

21st June, 2020

“Dying to Live”

Romans 6:1-11

It has been a challenging time over the last three months as we have adjusted to COVID-19 restrictions. Praise God we have learnt new ways of pastorally supporting each other, to grow in spiritual discernment and knowledge, to reach out to those in need, and those who are pre believer's by random acts of kindness.

Only seven more sleeps and we will be able to join together for praise and worship. Trust you have read the letter Council sent out last week, about new procedures that we will follow as we restart services. I understand that for July it will be a gradual process of feeling comfortable in venturing out after such a long time of lockdown. So, please follow doctor's suggestions about your health issues, and don't feel guilty about waiting until it is safe for you to meet in community!

Thank you for the phone calls, the emails, the notes & cards sent, and for your financial support during these extraordinary times. How good it is to be part of the family of God!

Today we look at the first eleven verses of Romans chapter 6. Paul establishes that in our baptism, we became new creatures – we died with Christ, and were resurrected to new life in Him. The key verse is verse 11, As followers of Jesus, we consider ourselves to be “*dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus*”. Next week we will look at v12-23 where Paul spells out the ethical implications of our new birth.

Look how The Message paraphrase puts the first five verses of this chapter:

“So, what do we do? Keep on sinning so God can keep on forgiving? I should hope not! If we've left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn't you realize we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land

That's what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we're going in our new grace-sovereign country”. WOW!

When working in our city church in Melbourne I often wondered how can we live in a city with its many people from different cultures and religions, and still be one united community of Jesus Christ? This is not easy - because our church was a church with people from different nationalities, cultures, traditions, even from different religious backgrounds. In the mid 90's our review of membership indicated we had 45 nationalities within our community.

How can we as followers of Jesus Christ be one, in spite of major differences? To answer this question was one of the main reasons why our apostle Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome. They suffered from much tension because people had very different views of how to serve God together.

The major problem they faced was that many followers of Jesus Christ with a Jewish background, were happy to have people from other nations and cultures in the church - as long as they behaved like the Jews did.

“Follow our laws, and then you are truly a good follower of Jesus”, they argued.

The people from the other nations could not accept this. “Why do we have to become like you first? Why can we not follow our Lord Jesus in the context of our own culture?”

In this letter to the church in Rome, Paul made it very clear to the Jewish followers of Jesus, that they should stop making their national law into the law book for all Christians. Making the laws of the Old Testament, of Israel, into law for all nations, suggests that we must all change our nationality and our culture before we can be real followers of Jesus!

Paul begins his letter by underlining that this is unacceptable - because it divides the church. And following the laws of Israel, including circumcision and all the laws of what to eat and what to not eat, does not save us anyway. It does not bring us closer to God, as the history of Israel has shown quite clearly.

God, in His grace, has reached out to us through Jesus Christ - the only one of Israel who truly obeyed God, who was truly a human copy of God. In our faith, He is central, by attaching ourselves to him, we become part of the people of God; by attaching ourselves to Him, God sees us as law-abiding Christians.

That is what Paul underlines. God’s response to our sin is not more law, but it is grace through Jesus Christ. God does not throw the law book at us, but he sends Jesus Christ.

So, we need to be careful that we do not approach other people with our own cultural rules; be careful that our interpretation of the Bible, which is always through the lens of our own culture and background, does not drive people apart. Grace as revealed in Jesus Christ brings people together, law apart from Him drives us apart!

While Paul asks the question do, we keep on sinning so grace may increase?

I think it is good for us to regularly ask the question: What difference does it make to our lives to be a follower of Jesus Christ? What is the distinctive about the Christian life? When we invite others into a relationship with God through Christ, what exactly is it that we are offering them?

If we don’t know what difference the Christian life makes, then we will offer good events, nice friendships and a place to meet, but as good as those things are the Christian life is far more than that, and the message we are to offer the community of Montrose must be deeper than that too.

In our reading we hit the very heart of what it means to be a Christian and the defining feature of the Christian life. The idea of the old self dying, and us being born into a new life in Christ. So, let’s unpack this passage in some more detail and see what Paul has to say about this whole idea.

Chapter six opens with Paul’s central argument about grace as God’s free gift.

V9-11 “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 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”.

What then are we to say? ...

Paul must love this rhetorical question, because he asks it a lot. In his letter to the Romans, it appears half a dozen times, at key turning points in Paul’s argument. “So, what do you think?”

Paul asks, “*Should we sin more so we can experience more grace?*” In his criticism, Paul answers his opponents’ arguments by carrying them to the extreme, in order to prove them wrong.

The group that was causing the most trouble in Rome consisted of Jews who still viewed righteousness as something to be obtained by being born Jewish, and doing good works by following the law. Paul argues that God’s grace is available to all who believe, and that it is through faith alone that we become righteous.

