How can it be encouraged? Some argue that focusing on fear and worrying over works guarantees godliness, but if you encourage the Christian to rest in the sovereign grace of God, expect the immoral consequences.

Solomon reminds us, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles. 1:9), which is certainly the case with doctrinal error in the church. What is a doctrinal error today, was an error in the Reformation, was an error in the Roman Catholic Church before it, was an error in the 1<sup>st</sup> century church: The lie that living in the freedom of God’s abounding grace will not restrain sinful behavior but encourage it. The contention is that Christian liberty leads to licentiousness. Or, as Paul put it, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” (6:1). “Are we to remain in sin so that grace may increase?” (6:1, NET).

Is it possible that by sinning we could actually be glorifying God? When Paul says “where sin increased, grace abounds all the more” (Rom. 5:20), does he mean that such abounding grace encourages us to abound in sin? No, Paul refutes this error emphatically: “By no means!” (6:2). “Absolutely not!” (6:2 NET). But why? Why does God’s grace not give us a license to sin as we please? Doesn’t liberty mean the ability to do whatever satisfies our desires? The world certainly thinks so.

We might expect Paul here to describe the sinfulness of sin and the holiness of God, which could certainly be fitting. But he doesn’t. Instead, he wants us to understand what God has done in Christ to us, what it did, and who we are because of it. He wants us to see that we actually died to sin, were raised to life, and are alive to God.

## **Dead to Sin**

Paul asks rhetorically, “How can we who died to sin still live in it?” We’re meant to hear the absurdity of a Christian still living in sin. We’re meant to think that living in sin is an impossibility for us. We’re meant to hear it as in our past, not present: we died to sin.

Now you may think: Saying it’s one thing but living is another; or I don’t feel like I’ve died to sin. Yet, Paul is quite clear: we *died* to sin; we are dead to it. So, what does he mean?

Perhaps it is helpful here to say what Paul does not mean. Paul is not saying that we have only died to the guilt of sin, although we have. He is not saying that we are to renounce sin in our lives, although we must. He is not even saying that we are in the sanctifying process of mortifying sin, although we are.

Paul says that we “died to sin.” The verb tense connotes an act in our past history. In fact, the same verb and tense are used twice in this passage, referring to us and to Christ: “we...died to sin” (6:2). “[Christ] died to sin” (6:10). The connection is telling and should encourage us to ask: What does it mean “Christ died to sin”?

The full verse reads, “For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God” (6:10). Christ’s earthly ministry was one of sinless perfection, but he willingly

substituted himself for us and our sin upon the cross. He who knew no sin died our death: He vicariously died to sin. He was dead and buried. And when he resurrected, he was not merely resuscitated or even raised like Lazarus to live and die again. He was resurrected eternally, separated from death forever.

Paul explains it this way: “Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him” (6:9). And just as Christ “will never die again,” so we have “died to sin.” We can never go back to it; it’s dead and gone. Sin characterizes the old not the new, Adam not Christ. John Stott said, “A born-again Christian should no more think of going back to the old life than an adult to his childhood, a married man to his bachelorhood, or a discharged prisoner to his prison cell.”<sup>4</sup> That we have died to sin is an unequivocal fact of our life in Christ whether we believe it or not, whether we feel like it or not.

To help us better understand this reality, Paul provides two examples, both familiar to the church: baptism and crucifixion. Paul says that we who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into his death, even buried with him into death. He does not mean that baptism conveys mystical power or that it conveys saving grace. Baptism is only but gloriously an outward sign of an inward reality, a seal of God’s Covenant of Grace. Regardless of when it is administered, it depicts the cleansing and remission of sins through the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit and our union with Christ. By virtue of this union, Christ’s death becomes our death: “We were buried therefore with him...we have been united with him in a death like his” (6:4-5). He died to sin, so we died to sin.

Likewise, Christ died by crucifixion, but we understand that it was more than a Roman display of justice. Upon the cross, the wrath of God was satisfied for our sin. The cosmic consequence far over shadowed the human suffering. And then, it was finished (John 19:30), a death died, and “the death he died he died to sin, once for all” (6:10). Therefore, all who are in Christ “Know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin” (6:6). By virtue of our union with Christ, upon Christ’s cross we died to sin, so how can we still live in it?

### **Raised to Life**

Just as we have died to sin through Christ’s death to sin, we have been raised to life through his resurrection. Consider the magnitude of this truth. Christ the Son died and was buried. God the Father raised him from the dead by his glorious power. Paul explained to the Ephesians that the Father of glory revealed the incomparable greatness of his power, displayed in the exercise of his immense strength, in raising Christ from the dead and seating him “at his right hand in the heavenly realm” (Eph. 1:17-20). And this same power and immeasurable strength has given us new life today and certain Resurrection on the last day (6:5).

Therefore, just as Christ is alive and well and reigning over his kingdom, so we are alive and living as citizens of his kingdom. The guarantee of this reality is in fact a defining characteristic

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *Romans: The Reign of Grace, Romans 5-8* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 2:656.

of what it means to be a Christian: We are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ. We literally live with him (6:8). In fact, everything you think, say, and do is with Christ in you. Let that sink in.

Because we have been raised to life with Christ, every part of our life is in his life. We no longer live in sin—we died to it. We live “in newness of life” (6:4). We are no longer “enslaved to sin” (6:6) but “set free from it” (6:7). Why? Because, we “live with him” (6:8).

Augustine explained this reality by explaining that before the Fall, Adam was *posse peccare* (“able to sin”), but after the Fall he was *non posse non peccare* (“not able not to sin”). This is the spiritual condition of every child of Adam apart from Christ. But through faith in Christ we become miraculously *posse non peccare* (“able not to sin”), and one day when we are glorified we will be *non posse peccare* (“not able to sin”). So, by virtue of Christ’s resurrection we are raised to life, a life today in which we are *posse non peccare* (“able not to sin”), a life in which we must consider ourselves dead to sin and “alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11).

### **Alive to God**

What then does it mean to be alive to God? A comprehensive answer likely exceeds the scope of this sermon, but it at least means that we have been rightly reconciled to our Creator as new creations in Christ. Paul put it this way to the Corinthians: “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself...” (2 Cor. 5:17-18). As new creations, reconciled to God, we are alive to God and all that pleases him. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, our desires change, leading us to hate the sin we are dead to and crave the things of God, who is our life.

Now at this point you may be in agreement but also remembering that you still struggle with sin, and sometimes you don’t desire what you should, and sometimes you feel anything but alive to God. Does this mean that you are not alive to God? No, if you have by God’s grace believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, you are indeed alive to God. But sometimes we forget who and what we are. Sometimes we listen more to the world, our flesh, and the devil than to God’s Word.

So, Paul gives us three practical principles to help reorient us to the truth, two for how we think and one for what we do. First, know the truth. We know that we were “baptized in [Christ’s] death” (6:3). We know that “our old self was crucified with [Christ]” (6:6). We know that Christ “will never die again,” because “death no longer has dominion over him” (6:9). We know these truths, so stop listening to how you feel and engage your mind on the truth God has revealed. “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32), indeed!

Second, consider the truth. We must consider ourselves “dead to sin and alive to God” (6:11). Why *must* we? Because, we died to sin and were raised to life. When tempted to sin, we should say to our flesh, I’m dead to this! This is not who I am; this is not what I do. Considering this truth is living in light of who and what we already are in Christ.

Third, do not let sin reign in you. If you died to sin, it has no business with you. It is dead to you. Therefore, we actively guard our minds, our eyes, our ears, our tongues, our hands, our feet.

## *Alive to God*

Paul said, “I discipline my body and keep it under control” (1 Cor. 9:27). He knew the vulnerability of his flesh and the enticement of sin, but he treasured the grace of God as far greater.

And this gets to the heart of why God’s grace does not lead us to licentiousness but rather liberates us to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matt. 22:37). We do not continue in sin so that grace may abound, rather because grace abounds, we have died to sin and been raised to life. Sin will have no dominion over us, for we live, and move, and have our being under the abounding grace of God. We are alive to God!