Paul imagines his opponents answering this argument with one of their own: doesn’t free grace just promote free sin? If God’s grace is so free, so all-encompassing, and there is nothing I can do to earn it, why bother being good? If God is going to forgive me anyway, why not just go on sinning to my heart’s content? In fact, doesn’t it make sense to sin more, so that God can forgive me more?

Certainly not, Paul tells us. It is precisely because we have chosen to align ourselves with God, and not with sin, that we have been changed.

And this is where baptism comes into the picture.

“We have been buried with him by baptism into death,” Paul writes, “*so we might walk in newness of life.*” Baptism is more than a simple rite of passage. It marks a radical change in identity. The old, sinful self is buried in the waters of baptism, and what comes up out of the water is a new creation. Just as the children of Israel walked into the Red Sea as runaway Egyptian slaves, and walked up out of that sea as God’s own nation, so we are called to walk in newness of life, set free from our slavery to sin.

So, what then should we say? What does that mean for us?

It means that Christ’s death was a one-time event, and he will not die again. If we are baptized into that death, we are also baptized into Christ’s resurrection to new life. I cannot say “new life” enough! We have been united with Christ in something completely new. Remember that Christ’s resurrected body was not his old body; even his closest friends did not recognize him at first. In the same way, our baptized selves are not anything at all like our old, sinful selves.

And yet, we often do not live like we have this “new life.” We stay stuck in patterns of behaviour that ignore the fact we have been made into completely new people, children of the living God. Paul thought the Roman Christians were acting as if sin was a good thing, reasoning that the more we sin, the more God forgives us. Theologian David Bartlett summarizes Paul’s answer in two parts: “*You’ve got to be kidding!*” and “*Be who you are.*”

Be who you are. You are not just symbolically washed clean in the waters of baptism. Baptism has drowned your old sinful self and given you a new identity. Live into that new identity as Christ’s own. You have died to sin, so stop acting like it rules you. Bartlett continues,

“When Christians are told to “remember our baptism” that does not mean so much remembering the time and the place or who baptised you. It is a way of saying: Remember who you are; you have died to sin and now you live a new life in Jesus Christ. It is a way of saying: Be who you are.”

Remember your baptism also means, “Remember who you belong to.”

“What then are we to say?” Are we to chime in with the “I’m Ok You’re OK” culture and claim that, since God accepts us just the way we are, there is no need to change? Do we subscribe to

the notion that sinning is actually good, because it creates more opportunities for grace? Or do we recognize that in becoming a follower of Jesus, we move from one kind of humanity, steeped in sin, into the very life of Christ? Because this is what Paul is saying, friends: since Christ is our model, whatever is true of him is now true of us, too. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. We have died to sin, we are risen to new life with and in him, and when he comes again, we will be ready to join him in eternal glory. What part of that would you not want to claim as your very own?

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright tells us, *“Living in accordance with a change of status requires that you recognize it and take steps to bring your actual life into line with the person you have become. ... Once you are baptized, of course, you can try to shirk or shrug off your new responsibilities. You can pretend you don’t after all have a new status. ... But what you can’t do is get unbaptized again.”* (N.T. Wright, *Paul For Everyone: Romans Part 1*, 102.)

The passage ends with a bit of a hymn that was apparently known to Paul, and perhaps known already to the Christian communities in Rome who first received this letter. When he writes, “We know that...” (verse 9), in a way he’s really inviting his hearers to join the song:

*Christ being raised from the dead, will never die again;
Death no longer has dominion over him.
The death he died, he died to sin, once for all;
But the life he lives he lives to God.*

Then Paul adds his own verse to the song, and this must have been a powerful addition for those Christians in Rome, to hear these new words being sung to them, as they are to us:

*So also consider yourselves dead to sin,
and alive to God in Jesus Christ.*

When Paul says, “consider” he isn’t asking you to think of yourself as dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ. He isn’t asking you to ponder this reality as an abstract idea. No, the verb translated here as “consider” is really a bookkeeping term. Other translations use the term “reckon” and we could just as easily use the word “calculate” to understand what Paul means here.

When you calculate a sum of numbers, you come up with a new number, but it isn’t really “new” – it was there all along; you just didn’t know what the total sum was until you calculated it. Add it up, Paul says. You have already been reckoned dead to sin, and alive to God in Christ Jesus. It may be hard to believe the answer you get when you do the maths, but this is the reality. We need to be who we are, redeemed children of God, and we need to start acting like it.

Sin has no hold on us any longer; it’s time to let go of it. New life means living into new habits and behaviours, new ways of thinking and relating to people. It means living into our identity as followers of Jesus Christ. (Next week, v12-23; Holiness)

As a church, what do we need to die to? As a church, what do we need to do in order to be alive to God? As a church, how can we best reflect that new life in our community of Montrose? As a church, how can we best help others to experience their own new life in God?

As individuals and as a church, we have a responsibility to respond to the new truth in which we stand (Dying to Live), by transforming the way we relate to others, the way we relate to the world.

Prayer: